

# His dark musical

Tim Rice's West End adaptation of *From Here to Eternity* dips into adult themes cut from the classic novel and film, reports Kirsty Lang

*Kirsty Lang* Published: 20 October 2013

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From here to modernity: Siubhan Harrison (Lorene) and Robert Lonsdale (Prewitt) (Johan Persson)

Every morning, the cast of Sir Tim Rice's new West End musical get a real drilling: a tough one-hour workout from a former marine. The show is about a group of American soldiers based in the tropical backwater of Hawaii — and all comparisons with South Pacific end there.

*From Here to Eternity* is a much darker view of life in the US army than the Rodgers and Hammerstein favourite; and it's not exactly like the bestselling novel from which it has been adapted, either. Rice and his team have used the uncensored version of James Jones's

book. When it was first published in 1951, swearwords and explicit references to prostitution and gay sex were removed. Now, for the first time, Penguin has issued an uncensored version of the book to coincide with the opening of the new musical.

For many, *From Here to Eternity* means the Oscar-winning 1953 Hollywood movie, complete with steamy sex scene on the beach between Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster — a landmark moment in cinema. Yet Jones's daughter, Kaylie, who owns the rights to his estate, says: "The film had very little to do with what my dad wrote. It was a sanitised version. I told Tim Rice that if he wanted to do the musical, he had to go back to the original manuscript — and I'm pleased to say he has."

Jones's early life mirrors that of the book's hero. Both grew up poor during the Great Depression and joined the army because they were jobless and hungry. On his father's advice, Jones took a posting in Hawaii, because he thought he'd be safe, but within months of his signing up, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. His daughter says he came back from the Pacific war an angry young man and resolved to write a novel that told the truth about army life.

The hero, Private Prewitt, is based on a soldier in Jones's regiment who was viciously bullied for refusing to join the boxing team. Prewitt once blinded a guy in a fight and has resolved never to box again. The only support he gets is from his best friend, Maggio, another tough kid from the wrong side of the tracks.

One of the most controversial scenes cut from the original book is where Maggio talks about "rolling

queers” (having sex with gay men for money) to fund his drinking, gambling and trips to the whorehouse. This is a central scene in the musical. There’s also a reference to the fact that the regiment’s star boxer is gay, and spends his whole time trying to prove he isn’t.

Jones fought over every cut to his manuscript, including the deletion of 113 f-words. He complained to his editor that he had simply recorded the way rank-and-file soldiers really talk, writing in a letter: “The things we change in this book for propriety’s sake will, in five years, or 10 years, come in someone else’s book that may not be as good as this one, and then we will kick ourselves for not having done it.”

Jones became so fed up with American puritanism that he moved his family to Paris in the late 1950s and remained there for 15 years. Sadly, he never lived to see the uncensored version of *From Here to Eternity* in print, let alone on stage. But Kaylie Jones thinks her father would have approved of Rice’s treatment.

She flew to London last year to see a workshop of the musical and, over dinner with the team, discovered that three of the key people involved (Rice, the book-writer, Bill Oakes, and the producer, Lee Menzies) had fathers who had fought in the Second World War and had come home emotionally scarred. “That was a huge moment for me, because I realised they were respectful of the book and understood the soldiers’ journey.”

Oakes had the job of condensing the 900-page novel into a 2½-hour musical. There are two intertwining love stories at the heart of it: Prewitt falls for a prostitute, while his sergeant, Milt Warden, seduces the captain’s

wife. “The key to this book is the idea that happiness is fleeting,” Oakes says. “It’s all in the title.” The action takes place in the days running up to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor: the characters don’t know what’s going to hit them, but the audience is fully aware of the impending disaster.

The show’s director, Tamara Harvey, says she wanted to re-create the sound, smell and feel of the army barracks on stage (without the sweaty socks). “There’s a lot of testosterone, it’s a real company of men. There is boxing, and Javier de Frutos, the choreographer, has taken everyday rituals like the army drill or the action of polishing a boot and turned them into a dance.”

The music is by Stuart Brayson, a relative unknown and longtime protégé of Rice. To evoke the period, he has drawn on many strands of 20th-century American music, from big-band swing to rock’n’roll and country. He opens the show with a number called G Company Blues, inspired by an American army marching song.

To sustain fidelity to the spirit of Jones’s book, the production team employed a former marine to oversee all aspects of the show, including that morning workout. He’s also a James Jones fan who was banned from reading the book by his parents. Even the censored version was considered too racy for a lot of people in 1950s America.

The musical is Rice’s first in more than a decade, and he has a lot riding on it, including some of his own money. (He is an executive producer.) Musicals are expensive to put on and therefore highly risky, as Rice knows only too well from watching the American version of his show

Chess flop on Broadway in 1988. But he can also look to his many successes, including *The Lion King*, *Evita* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

The last two prove he is no stranger to turning dark material into song-and-dance numbers. When I ask whether some of the subject matter in *From Here to Eternity* is appropriate for a musical, he says: “Plenty of people predicted *Les Misérables* wouldn’t work because it was too dark, too brutal for a musical — and they were wrong.”

*From Here to Eternity* is previewing at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London WC2