

Review**Ohio Light Opera: *The King and I* (June 22)**

by Robert Rollin



The Ohio Light Opera's June 22nd performance of *The King and I* was most enjoyable. The 1951 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical sparkled in this well paced production filled with good singing, excellent blocking and acting, lovely costuming, fine sets, Jerome Robbins' original choreography, and especially imaginative lighting, made all the more effective through use of backlit shadow puppets.

The King and I is a gem of a musical, though by no means without a few flaws. The presence of a mature widow and mother firmly loyal to her husband's memory and actively engaged as a caring parent, centers the show, as does the King, a dominating personality who, nonetheless, wants to bring his country closer to the more enlightened Western culture.

This musical is over three hours long, and the lengthy "play within a play" with its succession of dances can sometimes drag a bit. The OLO's production never flagged and the play on Uncle Tom's Cabin moved quickly. Here Rodgers' wonderfully orchestrated music, a rhythmically lively blend of Asian and Western elements, helped depict a culture in transition. The colorful costumes, quick changes, and skillful choreography all made the show flow well.

The two leads, Tanya Roberts, as Anna, and Ted Christopher, as the King, were excellent. Soprano Roberts has a remarkably beautiful quality that made her performance stunning. This musical must radiate from the central character, Anna's role, and Roberts was musically arresting, technically sound, and constantly on the move as she brought Anna to life. Though very young, she brought the role of a mature widow to life fully with the help of the fine costuming and her gorgeous voice.

Baritone Ted Christopher was equally good as the King. Though not blessed with a truly operatic voice, his rich booming sound and superlative acting skills were terrific. He depicted the King's gradual change from domineering despot to concerned father and enlightened leader with great energy and flair. Christopher has significant past experience, and also serves as the OLO's principal guest director.

Mezzo-soprano Sara Best did well as Lady Thiang, the King's chief wife, especially in the scene where she underlined "something wonderful" in the King's character—meaning his ability to understand the need for modernization. This is one of Rodgers' most angular and challenging melodies in the show. Best's voice seemed noticeably to fluctuate in tone color between her dark low register and her higher range. Sometimes this interrupted the flow of her performance.

The important love interest between Tuptim, the Burmese slave, and Lun Tha, the Burmese scholar who delivers her as gift to the King, seemed to lack the power it often has in other productions. Elise Kennedy as Tuptim certainly brought out the young naïve girl's personality, but her singing was uneven in projection and timbre. Clark Sturdevant as Lun Tha was more effective, but his vocal color slipped in the second act.

The cast deftly handled the other supporting roles. The children were consistently poised and obviously well rehearsed. Above all Hammerstein's words were designed to portray Rodgers' magnificent music in a number of contexts, as for example in "Hello Young Lovers," where Anna tells Tuptim and Lun Tha that she "has a love of her own," meaning her love for her deceased husband and her child. The King enters and the scene changes, but she later returns with her lovely theme.

Indeed, Anna seems to be the purveyor of Rodgers' finest and most memorable melodies, as in "I Whistle a Happy Tune," "Getting to Know You," the reprise of "Hello Young Lovers" in Act II, "Shall We Dance," and the return of "I Whistle a Happy Tune." The Overture and Entr'acte (before Act II) presented these entrancing tunes. The orchestra played with flair. On a few occasions the brass overbalanced the strings, but conductor J. Lynn Thompson kept things moving and brought out Rodgers' wonderful orchestration. *The King and I* is truly one of the great musicals and the production did it justice.

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