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THE KING AND I *** out of ****

LINCOLN CENTER THEATER AT THE VIVIAN BEAUMONT

Western superiority has never seemed more charming than in the Rodgers & Hammerstein musical *The King And I*. This handsomely mounted revival helmed by Bartlett Sher boasts a clutch of great songs, beautiful singing by the cast, some adorable children and two wonderfully charismatic leads. Short of a complete overhaul of the original book, it won't get much better than this. This show can't have quite the same impact as Sher's *South Pacific* because that revival dusted off a classic that most (like me) had dismissed as a stodgy, dated relic. Here, they minimize the flaws in the original story and present this romantic tale with polish and style. But the flaws remain.

A dry run of sorts for their final smash hit *The Sound Of Music*, this *King* offers the exoticism of the East via the memoirs of widow Anna Leonowens (Kelli O'Hara). She bravely ventures to Siam with her young son to serve as a tutor for the children of the King. Said King (Ken Watanabe in his English language stage debut) is admirably progressive, learning English and wanting to soak up as much knowledge as his can to prepare his country for the future. An early reference to geo-politics (with the French nudging in here and there on his neighbors) places the King's worries in the proper, intelligent context.

But first comes a flourish that lets you know you're at Lincoln Center with all its resources. Anna and her son Louis (an admirably restrained Jake Lucas) arrive in port on a ship. Clearly, set designer Michael Yeargan was puzzling over how to capture the grandeur of a sailing ship in the 1800s and then suddenly said, "I've got it! We'll just build the damn thing!" And there appears a ship, majestically coming into view and then pulling into dock and then rather unexpectedly its prow keeps coming and coming and coming until the front of the ship extends well out over the audience.

It's a well considered stunt that works on many levels. First, it allows O'Hara to immediately establish an intimate rapport with the audience. She and her son are almost within arm's reach as Anna sings "I Whistle A Happy Tune" to buck up their courage. The Vivian Beaumont is an intimate space for a big musical, with the audience surrounding the thrust stage on three sides. But with O'Hara literally suspended out over the crowd (she's standing at the very prow of the boat), we're closer than ever. It's an ideal way to see the uncertainty and vulnerability of this woman who puts on a good show at court where she's often prim and proper, by necessity. Second, that grand vessel also shows the West bursting into the world of Siam, literally jutting into their tiny, isolated kingdom. You could no more keep it out than keep out the sun, it seems. This *King* faces many challenges and only a fool would pretend otherwise. Third, it's just really, really fun to see.

Happily, this elaborate moment does not set the tone for the show. The costumes of Catherine Zuber are elegant, the lighting by Donald Holder is warm but while the sets have scale and sophistication, they notably avoid the Orientalism that can plague *The King And I*.

For example, in an excellent bit of staging, the King enters his grand throne room traveling from the front of the stage all the way towards the back, servants lined up on both sides to kowtow. You get a sense of his grand

presence and the beauty of the palace, minus the frippery. The entire show takes its cue from this, with scene changes like the schoolroom and outdoor gardens all suggested with a few hanging pillars and other modest decorations. It's theatrical, handsome and very effective.

Quickly we're caught up in a droll clash of civilizations. Anna is there to educate the King's many, many kids. ("The March Of Siamese Children" is invariably a crowd-pleasing moment and works like a charm again here.) Women are just as good as men? That's one of her many incendiary thoughts, almost as earth-shaking as the map that shows Siam as tiny and the rest of the world as so very large. The King and Anna develop a grudging, genuine respect tinged with warmth; he's not used to being challenged and kind of likes it. Their rapport only falters when Anna challenges him too directly.

It's all amusingly done, handled with grace by O'Hara and Watanabe. And of course, there are the songs, tunes so timeless they seem to have always existed. Act One alone has a clutch of standards, including "Hello, Young Lovers," "We Kiss In A Shadow" and "Something Wonderful." Act Two has one more winner ("I Have Dreamed") and a lot of reprises.

The other songs move the story forward with élan and are just as enjoyable, if more rooted in the scenes they're written for, songs like "A Puzzlement" and "Shall I Tell You What I Think Of You." They're (almost) all sung beautifully and the only real complaint one has with the show is the rather ham-fisted treatment of the Siamese. Yes, the ladies of the court get to sing the amusing "Western People Funny" but that's merely a respite from a show where the real funny people are the backwards King and his court.

Everything Western (except maybe women's clothing) is superior. The King behaves like a petulant child, partially -- to be sure -- because he's a king and has led a pampered life. But it feels intrinsically linked to Siam's backwardness. Bowing in the Siamese manner? Absurd and degrading. Bowing and curtsying in the British manner? Delightful! And one sharp word from Anna almost immediately puts the king on his deathbed.

Happily, the book by Oscar Hammerstein II has its pluses, like the Act One closer where the King amusingly puts Anna to the test over his rule about never letting her head be above his. (They end this battle by lying on the ground, giggling.) It wouldn't take much to put the story on a more even keel, just a little nuance here and a line of dialogue there, like that restored bit of dialogue about foreign policy that appears at the beginning.

Anna boasts that women are the equal of men. Oh really? Let them ask some polite questions. Can she hold public office? Take a lover? Own property? Vote? Anna is aghast at slavery. Since the English were just getting around to abolishing it in their empire after profiting handsomely for centuries, why such high and mighty manners? A little less clowning from the King would be welcome; let everyone be more self-aware about the elaborate dance he and his advisers go through. And in the grand tradition of popular entertainment, let word of an illness stalking the King color the entire show, then offer up a cough here and there so his later frailty won't seem so unexpected. Anna's outburst at the climax might trigger a relapse, but at least disapproval of a Westerner wouldn't be the sole origin for the King's rapid demise.

These reservations come to the fore in Act Two, but don't prevent the show from being a grand and polished entertainment. Act One is pretty flawless thanks to the talent involved. Act Two has always been a little problematic, both with the King's bolt from the blue illness and the secondary story of forbidden love at court. I've always found the elaborate retelling of Uncle Tom's Cabin to be filler (even if it did inspire an amusing parody in The Book Of Mormon). The staging here is superior to the 1996 revival I saw, with Christopher Gattelli reportedly drawing more directly here on the original work of Jerome Robbins. Still, when Tuptim has freedom and true love waiting for her, it's hard to understand why she feels the need to denounce the King in front of the Court and thus destroy her one chance at freedom. (The R&H estate would probably flip if you suggested cutting it entirely, I imagine.)

That's a lot of qualifiers, but they shouldn't overshadow the general triumph of what Sher accomplishes here.

The cast is excellent from top to bottom. Watanabe apparently has stage experience in Japan and it shows; he is commanding and comfortable despite acting in English for the first time in live theater. You never for a moment fail to understand his character's emotions and intent and that's what truly matters. He does more with a glint in his eye or a dismissive "etc. etc." than a dozen lines of dialogue can accomplish.

His singing -- of the Henry Higgins variety -- is fine. True, when the pace on "A Puzzlement" picks up, Watanabe gets a little garbled. It would be an issue with an original musical, but in a revival where many are already familiar with the song, it's not really a problem. His character really doesn't sing much, anyway. Overall, Watanabe's electric presence and considerable charm are a huge asset.

Mind you, when the Prince (a very good Jon Viktor Corpuz) belts out "A Puzzlement" in a reprise, it's a pleasure and a relief to hear the song delivered so capably. The same is true with the rest of the supporting cast. As Lady Thiang (the King's savvy number one wife), Ruthie Ann Miles of Here Lies Love is a delight both as an actress and when killing on "Something Wonderful" and "Western People Funny." Similarly, Ashley Park has a glorious voice as Tuptim; her big numbers are also knockouts. Unfortunately, she's paired with Conrad Ricamora as her lover and he's the sole weak voice in the show. Ricamora gets away with it on his first number, but holds back what should be a transcendent "I Have Dreamed."

That's the only casting mistake in a work Sher handles beautifully. Happily, we have a 29-strong orchestra (by my count of the credits), a rare treat in this day and age, ably supported here by the original orchestrations of Robert Russell Bennett from 1951 and the conducting of Ted Sperling, both of which are flawless.

Above all we have Kelli O'Hara, whose singing is matched only by her marvelous acting. It's very easy to take for granted such precision, not to mention the illusion of ease. But portraying essentially decent people with complexity and charm is no simple task. (Villains are always far easier.) Good people can be awfully boring, but not in the hands of a pro like O'Hara. The songs simply flow out of her, as naturally as breathing; you hear the song, not the singer, which is a high compliment. One can only hope she'll tackle Maria in *The Sound Of Music*, and soon, because if Julie Andrews has an heir in musical theater, clearly O'Hara is the one.

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