

British Theatre Guide

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The King and I

Book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, based on the novel *Anna and the King of Siam* by Margaret Landon

Applause

Released 24 January 2017

The enjoyment of musicals relies on a synthesis of story, music, performance and production values. As a result, viewers often have a great time without really taking in the characterisation or writing in the same way that they would when watching a straight play.

Therefore it can be illuminating to read scripts for works that are recognised as great.

While Richard Rodgers wrote the music for *The King and I*, which was one of the show's great attractions, this publication effectively showcases the work of Oscar Hammerstein II, the man responsible for both the book and lyrics.

Even 65 years after the event, his story holds up well as a tale of tolerance when two cultures collide when the King of Siam (now Thailand), a figure forever associated with Yul Brynner both on stage and screen, is "civilised" by Anna, an English governess hired to educate his children, who number in the several hundreds.

What is quite alarming is the extent to which East and West today as represented by North Korea and the United States seem to have advanced little in the intervening years to the extent that if the musical was tweaked very slightly it could be presented as a contemporary work.

Those who were not around at the time might be surprised to learn that the original Broadway Anna was Gertrude Lawrence, the actress whose legend is now permanently entwined with that of Noël Coward.

The pleasure of reading this book lies both in the chance to view at leisure the genteel power struggle between the central pairing, while also digesting every clever word of the lyrics that accompany a stream of classic Broadway show tunes.

Applause Books has created a very attractive edition of the play featuring a series of appealing production photos that is primarily targeted at those seeking to produce their own versions of the musical, which should guarantee significant sales in the foreseeable future. However, it also stands up in its own right as a good read for those wishing to relive wonderful nights out at the theatre.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)