



Society : Stage One Youth  
Production : Miss Saigon  
Date : 11 September 2015  
Venue : Desborough Suite, Town Hall Maidenhead  
Report by : Rosemary Roberts

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This isn't a review I was expecting to be writing, having been asked the day after I saw it to cover for your Rep, Gordon Bird, who was unfortunately due to see the last performance but taken ill, so apologies in advance if it's not quite what you usually get.

I visited Vietnam last year, listened to the stories told by people who lived through the war, and saw the, sometimes very disturbing, photographs on display in the War Remnants Museum. So for me Miss Saigon is more than just another musical, it is an account of a very real and turbulent period of time – the Vietnamese call it the American War – and its impact on the lives of those caught up in it. I was intrigued to see how a youth group could handle such a topic and such powerful emotions without having any real life experience to draw on.

I need not have worried, they rose to the challenge superbly.

#### **Kim – Debi Hovington**

This was a beautifully judged performance. At the start of the show, Kim is a naive peasant girl, forced to work in a nightclub after the war has destroyed her family and village. By the end of the show she is a mother prepared to die to give her son a better life. The transition the character makes requires not just an actress with a great voice, which Debi undoubtedly has, but one who understands the role and can deliver all those emotions. Debi made Kim's journey thoroughly believable so we understood why she would give up her child, then take her own life. The finale, This Is The Hour, when Kim chooses to decide her own fate and says farewell to her son was very moving. I particularly liked her interaction with Tam. It would have been easy for someone so young to have interpreted a mother's love with lots of hugging and cuddling, but Kim is not that kind of mother, and Debi conveyed her protective feelings for the child without fussing over him. And on a lighter note, I am always impressed by anyone who can sing, act and change costumes all at the same time! An outstanding performance, well done Debi.

#### **Chris – Robbie Alexander**

Initially, when I realised which actor was playing Chris, I was slightly concerned that Robbie's youthful looks might get in the way of credibility. However, Robbie grew with the part, and as the show progressed he became thoroughly believable as the GI caught up in a war thousands of miles from home. His line "But it was only two weeks" conveyed all the bewilderment of someone pitched into a different world, then returned to normality only to find his past catching up with him. He sang the complex numbers well and had no problem with the range. His duet with Kim, Sun and Moon, was beautifully performed. I understand Robbie was one of the youngest members of the cast at 14 years of age, so the very mature performance he gave in a difficult emotional role was very impressive.

#### **Engineer – Theo Stanson Papoui**

Theo is obviously a natural performer, one who thoroughly enjoys being on stage. From his very first scenes he commanded attention as he manoeuvred and cynically manipulated his way through an ever changing world, always with an eye on what was best for him. He used the whole stage to deliver his lines and songs, drawing the audience in with gestures and facial expressions. Blessed with not just a great voice but agile dancing skills (and possibly the highest high kicks ever witnessed

on the Desborough stage), he used both to great advantage. His big number at towards the end of the show, American Dream, was for me the stand out number in the show, and his panic and despair as he realises his dream is slipping away from him was excellent. The flourish at the end of the song showed how much he, as well as the audience, had enjoyed the performance. This was an amazingly confident performance from one so young – I'm sure we will be seeing him a lot more in the future.

### **John – Samuel Gipple**

Samuel was another actor whose character grew as the plot unfolded. From a brash GI, out for fun with the boys, in Act 1, he matured into a responsible, concerned adult. Obviously the suit and change of hairstyle helped, but that would not have been enough on its own. Samuel made the intervening years from Act 1 to Act 2, and the change in his character thoroughly believable. He had some difficult numbers, but handled them well, particularly Bui Doi at the start of Act 2.

### **Ellen – Marianne James**

Marianne has a beautiful alto voice, particularly in the lower register. Her performance as the wife who knows nothing of Chris's past was a lovely contrast to Kim's unsophisticated naive character, showing Ellen as a more mature and worldly product of 70s America. Her duet with Kim, I Still Believe, was one of the musical highlights.

### **Thuy – Matt Cooke**

I loved this performance. Matt made Thuy a very sinister character. The intense stare was extremely effective, showing the cold, calculating side of the character, building the tension so the audience was conscious of the violence to come. This was shown to great effect in the number The Morning of the Dragon.

### **Gigi – Kiera Ash**

It is not easy to have one of the opening solo numbers, but Kiera handled it with no sign of nerves and gave a very confident performance.

### **Mimi, Yvette, Yvonne – Eve Shanu-Wilson, Martha Pardoe, Ellie Bullen**

All three girls had lovely, strong voices and sang and acted with confidence. Throughout the opening scenes in Dreamland Club, they stayed in character whether part of the action or not.

### **Captain Shultz – Patrick Ashe**

Although the role of Captain Schultz is a smaller one, he has to sing some very difficult melodies in Kim's Nightmare, and Patrick handled them really well.

### **Club Owner – Joseph Bristow**

Joseph was suitably oily and manipulative as the Club Owner who tries to sell Kim.

### **Tam – Ted Fogg**

With no lines, Tam's role is to look vulnerable and capture the hearts of the audience, which Ted did admirably. Although he had long sequences when he was not involved in the action, he showed no sign of becoming unfocussed or fidgeting.

### **Chorus**

I was actually very surprised, when I looked at the programme after the show, to see there were only ten members of the chorus, so credit to them (and the choreographer) for making full use of the stage. This was a very tight knit, focussed ensemble. They had obviously been very well drilled, for I didn't spot anyone out of character, or hesitant, all the way through. The chorus numbers were all very well sung and executed with style. Whether nightclub girls, Vietnam army or 70s Americans, they were all in character. The panic and terror expressed during the evacuation of Saigon made that scene very real.

### **Directors – Julian Fox, Ursula Fox**

With its theme of war, prostitution, violence and loss, this was a very hard subject for any youth group to tackle.

With melodies that soar, and very young actors (14 – 19) it would have been easy to create an over-sentimental version of the musical, but that didn't happen. The performances were raw and subtle, never over played, and that allowed tension built until the show reached its dramatic climax.

I loved the use of projected photographs of the Bui Doi (American-Asian children left behind after the war ended) which powerfully brought home the human suffering of war – a very moving moment. The evacuation of Saigon was extremely well depicted, with the use of simple wire mesh panels, on wheels for easy and quick moving. The 'freeze' in *Movie In My Mind* was memorably effective.

I was slightly uneasy at some of the 'gyrating' of the younger members of the chorus in the sleazy nightclub scenes, and even though they were probably no younger than the girls in 70s war torn Vietnam clubs, I was aware of their youth in those particular scenes.

All the scenes flowed seamlessly – full credit to the stage crew.

### **Choreography – Ursula Fox**

This was obviously a very well drilled company. They executed the numbers with assurance and discipline. In each number, the style matched the scene it was portraying, from the free dance in the opening nightclub scenes, through the exuberant *American Dream*, to the exact, military precision of *The Morning Of The Dragon*, when every pair of eyes stared ahead unblinking, adding a chilling menace to the scene. This latter number mirrored the Vietnamese martial arts, complete with sticks – very impressive.

Full use was made of a not particularly big stage, so that it never seemed overcrowded.

### **Musical Directors – Bridget Biggar, AJ Gibson**

I'd be intrigued to know exactly how co-directing a musical works! But work it did. There is very little dialogue in *Miss Saigon*, but a huge, complex score. That every young soloist coped with the challenge of the very complicated music is a great credit to both Musical Directors. The diction was excellent, so there was never any problem following the sung plot. Although there were nine musicians in the pit, the conductor, Bridget Biggar, kept the volume to a level where it never drowned the singers, even during underscored bars, but enhanced what was going on on stage.

### **Costumes – Isobel Foley, Jean Gulrajani**

Costumes were used very effectively to complement the staging – the Vietnam Army costumes, for example, were suitably austere giving an air of menace and authority. The cheer leader outfits in *American Dream* were great fun, and lifted the mood from the sombre scenes around it, with all the girls wearing silver dance shoes, as against the character shoes worn during the rest of the show. All costumes were in keeping (the nightclub for example) but not all the same or the same but different colours, as is sometimes seen in amateur productions, giving an authentic feel.

### **Lighting – Andy Nicholson**

I've been to several productions at this venue when the lighting hasn't extended to the edge of the stage, leaving the front of the stage and any principals standing there unlit. I was really pleased to see that hadn't happened in this production. Lighting was used to good effect to enhance the scenes and create different moods; I particularly loved the red white and blue lighting used in conjunction with the smoke machine in *American Dream*.

### **Sound – Brian Cox**

During the first few numbers the sound seemed a bit overpowering, even allowing for the fact that my seat at the side was close to the speakers, and I was concerned that this might spoil the singing for me. Either I got used to it, or the sound level was reduced, because I quickly became unaware of it and was able to concentrate and enjoy what was going happening on stage.

### **Production – Maggie Kearney**

All props and scenery were appropriate to the era and setting. And in spite of the budget not running to a helicopter, this was handled very effectively!

### **Programme – Julian Fox**

The programme had the scenes and music numbers in the centre pages, so easy to find during the show, and a clearly printed cast list. As someone who has produced programmes in the past, I was really pleased to see that Julian had included background notes on the Vietnam War, the Fall of Saigon and on how the directors tackled the show. Even though programmes are usually read at home after the show, it really adds to the enjoyment of the show to understand the events and conditions of the time the show is set in. Thank you!

### **General**

This was an immensely difficult time for Stage One Youth. A young member of their company, who joined when the group first formed, and due to perform as Ensemble in Miss Saigon, died in a traffic accident only two weeks before the show. This was alluded to at the start of the performance, and also in a very moving and sensitively handled tribute left on stage after the final curtain call. That everyone not only got through the week, but put in such powerful performances, is a tribute to all those involved in this production.

I understand that, because of the age restraints on performing Miss Saigon, this was a cast who were almost all new to Stage One Youth. I've seen all but one of this group's productions; this was as good as, if not better, than any I've seen them do before. Their future is in good hands.

Stage One Youth, you should all be very proud of yourselves.