

## PROMENADE PRODUCTIONS

The King and I

The Bacon Theatre, Cheltenham September 15<sup>th</sup> 2016

*Director: John Pannett*

*MD: David Manifold*

*Choreographer: Heather Newman*

*Assisted by: Kate Williams*

This musical is derived from a novel by Margaret Landon and based on the memoirs of Anna Leonowen 'The English Governess and the Siamese Court', and tells of the time she spent as Governess to King Mongkut's many children. After we had settled into our seats the overture reminded us of the songs we were about to hear, and we prepared to be transported to Siam in 1862. When the curtains opened we saw a well-painted seascape from the deck of The Chow Phya as it arrived in Bangkok, this was to be the first of several excellent back cloths from Scenic and Property Hire, which helped create the splendours of the East. The costumes were equally exotic, with amazing headdresses. Anna's hooped dresses were splendid but must have caused a problem trying to manoeuvre around the stage.

This large stage gave the space to create the feel of palatial spaces and absorb the large cast without being overcrowded. The stage crew worked well to change the set quickly and efficiently and not slow down the pace of the show. The costumes, apart from those of the Westerners, were all exotic and well worn, and the difference in dress between the two cultures left no doubt as to who was who. Make up and hairstyles all contributed to the overall picture. The production had been well lit with appropriate changes for indoors and outside and the more intimate scenes; although the 'follow spot' was not always focused properly or operated well. The sound was well balanced and operated with good sound effects.

The Orchestra under the Direction of David Manifold was well controlled and did not overpower the voices, it produced a well-balanced sound and numbers were taken at a good pace. There were one or two slow entrances into songs, and there were a couple of places when a little music to cover a scene change would have been nice. The standard of singing from both Principals and chorus was high.

This is an older style show which requires a large cast with all the wives and children, but when I realised how many children were in the show I was a little concerned how long The March of the Siamese Children would take as sometimes it can be a little tedious, but it was lovely, well timed and each child presenting themselves in their own way to 'Mrs Anna'. The perception of this show is that apart from the King there are no parts for men, but there are several very important male roles, albeit small in comparison to the King. The Kralahome, The Interpreter and Captain Orton all help to put the story into the context of the time helping us to understand the protocol and manners of the time, and the vast differences between the two cultures and they all did it very well.

Sir Edward Ramsey a British Statesman and old friend of Anna's, was every inch an English gentleman and again showed the differences between the cultures. Lun Tha, the Burmese scholar and envoy, who brings the slave girl Tuptim to the Siamese Court, and falls in love with her, was played a little hesitantly and I felt there was a touch of 'first night nerves' but he sang his duet with Tuptim well. I am sure he would relax into the role as the week went on.

The two youngsters who played Prince Chualalngkorn, the King's son and Louis Leonowens, Anna's son were both very confident in their roles. Prince Chalalngkorn emulated his father in every way, and Louis was a good contrast with his western ways and concern for his mother. They worked together very well and their duet 'A Puzzlement' was a delight. It was a tribute to the grounding from Young Promenaders. The Priests and Guards are very minor roles but very necessary to the story and action.

The large number wives and children were well dressed and all moved, sang and acted well. The scene with Anna 'Getting to Know You' was a delight; also 'Western People Funny' with Lady Thiang was well sung and most amusing; and I really enjoyed 'The Small House of Uncle Thomas' it is a deceptively difficult play within a play but was well executed. Lady Thiang, the head wife of the King, was portrayed sensitively with a good mixture of subservience to her husband, dominance of the other wives and Tuptim, and curiosity of Anna and her Western ways. It was well sung and acted.

Burmese slave girl Tuptim, who had been sent as a present to King Mongkut was played exceptionally well by this talented young lady, she displayed her sadness at being in a strange land and her affection for Lun Tha very well, with a lovely voice and wonderful diction which enchanted the audience.

The well matched pairing of Anna and the King was a joy to watch. The King was very dictatorial and in total control of all those around him, but beneath this hard exterior there was a softer side which came across with his very small children and Anna. Anna was a very strong and uncompromising character who knew what she wanted, and was quite a match for the King who was used to total compliance from everyone but particularly his women folk. They complimented each other beautifully and displayed the many facets of their developing relationship. They both spoke and sang with very clear diction their 'Shall We Dance' was lovely.

The choreography from Heather Newman was full of 'eastern promise' and all performed confidently. Director John Pannett had brought out a great deal of humour in the production. He had encouraged his cast to use the stage well had worked with the strengths of his cast, choreographer, musical director and backstage team to provide a well rounded production which this first night audience really enjoyed.

*Frankie Telford.  
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