

Written by Mike Schulz
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Quad City Music Guild's current presentation of *The King & I* is colorful and handsomely mounted, and in one scene, at least, it's even surprising, particularly if you don't peruse the program's cast list before the production starts. (Please skip the next two paragraphs if you don't want the surprise ruined

e her
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It's the segment in which the Welsh tutor Anna (Jennifer Sondgeroth) first meets her employer, The King of Siam (Harold Truitt), and is introduced to her new charges - the king's children. The first to be seen is a pair of infants, being carried on in their mothers' arms, and before you've finished smiling at how ridiculously adorable these tots are, they're followed by two older, grade-school-aged children, who walk in, bow to Anna and their father, and take their places amidst the show's ensemble.

This pair, in turn, is followed by another pair, and then another, and then *another*, and by the time you're thinking there's no

way

more descendants can be in the offing, two

more

show up. If you have no idea where your own kids were between 7:30 and 10 p.m. on Thursday night, chances are they were on the Prospect Park Auditorium stage; with more than two dozen youths appearing in director Bill Marsoun's

King & I

, the musical's famed "March of Siamese Children" is endearing and highly comic, an enjoyable

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spin on the old "How many clowns fit in the Volkswagen?" circus routine. (I kind of wish, though, that the march had concluded with the arrivals of the infants, which might've made for a stronger, funnier capper.)



Yet the happiness I felt during this sequence turned out to be short-lived, as it was one of the rare times in this *King & I* when I felt anything at *all*. Thursday's final-dress preview looked great and was earnestly performed - with music director Erika Thomas' orchestra sounding especially sharp - and barring a few microphone gaffes (including an unintentionally funny 30 seconds when all we heard was the off-stage chatting of a few children's-chorus participants), the show appeared to be in solid technical shape; very little about the evening's presentation suggested that it was, in fact, a rehearsal. But professionalism isn't the same as inspiration, and for all of its sincerity and beauty, Music Guild's take on Rodgers & Hammerstein's classic is sadly lacking in inventiveness, emotion, and even basic, believable human interaction.

For many audiences, the production will no doubt be exactly the *King & I* they're hoping for, and the surface details are right on the money: Truitt drops his articles and routinely delivers that fists-on-hips, Yul Brynner pose; Sondgeroth mimics (expertly) Julie Andrews' cadences; the Siamese women giggle and shriek in their Western petticoats; et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Almost nothing that happens here, though, feels like it's happening for the first time. One scene segues dutifully into another, yet the characters don't appear to be driving the material - rather, the show appears to be dragging the characters along behind it - and all throughout the production, the people on stage don't seem to be talking or singing to each other so much as *at* each other.

Both Truitt and Sondgeroth read their lines terrifically well, but their individual readings don't mesh in a way that suggests actual conversation, and the same holds true for nearly every patch of dialogue in this *King & I*; one character speaks, and someone replies, and the first character replies to *that*, and I was rarely convinced that anyone had actually heard what the other said. (In the scene in which Stephanie Moeller's Tuptim tells Anna that she's escaping the palace, and in a later one in which a guard informs the king of a major figure's death, the information is delivered and accepted so blithely that nothing of dramatic import seems to be taking place.) Rodgers & Hammerstein's Siam is not, of course, meant to resemble any kind of real-world Siam, but what's missing from this production, more than anything, is realism. Even in a musical fairy tale such as *The King & I*, you need to believe the characters' connection to their world, and to each

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other

, and here, I rarely believed there were connections to either. (Even much of the staging defies belief; when the king bellows to his off-stage wives to wake up and come to his side, they enter the scene

two seconds later

, as if they were sleeping standing up, 10 feet away from him.)



Mary Decker, whose marvelously accented Lady Thiang made delicate, understated pronouncements in broken English, appeared fully engaged with whomever she was addressing (including the audience), and Christian Frieden, as Anna's young son Louis, was naturalistic and charming. Yet despite boasting strong voices, Moeller and Nick Munson (as Lun Thai) don't share much romantic chemistry - the actors appear awkwardly matched physically, vocally, and temperamentally - and nearly everyone else comes across as an afterthought; even the great James Driscoll, as the king's Kralahome, gets lost in the crowd. Michelle Heaton's costumes are powerfully vibrant, but unfortunately, they exude more personality than those wearing them are allowed to.

Beyond the children's march, there was one sequence on Thursday that really worked for me: the balletic "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," which Beth Marsoun choreographed with spry wit, and whose dancers (led by Dianna McKune as Eliza) performed the alternately herky-jerky and lyrical movements with considerable panache. I thought it was an excellent number, and one of the few times that this Music Guild endeavor didn't seem to be running on autopilot. In his director's notes, Marsoun states, "I have spoken to avant-garde directors of our theatre community who see no reason to do 'the old shows.' But what they don't appreciate is great theatre is not old or tired, but new and alive." I'm not sure who these avant-garde directors might be, exactly, but I agree with Marsoun - "the old shows," including those in the Rodgers & Hammserstein canon, can, and *should*, be new and alive. For all of this production's pleasures, though, those adjectives describe exactly what this

King & I
isn't.

For tickets and information, call (309)762-6610 or visit QCMusicGuild.com.