

***South Pacific* with BW & Cleveland Orchestra: talking to director Victoria Bussert**

by Jarrett Hoffman



Musical theater fans have a thrill coming their way this Saturday, August 24 at 8:00 pm at Blossom. On tap is a production of Rodgers & Hammerstein's 1949 *South Pacific* featuring students from the Baldwin Wallace Music Theater program. And the orchestra? It's one you might have heard of.

"There's no way for me to describe what it's going to be like the first time the students hear The Cleveland Orchestra play this music," [Victoria Bussert](#) said during a recent phone call. She heads the Music Theater program at BW and directs Saturday's performance.

"It will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because even on Broadway, you don't get orchestras of this size, or this world-renowned," Bussert said. "I'm kind of tingly just waiting for when we all walk into Severance [for rehearsal] and the students sing with them for the first time."

Andy Einhorn conducts this concert adaptation of the musical. (It was created by David Ives for a performance at Carnegie Hall in 2005, and includes all of the music from the original but condenses the dialogue.) The cast features BW students Kailey Boyle, Hanako Walrath, and Gordia Hayes, as well as three guest artists: baritone Elliot Madore, Tony Award nominee Loretta Ables Sayre, and Broadway singer Ryan Silverman. Tickets are available [here](#).

Based on James Michener's short story collection *Tales of the South Pacific*, the musical takes place on an island during World War II, and follows two love stories

complicated by racism. The first involves Ensign Nellie Bush, a nurse in the U.S. Navy, and French plantation owner Emile de Becque. Nellie abandons the relationship when she discovers that Emile has children from a previous marriage to a Polynesian woman. In the end, she reunites with Emile and his kids. *(Below: an image of that scene from the original production with Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin.)*



The parallel story is that of Liat and U.S. Marine Lieutenant Joseph Cable, who won't marry her because he knows his family would disapprove that she is Tonkinese. In the famous song "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," he laments how prejudice is passed on through one's upbringing.

"What is astonishing," Bussert said, "is how relevant the message of this piece still is today in terms of racism and prejudice."

Bussert has always struggled with seeing Nellie portrayed by actors in their thirties. “By that point, I feel like you’re not a child anymore and you shouldn’t have these issues. So I love that we have a 21-year-old student playing this role. I think taking that journey with her as she becomes educated through her circumstances is far more believable.”

How have the students dealt with the task of playing these characters? “I think one of the great things about working with young artists,” Bussert said, “is that this generation understands the value of embodying these roles in order to educate the audience. So if anything, they’ve really embraced the responsibility.”

South Pacific has also been criticized for the racial stereotypes it presents. “The roles that people think of as stereotypical are Bloody Mary and her daughter Liat,” Bussert said, adding that “ethnically appropriate people” have been cast in those roles.

(In an [article](#) for *HuffPost*, Rick Ayers points out more issues with the musical related to sexism, consent, and colonialism that are worth thinking about. He also writes, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not one of these scolds who think artworks should be suppressed or held back. Let’s show them all, but then let’s have a talk about them.”)

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Bussert’s history as a director dates back to the age of seven. “I was literally pulling the neighborhood kids together and directing them.” She noted, laughing, that at least one thing has changed since then: she doesn’t cast herself as the star in her own productions.

She always knew she wanted to be a director, but at many points in her education, she was encouraged to go into acting instead. “People said to me, ‘You’re not going to have a career as a director because there aren’t women directors.’ And that’s kind of the magical thing to say to me — that it can’t happen. That’s when I really turn it on.”

Now, Bussert considers it an important responsibility to nurture young female directors. “Certainly we have women directors out there now who are very inspiring,” she said. “But when you look at the Tony Awards this year, there was *one* woman nominated as a director of musicals.” That was Rachel Chavkin for *Hadestown*. “Fortunately she won, but it’s ridiculous that only one woman had that opportunity. It’s important to me to make sure there are more women’s voices out there.”

Among Bussert’s upcoming projects is the academic premiere of Cyndi Lauper’s and Harvey Fierstein’s 2012 *Kinky Boots* at BW. “It’s a show that we really went after,”

she said. “It’s got such an important message for our country right now, which is if you change hearts, you change minds.” Audience talk-backs will follow the performances. “We’ll discuss different topics, like the history of drag, and just continue to educate ourselves and the community.”

Why will it have taken seven years for *Kinky Boots* to be performed by students? The answer comes down to rights. “A show has to close on Broadway, and the first national tour has to have come to a completion,” Bussert said. “So the day they announced that the rights were available was the day I went after them. We had five of our grads in the Broadway production, so I was able to get to some high-up people very quickly. I said, ‘You know what? I think this is an important piece for us to be doing in our community,’ and within 24 hours they had granted us the rights.”

That production is one of many examples of the BW program’s success over the years. Asked what she’s most proud of in her 23 years at the school, Bussert quickly said it was her students. “They’re willing to work hard, and they see the results. I mean, two of our grads from May are already out on national tours, and that’s the goal. But you know, that doesn’t come from just wanting it, it comes from the training you’re willing to do.”

That led Bussert to mention someone I never expected to include in a story about musical theater. “Recently I’ve been extremely inspired by Baker Mayfield,” she said. She just went to her first Browns game, and noted that if she has to get herself psyched up for something, she re-watches his debut with the team last year.

“What inspires me about him is the fun he has doing it. So an athlete’s work ethic — that’s what I try to impart to the students. It’s thrilling to see them do the work and get the results.”

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