

# Carousel's 'The King and I' Worthy of a King

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## **Classic love story has exquisite costumes, sets**

SOUTH AKRON — The United States has been known since the early 1940s for producing the best musicals written and staged anywhere in the world.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II wrote "Oklahoma!," the first of the great American musicals, and in 1952, the Tony Awards went to their production of "The King and I." Based on Margaret Landon's "Anna and the King of Siam," the musical version ran for 1,246 performances on Broadway.

Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the show for two accomplished actors, Gertrude Lawrence and Yul Brynner. Neither was a great singer, however, so the writers produced the simplest songs for the leading characters, Anna and the King. The most elegant, sweeping songs in the show were placed in the subplot and given to the supporting characters, Tuptim and Lun Tha.

Many of the songs in this show have become classics of the American musical theater and have become popular songs, too, recorded and performed by many pop singers.

Anna sings "I Whistle a Happy Tune" and "Getting to Know You." The King and Anna sing "Shall We Dance?" Tuptim and Lun Tha have the two most romantic songs, "I Have Dreamed" and "We Kiss in a Shadow."

Carousel Dinner Theatre is now offering a lush, exquisite production of "The King and I." This production doesn't have one weak link.

This large cast is solid from the King and Anna through all of the children. This is one of the largest casts to perform on the Carousel stage, with about 25 adult roles and about 25 children's roles.

Director Stephen Bourneuf and choreographer Vince Pesce have created a show that is seamless — the musical number, the dances and the ballet, and the dialogue fit together without a break. This smoothness is rare in the theater.

Set in the early 1860s, the story deals with Anna Leonowens (Jennifer Hughes), a widow from Wales who accepts a job as teacher to the children of King Mongkut (Francis Jue), of Siam.

The King wants his children to learn English and for his country to become more like England. He has heard the British think he's a barbarian. He wants to become more like the British (consider Queen Victoria) and thinks Anna can help him. Yet, as king and absolute dictator, he is slow to give up any of his powers and accept the advice of a mere woman.

Early in the story he receives a beautiful young woman named Tuptim (Jonelle Margallo) as a gift from the King of Burma.

Tuptim traveled to Siam with her lover, Lun Tha (JP Moraga). Tuptim wants to continue learning English and asks Anna to help her. Anna lends her a copy of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Later, in the second act, Tuptim adapts the book to a charming ballet titled "The Small House of Uncle Thomas." After the performance of the ballet, Tuptim plans to escape with Lun Tha, but they are caught by the King's guards, and Lun Tha is



Jennifer Hughes (Anna) and Francis Jue (the King) star in Carousel Dinner Theatre's production of "The King and I."

Photo courtesy of Eric Mull Photography

killed. The King plans to beat Tuptim, but Anna intervenes. In the plot of the musical, the King is humiliated by Anna, retreats to his quarters and declines in health until his death.

Anna is called to his deathbed and there promises to help his son Prince Chululongkorn (Jacob Rummell) to become a good king.

Scenic designer Robert Kovach created a stunning set that provides a backdrop of Siam and, yet, gives the large cast plenty of stage room for the big dance numbers. The various sets move quickly and silently around the stage to focus the action on various rooms within the palace and on the docks.

The costumes for this production were originally used on the latest Broadway revival. They were expensive to build originally and look elegant and expensive on the stage. Dale Dibernardo (resident costumer designer) is responsible for bringing these glorious costumes to the Carousel stage. All of the costumes are a delight for the eye, but when the King and Anna take the stage to sing and dance "Shall We Dance," they wear two of the most impressive costumes worn in this production. The King wears a sequined decorated coat and short pants. Anna wears a blue gown that must have a 12-foot circumference at the bottom of the skirt.

These costumes and sets make this one of the most visually beautiful shows ever on the Carousel stage.

Fortunately, the script, music and lyrics also are among the best to ever play on the Carousel stage. The cast is first-rate, and the visuals leave nothing to be desired.

If the musical theater is one of America's best exports, this production of "The King and I" should make us proud to be Americans. "The King and I" is what good musical theater should be.

This production continues through April 26. For ticket information, call (330) 724-9855.

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