Notes on *Pacific Overtures* (1976)

**Original Broadway Production**
Opening Night: January 11, 1976  
Closing Date: June 27, 1976 (13 previews, 193 performances)

**Creative Team of the Original Production**
Music & Lyrics by: Stephen Sondheim  
Book by: John Weidman  
Produced & Directed by: Harold Prince  
Choreographed by: Patricia Birch  
Kabuki Consultant: Haruki Fujimoto

Scenic Design: Boris Aronson  
Costume Design: Florence Klotz  
Lighting Design: Tharon Musser  
Orchestrations: Jonathan Tunick

**Kabuki Consultant:** Haruki Fujimoto

** casts of Various Productions**

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<td>B.D. Wong</td>
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<td>Kayama</td>
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<td>Michael K. Lee</td>
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<td>Tamate</td>
<td>Soon-Teck Oh</td>
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<td>Lord Abe</td>
<td>Yuki Shimoda</td>
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<td>Shogun’s mother</td>
<td>Alvin Ing</td>
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<td>Madam</td>
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<td>Old Man Boy</td>
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<td>Mark Hsu Syers</td>
<td>Evan D’Angeles</td>
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**Director:** Harold Prince  
(& Choreographer) Amon Miyamoto

**Awards**

The Original Broadway Production Won 2 Tony Awards in 1976: Scenic Design (Aronson) and Costume Design (Klotz). It was also nominated for 8 additional awards: Best Musical, Book of a Musical (Weidman), Original Score (Sondheim), Actor in a Musical (Mako), Featured Actor in a Musical (Isao Sato), Lighting Design (Musser), Choreography (Birch), and Direction of a Musical (Prince).

The Broadway Revival was Nominated for 4 Tony Awards in 2005 (no wins): Best Revival of a Musical, Orchestrations (Tunick), Scenic Design of a Musical (Rumi Matsui), and Costume Design of a Musical (Junko Koshiro).

**Synopsis/Songs**

**Setting:** Japan, 1853-present.

*Pacific Overtures* is the story of Commodore Matthew Perry’s expedition to Japan in 1853, a display of force intended to persuade Japan to begin trading with the West after 250 years of isolation, as told from the Japanese point of view. The style combines Kabuki, Noh drama, and American musical theater, as if, Sondheim has said, “written by a Japanese who’s seen a lot of American musicals.” The highly stylized action is presented by an all Asian or Asian-American cast, with all speaking roles taken by men (as in traditional Japanese theater). Only in the final number do women appear, though they assist onstage as “invisible” black-dressed puppeteers and stagehands.
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**Act I (1853)**

A Reciter presides, both explaining things to us and taking part in the action. “The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea” describes life in Japan prior to Perry’s arrival. The Shogun’s councilors bring in a prisoner in Western dress. He is Manjiro, a fisherman shipwrecked as a teenager and taken to live in Massachusetts. Now, years later he has returned to Japan to warn his countrymen of the approaching American warships.

Lord Abe, the chief councilor charges Kayama, a minor Samurai, with the task of meeting the foreign intruders. Returning home, Kayama tells his wife Tamate of the situation. Two observers sing “There Is No Other Way.” An alarm sounds when the warships are spotted: “Four Black Dragons.” Perry’s man-of-war sails onto the stage. The Americans tell Kayama that they are authorized by President Millard Fillmore to speak only to someone of the highest rank, which Kayama is not. When Kayama reports this to the councilors, he also suggests that as long as the representative is dressed in a regal costume, the Americans will be none the wiser. The councilors decide to send Manjiro back with Kayama to negotiate.

The Americans announce that they will send a landing party ashore in six days. If the Shogun does not cooperate, they will fire on the town at the harbor.

The scene shifts to the Shogun’s house where he is attended by numerous people, including his mother and his physician. The Shogun hesitates to act, and “Chrysanthemum Tea” enacts the next fateful six days. Deciding that no Shogun is better than an ineffectual one, the mother adds a little something to his tea each day until he dies.

Kayama and Manjiro propose to receive the Americans, but to do so in a specially constructed hut so that after the meeting, the hut can be burned so that no barbarian feet will ever have touched Japanese soil. As the two colleagues walk home, they exchange “Poems”—a series of haikus.

Not everyone is avoiding the invaders. Planning to make some money, a Japanese madam leads four hesitating girls toward the harbor: “Welcome to Kanagawa.”

On the appointed day, the Americans come ashore, and a meeting occurs. The Reciter tells us that there is no Japanese record of what happened that day. An Old Man interrupts, saying that he was there. As a child he had watched everything from a perch high in a tree. A Warrior was also hidden below the floor of the hut. The Old Man, the Boy, and the Warrior each tell a version of what happened that day: “Someone in a Tree.” When pressed to name a favorite song, Sondheim has often said that this is it. “I like the swing and relentlessness of the music and the poetic Orientalism of the lyric, but what I love is its ambition, its attempt to collapse past, present, and future into one packaged song form. That ambitious invention was John Weidman’s. The song is a distillation of a five-page scene he wrote. . . . This song comes closest to the heart of *Pacific Overtures.*” (*Finishing the Hat*, 2010, p. 323.) Note: Lyrics to this song are included below.

The act ends with a traditional Kabuki lion dance, with the lion embodying evil in the form of Commodore Perry.

**Act II (1854–present)**

The Emperor officially honors Lord Abe, Kayama, and Manjiro. Afterward, Lord Abe is visited by a succession of admirals from America, Britain, the Netherlands, Russia and France, each singing a song in
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his national style: “**Please Hello.**” (This scene allows Sondheim to indulge his fondness for pastiche, but instead of popular song styles, each admiral’s verse reflects a particularly national musical style: Sousa march for the American, Gilbert and Sullivan patter song for the British, a clog dance for the Dutch, a dirge for the Russian, and a can-can for the French.) The Westernization of Japan is proceeding rapidly.

The next scene covers a period of fifteen years. In separate rooms, Manjiro prepares an ancient tea ceremony while Kayama sings “**A Bowler Hat.**” the stanzas interspersed with letters detailing events over the decade. As the song progresses, Manjiro stays in his traditional samurai garment, while Kayama progresses into full Western garb: bowler hat, umbrella, pocket watch, cigar, monocle, spectacles.

Three British sailors spy a lovely young woman in a garden. Assuming she is a geisha, they attempt to buy her services (“**Pretty Lady**”). She cries out, her father arrives, and in the fight that follows, the father kills one of the sailors, precipitating an international crisis. In the chaos that follows, many are killed. Kayama is confronted by a samurai, who turns out to be Manjiro. They fight, and Kayama is killed.

The Emperor arrives and announces that henceforth, in the name of progress, the Japanese must abandon their traditional ways and devote themselves to becoming the equals of the Western powers. The scene catapults to the present day (or at least 1976), with the entire company in Western dress celebrating Japan’s progress (“**Next**”).
“Someone in a Tree”

OLD MAN
Pardon me, I was there.

RECITER
You were where?

OLD MAN
At the treaty house.

RECITER
At the treaty house?

OLD MAN
There was a tree?

RECITER
Which was where?

OLD MAN
Very near.

RECITER
Over here?

OLD MAN
Maybe over there,
But there were trees then, everywhere.
May I show you?

RECITER
If you please.

OLD MAN
There were trees
Then, everywhere.

RECITER
But you were there.

OLD MAN
And I was there!
Let me show you.

RECITER
If you please.

OLD MAN
(tries to climb)
I was younger then?
(tries again)
I was good at climbing trees?
I was younger then?
I saw everything!?
I was hidden all the time?
It was easier to climb?
I was younger then?
I saw everything!?
Where they came and where they went?
I was part of the event.
I was someone in a tree!
I was younger then?

(Suddenly, a Young Boy appears, scurries across the stage, and up the tree.)

BOY (to the Old Man)
Tell him what I see!

OLD MAN
I am in a tree.
I am ten.
I am in a tree.

BOY
I was younger then.

OLD MAN
In between the eaves I can see?
(to the Boy)
Tell me what I see.
(to the Reciter)
I was only ten.

BOY
I see men and matting.
Some are old, some chatting.

OLD MAN:
If it happened, I was there!

BOTH
I saw/see everything!

OLD MAN
I was someone in a tree.
“Someone in a Tree”/2

BOY: Tell him what I see!

OLD MAN
Some of them have gold on their coats.

BOY
One of them has gold.
He was younger then.

OLD MAN
Someone crawls around passing notes?

BOY
Someone very old?

OLD MAN (to the Reciter)
He was only ten.

BOY
And there's someone in a tree?

OLD MAN
Or the day is incomplete.

BOTH
Without someone in a tree,
Nothing happened here.

OLD MAN
I am hiding in a tree.

BOY
I'm a fragment of the day.

BOTH
If I weren't, who's to say
Things would happen here the way
That they happened here?

OLD MAN
I was there then.

BOY
I am here still.
It's the fragment, not the day.

OLD MAN
It's the pebble, not the stream.

BOTH
It's the ripple, not the sea.
Not the building but the beam,
Not the garden but the stone,
Not the treaty house,
Someone in a tree.

WARRIOR
(slides panel open underneath the house)
Pardon me, I am here?
If you please, I am also here?

OLD MAN: They kept drinking cups of tea.

BOY: They kept sitting on the floor.

BOTH
They drank many cups of tea.
No, we told him that before.

WARRIOR: If you please, I am here.

RECITER: You are where?

WARRIOR: In the treaty house.

RECITER: In the treaty house?

WARRIOR: Or very near.

RECITER: Can you hear?

WARRIOR: I'm below.

RECITER: So I notice.

WARRIOR
Underneath the floor,
And so I can't see anything.
I can hear them,
But I can't see anything.

RECITER
But you can hear?

WARRIOR
But I can hear.
Shall I listen?
“Someone in a Tree”/3

RECITER
If you please.

WARRIOR
I can hear them now?
I shall try to shift my knees?
I can hear them now?
I hear everything?
I'm the part that's underneath,
With my sword inside my sheath.
I can hear them now?
One is over me?
If they knock, then I appear.
I'm a part of what I hear.
I'm the fragment underneath.
I can hear them now!

RECITER, OLD MAN, BOY
Tell us what you hear!

WARRIOR
First I hear a creak and a thump.
Now I hear a clink?
Then they talk a bit?
Many times they shout when they speak.
Other times they think.
Or they argue it?
I hear floorboards groaning?
Angry growls? Much droning?
Since I hear them, they are there,
As they argue it.
I'm the listener underneath.

BOY (peering into the house):
Someone reads a list
From a box.

WARRIOR (listening):
Someone talks of laws.

OLD MAN
Then they fan a bit.

BOY
Someone bangs a fist.

WARRIOR
Someone knocks.

OLD MAN
Now there was a pause.

ALL
Then they argue it:

WARRIOR
"But we want?"
"No, you can't
And we won't?"
"But we need it,
And we want?"
"Will you grant ? ?"
"If you don't?"
"We concede it ?"

OLD MAN
And they sat
Through the night
I'm a fragment of the
day

And they lit
Yellow tapers.
I was here then

BOY
And they chat
And they fight
And they sit
Signing papers
I am there still

RECITER
And they sat
Through the night
And they lit
Yellow tapers

And they chat
And they fight
And they sit
Signing papers

ALL FOUR:
If weren’t, who’s to say
Things would happen here the way
That they’re happening?

It's the fragment, not the day.
It's the pebble, not the stream.
It's the ripple, not the sea
That is happening.
Not the building but the beam,
Not the garden but the stone,
Only cups of tea
And history
And someone in a tree.