

ARTS AND THEATER

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Two plays opening here look at broad horizons

By Judith Newmark St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sep 7, 2017



From left: Leah Berry, Spencer Jones, Elle Wesley and Michael Halling in Stages St. Louis' production of "South Pacific." Peter Wochniak

Two shows opening here — Stages St. Louis' "South Pacific" and Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis' "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real" — might seem to have nothing in common.

“South Pacific,” Rodgers & Hammerstein’s musical about World War II in Polynesia, has remained an immensely popular show since it debuted in 1949. Based on stories by James Michener, it has a breathtaking score — “Some Enchanted Evening,” “Younger Than Springtime,” “Bali H’ai” — and complex characters, including Navy nurse Nellie Forbush and a French planter, Emile De Becque. In 1950, “South Pacific” won the Pulitzer Prize in drama.



The National Theatre of Ghana performs Tennessee Williams' "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real" at an outdoor market in Ghana. Handout photo

Two years earlier, that prize went to Tennessee Williams for “A Streetcar Named Desire.” Like “South Pacific,” “Streetcar” remains admired and often produced. But few of his admirers were aware of “Ten Blocks on the Camino Real,” a short, surrealistic drama in which a big-hearted American boxer, Kilroy, finds himself in a dead-end Latin American town where many of the inhabitants, from Casanova to the Gypsy girl Esmeralda, are literary figures. Yet Kilroy retains his generous spirit in a grasping world.

After a New York workshop, Williams developed the piece into a full-length play, “Camino Real,” that opened on Broadway in 1953. It ran just two months; many people found it disturbing and hard to understand.

But the two productions have something in common, apart from their post-war premieres: They both defy provincialism.

In “South Pacific,” that provincialism goes by a more familiar name: racism. Nellie loves Emile, and he loves her. She wonders what Emile, a well-read, sophisticated man, sees in “a little hick” like her.

But that’s not the big problem. The big problem is his son and daughter, children of his longtime relationship with a Tokinese woman (no longer living). They’re adorable, she says — but how can she forget about their mother? About their mother and Emile?

Marine Lt. Joe Cable finds himself in a similar quandary. He has fallen in love with a beautiful young Tokinese woman, Liat. Her mother, the entrepreneurial Bloody Mary, wants them to marry. Joe does, too. But when he imagines introducing Liat to his proper Philadelphia family, he foresees trouble. “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” Joe sings, a bitter plea against prejudice.

We don’t know what Joe might have ultimately decided, because he is killed in action. But Nellie, who believes that the Frenchman was killed as well, goes to his house to serve his children lunch and to tell them that she loves them. She’s going to raise them herself.

When Emile suddenly returns, singing (in French) that life is beautiful, the play ends with a joyous tableau: a happy mixed-race family, a triumph of life over death. Looking past her provincial roots, Nellie simultaneously becomes a happy wife, a happy mother and a citizen of the world.

“Ten Blocks” invites us to enjoy a broader view just by its performance here. Of course, Williams grew up in St. Louis; that’s why Carrie Houk set up the festival here.

But this is not a local production. “Ten Blocks on the Camino Real” is performed by the National Theatre of Ghana under the direction of David Kaplan. Curator of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival in Massachusetts, Kaplan has directed for the festival here as well, notably “The Rooming House Plays.” The production incorporates West African music, dance, dress and sensibility into Williams’ script. The show, which opened in Ghana last year, is touring the United States now.



From left: Paul Aguirre, Joanne Javien, Chris Tipp and Mark DiConzo in Stages St. Louis' production of "South Pacific." Photo by Peter Wochniak

We usually see plays by great American writers staged by American troupes with American performers. “Ten Blocks on the Camino Real” offers an opportunity to look at Williams through an unusual lens: the lens of a different culture.

It’s tempting to stake a claim to “our” culture. But art doesn’t need a travel visa. Like Nellie Forbush, we might decide we want to be less provincial, too. Who knows? A wider viewpoint might open us to wider pleasures.

What “South Pacific” • **When** Friday through Oct. 8 • **Where** Robert G. Reim Theatre, Kirkwood Community Center, 111 South Geyer Road, Kirkwood • **How much** \$25-\$60 • **More info** 314-821-2407; stagesstlouis.org

What “Ten Blocks on the Camino Real” • **When and where** 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. Friday at Strauss Park in Grand Center; 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. Saturday at Soulard Farmers Market; 1 and 3:30 p.m. Sunday at Strauss Park • **How much** Free • **More info** twstl.org