

## **SECTION TWO**

# **POST-VISIT EDUCATION MATERIALS**

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Exercises with an asterisk are particularly suitable for Key Stage 3 pupils.

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**2. SONG ANALYSIS - “THE AMERICAN DREAM”** **Page 10**

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**3. KEY SCENE ANALYSIS - “KIM AND ELLEN - THE FIRST MEETING”** **Page 13**

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Includes: Teacher sheet

## CULTURE, TRADITION AND CONFLICT

### Teacher sheet

#### Purpose

The purpose of this section is as follows:

- To introduce children to a selection of traditional Vietnamese spiritual beliefs and cultural practices
- To consider how these beliefs and practices influence the plot of *Miss Saigon*
- To explore the idea that, for certain feelings, Vietnamese culture prefers non-verbal communication whereas American & British cultures are more inclined to use verbal expression. This exercise can be used to assess pupils' speaking and listening skills.

#### Activities

- Reading the spiritual and cultural beliefs extract sheet and filling in the crossword on activity sheet 1 (answers below). The answers are all contained within the extract sheet.
- Following the instructions on activity sheet 2 and answering questions on each extract in turn related to *Miss Saigon*. Answers to questions: The altar is used when Chris and Kim get “married”; Thuy’s ghost appears from behind the shrine; Thuy tells Kim that she must marry him because “our father’s bound us together”.
- Reading the Vietnamese gestures sheet and following the drama game instructions on activity sheet 3.

#### Preparation

- Copy of the beliefs extract sheet for each pupil
- Copy of the cultural crossword on Activity Sheet 1 for each pupil
- Copy of the Activity Sheet 2 for every pupil
- Copy of the Vietnamese gestures sheet for each pupil
- Copy of Activity Sheet 3 for every pupil

#### Answers to cultural crossword (Activity Sheet 1)

*Across: 2 Ancestor, 6 Incense, 8 Older, 9 Respect, 11 Family, 13 Life, 14 Income, 15 Divorce, 16 Inform*

*Down: 1 Patriarchal, 3 Christianity, 4 Spirit, 5 Rites, 7 Legal, 10 Confucian, 12 Altar, 13 Lam*

#### Additional resources

A further layer could be added to these studies by exploring traditional Vietnamese music. An excellent introduction to Vietnamese musical forms, with downloadable music files, can be found on [www.saigoninfo.com/vanhua/music\\_main.htm](http://www.saigoninfo.com/vanhua/music_main.htm). Students could study the “wedding scene” between Chris and Kim where the bar girls sing a traditional celebratory song.

A fascinating photographic record of traditional Vietnamese cultural dress and food is available at [www.tribalcog.com/ecard/vietnam](http://www.tribalcog.com/ecard/vietnam).

## CULTURE, TRADITION AND CONFLICT

### Vietnamese spiritual and cultural beliefs extract sheet

## BUDDHISM

*The Buddhist influence in Vietnamese culture can be seen in the view of life on earth as transient and unstable. In the view of the ordinary Vietnamese person, life on earth is but a temporary stop on their journey to death and other reincarnations. Death, for Vietnamese, does not mean total disappearance. Only the corporeal\* frame is disintegrated, and the spirit survives and perpetuates itself in a series of reincarnations. The belief of the survival of the soul forms the spiritual basis for ancestor worship while the feeling of gratitude and affection for one's ancestors\* forms its moral foundation.*

*Ancestor worship is shared by Vietnamese people of all faiths; except perhaps the converts to Christianity. Most families have an ancestral altar placed in a prominent place in the main room of the house. The ancestral altar is set with incense burners and candlesticks together with the ancestral tablets and pictures. On the anniversary of the death of each ancestor, special rites are performed. These rites consist of making sacrifice offerings, burning incense, bowing and praying before the altar. Whenever there is an occasion of family joy or sorrow, weddings, births, promotion, or funerals, rites are performed to honour the ancestors and inform them of the special event.*

Source: *The Vietnamese Philosophy of Life* by Huynh Dinh Te,  
<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/5908/religion/philosophy.html>

\* Key words: “Corporeal” = physical body      “Ancestor” = someone from whom you are descended

## FAMILY CULTURE

### Extract 1

*The kindnesses of my father are comparable to the Thai mountain.  
Those of my mother, to a perennial Spring.  
With great fervour I venerate my father and my mother*

Popular Vietnamese Song

### Extract 2

*Vietnamese society is family oriented and essentially classless. The Vietnamese family is especially important and close-knit. Held together by the ancestor cult, the family is the first loyalty of the Vietnamese before his allegiance to country ... The family consists not only of the living, but of the spirits of the dead, as well as those who have not yet been born. Any thing a man does, he does out of family consideration rather than for himself as an individual. In this traditionally patriarchal society, great respect is given to men, especially to older men.*

Source: <http://vietcatholic.net/culture/familyhtm>

### Extract 3

*During the thousand years that the Chinese maintained control of Vietnam, Vietnamese culture was permeated by their Confucian philosophical beliefs. This philosophy was based on the existence of the extended family structure (Lam) throughout 2,000 years of Vietnamese history. It was believed that in order to achieve human perfection, one must follow the established codes of behaviour of Confucianism which include reverence for ancestors and respect for elders...The importance is not upon the individual's accomplishments but upon his duty to family and society.*

*After marriage, a woman would become a housewife and mother. She was expected to be dependent upon her husband, budgeted his income for the household, took care of children and even grandchildren, performed all household tasks. Divorce was legal but not common. A wife could be unhappy in her marriage; but rather than accept divorce, the family encouraged her to sacrifice and to endure the difficulties of the marriage for the sake of her children.*

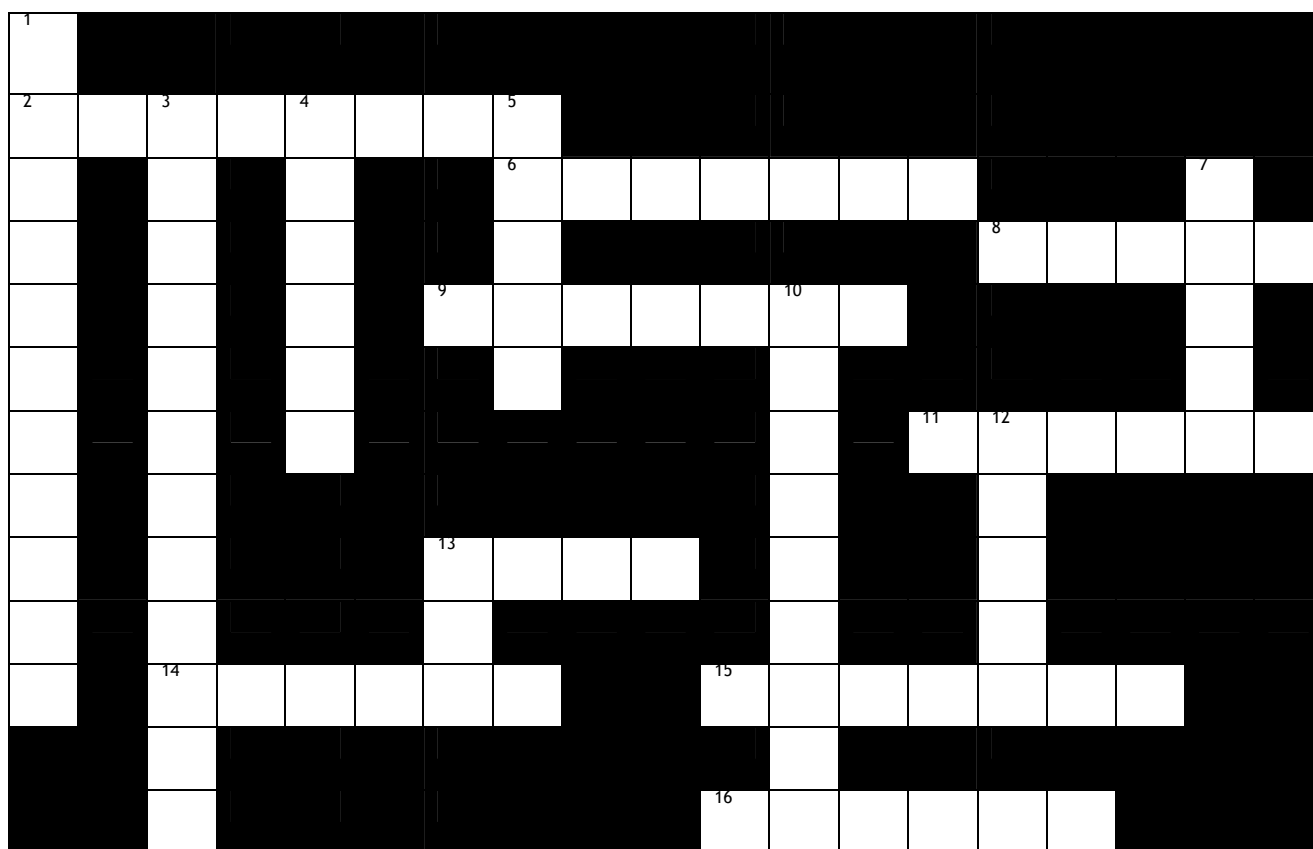
*Western style courtship and romance were seen as inappropriate for unmarried Vietnamese people. Even nowadays, virginity is still cherished and pregnancy out of wedlock is uncommon. Moreover, it is a grave disgrace to the family*

Source: <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/5908/values/traditionalval.htm>

## CULTURE, TRADITION AND CONFLICT

### Activity sheet 1

All the answers to this crossword can be found on the cultural and spiritual beliefs extract sheet.



#### Across

2. A person in the distant past that you are descended from
1. This material is burnt during special rites
8. If you are a man, then the \_\_\_\_\_ you are, the more highly you are thought of
9. Great \_\_\_\_\_ is given to men (especially those in *question 8 across*)
11. This unit is especially important and close-knit in Vietnamese culture
13. Seen as transient and unstable by Buddhists
14. The Vietnamese wife budgets this for the husband
15. The act of breaking up a marriage (not common in Vietnamese culture)
16. Rites are performed to \_\_\_\_\_ ancestors of a special event

#### Down

1. A \_\_\_\_\_ society is one which is dominated by men
3. Some Vietnamese people converted to \_\_\_\_\_ and stopped worshipping ancestors.
4. Buddhists believe that, even if the body dies, then the \_\_\_\_\_ will survive.
5. These are performed at the altar
7. The act described in *question 15 across* is \_\_\_\_\_ but not common in Vietnamese culture.
10. Under Chinese rule, \_\_\_\_\_ philosophical beliefs were brought to Vietnam
12. The Vietnamese bow and pray before this during special rites.
13. The Chinese term for philosophical beliefs based on an extended family structure.

## CULTURE, TRADITION AND CONFLICT

### Activity sheet 2

#### Read through the extract on “Buddhism”

1. When in the musical do you see characters using an altar (hint: a type of wedding ceremony is taking place)? Who is involved in the scene?
2. Where does Thuy’s ghost appear from?
3. What reasons does Thuy give for Kim needing to marry him?

#### Read through the Extracts 1 & 2 under “Family Culture”

1. Think about how the beliefs described here must have put pressure on Kim to marry Thuy. What would you have done in her position?
2. Does an understanding of Vietnamese cultural beliefs help to explain the emergence of Thuy’s ghost more fully? What does the ghost represent and why does he haunt Kim?

#### Read through Extract 3 under “Family Culture”

1. Do these beliefs explain Kim’s behaviour at the strip bar at the beginning of Miss Saigon?
2. How can you see these beliefs manifested in Kim’s attitude to Chris when he returns to see her and Tam?
3. How would these beliefs shape Kim’s reaction to Chris rejecting her?

#### Extended exercise

Write about a tradition that is important to a group to which you belong (ethnic group, family group, religious group etc). What personal value do you attach to this tradition? Why? Will you pass it on to your children?

#### Key words

Culture: “all the knowledge and values shared by a particular society”

Tradition: “any kind of teaching, written or spoken, handed down from generation to generation”

Source: [www.hyperdictionary.com](http://www.hyperdictionary.com)

**CULTURE, TRADITION AND CONFLICT**

## Vietnamese gestures list

**The Meaning of Some Patterns of Vietnamese Non-verbal Communication**

Nonverbal Patterns	Meaning in Vietnamese Culture
Bowing	Greeting; great respect.
Avoiding eye contact.	Showing respect to people senior in age or status or of the opposite sex.
Smiling	<p>For the Vietnamese, smiling is a proper response in most situations; verbal expression is generally not needed or is not appropriate. It is used as a substitute for "I'm sorry", "Thank you" or "Hi!" It is used instead of a ready yes to avoid appearing over-enthusiastic.</p> <p>For casual and informal circumstances, feelings of thankfulness or apology are not expressed by verbal expression such as "thank you" or "I'm sorry" but by non-verbal, silence or a smile. Parents and teachers never say thanks to their students for a small service, such as closing the window or passing the books around. A smile will do in this case.</p> <p>A smile is also a proper response to scolding or harsh words to show that one sincerely acknowledges the mistake or fault committed.</p> <p>A smile or a blush in the face is the proper response to a compliment. The person who gives a compliment never expects a "thank you" in return. In Vietnamese culture, a verbal expression of thanks in this case amounts to a lack of modesty from the person who receives the compliment. If a verbal response were necessary, one would deny the compliment, saying that one does not deserve it.</p>
Shaking hands.	Friendly greeting between men (except elderly men); only acceptable for a Vietnamese woman if she is greeting a non-Vietnamese man.
Palm of right hand facing away from the body, fingers moving up and down several times.	"Come here." Not used to people senior in age or status.
Forefinger and top of thumb meet to form circle, other fingers upright.	"Zero." Poor quality.
Palm of right hand facing oneself, forefinger crooked and moving back and forth.	Offensive to adults; threatening to children.
Holding hands with or putting an arm over the shoulder of a person of the same sex.	Friendly gesture, common in public
Crossing arms.	Sign of respect.
Patting a person's back.	Disrespectful.

## VIETNAMESE GESTURES

### Activity sheet 3

- Read through the list of Vietnamese gestures
- Discuss with your partner the main differences between UK/American gestures and Vietnamese expressions

#### Drama games

Look at the following scenario and act out the situation in pairs, using the appropriate gestures from each culture

**The Vietnamese consider dog meat to be a delicacy; it is traditionally meant to bring great luck and good health.**

One of you should imagine that you are an American who has gone to a Vietnamese person's house and has been honoured with a meal of dog meat. The partner should imagine that they are the host.

Think about the following:

- What would the American visitor's reactions be to being served such a meal?
- How would the Vietnamese host react in return?
- How would the conversation progress?
- How would the conversation end?

You should workshop a short scene (a couple of minutes in length), and then re-act it putting in the appropriate non-verbal gestures to accentuate your feelings. Present your scene to the rest of the class.

Now study the following scenario, once more acting out the situation in pairs.

**At the time *Miss Saigon* was written, most Americans would have found it acceptable for teenagers to date a partner of their choice. However, Vietnamese culture frowned upon public displays of affection, especially between mixed race couples.**

One of you should imagine that you are an American teenager who has gone to Vietnam on holiday to stay with a Vietnamese family. You meet a Vietnamese girl/boy that you really like and they show you around the local town. When you get home, the father of the family that you are staying with asks you not to see the girl/boy again, as people will start to talk. One of you should imagine that they are the father.

Think about the following:

- How do you think that the father would approach the topic?
- How would he feel about the actions of the teenager?
- As the teenager, how does it feel to be told that an accepted part of your culture is unacceptable?
- How would the conversation end?

## SONG ANALYSIS - “THE AMERICAN DREAM”

### Teacher sheet

#### Purpose

The purpose of this section is as follows:

- To give students a further opportunity to think about how songs in a musical are more than just ‘good tunes’ - they communicate a lot about the characters and the particular situation that they find themselves in.
- For students to crystallise their thoughts about the motives and actions of the key characters in the musical
- For students to further extend their exploration of cultural differences between East and West and reflect on prevailing cultural stereotypes

#### Activities

- Pupils to read through “The American Dream” lyric sheet, stopping to discuss any unfamiliar words (some of which are defined in the glossary on their activity sheets). You may want to play the song to them as they follow the words.
- Pupils to engage in the extended writing and discussion activities (numbered One, Two and Three on their activity sheet, and increasing in difficulty at each step).

#### Preparation

Copy one lyric sheet and one activity sheet per pupil. A copy of the map of Vietnam from section 1 may be useful when discussing the Engineer’s birth place of Haiphong.

<b>SONG ANALYSIS - “THE AMERICAN DREAM”</b>
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Lyric sheet
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Here are the main lyrics to the Engineer’s final song, “The American Dream”:

*My father was a tattoo artist in Haiphong  
 But his designs on mother didn’t last too long  
 My mother sold her body, high on betel nuts  
 My job was bringing red-faced monsieurs to our huts  
 Selling your Mom is a wrench  
 Perfume can cover a stench  
 That’s what I learned from the French*

*Then it all changed with Dien Bien Phu  
 The Frogs went home, who came - guess who?  
 Are you surprised we went insane?  
 With dollars pouring down like rain  
 Businessmen never rob banks  
 I can sell crap, and still get thanks  
 That’s what I learned from the Yanks*

*I’m fed up with small time hustles  
 I’m too good to waste my talent for greed  
 I need room to flex my muscles  
 In an ocean where big sharks feed  
 Make me a Yankee; they’re my family  
 They’re selling what people need*

*What’s that I smell in the air? The American dream  
 Sweet as a new millionaire: the American dream  
 Pre-packed and ready to wear: the American dream  
 Fat, like a chocolate éclair as I suck out the cream  
 Luck by the tail. How can I fail?  
 And best of all it’s for sale: The American dream*

*Greasy Chinks make life so sleazy  
 In the States I’ll have a club that’s four-starred  
 Men like me there have things easy  
 I’ll have a lawyer and a bodyguard  
 To the Johns there; I’ll sell blondes there  
 That they can charge on a card*

*What’s that I smell in the air? The American dream  
 Sweet as a suite in Bel-Air: the American dream  
 Girls can buy breasts by the pair: the American dream  
 Bald people think they’ll grow hair: the American dream  
 Call girls are lining Times Square: the American dream  
 Bums there have money to spare: the American dream  
 Cars that have bars take you there: the American dream  
 Onstage each night, Fred Astaire: the American dream*

*Schlitz down the drain!  
 Pop the champagne!  
 It’s time we all entertain  
 My American dream!*

## SONG ANALYSIS - “THE AMERICAN DREAM”

### Activity sheet

Read through the lyrics to “The American Dream” on the separate sheet.

The following glossary may help you:

*Betel nuts* - naturally occurring narcotic, popular in Asia although technically illegal

*Chinks* - derogatory slang for Chinese people

*Frogs* - derogatory slang for French people

*Haiphong* - third biggest city in Vietnam, located in the North of the country (see [map](#))

*Dien Bien Phu* - location where Vietminh forces defeated the French during the Vietnam War

*Schlitz* - any cheap alcohol

*Yankee* - the Engineer is referring to anyone from America

### ACTIVITY ONE - Sell the dream!

Design a poster advertising the Engineer’s view of the American Dream. You can use pictures from magazines, newspapers and the internet. Imagine that you are trying to entice people into the country.

### ACTIVITY TWO - Fight your corner

*Miss Saigon* is about dreams being shattered. As the Engineer sings this song, we know that he will never realise his American dream because Chris is not going to take him, Kim and Tam to America. Imagine that you are the Engineer and that you have found out about Chris’ plans. Prepare a speech to try and convince him to take you to America. Students should then present their speech to the class

### ACTIVITY THREE - The end of the dream?

The war in Vietnam signalled the end of many people’s faith in the “American way”. This was the first time ever that America had lost a war. Look at this quote by Henry Kissinger (the U.S. negotiator who facilitated the cease-fire between American and the North Vietnamese government in 1973):

*“Vietnam is still with us. It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power - not only at home, but throughout the world. It has poisoned our domestic debate. We paid an exorbitant price for the decisions that were made in good faith and for good purpose.”*

In what way does the musical *Miss Saigon* draw our attention to flaws and cracks in the idealistic vision of “the American dream”? Think about the effects of:

- a) America losing the war
- b) The huge numbers of American and Vietnamese casualties
- c) People discovering the plight of the Bui Doi

This should either be an open discussion or a writing exercise.

## KEY SCENE ANALYSIS - KIM AND ELLEN'S FIRST MEETING

### Teacher sheet

#### Purpose

The purpose of this section is as follows:

- For students to explore one scene in detail, looking at the characters' personal attitudes and motives
- For students to understand the place a particular scene occupies in the context of the wider production
- For students to explore alternative narratives for a particular scene and thus alter the ending of *Miss Saigon*. This will give students insight into the work of the musical creators.

#### Activities

- Read through the selected dialogue from Kim and Ellen's song in class.
- Students should attempt the questions on the accompanying activity sheet. Suggested answers are as follows:
  1. The scene comes towards the end of the musical. Students can look back at the synopsis to clarify if necessary
  2. Kim enters the room hoping to meet Chris, excited about their future together, and hopeful that her luck has changed
  3. When Kim meets Ellen and realises that Chris has re-married, she is adamant that Tam must go with them back to America for a better life
  4. Ellen wants Kim to realise that she is being unreasonable and that Chris has moved on. He now has a whole new life in a different country
  5. Ellen is shaken by meeting Kim and looks for reassurance from Chris that she is his only love. She tells Chris that she couldn't bear to have Kim living near her
  6. Kim, in a state of despair, goes back home to Tam. When she hears Chris and Ellen approaching, she kills herself - forcing them to take Tam to America and look after the child.
- Given that the answer to the last question is that Kim kills herself shortly after this scene takes place, pupils need to understand that this is a KEY SCENE in the musical - a crux turning point in the narrative. Ask the class to talk about the effect that meeting Ellen has upon Kim before they attempt the questions.
- The class should then work in pairs to workshop an alternative narrative for this scene (prompt them with questions about how Ellen could have handled it differently, how Kim could have reacted differently, whether the students would prefer it if Chris had entered the hotel room during the conversation etc.) The class should then discuss how the differences made in this scene could influence the ending of the musical and the fate of the characters.

*Note: As this activity may work better for female students, an alternative activity would be for male students to workshop a scene where they take the part of Chris in a chosen scenario. They could imagine the various ways he could have reacted to Ellen's description of the hotel room meeting and how his actions could have changed the course of the narrative.*

#### Preparation

- Condensed scene dialogue sheet - one between two pupils
- Activity sheet - one per pupil

**KEY SCENE ANALYSIS - KIM AND ELLEN'S FIRST MEETING**

Scene dialogue

Read the following condensed passage of sung conversation between Kim and Ellen when they first meet at the hotel in Bangkok.

- Kim:** They must have written the room number wrong  
I am looking for someone named Christopher Scott ...  
Well, you must be, of course, you're John's wife are you not?
- Ellen:** I'm Chris' wife - my name is Ellen
- Kim:** Tell me you are lying
- Ellen:** I'm sorry it's true.
- Kim:** I feel walls in my heart closing in. I can't breathe, I can't win.
- Ellen:** As for the child, you say it's Chris's.
- Kim:** Oh yes, Madame. My son is Chris's. I had a dream for my son to belong; not live his life in the streets like a rat.
- Ellen:** We aren't rich, but we'll shoulder our load. Chris and I are totally together on that.
- Kim:** Then you must take Tam with you.
- Ellen:** Take a child from his mother? Impossible, Kim.
- Kim:** You will take Tam with you. Then he'll get what I wanted for him.
- Ellen:** But Kim, your child needs you. Chris is married to me; we want kids of our own.
- Kim:** Tam's chance lies with you now, not with me.
- Ellen:** No! Can't you see? It won't work. It can't be.
- Kim:** If you're saying that because you've made him change his mind, Chris must go away and leave me and his son behind. If you're saying that because my husband has another wife, my child has no future, like the dust of life. He must come tonight to my place - tell me so to my face!
- Kim exits*
- Ellen:** I don't want this. I didn't come here to meet a girl who loves my husband. I came here to help, but what do I do? Now, after this, what do I do ...?

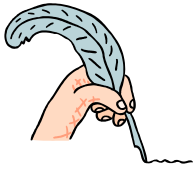
End of scene

## KEY SCENE ANALYSIS - KIM AND ELLEN'S FIRST MEETING

### Activity sheet

Read the scene between Kim and Ellen on the separate sheet and answer the following questions:

1. Where does this scene come in the musical: nearer the end or the beginning?
2. What is Kim's state of mind when she enters the hotel room?
3. What does Kim want Ellen to do? Why?
4. What does Ellen want Kim to do? Why?
5. What does Ellen do next?
6. What does Kim do next?



### SCRIPTWRITER'S CHALLENGE

Using the information you now know about this KEY SCENE, you are going to think about ways in which the scene could have been written differently.

Think about the different ways that:

- \* Ellen could have responded to Kim's demands
- \* Kim could have reacted to Ellen's line of argument

Will your re-write of the scene alter the ending of *Miss Saigon*? How?

## REVIEWING THE SHOW

### Teacher sheet

#### Purpose

The purpose of this activity is as follows:

- To encourage your students to reflect critically on the production they have seen.
- For students to consider the different aspects of theatrical production, in particular the production of a musical.
- To give students the opportunity to express their opinions on the show, giving their reasons, both orally and in writing.

#### Activities

- Students to discuss whether or not they enjoyed the production of *Miss Saigon* in class.
- Students to look at the reviews and consider whether they agree with them. Students can also consider how much of the review is personal opinion and how much is factual?
- Students to think through each of the terms on the activity sheet (see below for further explanation of terms)
- Students to write their own reviews, expressing their own opinions and covering the points discussed.

Below are some aspects of a production to draw to the students' attention before they write their own reviews:

- The storyline                      How well was the story performed on stage?  
Did you think that the material was appropriate for a musical?  
Were you able to follow the plot?
- The acting                              How believable the characters were.  
Who stood out?
- The singing                            How well the actors sang.  
Who sang particularly well?
- The orchestra                        How well the orchestra played.  
How well the orchestra worked with the performers
- The songs/ music  
(i.e. Schönberg's composition, as distinct from the actors' and orchestra's performance- though in practice the students are likely to discuss the two together)  
  
Which were the most memorable songs?  
What was particularly striking about them?  
How well did the songs tell the story?
- Choreography                        How precise and well choreographed were:

(dance and movement) a) Dance sequences during the songs.  
b) Other stage business (i.e. movement and action) which took place during the songs.  
c) The movement sequences between songs, e.g. the 'slow-mo' during the evacuation scene?

- Set  
How it moved/changed.  
How different levels were used.  
How smooth the scene changes were.  
How it helped to tell the story.
- Lighting/sound/special  
How lighting, sound and special effects contributed to, or complemented, what was happening onstage.
- Dialogue  
Was the dialogue between the different characters interesting and/or convincing?  
Which parts of the spoken dialogue, and accompanying stage activity (action), did you find most memorable, and why?
- Timing and pace  
How well delivered was the production as a whole?  
Was the production well-paced?  
Was the delivery of comedy dialogue well-timed (e.g. The Engineer)?
- Overall  
Was watching the show an enjoyable experience?  
Would you recommend it to someone else? Why (or why not)?  
What would you change to improve the production?

It would be a good idea to emphasize that considering the various aspects of the performance (as outlined above) will help the students to give reasons for what they thought about the show overall. It would also be worth saying that a good review is one in which the writer says what they really think (as some of them may feel that they ought only to say good things about the production).

### **Preparation**

A selection of reviews for each pair of students

Activity sheet - one per pupil

Extra paper for each pupil

## REVIEWING THE SHOW

Sample review 1 - from 2000 US tour

### **Miss Saigon, with its take on war, cuts right to heart** **By Jack W. Hill, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette** **May 19, 2004**

It's hard to avoid thinking about what the great as-yet-unwritten musical about the current war in Iraq will be, while watching Miss Saigon, the defining theatrical experience of the Vietnam War, the national tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But, as they say, that will be another story.

Meanwhile, Miss Saigon, which opened Tuesday night at Robinson Center Music Hall, continues to fascinate and attract as it tells the small human story contained within the larger tragedy of the aftermath of the American withdrawal from a war that had been lost. And we watch, even though we know how the story turns out with both the war and the doomed romance of some of the war's supposed survivors.

The musical's plot line closely resembles that of Puccini's opera Madame Butterfly, which may not be obvious to nonopera fans, though even they may suspect a borrowing from that earlier medium when lyrics bang against each other as voices attempt to fit everything in with great haste.

It would be almost impossible to overstate the excellence of the performance of Jon Jon Briones as The Engineer, the man who is determined to go from bordello operator to big-time capitalist in America. Briones ought to have his role down, having been in the original London cast and several others, but regardless of the quantity of his performances, it's the quality that cannot be faulted. This guy is funny, agile, believable and fast on his feet.

For a voice that soars to awesome heights, Alan Gillespie, in the role of Chris, the American soldier who falls for Kim, the newcomer bar girl, is top shelf, as was Jennifer Paz as Kim, whose dream is to escape to a more peaceful place. Gillespie soars on "Why God Why?" but the unforgettable songs were by The Engineer, as he sang "If You Want to Die in Bed" and "The American Dream."

Even Kim's 3-year-old boy, Tam, played by Jonathan Wade, knew what he was doing on the stage and tugged at the heartstrings as the struggle of his hapless parents played out around him.

The huge cast of nearly 40 was amazing to watch, as was the intricate set and the lighting. One of the dance routines, "The Morning of the Dragon," was a quick lesson in how the war had been waged, using paper dragons to demonstrate.

The 13-piece orchestra added to the spectacle but occasionally drowned out some of the lines that were not as loudly sung as others.

Performances continue at 7:30 p.m. today and Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and a 2 p.m. matinee Saturday. More information is available from Celebrity Attractions at (501) 244-8800 or Ticketmaster at (501) 975-7575.

## REVIEWING THE SHOW

Sample review 2 - from 2000 US tour

### **Review: Mann's 'Miss Saigon' a theatrical triumph By Maxine Ginsberg, Naples Daily News December 4, 2003**

What was won or lost in the Vietnam War may always be subject of debate, but there is no question that Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg's "Miss Saigon" has been a winner with audiences since 1989. Billed as the sixth-longest-running Broadway show, it has been seen by 31 million people in 19 countries and heard in nine languages. But the show, which opened Tuesday night at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall for a six-night run, might present some conflicts for local theatergoers old enough to have experienced the pain of those times. That a show can stir powerful emotions is a tribute to its creators and performers. The audience must be the judge of just how much it wants to be moved.

Because make no mistake, "Miss Saigon" is no "Damn Yankees" nor "Guys and Dolls," where the menace is minor and everybody feels good at the end. This work takes the "Madame Butterfly" theme and weaves into the complex tapestry of the fall of Saigon and the aftermath of the American presence there. Who would pay to see anything so grim?

Everyone who loves the theater and appreciates the artistry producing such a show requires. First, there's the story: A Saigon bar girl and an American soldier fall in love just before Saigon falls. The plot is thickened with a charming opportunist, a rejected suitor, a wife, a buddy, a child. The authors deliver an all too believable portrait of the people who lived in that time and place, and without much humor for respite. Then there's how the story is delivered: Spectacularly. From the sleazy bar room to the chaotic airport gates, the lighting and scenery are stunning, with every effect as excellent as one expects from a Cameron Macintosh production. The reunification scene was eye-popping, even if it did send chills up some show-goers' spines.

Now about the music, which produced no popular hits. Remember, this is the team that wrote "Les Miserables." That's actually not hard to forget, since the format is the same-almost all singing-and the structure of the songs is such that "Les Miz" fans might think they're in Paris, not Saigon. Though not Top-40 material, the songs are excellent within the framework of the story. "The Movie in My Mind," and "Why God Why" are particularly poignant; "The Last Night of the World" is a haunting love song, and "The American Dream" is a witty, cynical number that provides much needed levity.

Under the direction of Musical Director/Conductor Kevin Casey, the "Miss Saigon" orchestra did the score proud, providing softness, brassiness and fearsome ferocity as the story slid from the romance of the lovers to the vagaries of war.

But even the best ammunition can't save the day if the major players aren't up to the challenge, which in this case means acting chops as well as lung power. No danger of that with this troupe. On Tuesday night, Jennifer Paz was the perfect Kim-sweet, naive, and tough when she had to be. When she sang her hopes and dreams, it was not Paz as Kim, but Kim, taking the audience back to life in Vietnam during and after the American presence. (Jennifer Hubilla also performs the role at certain performances.)

Alan Gillespie's Chris was not wanting, either in vocal prowess or ability to convey the soldier's tortured experience, first in finding love in an unexpected place, then in the frustration of the events that ensue. Because he slithers so effortlessly from scene to scene, it's easy to underestimate the contribution of Jon Briones as the engineer, a character not unlike the master

## REVIEWING THE SHOW

### Sample review 2 - from 2000 US tour - continued

of ceremonies in “Cabaret,” the Thenardiers of “Les Miserables” or even the venerable Sgt. Bilko, folks who always make a buck in a bad situation.

Briones inhabits his character so well, one would expect him to try to broker a quickie “transaction” in any chance meeting offstage. Instead of being despicable, he’s accepted as the classic survivor who makes out in any situation.

Rachel Kopf and Wallace Smith provided solid support as the wife and buddy respectively, and 5-year-old Jonathan Wade showed remarkable poise and focus. But the one-named Tadeo, though possessed of a fine voice, disappoints in his portrayal of the suitor.

There’s minimal choreography, mostly martial, well performed and subtly placed within the play, and the chorus was impeccable, most notably, Ramona Dubarry’s a solo as Gigi.

Director Mitchell Lemsky keeps the pace brisk and the large cast performing at 100 percent throughout. On Tuesday night, some of the comments made by soldiers and bar girls were hard to understand. Whether better enunciation or better sound equipment is the cure is a mystery. Why the show is called “Miss Saigon” is a mystery revealed early on in this masterfully rendered work that garnered a standing ovation from the nearly full house on opening night.

Those who can endure the sadness of those times in order to experience an excellent theatrical production will find out why the show’s popularity is no mystery. Just as Vietnam has been described by those who were there, “Miss Saigon” is an awesome blend of beauty and heartbreak.

## REVIEWING THE SHOW

Sample review 3 - from 2000 US tour

### **'Miss Saigon? Big production, big voices By Jeff Murphy, The Wilmington News Journal January 28, 2004**

Landing at downtown's DuPont Theatre, and staying put for an extended fortnight run, is a musical theater treat - the popular, if melodramatic, story of forbidden love "Miss Saigon".

After nearly 10 years on Broadway, this new touring production is an impressive but somewhat scaled down adaptation of the epic original that can still boast plenty about its spectacular stagecraft, talented singing actors and technical wizardry, even if a helicopter doesn't actually land on the Hotel du Pont stage.

The same collaboration team that created "Les Misérables" this time borrows from the same tale of Asian-American romance as the opera "Madame Butterfly". However, the male character who leaves his lover behind is far more likable than Puccini's.

The story begins in 1975 during the Vietnam War and involves two lovers, a young local named Kim, who is forced into prostitution, and Chris, an American soldier. Although she is arranged to marry the young and proud Thuy, Kim falls for the Marine as Saigon also falls. Years pass, and Chris marries another while things get worse for Kim near what is now Ho Chi Minh City. An unlikely ally arranges for the lovers to meet in Bangkok, where Kim hopes the child's father can take the baby to the United States.

This production is big in many ways and uses a huge army of a cast and some great stage effects - including some exacting lighting and banks of fog - to heighten and extend the spectacle. Most noticeable is the use of a powerful sound system. Before an attractively painted scrim rises on a stage alive with activity and moving scenery, the deafening sound of a helicopter roars by. In this space where the proscenium frame seems as tall as it is wide, this production uses the entire vista surprisingly well, and at times seems even cramped.

The music carries the play and a small but full orchestra plays full out in big numbers like "The Heat Is on in Saigon", "Bui-Doi" and the triumphant finale. Some big voices are used as well, especially from the capable leading actors. Jennifer Paz - as Kim - has an amazingly large voice for her small frame, while Alan Gillespie also soars as the GI Chris. Jon Jon Briones, a veteran of the show, is immensely entertaining as the Engineer, especially during the quirky "If You Want to Die In Bed". The flashback scene, for those familiar with the Broadway version, is also handled with big ambition and succeeds in bringing larger-than-life quality to this loud but hugely entertaining musical.

## REVIEWING THE SHOW

### Activity Sheet

You have seen the show and learnt about the people, the places, the songs, the characters and the story behind the musical. Now it is time for you to say what you think of the musical and write your own review of *Miss Saigon*.

Look at these reviews written by various newspaper critics at the time of the original production of *Miss Saigon* in London:

You may or may not agree with what the reviews say, but they will give you ideas of what to talk about in your own writing.

You are now going to write a review of *Miss Saigon*. What did you think of the production that you saw?

Think about:

- what you liked about it, and why
- whether there was anything about it which could have worked better
- whether you would recommend the show to other people



Have a go at brainstorming some initial ideas, then write an extended piece of around 600 words.

## FURTHER STUDY OPPORTUNITIES

### Teacher sheet

Additional ideas for discussion, writing and homework projects:

#### CREATIVE EXPRESSION

- Imagine you are Ellen after her first meeting with Kim. In either prose or poetry, write your feelings about realizing for the first time that you do not solely possess the love of someone you love deeply.
- Chris experiences a strong sense of disillusionment and confusion at the beginning of *Miss Saigon*. Think of a time when you felt a similar way. Relate the events and circumstances that led to your becoming disillusioned. Describe how you felt and what you did to deal with those feelings. How did the experience change your actions and attitudes in the future?

#### DISCURSIVE ESSAYS

- Write an essay describing how one of the following emotions plays a role in the plot of *Miss Saigon*?
  - Love
  - Greed
  - Sacrifice
  - Responsibility
- Write an essay on the significance of dreams in *Miss Saigon*. Which characters dream? Why? What do they dream about?
- While watching the show, which is entirely sung, we have the impression of a seamless whole. Actually *Miss Saigon* is made up of a group of strong musical and lyrical segments which are joined to create the whole. After seeing the show, listen to a recording of *Miss Saigon*. Select one of the following segments:

“The Heat Is On In Saigon”

“The Movie In My Mind”

“Why God Why?”

“Sun And Moon”

“The Morning of the Dragon”

“I Still Believe”

“Her Or Me”

1. Summarize the contents of your segment
  2. Write a short essay on the segment, incorporating the following points:
    - What the audience learns about the character or characters who sing this segment
    - The significance of the mood at this particular moment to the whole show.
    - The significance of the themes presented during this segment to the whole show.
- Listen to the whole recording of the musical. Identify the repeated musical themes. Why are these themes repeated? How does this recurrence add to the power of *Miss Saigon*? Do you think that this same power could be achieved through words?