

Spotlight students become pioneers in Musical Theater as they prepare for Pittsburgh's first high school production of *Miss Saigon*

West Side Story, *Into the Woods*, *Les Miserables*; they were all just warm-ups for what may be Spotlight Performing Arts Academy's largest and most challenging musical yet. On May 18, 19 and 20, director Beth Walter will unveil Pittsburgh's first high school production of *Miss Saigon*.

With music, book and lyrics by Claude Michel Schonberg and Alain Boubil, *Miss Saigon* is a modern adaptation of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, similarly telling the tragic story of an ill-fated romance between an Asian woman and her Caucasian lover. Set in 1970's Saigon during the Vietnam War, *Miss Saigon* is almost entirely sung, combining a unique blend of the thematic elements in *West Side Story* with the stylistic elements of Schonberg and Boubil's *Les Miserables*.

Since its London premiere in 1989 and its Broadway premiere in 1991, *Miss Saigon* has enjoyed a rich production history, breaking several box office records and receiving numerous Tony nominations, including awards for lead actor and lead actress. The world high school premiere of *Miss Saigon* took place in March, 2006 at St. Joseph Regional High School in Montvale, New Jersey, a private Roman Catholic college preparatory school operating under the auspices of the Catholic Archdiocese of Newark. Working closely with Music Theater International in New York, the school launched the show on an experimental basis, to see if it was feasible on a high school level.

Proving successful at St. Joseph's, additional high schools are now undertaking the project, with Spotlight Performing Arts Academy in West View becoming the first theater school in the Pittsburgh area to tackle the show with a cast made up of all high school performers. Complete with complex dance numbers, dazzling special effects and a contemporary pop/rock score, *Miss Saigon* presents the Spotlight students and staff with numerous challenges which enhance the Academy's philosophy that arts education is critical to students' emotional growth, moral development and the acquisition of critical thinking skills.

The story of *Miss Saigon* takes place in a war-torn section of Saigon, and involves an interracial love affair between America soldier Chris (played by Connor Mrozowski, a Senior at Winchester Thurston School) and Vietnamese showgirl Kim (played by Jean Jagiello, a Senior at Vincentian Academy). The story also includes the portrayal of various wartime atrocities, prostitution, suicide, and the often sordid conditions faced by the homeless, destitute victims of war like Kim and her French-Vietnamese boss, known as The Engineer (double cast and played by George Chammas, a Senior at Vincentian Academy and Matthew Harvey, a Junior at North Catholic).

Rehearsals for the production began in late February at Spotlight studios in West View, and director Beth Walter welcomes the challenges of putting her teenage actors into the mindsets of the young people who lived through the Vietnam War, and handling the adult themes tastefully and effectively. While the subject matter might make *Saigon* appear to be an unlikely candidate for high school theater, Walter is confident that the production will showcase both the strong acting and vocal talents of her young performers, and prove the ability of high school actors to portray more serious subject matter.

In addition, Walter views working on this production as an opportunity for students to learn about a period in American History that is all-too-often ignored in history classes and textbooks. Walter explains, “The cast most definitely feels the weight of telling a story as emotionally heart-wrenching and as historically significant as *Miss Saigon*. I want the students to take their work seriously and to be proud of their achievements. This is an opportunity for them to talk openly about what was a very troubling time in American history, and to be able to simultaneously reflect on current government policies and the effect that they are having worldwide.”

Miss Saigon will open on May 18 at 7:30pm at the Kean Theater, St. Barnabas in Gibsonia. Other performances are scheduled for May 19 at 2pm and 8pm and May 20 at 2pm. Call 412-931-1001 for ticket information and reservations.