



## ***Miss Saigon* Study Guide**

---

I.	About <i>Miss Saigon</i> .....	page 2
II.	The Story of <i>Miss Saigon</i> .....	page 3
III.	Culture and Conflict .....	page 8
IV.	Lovers Divided .....	page 10
V.	The Bui Doi .....	page 11
VI.	Creating the Musical .....	page 12
VII.	The War in Vietnam .....	page 18
VIII.	People, Places, Things .....	page 23
IX.	Creating <i>Miss Saigon</i> .....	page 25
X.	Final Thoughts .....	page 26
XI.	Quick Takes .....	page 27
XII.	Resource List .....	page 31

## **I. About Miss Saigon**

IN A WORLD THAT'S MOVING TOO FAST  
IN A WORLD WHERE NOTHING CAN LAST. . .  
I HAVE FOUND YOU. . .

*Miss Saigon* is one of the most spectacular musicals of our time: the culmination of years of work by the creators of *Les Misérables*, Alain Boublil and Claude Michel Schönberg (with English lyrics and additional material by Richard Maltby, Jr.).

*Miss Saigon* is an epic and tragic story of a young couple in love, caught in a world at war.

*Miss Saigon* begins in 1975, when the conflicting cultures and ideologies of the world seemed to meet violently in one city: Saigon. Cultures clash, ways of life battle on a grand scale. At the eye of the storm stand two lovers: Chris, an American soldier, and Kim, a Vietnamese girl. Their poignant struggle against the forces of war and prejudice is the heart of *Miss Saigon*'s story.

Since many students only confront the reality of such conflicts as images on a television screen or a dry newspaper account, this sweeping musical can help them focus on the ways in which war affects individuals, young people like themselves.

The questions, assignments, and background information found in this study guide are designed to encourage students to deal with the ideas and themes found in *Miss Saigon* through individual and class activities, and to prepare them for a more knowledgeable viewing of the show.

Since *Miss Saigon* can be seen on different levels — as a spectacular musical entertainment, a moving love story, and a biting statement about prejudice and war — this guide covers a broad spectrum of subject areas that can be easily integrated into a wide variety of educational settings.

## **II. The Story of *Miss Saigon***

### The Characters

#### **Kim**

A 17-year-old Vietnamese orphan from a simple background. The death of her parents has forced her to seek work in the sleazy club 'Dreamland' in Saigon, entertaining American Marines. She falls in love with an American sergeant. Her faith is a source of strength that fuels her instinct for self-preservation; and with the birth of her son, her determination for survival becomes stronger still.

#### **The Engineer**

A half-French, half-Vietnamese pimp who has risen against adversity to become the owner of the aptly named nightclub/brothel, 'Dreamland.' He is sly and manipulative, always looking to make a quick profit and take advantage of the American occupation of Saigon and the dollars it brings. His ultimate dream is to escape Saigon and become an American citizen.

#### **Chris**

A young American marine, he has chosen to serve a second time with the army as a driver for the American Embassy in Saigon. He falls in love with a beautiful Vietnamese girl, Kim. When he finds himself back in his own country he has recurring nightmares, and is finding it impossible to reconcile in a new marriage to his American wife, Ellen. He is trying to come to terms with life when his sense of responsibility and the news of Kim's survival force him to return to the East to confront his past.

#### **John**

An American marine and close friend to Chris, he holds a responsible administrative post in the American Embassy in Saigon. Upon returning home he devotes himself to helping orphaned children fathered by American soldiers during the conflict. He is the one who will break the news to Chris of his son, and again befriends him becoming his mentor and go-between as Chris prepares to meet Kim and Tam in Bangkok.

#### **Thuy**

A young, self-obsessed Vietnamese man; through a cultural wedding bond, he has been promised Kim's hand in marriage. He is totally obsessive in his love for her and is determined to fulfill the original vows of their parents. As the North Vietnamese army invades Saigon, he changes from his allegiance with the South and becomes a high-ranking Commissar and uses his newly acquired powers to find Kim after the war and make her his personal property, by force if necessary.

#### **Ellen**

The American wife of Chris, she has become a stabilizing influence for her husband after the Vietnam War. She travels with Chris when he returns to the East, where she forces him to face his memories he has kept from himself and from her for so long. She is by his side when he is united with his son and they witness the tragic fate of Kim.

## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

### **ACT 1**

The action begins on a Friday night in Saigon in April 1975. Backstage at Dreamland, an after-hours club which is frequented by American Marines, a group of bar-girls is preparing to perform. The Engineer, who owns the club, introduces them to a new girl, Kim, a 17-year-old orphan who has fled the countryside after seeing her family destroyed.

Afraid that the enemy forces of the Viet Cong will kill them if they are left behind when Saigon falls, the bar-girls are eager to connect with an American G.I. who can get them out of the country. The Engineer wants to get his hands on a visa so that he can escape when the Americans pull out. He sends the girls on-stage for a sham beauty contest to select a "Miss Saigon."

A group of Marines enters the bar singing "The Heat Is On In Saigon." Among them are two friends, Chris and John. Although Chris is reluctant, John insists that a night at the club is what they need to escape the increasing sense of danger from the approaching enemy, the Viet Cong.

Chris is astounded by Kim's innocence when the Engineer pushes her forward to solicit the crowd. While the other girls offer provocative invitations, she speaks of a "heart like the sea" and "a million dreams are in me." Gigi, one of the experienced bar-girls, is chosen "Miss Saigon." She is "won" by a Marine and begins to dance with him. The scene freezes as Gigi sings "The Movie In My Mind," describing the dream of a new life in America she envisions each time she is in the arms of a G.I. Kim sings of the movie in her mind - a dream of a man who will not kill and will keep her safe.

Sensing that Chris is interested in Kim, John bargains with the Engineer to secure her for his friend. Kim and Chris dance as a Marine plays the saxophone. Chris takes Kim to a tiny room overlooking the moonlit city.

Chris, deeply touched by what he has shared with Kim, quietly leaves the room while she is sleeping. Walking through the street, he sings "Why God Why?" questioning why he has had this profound experience when he is about to leave Saigon. He is drawn back to the room and tries to give Kim money. Kim refuses to take it and tells him that she has seen her parents die in flames. She was betrothed to a man she didn't love before her village was destroyed. Now she has no future except to sell herself at Dreamland.

Chris asks her to live with him and they express their love for each other ("Sun and Moon"). As they part, she says that she will bring friends to bless their room with paper unicorns and perfume in keeping with her traditions.

Chris calls John at the Embassy, where they both work, to tell him that he needs time to spend with Kim. John says that Saigon is falling apart and urges him to come to the Embassy right away. Chris bargains with the Engineer for another night with Kim.

Gigi and the other bar-girls are helping Kim move in with Chris. They set up a small shrine with photos of Kim's parents. Kim leads "Dju Vui Vai," a song which she tells Chris is traditionally sung at weddings.

In the midst of their celebration, the door flies open and Thuy, Kim's fiancée, appears. He has come to claim Kim and save her from the shame of being a bar-girl. When he sees

## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

Chris and the shrine to her parents, he is outraged. Kim tells him that her parents' promises died with them. Kim refuses to go with Thuy. He leaves, saying that she is his until she dies. He predicts that "Saigon will fall and so will your G.I."

Chris tells Kim that he has decided to bring her with him to America. They sing "The Last Night of the World," recalling the saxophone that was played at their first meeting. Its lonely sound is now a "cry that tells us love goes on and on." Kim and Chris promise each other that their "lives will change when tomorrow comes."

Three years have passed during which the Viet Cong have taken over Saigon ("The Morning of the Dragon"). The Engineer is brought in by two soldiers. We learn that he was taken prisoner by the Viet Cong and has been forced to work in rice fields. Although his captors attempted to brainwash him, they have been unsuccessful. He is led before Thuy, who is now a Commissar. Thuy demands the Engineer's assistance in finding Kim and gives him 48 hours to accomplish this deed.

Kim is living in a small room which she shares with a group of Vietnamese. She sings "I Still Believe," remembering her nights with Chris. In America, at the same time, Ellen, who is now married to Chris, sits beside her sleeping husband on their bed, singing the same song. Ellen knows that Chris is tormented by secrets that he cannot share with her, but she vows to be his wife for life. A world away, Kim, alone in a room full of strangers, makes the same vow.

The Engineer appears with Thuy. Thuy wants to forget Kim's transgression and marry her as their parents decreed. She says she is still bound to Chris. Thuy calls her a fool and summons his men into the room, where they threaten Kim and the Engineer. Thuy again demands that Kim agree to his wishes. The Engineer is sent out of the room and Kim reveals her secret to Thuy: her two-year-old son, Tam. Thuy says she can't keep the child since he intends to marry her. He calls the child his enemy and draws out his knife to kill the little boy. Kim pulls out a gun and threatens to shoot him. He will not relent. She kills him.

Kim is horrified by her action, but decides that she and Tam must find a way to reach Chris in America. The Engineer is making his way through the city ("If You Want To Die In Bed"). He finds his way to the remains of Dreamland and opens a trap door. There he finds a box of counterfeit watches he had hidden. Planning to sell them in Bangkok and then travel to the United States, he is about to leave when Kim appears. She begs for his help, and he realizes that the baby is their passport to America. He leaves to buy their passage on a boat to Bangkok. Kim consoles Tam and promises him that she will risk anything for him ("I'd Give My Life For You"). The Engineer, Kim, and Tam join a group of Vietnamese boat people who sing "No place, no home. No life, no hope. No chance, no change. No regret, no return, no good-bye."

## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

### **ACT 2**

John now works on behalf of Bui-Doi (*pronounced: bwee DOY*) children, the children of American and Vietnamese conceived during the war. He is showing a film relating the plight of these children at a conference in Atlanta. ("Bui-Doi"). The images in the film of the small forgotten victims reach out to haunt the veterans of the war, including Chris, who has been summoned to the conference by John.

Chris learns that Kim has escaped to Bangkok and that he is the father of her two-year-old son. Chris is distraught. Believing that he would never see Kim again, he has married Ellen. John suggests that Chris tell Ellen the truth. Then they can go to Bangkok together to face the situation.

In Bangkok, the Engineer has landed a job as the doorman and barker at a sleazy nightclub called "Le Moulin Rouge" ("What a Waste"). John arrives, and the Engineer leads him to Kim. John tries to tell her the truth about Chris, but she insists on showing off her son. John is torn between telling her the truth himself and allowing Chris to tell Kim about his marriage ("Please"). He tells her that Chris is in Bangkok and that he will come to see her. When John leaves, the Engineer tells Kim not to wait for Chris to come to her but to go to his hotel at once. She asks her parents' pictures for their blessing, and the Engineer leaves to find out where Chris is staying.

As she waits for the Engineer, Kim falls asleep. Thuy's ghost appears to haunt her. He asks her where Chris was the night Saigon fell. We travel back to the past she remembers. After getting her a visa so that she could return to the United States with him, Chris left her in their room with a gun and went to work at the Embassy. He assures her that they will have plenty of warning when it is time to escape. However, when he reaches the Embassy it is a wild scene, with mobs of Vietnamese pounding at the gates, begging to be evacuated. Kim comes to the gate just as the order is issued that no more Vietnamese can enter the grounds. Although Chris and Kim struggle to reach each other, their efforts are in vain ("The Fall of Saigon"). He is forced to board the last helicopter to leave Saigon. She is left crying at the gate, singing "My heart, against all odds, holds still" as their love affair is swallowed up and the old city disappears forever.

Kim wakes up and sings of her unwavering love for Chris. The Engineer brings the address of the hotel, and Kim runs through the city to find him. At the same time, John is bringing Chris through the streets to find her.

At the hotel, Ellen mistakes Kim for a maid. Kim assumes that Ellen is John's wife. Ellen, realizing who Kim must be, tells her that she is Chris' wife. Kim is stunned. As the truth sinks in, she insists that Ellen and Chris must take Tam back to America with them. Ellen refuses, saying that Tam belongs with Kim. Kim says that Ellen and Chris cannot condemn her child to be part of the dust of life.

Ellen is very upset at having met Kim and feels that part of Chris will always love Kim. Chris and John return, and Ellen confronts Chris with her doubts about his love for her ("Now That I've Seen Her"). He explains that his relationship with Kim happened when he was a different and deeply confused man. Kim put him in touch with his feelings at a very complex time. But only with Ellen did his life begin again. They reaffirm their love for each other.

## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

John reminds them that they must resolve Tam's future. Chris says that Kim and Tam must remain in Bangkok with his financial support because Ellen could not accept the idea of having Kim in the United States. John knows that Kim will not accept the idea of having Tam stay in Bangkok and warns them to reconsider ("The Confrontation").

Outside, Kim is promising Tam that he will have a new life in America. She knows that Chris will come for his son. She goes back to the club and lies to the Engineer, saying that Chris is coming for them that night. She says that the Engineer must pack his things and prepare for the journey to America. The Engineer sings about "The American Dream" and shares his vision of America.

Kim dresses Tam in his best clothes. She tells him that his father is coming to take him home. She kisses Tam and hears Chris and the Engineer approaching. She gives Tam a toy and sends him out to join the Engineer. She takes Chris' gun out of her bedside table and disappears behind the bed curtain. A gunshot is heard. Chris runs into the room. Kim's body falls out from behind the curtain, and Chris cradles her in his arms as she dies, singing "How in the light of one night have we come so far?"

*Themes and Topics to Explore*

**III. Culture and Conflict**

YOU ARE HERE LIKE A MYSTERY  
I'M FROM A WORLD THAT'S SO DIFFERENT  
FROM ALL THAT YOU ARE.  
HOW IN THE LIGHT OF ONE NIGHT  
DID WE COME SO FAR?

*Questions for Discussion*

1. What is culture?
  - Is it possible to have more than one culture within the same country? The same city? The same neighborhood?
  - How do you define your own culture? Are you part of more than one culture?
  - What clashes of culture affect your life every day?
  - How can understanding other cultures reduce the chance of war?
  - What are some of the tensions between Eastern and Western cultures portrayed in *Miss Saigon*?
  - How do members of one culture learn about another in today's world?
  
2. What is tradition?
  - What is the role of tradition in keeping cultures intact?
  - What are some of the Vietnamese traditions depicted or described in *Miss Saigon*?
  - How does tradition affect the outcome of the plot of *Miss Saigon*?
  - Do you think tradition has a place in contemporary American society?



## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

### *Ideas for Research and Writing Assignments*

- In *Miss Saigon*, Chris calls Vietnam “A place full of mystery that I never once understood.” Choose a war (other than the war in Vietnam), in which America has been involved, from the wars against the American Indians to the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Read about the conflict to discover how the opposing cultures differed. How much did Americans understand of these “places full of mystery”? Would the understanding of the cultures of other nations have decreased the chance of war?
- Now that you have researched a conflict of cultures, imagine you are an American soldier arriving in the country you have researched. Write about the unexpected and unfamiliar sights and customs you might experience.
- Arrange an interview or a class visit with someone of another heritage who lives in your community. Discuss the ways in which their culture and traditions have changed or remained the same in America.
- 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?
- Create a skit around one of the following scenarios that involve a potential culture clash:
  1. A woman tries to enter an all male club.
  2. Culture “A” believes that a person must never cover their heads when eating. Culture “B” believes that one must always cover their head. A member of culture “B” wearing a hat appears at a restaurant owned by a member of culture “A”.
  3. A member of Culture “A” keeps the Sabbath on Saturday. His company is bought by a new owner who insists that anyone working for him must work on Saturdays.
  4. A member of Culture “A” is negotiating a deal with a member of Culture “B”. In Culture “A”, the truth is absolute. In Culture “B” the truth is whatever is convenient and lying is not considered wrong.
  5. Culture “A” considers eating dog a delicacy. Culture “B” considers it totally unacceptable. A member of Culture “B” is served dog at the home of a member of Culture “A”.

## **IV. Lovers Divided**

I STILL BELIEVE  
BY ALL THE GODS  
YOU WAIT FOR ME  
MY HEART  
AGAINST ALL ODDS  
HOLDS STILL. . .

### *Questions for Discussion*

*Miss Saigon* was inspired by a 95 year old tale of Asian American romance that began with the publication of a story by John Luther Long called “Madame Butterfly” in Century Magazine in 1887. The idea of lovers divided by race, nationality or religion appears throughout the history of literature and drama.

- Why do you think this theme has such a fascination for audiences?
- Why is intermarriage between individuals of different races, nationalities or religious groups often threatening to the members of these groups? Are there legitimate reasons for their fears of intermarriage?
- What is the attitude of the society and culture in which you live concerning inter-racial, inter-nationality, inter-religious relationships?
- How do you feel about the possibility of intermarriage in your own life? Why?

### *Ideas for Research and Writing Assignments*

- Write about the theme of love divided in a legend, novel, drama, musical, or film such as Romeo and Juliet, West Side Story, Wuthering Heights, or Spike Lee’s film Jungle Fever.
- Create your own tale of love divided in short story form. Set it in another time and place, or in your own world.
- Discuss the statement, “People should be allowed to marry whomever they choose.”
- Create a brief skit around the following scenarios:

Two young people of different religions tell their parents they want to get married.

Young people of different races go on a date to the movies and are harassed.

**V. The Bui Doi** (*pronounced: bwee DOY*)

THESE KIDS HIT WALLS ON EVERY SIDE  
THEY DON'T BELONG IN ANY PLACE  
THEIR SECRET THEY CAN'T EVEN HIDE  
IT'S PRINTED ON THEIR FACE

*Questions for Discussion*

- The Bui Doi are the children of Vietnamese women and American soldiers. They are called the “Bui Doi,” or the “dust of life” because they were shunned by both the Vietnamese and the Americans. Why do you think that innocent children were and are treated in this fashion?
- Who should have been responsible for the Bui Doi’s welfare? Why?
- How are children who have parents of different races treated in your community? Children of parents from different nationality groups? Children of parents from different religions?
- Have you ever been the victim of prejudice because of physical characteristics, religious beliefs, race, nationality or social class?
- What are the prejudices in your own society based on? Why do they continue? What can be done to overcome them?

*Ideas for Research and Writing Assignments*

- Research the conditions under which most Bui Doi children had to live after the war. What has happened to these Bui Doi who are now in their late teens and twenties?
- Research other wars which have left behind a population of unwanted children. Compare the plight of these children to that of the Bui Doi.
- Imagine you are a Bui Doi child. Write about your feelings.

## **VI. Creating the Musical: Bringing the Dream to Life**

I HAVE A HEART LIKE THE SEA  
A MILLION DREAMS ARE IN ME. . .

In many ways, *Miss Saigon* is about dreams: striving for the dream of a better life, the dream of success, the dream of peace. The dreams of the characters in *Miss Saigon* help them survive the horrors of war.

The creation of a musical like *Miss Saigon* involves having a dream, and spending years for that goal. Many people worked together to bring that dream to life.

### **Create Your Own Musical**

#### **Lyricist and Composer: Getting the Idea**

- How do ideas begin? Have you ever begun a project with a simple idea? Give examples of great ideas or inventions that have begun with simple thoughts or images.

In 1985, ALAIN BOUBLIL (Lyricist) and CLAUDE MICHEL SCHÖNBERG (Composer), the creators of the musical *Les Misérables*, saw a picture in a news magazine of a Vietnamese mother saying good-bye to her child, who was leaving for the United States to join her American father.

“She knew, as only a woman could,” said Schönberg, “that beyond this departure gate there was both a new life for her daughter, and no life at all for her. . . Her mother was leaving her there and would never see her again.”

## Miss Saigon - Study Guide

---



This photograph was the starting point for *Miss Saigon*. Boublil and Schönberg found their dream: to bring the pain and courage of that photo to the stage.

- Select a photograph (from a newspaper, magazine or textbook) that makes a powerful statement to you.
- Write a story about it.
- Plan a musical based on your story.
- How will your musical be relevant to today's concerns? Where will it be set? When will it be set?
- Outline your musical scene by scene.

### **Telling the Story Through Music**

As composer, Schönberg wanted to emphasize the conflict between ways of life in the music of *Miss Saigon*: “I knew I wanted in the very beginning of the score to hear this clash between two cultures.”

- What role would different types of music play in your musical? What kind of music will your characters sing?
- What type of cultures could these instruments represent?
  - banjo
  - bag pipes
  - tom-tom
  - electric guitar
  - steel drum
- What types of cultures could these kinds of music represent?
  - Jazz
  - Reggae
  - Country
  - Gregorian Chant
  - Rap
- How will music reflect the cultures in your musical? What kind of music or musical instruments could you use to represent the cultures portrayed in your musical?

## *Miss Saigon* - Study Guide

---

### **The Actor:** Making it in the Theatre, Bringing the World of *Miss Saigon* to Life

The original casting of the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* took place on an international scale: New York, Los Angeles, Hawaii, and the Philippines were all visited by the casting team to pick actors who could bring the story of *Miss Saigon* to life.

Three actors from the Broadway production talked about their roles in *Miss Saigon*, and their lives in the theatre.

- LEILA FLORENTINO (Kim)
- SEAN MCDERMOTT (Chris)
- HERMAN SEBEK (The Engineer)

#### *Getting Started*

All three actors started thinking about a life in the theatre at a very young age.

Leila, who was born in the Philippines, said, “My father was a playwright. . . so I studied acting with him when I was four. . . “

Herman said, “According to my Mom, I was born dancing,” while Sean remembered getting started in high school musicals and plays. Both Herman and Sean spoke of being inspired by movie musicals. Although they all started at a young age, Leila emphasized that “it’s never too late” to begin, if the desire is there.

#### *Questions*

- Do you know what you want to be after you finish school?
- What can inspire you to think about a certain career? A parent or relative? A teacher? A book or movie?

#### *Advice*

Training, experience, and a love of the theatre, are the three main ingredients that the actors said anyone must have to make it in the theatre.

“Make sure you’re really doing it for the love of the art. . . “ said Herman, “Be true to your heart. . . “

“There’s no business like it!” said Sean.

Training in all aspects of the theatre was important to the actors: “What I heard was. . . “ said Sean, “When you come to New York, you’ve got to do everything. There’s a term called ‘the triple threat’ (acting, singing and dancing) and that’s what you had to be in order to make it in this business. “

Even though there is not much dancing for Kim in *Miss Saigon*, Leila was grateful for her training: “Some people say that I move gracefully on stage, and it’s the dance training that’s helped.”

## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

### *Questions:*

- What do you think is more important to a career: training or love of the work?
- Do you have to love your job to do a good job? To enjoy your job?
- Define and discuss the following: a job, a career, a vocation.

### *Preparing for Miss Saigon:*

To prepare for their roles, the actors were all given books on Vietnam, and watched documentaries and movies about the war, in order to get a better feeling of what Sean called “the pain they were feeling.”

Leila interviewed someone who had been in the war: “(I asked him) what it was like there. It’s such a coincidence, because he fell in love, also, with a young girl. He had been in places (like the Engineer’s club) and seen girls, some 14 years old. He described to me how they looked and some of them, the older ones, (had) so much hatred in their eyes.”

For Herman, preparation came from within: “For me, a great resource is my own personal family history... my parents and my four brothers and sisters... were refugees from Indonesia... and though my family is part Indonesian, we were still seen as white and foreign. They were forced out of the country, they had to flee, and then they emigrated to America. My mother and father were the real survivors, they were “Kim” and “The Engineer,” just getting through and surviving...”

“(The story of *Miss Saigon*) has happened many times, we’ve had Jewish people come back after the play and say, ‘Yes, we know that story, too.’”

### *Questions:*

- Think about your musical.
  - What types of actors would you need?
  - What kind of preparation would they need?
  - Would they have to have training in acting, singing and dancing?



### **What do you think? The job of the critic**

After seeing *Miss Saigon*, put yourself in the shoes of a newspaper or television critic and write a review of the show. You may wish to include any combination of the following elements in your review:

- Did the show hold your interest? Why?
- Describe the manner in which the story was presented to the audience?
- What was the structure of the story? Was there a single story or multiple stories? How did the multiple stories connect? Was anything about the story unexpected? How did the show begin and end?
- Describe the way music and lyrics worked in the show.
- Describe the sets, costumes, lighting, and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add to the meaning of the show?
- Discuss the effectiveness of the performers.
- Discuss the ideas presented in the show. Analyze their importance to your reader.
- Does *Miss Saigon* remind you of any other musicals, plays, movies or books? What elements does *Miss Saigon* share with these other works?
- Explain why your reader should make an effort to see the show.

## **VII. THE WAR IN VIETNAM**

VIETNAM —  
YOU DON'T GIVE ANSWERS, DO YOU, FRIEND?  
JUST QUESTIONS THAT DON'T EVER END?

### *Questions for Discussion*

- How is Kim symbolic of the problems women suffer in wartime? Using the Vietnam Timeline, or your own research, think about what circumstance and events might have led Kim to become a bar-girl in Saigon and Bangkok.
- How is family life impacted by war?
- After seeing *Miss Saigon*, discuss how the war affects the lives of the following characters: Kim, Chris, The Engineer, Tam, Thuy.
- The images created by *Miss Saigon* of the South Vietnamese trying to escape Saigon are haunting. Was it the responsibility of the U.S. military to help South Vietnamese citizens escape from Saigon when American troops pulled out?
- What kinds of devastating long-term effects are felt by survivors on both sides of a war long after the conflict is over?

### *Ideas for Research and Writing Assignments*

- The Vietnam War means many different things to different people. To some it was a war worth fighting. Read about the war to discover why many people believed in it. Others considered it a dark chapter in our country's history. Read about the war to discover why.
- Ask someone who participated in the war and supported it to visit your class and share their memories of the experience. Also, ask someone who protested the war to share their memories and explain their position.
- Interview your parents (if they remember the war), your grandparents, and other people who lived through the war. Ask them how they felt about the war at the time. Have their viewpoints changed since then? Tape record your interviews and join the rest of your class in creating your own oral history of that time.
- Using the Vietnam timeline as a starting point, research the events leading up to America's involvement in Vietnam.
- Research what was actually going on in Saigon in April 1975, when the musical takes place. What events led up to the fall of Saigon? What was the final departure of the Americans from Saigon really like?
- Imagine you are Kim. Write your thoughts as you watch the helicopter leaving without you.
- Imagine you are Chris. Write your thoughts as the helicopter rises to the sky.

## ***Miss Saigon* - Study Guide**

---

- When we meet the Engineer after the war, we learn that he has been “re-educated.” What does this really mean?
- Visit a veteran’s hospital and talk to the survivors of America’s past wars. Write about the human cost to each individual who goes to war.
- Research the history of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D. C. Why has the wall become such an important symbol?

**Vietnam War Timeline**

SO I WANTED TO SAVE HER, PROTECT HER. . .  
I'M AN AMERICAN  
HOW COULD I FAIL TO DO GOOD  
ALL I MADE WAS A MESS, JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE,  
IN A PLACE FULL OF MYSTERY  
THAT I NEVER ONCE UNDERSTOOD. . .

The history of conflict in Vietnam actually begins in the 19th century. During the reign of Napoleon, France took full control of Vietnam, which became in effect a French colony. This explains the heavy French influence that permeated the Vietnamese culture (think of the Engineer: half French, half Vietnamese).

**1890** Nguyen Sinh Cung is born in Central Vietnam. This son of a teacher and medicine man would grow up to be the leader of the revolt against the French. He took the name Ho Chi Minh (translated roughly “Bringer of Light”) and became a legend among his people as a leader and fighter.

**1932** The French government sets up leadership with Vietnamese representatives under their control. This puppet government will change hands many times over the next decades.

**1941** After traveling in Europe and Asia for decades, and becoming influenced by the Communist doctrine of Marx and Lenin, Ho Chi Minh returns to Vietnam to form the Vietminh, or Vietnam Independence League (later to become the North Vietnamese army, the Vietcong, or “The Cong,” as they were known to American soldiers).

Ho is held in reverence by his followers, called simply “Uncle Ho.”

**1946** War begins between French forces and Vietminh.

**1950** January 14, Ho Chi Minh declares that the area under his leadership, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, is the only legal government. His government, now seen as “North Vietnam” is recognized by the Soviet Union and China. The United States and Britain continue to recognize the puppet government in “South Vietnam.” “The lines for international involvement in the conflicts of Vietnam are drawn.

On June 26, President Harry Truman grants \$15 million in military aid to the French.

**1954** March 13, the French forces are badly defeated by the Vietminh at the battle of Dienbienphu. The American government realizes that the French cannot hold against the Vietminh: President Eisenhower reaffirms support of South Vietnam with \$100 million in aid. United States agrees to train South Vietnamese army. As the Engineer sings:

THEN IT ALL CHANGED WITH DIENBIENPHU.  
THE FROGS WENT HOME, WHO CAME? GUESS WHO?”

## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

- 1960** John F. Kennedy becomes President of the United States. As he leaves office, Eisenhower warns him of the potential danger in Vietnam.
- 1961-1962** United States supplies South Vietnam with more equipment and advisers. American advisers increase from 700 to 12,000.
- 1963** Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, succeeded by Lyndon Johnson. By the end of the year 15,000 American military advisers are in South Vietnam and \$500 million in aid is given to the South Vietnamese government.
- 1964** North Vietnamese patrol boats attack the American destroyer Maddox two times on and around August 2 in the Tonkin Gulf (the second attack is later disputed). Congress passes Tonkin Gulf resolutions on August 7, giving Johnson extraordinary power to act in Vietnam.
- 1965** In response to continued attacks on American installations, President Johnson initiates Operation Rolling Thunder: sustained bombing of North Vietnam. First troops land in Vietnam, March 8; by December, American troop forces in Vietnam reach 200,000.
- 1966-1967** Bombing of North Vietnam continues. American troop strength reaches 500,000. Sustained bombing and fighting destroy much of Vietnam, creating a large population of poor and homeless people. Many flee to the relative safety of the cities, where, as shown in the first act of *Miss Saigon*, women were often forced into prostitution.
- Nguyen Van Thieu, trained in France and the U.S. becomes President of South Vietnam.
- 1968** Tet Offensive begins as Vietcong attack South Vietnamese cities and towns. Richard Nixon is elected to the presidency.
- 1969** Ho Chi Minh dies in Hanoi at age 79.
- Massive anti-war demonstrations begin in Washington, D.C.
- Nixon begins gradual withdrawal of American troops.
- 1970-1971** Protests continue in the U.S., while American troop withdrawal continues in Vietnam.
- 1972** North Vietnam launches increased offensive against South Vietnam.
- Nixon announces intensification of American bombing of North Vietnam.
- Nixon re-elected, November 7th, in a landslide.
- 1973** After nearly two years of negotiations, many held in secret, cease-fire agreements between the United States (with Henry Kissinger as U.S. negotiator) and the North Vietnam government, are signed in Paris.
- Last American troops leave Vietnam, March 29, leaving extensive embassy personnel.

## ***Miss Saigon - Study Guide***

---

**1974** Thieu declares that war has begun again. With American troops gone, Communist forces plan to resume fighting.

August 9 — Nixon resigns in the midst of the Watergate scandal; Gerald Ford becomes President.

**1975** Communist forces begin to capture provinces in South Vietnam, moving toward Saigon.

President Ford says the war is “finished. “

Thieu leaves Saigon, April 25.

*As John sings,*

CITIES IN THE BOONDOCKS  
ARE DROPPING LIKE FLIES. . .  
CROWDS AROUND THE EMBASSY  
HAVE TEARS IN THEIR EYES  
THIEU HAS RESIGNED  
THE NEW REGIME MAY NOT HOLD  
PEOPLE AT THE PALACE  
THINK WE’LL SEND THE MARINES  
WE ARE SENDING NOTHING —  
FROM WHAT I’VE BEEN TOLD

April 29 — Last Americans leave Saigon, in the largest helicopter evacuation ever recorded. A fleet of seventy helicopters fly 1000 Americans and 6000 Vietnamese out of Saigon, leaving thousands still behind. This evacuation is shown in the “nightmare” sequence in Act Two of *Miss Saigon*. As the crowds plead with the soldiers in the helicopters:

THEY’LL KILL WHO THEY FIND HERE!  
DON’T LEAVE US BEHIND HERE!”

April 30 — Communist forces take over Saigon, changing the name to “Ho Chi Minh City. “

**1976** Jimmy Carter elected President, pardons most of the 10,000 Vietnam War draft evaders.

**1978** North Vietnamese forces, still in control of Saigon, celebrate the Third Anniversary of Reunification, as shown in Act One of *Miss Saigon*.

**1982** Vietnam veteran memorial unveiled in Washington, November 11th

*“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. So we paid an exorbitant price for the decisions that were made in good faith and for good purpose.” — Henry Kissinger*

## VIII. People, Places, Things

The following are names of people, places and things mentioned in *Miss Saigon*. Discussing them briefly before seeing the show will enrich your viewing:

- *Saigon*

THE HEAT IS ON IN SAIGON...

Capital city of South Vietnam, it became Ho Chi Minh City when the North Vietnamese took over on April 30, 1975. It was the home of the American Embassy, where John and Chris are stationed.

- *Thieu*

THIEU HAS RESIGNED,  
THE NEW REGIME MAY NOT HOLD...

Nguyen Van Thieu, trained in France and the U.S., became President of South Vietnam in 1967, and stayed in power until he resigned in 1975, just before the Communist invasion of Saigon.

- *Visa*

I NEED A VISA  
FROM YOUR EMBASSY...

The Engineer tries to buy a visa to get him to America. A visa is an official permit authorized by the government, allowing passage into a country. These were at a premium in Saigon, since so many people were trying to leave the country.

- *Ambassador Graham Martin*

American Ambassador to Vietnam, he was one of the last out of the embassy on April 29, 1975. His personnel affectionately called him “the Old Man.”

- *Ho Chi Minh*

DEEP INSIDE, I KNOW WHAT I KNOW  
WHEREVER I GO  
I SPEAK UNCLE HO  
AND THINK UNCLE SAM

Leader of North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh (“Bringer of Light”) was worshipped by his people, often called affectionately “Uncle Ho.” He died in 1969, and it is a testimony to his power that during the Third Anniversary of Reunification in 1978, shown in the first act of *Miss Saigon*, his picture and statue are still revered.

## Miss Saigon - Study Guide

---

- *“Paper Tiger”*

THE MORNING OF THE DRAGON,  
TRUTH LIT UP THE STREET  
THE TIGER WE WERE STALKING  
WALKED ON PAPER FEET.

The derogatory term the Vietcong used for the American army. A “paper tiger” looked fierce, but would crumple in a fight.

- *Vietcong*

The army of North Vietnam. Thuy is a soldier in the Vietcong who, after the fall of Saigon, becomes one of its leaders or “the People’s Commissar.” The American soldiers’ nickname for the Vietcong was “The Cong,” or the “V.C.”

- *Re-education*

THREE YEARS OF SCHOOL WAS NICE  
IN RICE FIELDS PLANTING RICE  
YOU DID GOOD WORK, YOU SEE  
RE-EDUCATING ME.

Many South Vietnamese people were put in camps after the fall of Saigon to “re-educate” them in Communist doctrine. “Re-education” often involved torture and brain-washing. The Engineer spends 3 years in a re-education camp before finding Kim again.

- *Bangkok*

The capital of Thailand, it was the destination for many refugees from Vietnam, traveling by boat across the dangerous bay of Mekong. These refugees became known as “boat people.”

- *Bui-Doi*

THESE KIDS HIT WALLS ON EVERY SIDE,  
THEY DON’T BELONG IN ANY PLACE.  
THEIR SECRET THEY CAN’T EVEN HIDE,  
IT’S PRINTED ON THEIR FACE.

Bui-Doi, or “the dust of life” were the children of American soldiers and Vietnamese women. Both their American and Vietnamese families often shunned these children.



## **IX. Creating Miss Saigon**

Here is a descriptive list of other people involved in the production:

**Producer** (Big League Theatricals; Dan Sher, Executive Producer)

Responsible for financing the production, gathering the creative team, and overseeing the creative and commercial aspects of the entire production

**Director** (Mitchell Lemsky)

Responsible for overall supervision of production

**Musical Staging** (Jodi Moccia)

Responsible for setting all dance sequences and teaching these steps to the actors

**Orchestrator** (William D. Brohn)

Takes the music and rewrites it for individual instruments

**Costume Designer** (Adreane Neofitou & Suzy Benzinger)

Designs costumes for the production

**Sound Designer**

Organizes placement of speakers, working of body microphones, and adjusts sound

**Casting Director**

Responsible for casting all the actors, usually done with the director and the composer

**General Manager**

Responsible for overseeing all financial aspects of the production

**Production Manager**

Oversees the technical aspects of the production.

**Company Manager**

Responsible for all the actors and crew (the company), especially true during touring.

**Stage Manager**

Gives direction backstage during performances.

## **X. Final Thoughts After Seeing Miss Saigon**

### ***Miss Saigon as Tragedy***

#### *Questions for Discussion*

- What are the causes of the tragedy in *Miss Saigon*?
- Does the fact that Chris and Kim behave impulsively contribute to their tragedy?
- Is the tragedy of *Miss Saigon* a tragedy of fate? Do the characters have any control over their lives? Does the responsibility for their tragedy rest with them or with forces beyond their control?
- What are the key turning points of the tragedy? In other words, which actions make the outcome of the plot unavoidable?
- As in most tragedies, there is a shred of hope at the end of *Miss Saigon*. What is it?
- Who is responsible for Kim's death?
- By writing the ending of *Miss Saigon* as they did, what do you think the authors were trying to say?

#### *Ideas for Research and Writing Assignments*

- Trace the shifting moods of optimism and despair in *Miss Saigon*. How do these mood shifts help to make the musical more powerful?
- Rewrite the ending of *Miss Saigon* as you wished it could have ended.
- If Kim had not killed herself, describe in writing what might have happened to Kim, Tam, Chris and Ellen?

## **XI. Quick Takes: Additional Ideas for Discussion and Writing After Seeing *Miss Saigon***

- Imagine you are Ellen after her first meeting with Kim. In either prose or poetry, write your feelings about realizing in a very concrete way for the first time that you do not solely possess the love of someone you love deeply.
- Have you ever felt the sense of confusion and disillusion that Chris is experiencing in the beginning of *Miss Saigon*? 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?
- Write an essay describing how one of the following emotions plays a role in the plot of *Miss Saigon*?
  - a. Love
  - b. Greed
  - c. Sacrifice
  - d. Responsibility
- Discuss the intimate versus the epic scale of history. Which is more powerful, the story of two individuals like Kim and Chris who are swept along by the force of events or an overview of an entire conflict?
- Write an essay on the significance of dreams in *Miss Saigon*. Which characters dream? Why? What do they dream about?
- How do you feel about the Engineer's view of "The American Dream"?
- Do you create "movies" in your mind during difficult times? Think of a time when you have done this; write about it.
- During their evacuation, John says to Chris, "It's not you, it's war that's cruel and if some dreams get smashed perhaps it's best that they were." What does he mean by this statement? Do you agree?
- Chris and John have a strong friendship. Why are such friendships formed in wartime?

## ***Miss Saigon* - Study Guide**

---

- While watching a show that 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 that 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 Wedding Ceremony (Dju Vui Vai)”  
“The Last Night of the World”  
“The Morning of the Dragon”  
“I Still Believe”  
“This is the Hour”  
“If you want to die in bed”  
“Bui Doi”  
“Her Or Me”  
“The American Dream”

- I. Summarize the context of your segment.
- II. Discuss:
  - What do we learn about the character or characters who sing this segment?
  - What do we learn about the world of the musical in this segment? What do we learn about the mood of this particular moment and its importance to the whole?
  - What do we learn about the larger themes of the show from this segment?
- III. 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*? Could this same power be achieved through words?

### **The Creators of *Miss Saigon***

**ALAIN BOUBLIL** (Conception, Book and Original French Lyrics) Born in Tunisia, Alain Boublil emigrated to Paris at the age of eighteen. He graduated in Economics only to end up before too long writing his first French pop lyrics. He then discovered the existence of musical theater after seeing *West Side Story* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and went on to team up with composer Claude-Michel Schönberg. Over twenty years their partnership gave birth to *La Revolution Francais* (the first-ever staged French rock opera) and the award-winning *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon* and *Martin Guerre*. He has also co-produced with Claude-Michel Schönberg the major cast albums from all their shows worldwide. On his own his recent work includes the play *The Diary of Adam and Eve*, based on short stories by Mark Twain. Alain lives in London and with Marie and is the proud father of four sons.

**CLAUDE-MICHEL SCHÖNBERG** (Conception, Music, Book) Born in 1944 of Hungarian parents, Claude-Michel Schönberg began his career a singer, writer and producer of popular songs. He wrote the musical score of *La Revolution Francaise* (Paris, 1973), *Les Misérables* (Paris, 1980 and London, 1985) and *Miss Saigon* (London, 1989) and *Martin Guerre* (London, 1996). Since then he has also supervised overseas productions and co-produced several international cast albums of his shows. He lives in Paris with his wife and two children.

**RICHARD MALTBY JR.** (Lyrics) conceived and directed *Fosse* (1999 Tony Award, Best Musical) and *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978 Tony Awards, Best Musical and Best Director). He also wrote the musicals *Starting Here*, *Starting Now*, *Closer Than Ever*, *Baby* and *Big* (all with composer David Shire); the American adaptation of *Song and Dance* (with Andrew Lloyd Webber and Don Black); *Miss Saigon* (with Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg); and *Nick and Nora* (with Charles Strouse). On Broadway, he also directed *Baby* and *Song and Dance*, and Off-Broadway, *Closer Than Ever* and *Starting Here*, *Starting Now*. He has received nominations for and/or won Tony, Outer Critics Circle, New York Drama Critics and Grammy awards for his musical scores.

**BIG LEAGUE THEATRICALS, INC** (Producer) is thrilled to have produced the North American Touring production of Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* and *Footloose* as well as successful long runs of *Footloose* at Harrah's in Atlantic City and the Rio All-Suite Casino Resort in Las Vegas. Big League Theatricals has produced and general managed numerous North American and South American tours of musical theatre and international attractions throughout its 12-year history. Among the recent successes are *Titanic-The Musical*, *The King and I* (North American and International tours), *The Who's Tommy* (North American and International tours), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (starring Rip Taylor), *1776*, *Mame* (starring Morgan Brittany) and *Guys and Dolls*. The booking department at Big League Theatricals, Inc. is among the most respected in the industry. It represents attractions ranging in scope from the national tours of *Spirit of the Dance* to *Blast*. Forthcoming productions for Big League Theatricals will include the second year of Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, *Miss Saigon* and *Blast II-Shockwave*. Visit their website at [www.bigleague.org](http://www.bigleague.org).

## ***Miss Saigon* - Study Guide**

---

**MITCHELL LEMSKY** (Director) attended the Juilliard School of Drama in New York City. He was the Executive Producer and Associate Director of *Miss Saigon*. Other Broadway productions include the current revival of *Oklahoma!*, *Cats*, *Song & Dance*, *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera* and the American premiere of *Martin Guerre*. Off-Broadway productions include *Fen*, *Soapy Smith*, *Lenny and the Heartbreakers* and *Found a Peanut* (all for the New York Shakespeare Festival) as well as productions at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

**JODI MOCCIA** (Musical Staging) choreographed *The Rhythm Club* at the Signature Theater in Virginia for director Eric Schaeffer. She was Associate Director/Choreographer for the Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim's *Putting It Together* starring Carol Burnett. Along with Bob Avian, Moccia has choreographed the Broadway, national tour and international touring companies of *Miss Saigon* and *Sunset Boulevard*.

**NICHOLAS HYTNER** (Original Director) Broadway: *Carousel*, *Twelfth Night* (Lincoln Center), London: *The Lady in the Van*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, *The Madness of George III*, *Carousel*, *Ghetto*, many productions at the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Co. Film: *The Madness of King George*, *The Crucible*, *The Object of My Affection*, *Center Stage*.

**BOB AVIAN** (Original Musical Staging) has danced in over a dozen Broadway shows including *West Side Story*; *Hello Dolly!*; *Funny Girl*. He served as Associate Choreographer/Assistant Director to Michel Bennett on *Henry*, *Sweet Henry*; *Promises, Promises*; *Coco*; *Company*; *Follies*; *Twigs*; *Seesaw* and *God's Favorite*. Choreography credits include *Putting It Together*, *Miss Saigon*; *Sunset Boulevard* (Tony nomination). *Martin Guerre* (London), *Follies* (London). Tony Awards: *A Chorus Line* (Co-choreographer); *Ballroom* (Choreographer, Co-producer). Produced Tony-winning *Dreamgirls* (Broadway/National Companies).

## **XII. Resource List**

Behr, Edward, Mark Steyn. *The Story of Miss Saigon*. Arcade Publishing Company, Inc.

### **On Vietnam**

Butler, David. *The Fall of Saigon*. Simon and Schuster.

Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam*. The Viking Press.

Safer, Morley. *Flashbacks*. Random House.

### **On The Theatre**

Atkinson, Brooks. *Broadway*. The MacMillan Company.

Behr, Edward. *The Complete Book of Les Miserables*. Arcade Publishing Company, Inc.

Bordman, Gerald. *The American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. Oxford University Press.

Gottfried, Martin. *Broadway Musicals*. Abrams.

Green, Stanley. *The World of Musical Comedy*. A.S. Barnes.

### **Authors of the *Miss Saigon* Study Guide**

**PETER ROYSTON** is a graduate of Columbia University. He is co-author of the *Miss Saigon* and *Les Miserables* study guides, and is writing *The Phantom of the Opera* study guide. Before his current position as Educational Sales and Marketing Manager for Theatre Direct, Inc., a group theatrical ticket agency, he was assistant to Alan Wasser, General Manager for the Broadway and touring productions of *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Miss Saigon*.

**SARAH SCHLESINGER**, author of a series of Music Theatre International Study Guides, is Program Coordinator and the Faculty Lyricist-Librettist for the Musical Theatre Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Before joining the NYU faculty, she taught at Pace University and Towson State University as a specialist in mass communications and group discussion processes.

She has a string of musical lyricist-librettist credits: *On the Swing Shift* (Manhattan Theatre Club), *Heidi* (Theatreworks USA), and *Follow the Sun* (Hudson Guild), among others. She just completed work on *Love Comics*, a musical interpretation of the romance comics of the 1950's and '60's, with David Evans. Ms. Schlesinger also is working on *O'Henry's New York*, as well as writing lyrics for a new musical based on Frank Baum's *Queen Zixi of Ix*.

She is the author of recent non-fiction works published by Random House/Villard, William Morrow, Avon Books, and the Princeton Book Company.

*The Miss Saigon Study Guide* was edited by Helen Sneed, Music Theatre International.