

REVIEWS



Siam I am: Dom Magwili in "The King and I."

THE KING AND I at the Marian Theatre

Reviewed by D.L. King

Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts (PCPA) guest director John Loschmann should be commended for digging below the surface theme of "East meets West" in this beautiful production of the well-loved Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II extravaganza. For, as Loschmann (a former conservatory executive director for A.C.T. in San Francisco)

and crew so aptly demonstrate, the story defends Western ideals of sentimental love vs. possession and domination of woman by man, while capturing the complicated friendship and passion between two very different, very strong-willed people.

Though the play was originally conceived about Anna Leonowens and designed for star Gertrude Lawrence, Yul Brynner's definitive stamp on the role of the King long ago changed the focus of the play from Anna to the monarch. And Dom Magwili, familiar to Los Angeles theatergoers for his work with the East West Players

and other companies, is absolutely spell-binding in his interpretation. Though his singing tends to bottom out a bit in the lower registers, in every way Magwili is regally commanding: By just marching onstage, he fills the theatre with an electrifying presence.

The other "star" of the PCPA revival has to be the majestic scenic design by R. Eric Stone. Just when we think that he can't top himself (i.e., the awe-inspiring beauty of his stained-glass set for last winter's *The Sound of Music*, or his haunting cathedral for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), he blows us away with an absolutely breathtaking palace. My telling you how amazing this set is will in no way spoil the surprise when the fully blown sail-and-mast on the deck of the Chow Phya comes down to reveal the splendid gold-leafed backdrop and stage.

Though the opening scene ("I Whistle a Happy Tune") is not as touching or musically "pretty" as might be anticipated, and some of the musical design by Kevin Robison seems to pit the vocalist against his instrumental accompaniment (Magwili's valiant effort in "A Puzzlement" is the strongest case in point), the rest of the play measures up to the vision set by Loschmann and Stone. Heidi Ewart as Anna is properly, primly British, and brings a strong voice and demeanor to her portrayal of Anna.

Another decisive, all-important element to the success of this production is its extraordinary supporting cast: Michael Tremblay's forbidding Kraiahome makes the audience just a little uneasy with his sharp delivery, and another Tremblay, Julie, promotes a new-found respect for the role of the long-suffering Lady Thiang with her singular singing. Jacqueline Maraya's lovely voice suits her equally lovely acting as Tuptim, while Timothy James Karasawa delights as Prince Chulalongkorn ready to fill his father's royal shoes.

"The King and I," presented by the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts at the Marian Theatre, Allan Hancock College Campus, 800 S. College Dr., Santa Maria, July 10-25. Continues at the Festival Theatre, 420 2nd St., Solvang, July 30-Aug. 15. (805) 922-8313.

Back Stage West, 7/14/98
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