

ACCENT



The last helicopter to flee Saigon during the American withdrawal in 1975 leaves behind many desperate Vietnamese, including Miss Saigon's heroine, Kim. [PHOTO BY MATTHEW MURPHY AND JOHAN PERSSON]

Still a spectacle

Critics are mixed, but theatergoers love 'Miss Saigon's' love story — and, of course, that big helicopter

By Jan Sjostrom
Palm Beach Daily News

Miss Saigon seems to be one of those musicals that people either love or loathe.

At least judging by critics' reactions to the Cameron Mackintosh-produced revival that, along with its famous helicopter, will land on Tuesday at the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach.

The New York Times' Ben Brantley said the 2017 Broadway production "feels about as affecting as a historical diorama, albeit a lavishly appointed one."

Director Laurence Connor's decision to move the show's center of gravity away from

If you go

What: Miss Saigon
When: Tuesday-March 8
Where: Kravis Center, West Palm Beach
For information: Call 832-7469 or visit kravis.org

the sleazy, cynical Engineer to the star-crossed lovers Kim and Chris diminishes the show, he said, because "they're hemmed in by a score that reduces them to love-struck archetypes."

The Chicago Tribune's Chris Jones was impressed by Connor's take on the show. In his view Connor "understands that audiences are shelling out the big bucks for a huge romantic spectacle



Emily Bautista portrays Kim and Anthony Festa plays Chris in the revival of Miss Saigon that opens Tuesday at the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach. [PHOTO BY MATTHEW MURPHY]

and, with the help of designer Adrian Vaux, delivers that in such a way that no one is likely to leave the theater saying that Miss Saigon was so much bigger and better in the 1990s."

Jones said the North American tour's cast was the best of the three productions of the revival he's seen.

Miss Saigon is the latest blockbuster original producer

Mackintosh has dusted off, following his successes with revivals of The Phantom of the Opera and Les Miserables.

It's taken him a while to revive Miss Saigon, which debuted on Broadway in 1991, because "it requires such a huge international cast of Asian and Western performers and a vast array of visually stunning sets," Mackintosh said.

This version features Bob Avian's original choreography but new sets, costumes, lighting and sound. The revival "takes a grittier, more realistic approach that magnifies the power and epic sweep of Boublil and Schonberg's tremendous score," Mackintosh said.

Those familiar with the

See SAIGON, E2



National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward speaks tonight at Festival of the Arts BOCA. [CONTRIBUTED]

Songs of sorrow and the South

Ward's novels and non-fiction confront painful topics, from a sibling's death to Hurricane Katrina

By Nancy Gibson
The Columbus Dispatch

Jesmyn Ward's novels — including "Sing, Unburied, Sing" and "Salvage the Bones" — beautifully but sorrowfully tell what it is like to be poor and black in the American South of today.

The 42-year-old Ward,

An Evening With Jesmyn Ward

When: Tonight, 7 pm
Where: Festival of the Arts BOCA, Mizner Park East Tent, Boca Raton
Information: festivalboca.org

a native of Mississippi and a professor at Tulane University in New Orleans, has lived a life not unlike those of her characters and continues to write works

See SONGS, E2

Why Boomers love river cruising

By Hannah Sampson
The Washington Post

Diana and David Carlson have traveled around the world over the years: Egypt, South Africa, China, Prague, Berlin and more.

"My husband's getting to the point where he says, 'I just don't like those long plane trips,'" says Diana Carlson, 73. That's fine with her. "I say, 'OK, we'll go on the boat again.' I'll go on it as often as I can."

By "the boat," Carlson means the American Queen, a six-deck paddle-wheeler that plies the Mississippi River as the flagship of the American Queen Steamboat Company. For all the Southern California couple's globe-trotting, they've sailed nearly 20 times with the cruise line that's devoted to U.S. rivers.

The Carlsons are exactly the kind of customers the operators of American river cruise lines want to reach: They have the time and ability to travel, an interest in exploring U.S. sites and — importantly — they know that



The American Queen ship in Cincinnati. [AMERICAN QUEEN STEAMBOAT COMPANY HANDOUT PHOTO]

river cruising exists in the United States.

"I really believe the demand is there," says Charles Robertson, president and CEO of American Cruise Lines, which operates a fleet of 12 small river and coastal ships that touch 30 states. "It's a matter really of raising awareness about cruising as an option in this country. The demand for river cruises globally is enormous, and I think most people just aren't aware yet that it's actually an option here."

Baby boomers are the group that operators are most keen on reaching. Robertson said his company has historically attracted cruisers 65 and older, but are attracting more in their 50s with amenities on new boats, like yoga rooms, gyms and unique gathering areas.

"People that cruise on our boats need two things: time and money," says John Waggoner, chairman and CEO of American Queen Steamboat

See RIVER, E2

Early intervention key to treating shingles



Dr. Keith Roach

Dear Dr. Roach: I was diagnosed with shingles after a few days of a painful rash. The doctor recommended acyclovir, gabapentin and prednisone. Do these really help? — **M.F.**

Answer: Shingles is when the chickenpox virus reappears in a specific area of the body, such as in a beltlike distribution on the torso. In fact, the word “shingles” comes from “cingulatum,” the Latin word for “belt.” But it can appear on any area of the body. Shingles damages the nerves, and is usually painful, with a degree of pain

that can range from mild to excruciating. Some people have intense itching in addition to or instead of pain.

Treatment with an antiviral agent — acyclovir or one of its newer and more potent cousins, such as valacyclovir (Valtrex) — is effective at reducing symptoms if started within 72 hours of the onset of rash, preferably immediately. Gabapentin is an agent to reduce nerve pain. It takes time to build up to an effective dose, and some physicians prefer to use shorter-acting pain medication for the pain of shingles itself. The most recent studies on prednisone, a potent anti-inflammatory steroid, have failed to show benefit, and I no longer prescribe it.

The dreaded complication of shingles is postherpetic neuralgia, which can last for weeks, months or

even years after the damage to the nerves is caused by shingles. The older a person is, the more likely she is to get it, and the longer it tends to last. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how bad postherpetic neuralgia can be: I have seen healthy older adults become bedbound due to PHN. Early treatment with gabapentin or other pain medications is indicated.

It’s much better to prevent shingles than it is to treat it. The new shingles vaccine is highly effective at preventing shingles and more effective at preventing or reducing the severity of PHN. Two doses are recommended for adults 50 and over.

Dear Dr. Roach: In the coming days, I will be having parathyroid surgery for the removal of one of my parathyroid glands.

Will surgery improve my libido (I am male)? Will it also have a positive effect on any heart condition I might have? — **M.T.**

Answer: The parathyroid glands are so named because they sit on top of the thyroid gland in the neck. There are usually four, and a benign tumor of one (occasionally two) can cause elevated level of parathyroid hormone. The hormone causes increased absorption of calcium from the bones, leading to both bone loss and high blood calcium levels, which is how the disease is usually discovered. Treatment with surgery is the definitive way to get parathyroid levels back to normal and protect the bones.

However, there are many other possible symptoms of high parathyroid hormone levels. Among these are depression, lethargy, decreased desire for social

interaction and trouble thinking. Loss of libido is seldom discussed in the medical literature but is absolutely a potential symptom of high parathyroid hormone. Many men and women who have had surgery note a significant improvement in their libido. One surgeon noted that 75% of his male patients under 65 noticed improvement in their sex life after surgery.

Although many experts feel that high PTH leads to increased risk of heart disease, the data are not conclusive. However, I feel it likely that getting the parathyroid and calcium levels down to normal likely improves cardiovascular health.

Write to Dr. Keith Roach at King Features, 300 W. 57 Street, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10019-5238

SONGS

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inspired by her experiences and those of family members.

She appears tonight to discuss her work as part of Festival of the Arts BOCA.

Her 2013 memoir, “Men We Reaped,” tells of five young men — friends and family members — who died in the South over a period of four years. In it, she painfully concludes that the deaths could be attributed to where they lived, a place with a history of racism and economic struggles that contribute to drug abuse and the dissolution of families.

Ward was the first person in her family to attend college. She graduated from Stanford University in California and earned a masters of fine arts from the University of Michigan. She returned to the South and lives today in the same area of Mississippi where she spent most of her childhood.

Ward spoke with The Dispatch from her home in DeLisle, Mississippi.

Q: “Sing, Unburied, Sing” (2017) is so beautifully written but so sad. Is it difficult to write stories like that?

A: The beauty of language is one of the things that drew me to reading when I was a kid, and it’s definitely one of the things that drew me to writing. I’ve always been in love with language and curious about the connections you can make with language — figurative language. How you can take someone out of their own experience and put them in another experience? I’m aware that the people that I write about are troubled and that the place where I write about is very difficult. Horrible things happen. But I feel the responsibility to tell stories about these people.

Q: “Salvage the Bones” is a fictional story, but it was inspired by your experience in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina. What happened to your family?

A: We didn’t evacuate. We have a really big family and (are of) limited means. ... We stayed here during the storm. We thought we were prepared but we didn’t realize that ... the storm surge would be so bad, so the house flooded. We had to flee in the middle of the hurricane. We swam out ... most of our cars had been swept away. But some in our family had trucks so we piled in and tried to make it to our church but didn’t make it. We found a

field that was a little higher ground. And we waited out the hurricane there. Towards the end of the storm we were able to go a bit further and find people who offered us shelter.

Q: One of the five young men you write about in “Men We Reaped” was your brother, Joshua, who was killed by a drunken driver. His death had a big impact on your writing, didn’t it?

A: It changed my point of view, the way I looked at the world and thought about the world. When you’re young you ... think you’ll live forever. Fatal accidents and fatal disease will happen to someone else. When my brother died, that was the moment when I realized life was not infinite. ... Random bad things will happen to the people I know and love. You can’t waste time, because you don’t really have a lot. After my brother died, it really hit me that I wanted to be a writer. I knew the odds were that I wouldn’t be successful, but I was going to try.

Q: You obviously have succeeded. You received a MacArthur genius grant and you are the first woman and the first person of color to have won two National Book Awards for fiction. Were you surprised?

A: The first (National Book Award) I definitely did not think I had any chance of winning. I was completely shocked. I didn’t think I would win the second one either. I knew it would be a huge deal if I won it twice.

Q: What are the challenges of being a black woman who writes fiction?

A: Mostly it’s really hard for black women to sell their work, to convince the powers that be (in publishing) that there’s an audience for it. There was this doubt that certain people had that our stories aren’t universal — that there would be a limited audience. The default is that everyone wants to read about a white banker in New York. That assumes that we’re all able to identify with that version of humanity, but not a poor black girl trying to survive a hurricane.

I’ve faced some of that also with readers. Sometimes in schools, kids are assigned my books and some aren’t happy about it. They think they don’t have anything in common with the people I write about. But “Salvage the Bones” is about grief, sibling relationships, the ways parents sometimes fail children. Those are all human things that we experience across the board.

SAIGON

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musical will recall that its French creators, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg, transposed the story from Giacomo Puccini’s 1904 opera Madama Butterfly to Saigon as the Americans were beating a retreat from the Vietnam War.

According to Mackintosh “the tragic love story at the heart of the show has become even more relevant today with innocent people being torn apart by war all over the world.”

The revival avoids the controversy that bedeviled

the original production, which starred white actor Jonathan Pryce as the Engineer, by casting performers of Asian descent as the Vietnamese characters.

The show is still a spectacle.

The helicopter, which descends in the second act to carry off Chris and leave Kim behind, weighs more than 3 tons and is 26 feet tall. The craft’s hall-swallowing impact is increased by holographic projections.

The show travels in nine trucks, which it no doubt needs to carry the 16 costumes changes worn by the women in the ensemble, the soldiers’ flak jackets and helmets (all once used in action) and everything else required to surround

its 42-member cast with an immersive environment.

Instruments played by the 15-member orchestra include Asian flutes and 77 different percussion instruments, including skull drums, ankle bells, singing bowls, Thai chap cymbals and kabuki blocks.

There’s no denying that Miss Saigon is one of the most popular shows in musical theater history. The original production ran for nearly 10 years on Broadway.

The show has been performed in 32 countries, in 15 languages and has been seen by more than 36 million people worldwide.

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RIVER

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Company. “Because of that, boomers are ideal. Most of them have traveled all over the world. They want to stay closer to home, they want to learn more about the U.S.”

About 80% of the steamboat company’s passengers are baby boomers. Waggoner said depending on the boat in question, demographics on board skew toward 65 or 70, plus or minus 10 years. Cindy Anderson, an owner of the travel agency USA River Cruises, says the market has largely been travelers 65 and older.

European river cruising got a huge popularity boost in the past decade during the run of the TV period drama “Downton Abbey” — not because of any particular plot line, but because Viking River Cruises was a sponsor of the PBS Masterpiece series. U.S. audiences who couldn’t get enough of the Crawley family and their staff also got an eyeful of the company’s boats, cabins and destinations.

Although Americans have been traveling on U.S. rivers for centuries, the modern river-cruise industry in the country is still nascent and dominated by two companies. American Cruise Lines started sailing in 2000, while major operator American Queen Steamboat Company launched its first ship in 2012. Both have seen accelerated growth in recent years. Between them, they cover waterways including the Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, Cumberland, Hudson, Columbia and Snake rivers as well as coastal areas in New England, the Southeast and Alaska.

Itineraries are often focused on history or nature, with a heavy dose of Americana. Cruise lines organize themed

trips around the Civil War, Kentucky Derby, music, food or bourbon. Trips tend to include alcohol, and most shore excursions and can cost far more than a typical Caribbean cruise, between \$6,000 to \$10,000 a week per couple, depending on the line. “I think a lot of people have not really explored the United States in that way,” says Colleen McDaniel, editor in chief of the news and review site Cruise Critic. “And it’s a really fabulous way to do it. The pace is a little bit slower, which is great for some people.”

The Cruise Lines International Association doesn’t break out statistics for river cruising in the United States, but the two biggest players say they are having to add ships to keep up with the demand.

American Cruise Lines can carry about 80,000 passengers this year, with that number expected to grow as more boats come online; two more new vessels will be added in 2021, bringing the total to 14. The line, which sails paddle-wheelers, coastal ships and modern riverboats that carry between 100 and 200 passengers, has more than doubled capacity since 2015.

American Queen Steamboat Company needs about 46,000 customers a year to fill the six vessels it owns under two brands — the namesake steamboat company and the recently acquired Victory Cruise Lines. The operator christens its latest addition American Countess, a 245-passenger steamboat built using the hull of a former casino boat, in April. Last year, the operator acquired Victory and its two coastal vessels, and is building a third.

“They want to get the ships on those rivers fast,” McDaniel says. “So I think that represents the demand that’s out there.”

And Viking — now an industry powerhouse with 78 ocean

and river vessels — is making bigger moves in the United States. The company recently announced a new expedition ship that will sail to United States and Canadian destinations on the Great Lakes.

The Associated Press reported last week that Viking also plans to start Mississippi River cruises in 2022; the operator has been talking about plans to enter the market for several years. More details were not immediately available.

U.S. law says lines that sail only domestic itineraries must meet stringent requirements that keeps foreign operators out. Vessels must be built in the United States, staffed by American crew, and inspected by the Coast Guard, among other rules. It wasn’t clear how Viking planned to meet those requirements, but competitors say they hope the line’s arrival will drum up more attention for the still-niche sector.

Anderson, whose travel agency focuses on American rivers, said current global events are also driving interest in local exploration.

“A lot of people are not leaving the United States because of this new virus,” she says, referring to the novel coronavirus that has sickened more than 81,000 people and killed more than 2,770. “We’ve had a huge amount of cancellations for overseas, but we’ve also had double the amount of bookings for the U.S. now.”

For 77-year-old Al Elliott of Georgetown, Texas, the rivers have been a great place to spend his retirement (and his kids’ inheritance, he joked). He takes Amtrak to all his cruises and counts a wine cruise as one high point.

“I think my liver’s still trying to dry out from that one,” he says, though he’s hardly done with the theme. “They have a beer cruise I want to go on.”

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The Palm Beach Post