

'King' rules with laughter and song

By the time the king and Anna dance in Sierra Repertory Theatre's crowd-pleasing season opener "The King and I," the audience was just itching to cheer. Once the first half of the cast had taken its final bows, Sunday's audience was standing and cheering wildly.

While the details of the story about the English schoolteacher who ventures to Siam (Thailand today) to help the king modernize his country and educate his many children and wives might not be secret (you've seen the 1956 film, right?), exactly how big Sierra Rep Artistic Director Scott Viets would make the show was given as tidbits and teasers.

"I deliberately went bigger with the cast because we'd like to try to truly present theatrically the enormous scale of King Mongkut's world," he said in a press release.

He succeeds on this point; the cast is spot on at every turn, and there are moments when more than 30 people are onstage, yet each individual can be seen. It's a marvel when looked at purely from a blocking point of view.

Jared Lee is a terrific king, and while it probably doesn't hurt that



Theater Review

By Mike Taylor

he's played the role before, in this production he doesn't miss a beat. Every inflection, every glance and every note he sings are right on the money, and when the king is angered – which is quite frequently – his shouts silence all of Sonora.

Playing off of Victoria Strong, who embodies Anna with a marvelous manner that's less schoolmarm and more refined Englishwoman, must have made Lee's job incredibly easy. She has a beautiful singing voice and delivers every line with crispness, delicateness and a determination befitting a late 1800s widow striking out into unfamiliar territory.

When the king and Anna spar, the fireworks fly, though in a fun-loving way. Their chemistry is as golden as the king's jewelry, especially during one scene late at night when they discuss an impending visit

from a British government official.

Viets also touted the sets for the show. Since most of the action revolves around the palace, he said, "This will afford us the opportunity to put a lot of intricate detail into what the palace should be: lavish and grandiose."

For the first time I can recall in a Sierra Rep show, I must disagree. Noble Dinse's sets look pretty enough, but much of the artistic intricacy seems to have been spent on the proscenium arch and some columns – decorated with lighted panels that flash at moments in the show – and on beautiful flats used to indicate where we are at certain scenes. The throne room, while adorned with jewels along the steps, doesn't have the same oomph as the rest of the show (disposable throw pillows rather than velvety cushions?).

When speaking of oomph, guest costume designer Peggy McKowen truly adds to the spectacle. Even the opening scene – in which Anna's plight is exposed and passengers and sailors scurry about a ship – features captivating outfits. Once in the palace, however, the eyes are encouraged to dart all



Photo by Rich Miller Photography

Victoria Strong is Anna and Jared Lee plays the king in "The King and I," playing through April 6 at the East Sonora Theatre.

about the stage, where treats are found in even the simplest costumes. It seems the wardrobe might have taken the lion's share of the decorative budget for the production, which makes the larger scenes – when the entire cast is onstage – sad because the room isn't as lush and opulent as the garb.

My attention, and that of most of the folks in last Sunday's matinee audience, was centered on the children throughout the show; they are a marvel. Only twice did I catch slight divergences from character, and these are youngsters, many of which are making their stage debuts. Their introductory scene with the king and Anna is sweet, charming and filled with giggles – from the crowd, that is.

Quickly, here are some other standouts in this remarkable cast:

Ren Hanami is a treat as Lady Thiang, the king's "head wife"; she has a glorious singing voice and a demure-yet-knowing demeanor. Hearing her sing "Something Wonderful" sends chills of joy.

Russell Germain, as Prince Chulalongkorn, plays wary very well as he first meets Anna. The character is emulating his abrupt father and once he delivers his final monologue, his actions transform into

those of a self-assured, compassionate monarch.

Rocky Heron and Kiyoko Williams shine as star-crossed young lovers. Their duet, "I Have Dreamed," is another crowd pleaser. Williams also serves as the narrator during "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," which the king orders performed for the visiting British. This elaborate fable is intricately performed with masks, a dancing dragon and an interesting fabric "river." Lia Metz adapted Jerome Robbins' original choreography and it's stunning.

Daniel Kook plays one of the youngest children and steals just about every scene. At a fresh age 6, his pleading with Anna as she decides to leave the country after disagreeing with the king is a warmhearted tearjerker.

Spectacle has become a hackneyed term used in describing Sierra Rep shows but "The King and I" is truly that. You will laugh, swoon and cry all within the three-hour show, leaving the theater whistling your favorite tune.

The production plays through April 6, but I'd call for tickets soon so you beat the rush that's sure to greet this golden show; etcetera, etcetera.

Venom and vinegar visit Tahoe

Legendary comedian Don Rickles returns to South Lake Tahoe for a one-night stand at the MontBleu Resort Casino & Spa at 9 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 16, to unleash his vim, vinegar and venom.

The lovable Rickles honed his craft to perfection with 60 years in nightclubs, major showrooms and venues throughout the country, winning favor and friendship among entertainment legends like Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Dean Martin and countless others.

Most people identify the acerbic funny man by his many appearances on television with talk show hosts Johnny Carson, Larry King, Jay Leno and David Letterman. He recently starred in the highly acclaimed John Landis-directed documentary,

"Mr. Warmth: The Don Rickles Project," which debuted on HBO in December. His movie career highlights include an appearance in "Casino" and "Kelly's Heroes," as well as early roles in "Run Silent, Run Deep" and "Rat Race." He earned younger fans as the voice of Mr. Potato Head in Disney's "Toy Story" and "Toy Story 2."

He has starred in live stage productions and has had two best-selling comedy albums. In the spring of last year, he became a best-selling author with the release of "Rickles' Book" by Simon & Schuster.

Entering from stage left to the arena under the strain of his theme song, "El Toro," audience members in the front can expect to be verbally charged.

Tickets are \$50 and \$60 and



Don Rickles

may be reserved by calling (775) 586-2000 or (800) 648-3353, or visit ticketmaster.com.



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