

SRT opens with spectacular 'King and I'

By KATHIE ISAAC-LUKE
For *The Union Democrat*

For the opening of its 2008 season, Sierra Repertory Theatre has pulled out all the stops with a sumptuous and captivating production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "The King and I."

The musical is based on Margaret Landon's 1944 novel which chronicles the experiences of Anna Loenowens, a widow who spent five years in Siam tutoring the children of King Mongkut.

The set design by Noble Dinse is lavish and intricate. The stage is layered with columns and cornices giving it a multi-dimensional appearance and making it appear larger.

The jewel encrusted proscenium surrounding the curtain suggests a window into another world, and immediately conveys to the audience that they are in for a special journey.

Befitting the scale of this production, director Scott Viets has assembled the largest cast ever to appear on stage at SRT. The ensemble acting is so fine that each of the 37 actors seems an integral and indispensable part of the whole.

The SRT musical contains the complete score of the original 1951 Broadway production, which includes such memorable songs as "I Whistle a Happy Tune," "Hello Young Lovers," "Getting to Know You" and "Shall We Dance?"

At a misty port in Siam, circa 1865, we first see Anna trying to reassure her son as they make the transition from their familiar world to a strange new one. She is first greeted by the Kralahome, the king's minister who protects him and counsels him against change.

Once transported to the royal palace, Anna is unhappy that the king has reneged on his promise of providing her with a suitable house. In addition, she is made to wait weeks to have an audience with him. The clash of cultures that ensues is personified by the stubborn and authoritarian king and the fiercely independent Anna.

The king respects scientific inquiry and wishes to assimilate Western knowledge, but is conflicted over the possibility that such change might undermine tradition. He tells Anna that he has 67 children by many wives, but only the favored ones will be attending her classes.

The king's lifestyle is foreign and even shocking to Anna's Victorian sensibilities, yet in time she learns to appreciate his intelligence, knowledge of history and love for his family and country.

Anna's dress and manners are a puzzle to the king. When he asks why she wears such an



RICH MILLER/COURTESY PHOTO

"THE KING AND I" stars Victoria Strong and Jared Lee.

unwieldy hoop skirt, she tells him that it represents "a circle of protection." He rejoins that "English men must be very aggressive."

Soon Anna befriends Tuptim, a slave from Burma who was a gift to the king. Anna gives her the book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and Tuptim later translates it into a ballet which is performed for visiting English dignitaries. Tuptim is in love with Lun Tha, and their forbidden liaisons result in tragic consequences. Anna's response to the king's idea of traditional justice forces the most serious confrontation between them.

Victoria Strong gives a remarkable performance as Anna. She crafts a British

accent that is perfect and never falters. Her perceptive interpretation of her character leads us to admire Anna's courage and determination.

Jared Lee is dynamic and thoroughly convincing as the king. He captures the imperious nature of the monarch, as well as his more accessible side. We see his curiosity slowly blossom into a greater tolerance and understanding.

Anna's son Louis and the king's eldest son and heir to the throne are about the same age and have conflicts and misunderstandings of their own. Russell Germain as Prince Chulalongkorn and Sheamus Vaughan-Warde as Louis are charming in their roles.

REVIEW

Kiyoko Williams is wonderful as Tuptim and Sonora actor Rocky Heron did a fine job in the role of Lun Tha. Together the lovers sang impressive renditions of the beautiful ballads "We Kiss in a Shadow" and "I Have Dreamed." These haunting melodies serve to underscore the tragedy of their fates.

Originally tapped to fill in for Equity actor Sean Williams, Heron is now playing the role of Lun Tha throughout the run.

Exemplary performances also are given by Brian Rivera as the Kralahome and Ren Hanami as Lady Thiang, the king's first wife.

All of the children playing the king's offspring give wonderfully disciplined and touching performances, and the actors who play the king's eight wives are also excellent.

The choreography by Lia Metz is magical. The dancers who perform the imaginative ballet "The Small House of Uncle Thomas" are all outstanding.

Anna's hoop skirts and the resplendent costumes of brocade and satins designed by Peggy McKowen are a visual feast. The vivid lighting by Christopher Van Tuyl is perfectly complementary.

Mark Seiver provides the musical direction and musical orchestration is by Sean Paxton.

With its depth, vibrancy, engaging performances and impeccably staged musical numbers, this production is nothing short of spectacular.

The play runs through April 6 at the East Sonora theater. For reservations, call 532-3120.

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