



## [Miss Saigon](#) at Palace Theatre

**Producer – Sir Cameron Mackintosh**

**Composer Claude-Michel Schönberg and lyricist Alain Boublil**

**Reviewed by [Katie Leicester](#) March 2018**

Miss Saigon is my absolute favourite musical so writing this review is probably the hardest but the most exciting opportunity so far as a critic. I first saw the production at The Theatre Royal on Drury Lane in 1989, intrigued and enchanted by Cameron Mackintosh's works I naively watched Miss Saigon with the cast of Lea Salonga as Kim, Simon Bowman as Chris and Jonathan Price as the Engineer not realising then that this musical would capture my heart for ever more.

Of course there will be a whole new generation of theatregoers who never saw it during its ten year run throughout the 1990's, but may have seen the revised version billed as the 25th anniversary production that opened at the Prince Edward Theatre in 2014 and closed in 2016. Many can relish the chance to see the familiar work and compare their previous viewings of Miss Saigon, whilst new comers can be captivated by this ill-fated love story that carries the audience through the tumult of war, separation, hope and despair - all within three hours.

Set during the Vietnam War, *Miss Saigon* tells the tragic story of Kim (**Sooha Kim**) a 17 year old girl forced into prostitution after her village is bombed and her family have been killed. It's the last days of the Vietnam War where Kim is working in a Saigon bar called 'Dreamland', run by a notorious character known as the Engineer (

**Red Concepcion**

), where she meets and falls in love with an American GI named Chris (

**Ashley Gilmour**

). They are torn apart by the fall of Saigon, and for three years Kim goes on an epic journey of survival to find her way back to Chris.

From the opening number it is clear to see why the show has run for so many years, the gravitas and scale of the set design with its slick and smooth movements means there is always something for the eye to focus on with its many flashing signs above the bar, to the acrobatics during the reunification of Vietnam, the fire breathing dragon with its huge statue of Ho Chi Minh in the backdrop, the epic design of the hovering helicopter and finally the American Dream scene where you are wowed by an American Cadillac and Statue of Liberty on stage.

In terms of performance this tour also demonstrates that we've reached a point where touring productions match if not excel their West End/Broadway counterparts. Sooha Kim, the first Korean actress to perform as Kim outshone all of her predecessors including Eva Noblezada who was handpicked by Sir Cameron personally for the role in his 2014 revival. Sooha, with her youthful looks, endearing innocence and vulnerability, was perfect for the qualities needed to play this role and despite her petite frame she delivered powerful but melodious vocals, making her the best Kim I have seen in nearly 30 years. Her rendition of 'I Still Believe' moved the audience, seeing her desperately clinging to the belief that her love will return and her delivery of 'I'd Give My Life for You' had every mother in the audience feeling her desire and passion to give her child the best chance in life, and promising to lay her own life before his so no harm would come to him. Sooha was not only believable in this role but captivating as an

enchantress, as she took you through an array of emotions right up to the final sacrifice where she pleads for her child to have a better chance in life and the desperation to do what is right for him even at the cost of her own life.

It is however the ‘supporting’ roles that really stood out in this production. An often over-looked part, Thuy played by **Gerald Santos**, has a scene that really rips at the heart and makes his part human is where his heart is broken by Kim’s rejection - you see his emotional devastation and pain as she reveals she has a child to her GI. An often thankless and unlikeable role is Chris’ wife Ellen (**Zoe Doano**) who in previous productions comes across as cold and calculated, often disliked because not only does she get the guy, she gets the child too. It has changed over the years to try and soften the character to a more warm and vulnerable one by the use of song and lyric changes such as ‘Now that I’ve seen her’, which was harsh and bitter where Chris is given an ultimatum of “it’s her or me?”, to ‘Maybe’ which sees her more in turmoil after seeing the love Kim has for Chris and is willing to let him go if he really loves her. Zoe Doano was the first Ellen to show the side I believe the producers and lyricists have tried to do so for many years, the words were of course exactly the same but it was how Zoe delivered the dialogue and her acting skills that truly delivered a different side to Ellen’s character than ever before. As much as the role of Kim has captured my heart the most surprising part of the evening was when I interpreted the two females as victims of this tragedy for the very first time.

Unfortunately many actors are hard to follow, with long running shows and the role of John and the engineer did not live up to the predecessors such as Hugh Maynard and Jon Jon Briones. The interpretation and performance from Ryan O’Gorman and Red Concepcion disappointed me personally, but thankfully overall, the actors and actresses delivered another outstanding performance of this epic love story and for me the greatest musical of all time.

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**Miss Saigon remains in Manchester until 21st May then continues its tour**

**to Bristol.**