

Theater Review: 'The King and I' at Lyric Opera of Chicago

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 5, 2016 - 11:11am

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CHICAGO – The venerable musical “The King and I,” by the legendary team of (Richard) Rodgers and (Oscar) Hammerstein, is now 65 years old. The Lyric Opera of Chicago is injecting fresh life into this senior aged play, with a sumptuous new production that is top drawer at every level.



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

The multi-diverse cast brings an emotion and dignity to the story of Anna Leonowens, a British teacher hired by King Monkut of Siam (now Thailand). The staging is a feast for the eyes, and special moments like “The March of the Royal Siamese Children” and “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” doesn’t have any more politically incorrect baggage – which has hampered earlier stagings – and are absolutely sensational. Expert production people have put this show together, and it is a musical that will touch and entertain any age group.



Shall We? His Royal Highness (Paolo Montalban) and Anna (Kate Baldwin) in 'The King and I'

Photo credit: The Lyric Opera of Chicago

The King of Siam (Paolo Montalban) needs a teacher for his 67 children in the early 1860s. Enter Anna (Kate Baldwin), a proper British instructor who seeks a change of scenery after her military husband passes away. She and her son Louis (Charlie Babbo) arrive in Siam, only to find out that a promised residence is not available, and they have to stay in the palace. Anna’s clash with the King on this issue grows their

connection, distracting him from his latest wife Tuptim (Ali Ewoldt), who is actually in love with Lun Tha (Sam Simahk). The two star crossed couples will walk down a precipitous path to their final solution.

The original story of 'The King and I' is quite amazing. A novelization based on an Anna Leonowens memoir (yes, the King and Her were real people) became an unlikely best seller in the 1940s, and a narrative film called "Anna and the King of Siam" (1946) was produced. The stage diva Gertrude Lawrence saw that the property as perfect for a musical, and a vehicle for her comeback. That is why Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the musical, and why Lawrence got rave reviews and that destined comeback (opposite Yul Brynner, of course, as the King). Ironically, Lawrence died of cancer a year and a half into the long run, and Brynner ended up playing the King in the film version, and over 4000 times on stage.

With that background, and literally hundreds of thousands of performances since its debut, "The King and I" has a long legacy to live up to, and the Lyric Opera of Chicago delivers that life. The two leads, Kate Baldwin and Paolo Montalban, build the chemistry throughout the the story on stage, until they get to the climatic "Shall We Dance" song, and deliver it with such a loose joy that the audience was roaring after it was done. Of the supporting cast, Ali Ewoldt as Tuptim has a glorious singing voice, providing necessary oomph to less familiar songs like "My Lord and Master" and "I Have Dreamed."



'The Small House of Uncle Thomas,' a Highlight from 'The King and I'

Photo credit: The Lyric Opera of Chicago

And of course, there are the glorious familiar songs, classics on their own. It will be impossible, once you experience the show, to not walk out humming "I Whistle a Happy Tune," "Hello Young Lovers," "Getting to Know You" and the aforementioned "Shall We Dance." These are tunes from "the great American songbook," and their luscious live orchestration, from the top players in Chicago, is as much a celebration as a presentation.

It's interesting to note that the stickier UN-PC elements of the narrative have been overcome through the years with more diverse casting, and stagings that celebrate the traditions and culture of Old Siam. In retrospect, it's where "The King and I" needed to evolve to, and in the journey to get there teaches us more about ourselves, in reaction to it. "Getting to Know You," indeed.

"The King and I" is performed at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, 20 North Upper Wacker Drive, at various days and times through May 22nd, 2016. [Click here](#) [18] for more information, dates/times and to purchase tickets. Featuring Kate Baldwin, Paolo Montalban, Ali Ewoldt, Sam Simahk and Charles Babbo. Music by Richard Rodgers. Lyrics and Book by Oscar Hammerstein. Orchestration by Robert Russell Bennett. Choreography by Trude Rittman, based on original dance design by Jerome Robbins. Directed by Lee Blakeley.



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