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'King' beautiful, fun, etcetera, etcetera

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SONORA -- Never traveled to Thailand? You can get a taste of this exotic land for the next couple of months at Sierra Repertory Theatre.

Director Scot Viets' staging of the musical "The King and I," which opens the company's 2008 season, emphasizes the pageantry and beauty of the Far East.

A dragon with piercing eyes decorates the curtain. The king's palace glows with red and green lights and features a golden Buddha and a stunning view of temple spires. It's no surprise to learn that the sets were designed by Noble Dinse, well known throughout the region for his exceptional work.

A crowd-pleaser, this oft-performed 1951 Rodgers & Hammerstein musical features adventure, romance and international intrigue.

British widow Anna Leonowens and her young son, Louis, travel to Siam (the former name of Thailand) in the 1860s so that Anna can take a job teaching the king's many children. Anna and the king clash at first because of their very different outlooks at life, but they eventually learn to respect each other.

Victoria Strong, who stars as Anna, acts and looks a bit like Deborah Kerr, who played the part in the 1956 movie. Proper, dignified and confident, Strong also is able to show a vulnerable side when needed.

Jared Lee is equally appealing as the monarch who is torn between modernizing his country and preserving customs. He is so handsome and entertaining that we understand why Anna would like him despite his chauvinistic attitude.

The two have a great chemistry together and got applause at Sunday's opening performance when they waltzed around the stage in the famous number "Shall We Dance?" Performing to lively recorded accompaniment, they show off strong, pleasing voices.

Nine women of different ethnicities, shapes and sizes play the polygamous king's wives, while 15 adorable kids play his children. They're outfitted in luxurious, glittering robes, anklets and bracelets by costume designer Peggy McKowen.

Ren Hanami is saintly as the head wife, Lady Thiang, and offers a touching rendition of the ballad "Something Wonderful." Russell Germain is appropriately cocky as heir to the throne Prince Chulalongkorn, while Sheamus Vaughan-Warde is more reserved as Anna's son.

Brian Rivera is stern and biting as the king's right-hand man, the Kralahome. Rocky Heron and Kiyoko Williams moon over each other as star-crossed young lovers Lun Tha and Tuptim.

Kiyoko Williams also serves as the narrator of the engaging Siamese ballet "The Small House of

Uncle Thomas," a show highlight. Adapted by Lia Metz from Jerome Robbins' original choreography, the exciting dance is performed with ornate masks and costumes and exotic movements.

Other enjoyable displays of pageantry include a parade with a Chinese dragon and a small live dog, and a fireworks show seen from the king's palace.

This delightful show about the importance of getting to know people from other cultures will have you whistling a happy tune as you leave the theater.

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