

ARTS

Supporting players are the stars in MTG's South Pacific

SOUTH PACIFIC

Musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein.
Directed and choreographed
by Jeffrey J. Harig.
The MIT Musical Theatre Guild.
At Kresge Auditorium.
Continues through November 19.

By CHRISTOPHER J. ANDREWS

THE ONGOING MTG PRODUCTION OF *South Pacific*, the tale of sublimated sexuality and unspoken racism in the WWII Pacific Theater, isn't like most recent Guild shows: although the clever choreography and lively group scenes make for an upbeat, memorable evening as always, the usually strong lead performances were noticeably absent. This time around, it was the supporting players, both on and off-stage, that excelled.

Judging by the MTG shows I've seen in recent years, the MIT acting community seems to be composed largely of hunchbacks and scoliotics. Just once, I'd like to see a stage full of characters that don't have their heads attached at the sternum. Kimber Lynn Zinger '88, playing the role of Bloody Mary's daughter Liat, is a much-welcomed exception. Although her

part was fairly small, (and she really did little more than display her lovely navel), Zinger's expressive body gestures and poised stage presence easily outshined the rest of the production.

Commanding officers at the South Pacific naval base didn't look very authoritative, either; Captain Brackett's and Commander Harbison's off-screen counterparts seem convinced that the necessary ingredients of a military officer are a strained gait (with arms held directly at the side), a muffled deep voice, and the occasional clenched fist. Prepubescent boys playing dress-up was what I saw on stage.

Jana Reiss's (W '91) characterization of romantic lead Nellie Forbush reminded me of little Ronnie Howard playing Winthrop in *The Music Man*. One of the great beauties found in this kind of musical is the frequent use of relatively untrained voices, but Reiss didn't have a natural-sounding pleasant voice — she sang through a tightly constricted throat. She wasn't a very imposing figure on stage, either.

Nellie's romantic partner Emile will be more than the one who wears the pants in the de Becque family, it seems — he'll probably do most of the singing as well. Michael Friedhoff '90 had a warm speak-

ing voice and a superior singing voice that really does the role credit. (He even looks like Ezio Pinza, the concert bass-baritone who created the role.) "Lutellian" Cable (Ben Perry) also sang a beautiful "Younger Than Springtime" to Liat. Without these two gentlemen on stage, the show would have really suffered in the singing department.

F. Burriss Jackes '90 must have relished the opportunity to design sets for Kresge Auditorium's ample stage, rather than the usual ship-in-a-bottle challenge of building scenics for the "little" theater downstairs. The results were genuinely good-looking: well-thought-out sets simulated a tropical island beach, a Quonset-hut command headquarters, and the elegant veranda of a sprawling plantation with equally good results. Technically, the show was largely a success.

The chorus of sailors and Sea-bees brought a few laughs, too. Luther Billis (Tom Woodman '90), the pride of Brooklyn, was a believable scrounge artist with a pitiable (but good!) accent.

Peter Silberman led the MTG Orchestra to a creditable performance, but on-again off-again miking resulted in a few inaudible lines. Body-miking the leads was a

mixed blessing; Perry and Friedhoff were worthy of such close attention, but some of the sounds coming from one Tonganese matron would have been better left unheard.

Many of the group numbers were lively and full of fun, especially the well-known male numbers "There is Nothing Like a Dame" and "Bloody Mary." The women's choruses didn't work as well, though — "I'm Going to Wash That Man Right Out-a My Hair" was little more than a bevy of broads doing the twist with itchy scalps. The Sea-bees' numbers were exciting and authentic-looking, but the nurses' dancing simply was not "period style" — the dance steps would have been better received on last week's *Star Search* than in the mid-40s.

On the whole, group scenes were handled with a skillful touch by director-choreographer Jeffrey J. Harig; parallel action and theatrical "asides" were suggested by slow-motion and freeze-frame choruses, for example. A few of the solo numbers are worth hearing, but it is Harig's success with the group numbers and strong support from the technical department that makes the show at all worthwhile.

Distant Thunder's essential message: Vietnam War is still being fought

DISTANT THUNDER

Directed by Rick Rosenthal.
Produced by Robert Schaffel.
Written by Robert Stitzel
and Deedee Wehle.
At USA Copley Place.

By AARON MCPHERSON

THE VIETNAM WAR IS NOT OVER. It is still being fought, in the minds of the Americans who served there; and also in the minds of those who did not.

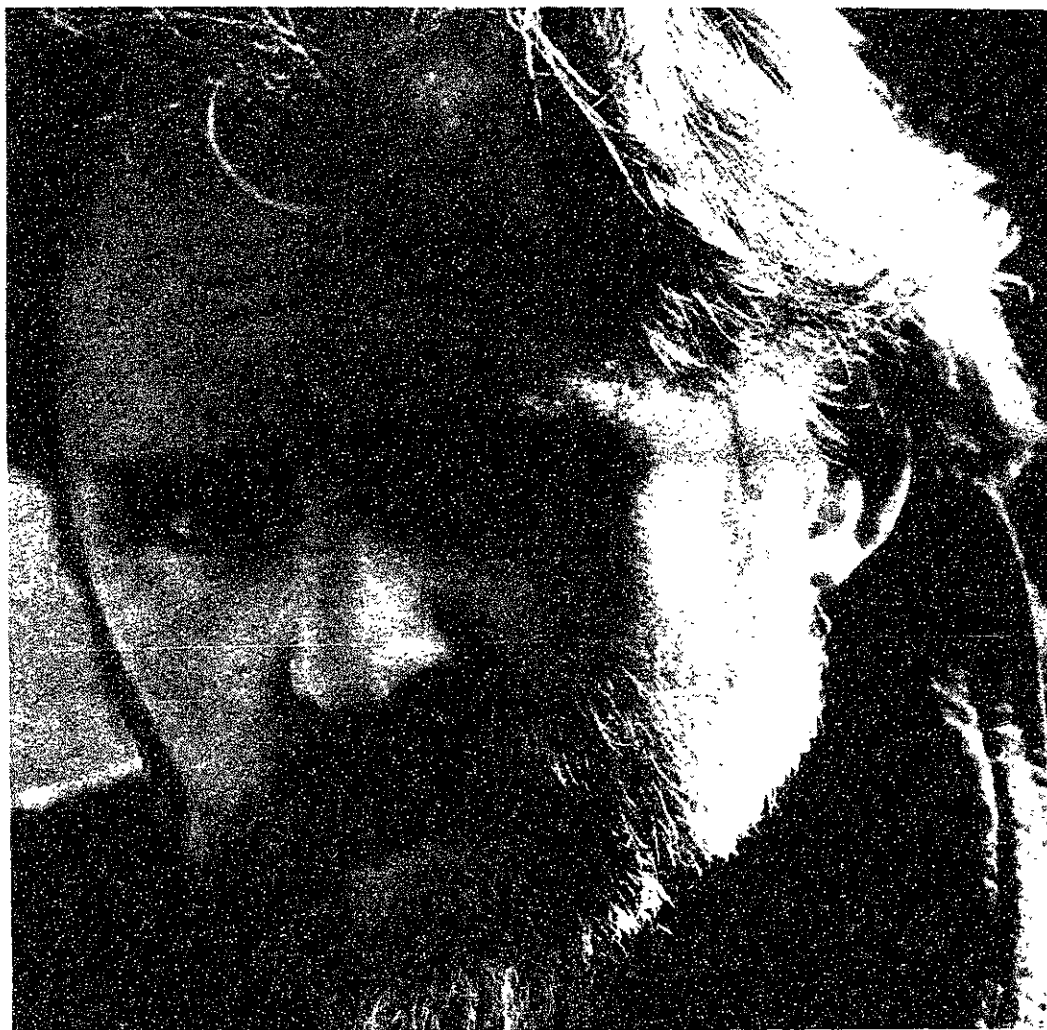
That is the essential message of *Distant Thunder*, billed as the first film to deal with the problems of Vietnam veterans who, thirteen years after the last American went home, are still dealing with the war's effects. The unlucky ones, those without strong family support or friendships, have taken to living in the wild. Apart from society, their only companionship, with other "Bush vets," is the only way these men can live with the violent passions and traumas that the war awakened in their souls.

Distant Thunder relates the story of Mark Lambert (John Lithgow), a former member of an elite Navy commando group engaged in covert attacks within the boundaries of North Vietnam, who decides he wants his son back.

At the time he left, Jack Lambert (Ralph Macchio) was just a wee baby, so it is with considerable trepidation that Mark comes down from the mountains of the Pacific Northwest to find a job and write to his son. He leaves behind him two pals, Larry (Denis Arndt) and Harvey Nitz (Reb Brown). Larry is apparently mad, scampering around the camp all day making absurd faces and firing his gun in all directions. Nitz is a huge, foreboding, silent figure; he resolutely guards the camp from trespassers, whom his carved wood sign says he will "execute." Mark's immediate reason for departure, besides the crazy company, is the suicide of another friend under the wheels of a freight train. Fearing a similar fate for himself, Mark masters his fear and comes out of hiding.

Fortunately, he is immediately befriended, in typical Hollywood fashion, by a woman named Char (Kerrie Keane), who sees him wandering around the log yard where she works. Having lost her own father in Vietnam, she gets him a job at the yard, helps him contact his son, and gives him important encouragement. They become good friends, which would be terrific were it not for Moss (Jamey Sheridan), Char's bonehead boyfriend, who flies into a jealous paranoia at the first sight of Mark. Predictably, he attacks Mark in a bar, not a very smart thing to do to a guy with post-traumatic stress syndrome. Rather than kill the silly fool, Mark runs back into the woods, convinced he is unfit for society.

Jack Lambert, by now eighteen, arrives at the log yard the next day and is understandably hurt by his father's absence. He and Char decide to go up the mountain and get him back. First, however, they must get past Nitz, Moss, and Mark's own fear which are determined to keep him in



his private hell. It is at this point that the movie really picks up and becomes exciting. Up to this point, *Distant Thunder* is just another "message picture," all about caring and helping your fellow man. We are forced to watch some dreadfully sappy scenes between Char and Mark, and between Jack and his mother. Ralph Macchio is simply miscast in this film; if he wasn't such a teen idol, it might have worked, but the script deliberately twists the character of Jack so as to fit Macchio's "image." He is first in his class, beloved by his mother, his coach, his classmates, and a cute girlfriend. Nobody who was really affected by his father's absence would be so well-adjusted, and the Macchio-teen-idol syndrome completely overwhelms his character. Even he doesn't know whether to be vulnerable or cocky.

At a press luncheon the day after the screening, the director (Rick Rosenthal) admitted that Macchio was the one member of the cast in whose selection he had not personally participated. Sounds like studio pressure; looks like it too. Too bad.

What saves *Distant Thunder* from melting into mush is the final sequence in the film, in which Nitz goes berserk and Mark must get himself, Jack, Char and Moss out of the area. All talk ceases as the terrified group fights to get out of what has become a chilling metaphor for Vietnam. For

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Cry in the Dark like a TV movie, albeit a good one

A CRY IN THE DARK

Directed by Fred Schepisi.
Screenplay by Robert Caswell
and Fred Schepisi.
Based on the book *Evil Angels*
by John Bryson.
Starring Meryl Streep and Sam Neill.
At the Nickelodeon Theater.

By MANAVENDRA K. THAKUR

SIGH. THIS FILM HAD SO MUCH going for it. It teams Meryl Streep — by far the most talented and accomplished actress working today — and Sam Neill, who is an excellent actor in his own right, with Australian-born director Fred Schepisi. Schepisi, who's made films like *Roxanne* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, returned to his Australian roots after ten years in the United States to make this film. He also brought along his usual technical crew. Best yet, he had already established a rapport with Streep and Neill when he cast them in his 1984 film *Plenty*.

Despite all this talent, though, *A Cry in the Dark* ends up resembling little more than a television movie — albeit a very good one. The acting and camerawork far surpass the mediocrity epitomized by television movies, but they cannot compensate for the topic, which is tailor-made for a television movie. When paying \$6 or more to see a film, one expects to experience more intelligence and depth than that got-

ten by simply flipping a switch or turning a knob. Schepisi's film avoids all the potential tearjerker possibilities of the story by displaying a great deal of taste and integrity, but at the same time the film demonstrates precious little sign of any wisdom or insight into the film's events or the forces that helped shape them.

The story recounts a true incident in which the Australian press, so-called scientific "experts," and Australians in general

vilified a bereaved mother named Lindy Chamberlain (Meryl Streep), whose nine-week-old baby Azaria disappeared when the Chamberlain family was vacationing in 1980 at Ayers Rock, a famous landmark in Australia. Mainly because Azaria's body was never found, the press and public discounted Lindy's claim that "a dingo took my baby" (a dingo is an Australian desert animal similar to the coyote), and instead

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Sam Neill and Meryl Streep in *A Cry in the Dark*