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The King and I

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II

Presented by Raymond Gubbay

Royal Albert Hall

(2009)

In the Royal Albert Hall's 138 year history *The King and I* is only the second musical to be fully staged here, and stage it they have! The decadent Albert Hall is the perfect venue to stage a musical where the majority of the scenes take place in an opulent palace. Performed in the round, Robert Jones's set design is vast and impressive. Taking up the entire floor of the arena, a dirty shipping yard, surrounded by water, strewn with barrels and cases and with ropes and chains hanging from above is transformed into an opulent palace with magnificent silks draping from every corner, stunning pillars and even a small firework display.

Despite the imposing scenery, the story of *The King and I* is a simple tale of East meets West. Based on the novel *Anna and the King of Siam* by Margaret Landon, Rodgers and Hammerstein's score tells the story of Anna (an English school teacher) and her son who go to Siam to teach the King's children. As an educated (scientific) woman from the western world, Anna has difficulty adapting to the customs and lowly position women must take in Siam. Despite their many differences, Anna grows close to the King and when news reaches the palace that the British diplomats are to be visiting the palace she wants to help him convince the western world that he and his people are not barbarians. However contradicting this theory is one of the King's many wives, Tumtim, who feels she is being held captive by the King and wants nothing more than to escape with her true love Lun Tha. Her feelings threaten to reveal the true nature of oppression and slavery in Siam and have a heavy impact on Anna's relationship with the King.

Whilst certainly an impressive spectacle to watch this cast of 70, the intimacy of the story is completely lost by the fanfare that surrounds it. By staging it in the round there is an obvious concern that the audience on all sides of the venue see the faces of the performers and therefore there is constant, needless blocking as the actors continuously walk around the stage with little motivation.

As always Maria Friedman, as Anna, captures the stories of the songs she is singing beautifully and gives an emotional performance as the frustrated school teacher but even she falls victim to this incessant movement. Starring opposite Friedman as the King is Daniel Dae Kim of *Lost* fame and whilst a great coup for the Albert Hall to land a Hollywood star, he unfortunately can't sing a note. His pompous ignorance is often amusing but he lacks the charisma of Yul Brynner who made the role famous and with whom you can't help but compare. The highlight of the show actually arrives in the form of the ill fated lovers, Tumtim (Yanle Zhong) and Lun Tha (Ethan Le Phong) whose sexual tension is palatable even in this vast space.

With the exception of classics such as "Getting to Know You", "Shall We Dance" and Friedman's fiery rendition of ""Shall I Tell You What I Think?" this is not one of Rodgers and Hammerstein's most memorable scores and so it is essential that the story itself make an impact. It is an old

fashioned tale and rather than create a feeling of nostalgia this production remains old fashioned, stuffy almost.

A flourish of drums, a cast in vibrant and exotic costumes entering the space from here there and everywhere and an actual firework display and yet this production still fails to ignite. Unfortunately it is a case of being a spectacle with very little soul.

Until 28th June

Reviewer: [Rachel Sheridan](#)