

Inside the Palace Walls

Broadway's new revival of
The King and I conjures the
exotic world of 19th-century Siam

By: David Barbour



The headline of the review in the *New York Herald-Tribune* by Otis L. Guernsey, Jr. on the morning of March 30, 1951, said it all: “They do it again.” There was no need to explicate: “They” were Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, and “it” was *The King and I*. Having turned out three blockbusters (*Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and *South Pacific*) and one succès d’estime (*Allegro*) in only eight years, Rodgers and Hammerstein seemed blessed by some goddess of theatrical good luck. Surely, after so much success, they must have wondered if, at long last, *The King and I* might prove to be their Broadway Waterloo. In the current issue of *Lincoln Center Theater Review*, Sandy Kennedy, who appeared in the original production of *The King and I*, says that the composer and librettist “were afraid it was going to be a bomb and everybody was going to be disappointed because *South Pacific* was such a success.”

Landon’s book a libretto about the relationship between two opinionated, complicated characters: The King, who struggles to bring his country into the modern world while retaining a hold on his power and prestige, and Anna, who is hired to tutor his several dozen children and who brings with her a host of Western ideas that shakes the Siamese court to its foundations.

The King and I succeeded as a vehicle for Gertrude Lawrence as Anna, and it launched the career of a then-unknown actor named Yul Brynner. The score yielded a harvest of standards, including “I Whistle a Happy Tune,” “Hello, Young Lovers,” “We Kiss in a Shadow,” and “Shall We Dance.” But, as Bartlett Sher’s Broadway revival at Lincoln Center Theater reveals, it is also the most intellectual of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals, a battle of ideas between a monarch poised on the cusp of modernity and a resilient and self-willed Victorian matron who has little use for polygamy and slavery. (That their conflict plays out in 1862, with news of the American Civil War on everyone’s lips, only adds piquancy to the narrative.) Their conflict—sometimes friendly, sometimes surprisingly hostile—is further complicated by a hint of sexual attraction—which, of course, can never be expressed. Anyone dismissing *The King and I* as a charming antique will be surprised to find how much it has to say about human rights, feminism, colonialism, and the clash between Eastern and Western values.

One wonders if the creative team of the Lincoln Center production experienced qualms similar to those that plagued Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1951, for Sher, his designers, choreographer Christopher Gattelli, and leading lady Kelli O’Hara were responsible for a stunning 2008 Lincoln Center Theater revival of *South Pacific*. In any case, they needn’t have worried: *The King and I* opened to rapturous reviews and went on to win a raft of Tony Awards, including best revival of a musical, best actress (O’Hara), best featured actress (Ruthie Ann Miles), and best costume design (Catherine Zuber). The original limited engagement has been extended indefinitely.

Even though *The King and I* survived for decades as a vehicle for Brynner—who spent most of the second half of his career appearing in revivals of it—it is, first and foremost, the story of Anna, and any good production will emphasize the overwhelming strangeness of Siam as seen through her eyes. Sher’s production achieves this through Michael Yeargan’s scenery, which makes canny use of the Vivian Beaumont Theatre’s enormous stage, and through Donald Holder’s lighting, which creates a wide variety of looks. In addition, Scott Lehrer’s sound design achieves a transparency that feels thoroughly natural, in keeping with the Rodgers and Hammerstein ideal of the musical play.

It helps that the entire creative team is well-versed in the challenges of working in the Beaumont, with its huge volume, modified thrust stage, and wraparound seating.



Left: The schoolroom, with the map of the world as imagined by the Siamese. Above: “Shall We Dance” is staged in a warm wash that switches abruptly when bad news arrives at the song’s end.

Arguably the team’s richest, most complex work, *The King and I* represents Rodgers and Hammerstein at their creative peak; none of their subsequent shows scaled such heights. In 1951, however, it must have seemed like an eccentric idea, even for the team that had found success in any number of unlikely places. Margaret Landon’s novel *Anna and the King of Siam* is a fictionalized account of Anna Leonowens, an Anglo-Indian widow who became a tutor at the court Mongkut, King of Siam (today’s Thailand). Hammerstein fashioned from



Holder says that “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” challenged him to find sidelight positions for the downstage thrust. Note the statue of the Buddha atop a golden ladder upstage. Note also the teak wood deck with inlaid gold strips.

Indeed, they have taken aspects of the room that have often been criticized, turning them to their advantage in creating the exotic, sometimes almost frightening, environment inside the palace walls in which Anna, a widow with a young son and no other family, finds herself.

Scenery

Even before the first note of the overture is struck at the Beaumont, one is plunged into the world of Mongkut’s Siam, thanks to Yeargan’s all-encompassing set design. The walls to the right and left of the proscenium are covered with towering panels of what appears to be deep red teak wood decorated with embossed gold female creatures resembling the Buddhist deity Phra Mae Thorani. Projecting out from the proscenium over the thrust stage (and framing the overhead light rig) is an arrangement of similarly designed teak beams. At the top of the show, this frame contains a white China silk canopy, about which more in a minute. The show curtain is a shimmering blend of deep red and gold. One immediately feels immersed in a beautiful, but strikingly unfamiliar, environment.

The design “spreads out beyond your peripheral vision,” says Yeargan, adding that this effect is intentional. “We wanted it to be mammoth. I didn’t want to mask it down

for a 24’-high proscenium.” At the same time, noting that Mongkut was a Buddhist monk before ascending to the throne, he decided that a certain minimalism was appropriate: “I didn’t want it to so busy that the audience would be fighting it. Also, I looked at photos from 1862 [the year in which *The King and I* takes place] and the design of the palace was really stark.”

Yeargan says that the idea of the teak superstructure came into focus when he saw a photo, in the *New York Times*, of a state building in the Ukraine. “It was made of wood and was totally symmetrical, with these beams that came out at you. I realized that if we put this kind of structure over the auditorium and put it in perspective, it would pull you in, visually.” He adds that it was standard practice among Siamese artisans to apply gold to teak wood. “We did it in three layers,” he adds, “to give it a more worn look, as if the panels had been there for 150 years. It’s an idea taken from a photo of the Thai royal palace.”

As the overture ends, the show curtain opens—interestingly, it goes from stage right to stage left, rather than up and down—and the China silk canopy, which is translucent, drops down to partially block the audience’s view of the stage. (“We had to carefully weight it, mainly through trial

and error, to make it fall in the correct timing with the music,” says Yeargan.) Behind the Kabuki curtain, we see the port of Bangkok, with a series of traditional Thai stilt houses in forced perspective in front of a vividly colored sky. The China silk canopy drops to the floor and is whisked away, revealing the Chow Phya, the steamship bearing Anna, and her son, Louis, to Siam. Before this, the thrust portion of the stage has been uncovered, revealing the 25-piece orchestra; now the slipstage extends over the thrust, bringing the Chow Phya downstage at an angle, from downstage right to upstage left.

It is a stunning scenic effect, quite possibly the most elaborate thing ever to be seen in the Beaumont; it is certainly the tallest. “I spent a year working on that ship,” Yeargan notes. “We went through so many versions of it, in perspective and not in perspective. There really was a clipper ship with the name Chow Phya, but that [with its excessive height and sails] would have been ridiculous. Anna is arriving from Singapore, which is not that far away; that meant we could do a tramp steamer,” a rather less complicated structure.

Yeargan, not a man to pursue spectacle for its own sake, insists that the impression it makes is crucial to the production. “It’s one of the most important scenes in the show. It’s the West arriving in the East,” he says, noting

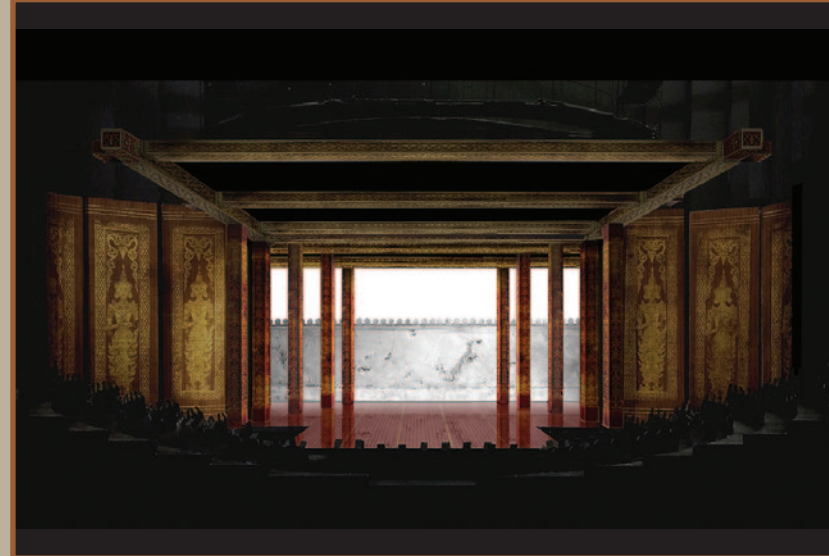
down an aisle of the auditorium to greet the ship. A little later, the Kralahome, the King’s representative, enters with his entourage via another aisle; thus, Sher establishes a tableau representing the culture clash at the show’s heart.

It will come as no surprise that fitting this enormous piece into the overall design was a challenge. “The scale of it was very tricky,” Yeargan says, “as was finding where Kelli should stand [for maximum visibility] when she appears. We lowered it about 3’ for visibility. One problem is that Kelli’s hoop skirt is wider than the ship—so we had to make the ship bigger and the hoop smaller!” Speaking of the ship’s structure, he notes, “It’s in perspective, to make it look bigger. We built it in three pieces; it’s moved by actors standing inside of it.” Later in the scene, the ship breaks up; two pieces are turned around, to become part of the scene as little houses. The third piece is taken offstage. All three are hung for storage, as is the case with many other scenic elements. The bulk of the production’s scenery was built, painted, electrified, and automated by Milford, Connecticut-based Showmotion.

The rest of *The King and I* takes place in the palace; taking advantage of the Beaumont stage’s extreme depth, Yeargan employed vast spaces, not tons of scenery, to emphasize the building’s grandeur. A stucco wall, a distressed replica of the actual wall that surrounds the



Yeargan’s set design spills into the house, drawing the audience into the world of Siam. Note the red and gold show curtain.



This drawing shows the upstage wall that is a feature of the palace interior.

that, in most productions, the scene is staged in one in front of a drop. Discussing the ship’s elaborate reveal, he says, “I didn’t want the curtain to open and reveal the ship,” hence the Kabuki; aided by fog, the effect, he adds, is of the ship “coming through the mists of time.”

Having dispatched this outsized vessel upstage, Sher stages the scene with a group of Siamese citizens running

Royal Palace in Bangkok, stands upstage, adding to the sense of enclosure. (Late in the second act, the wall flies up to reveal a group of the King’s courtiers who come downstage, arriving in his bedroom, where he is dying.) A series of six gold-embossed teak pillars fly or track in and out to redefine the stage space. The deck is “red-stained teak, with gold strips that echo tatami mats,” says



Each location is defined by a few key set pieces. The interior of Anna's quarters features her bed and a standing clock.

Yeargan. The effect is of a series of lanes moving up and downstage; Sher stages some scenes with characters standing in separate lanes, thus emphasizing physical or psychological distance between them.

Certain scenes, including those set in the King's chambers, are backed by an enormous gold statue of the Buddha, which was built by Cigar Box Studios. "I sent them an elevation of a famous Thai Buddha," Yeargan says. "They sent back a 3-D file with an image that you could spin around, [allowing the creative team to study it.] It's carved out of Styrofoam, but there is no roughness to it; the hands are perfect. I usually avoid sculpture on stage, because you can never do it properly, but when this arrived at the theatre, the whole company came in from rehearsal and were oohing and aahing at it."

A second, smaller Buddha appears in the sequence, "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," when the members of the court stage a ballet to the plot of *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin. This Buddha rests atop a golden ladder, which, in the ballet, the character of Little Eva climbs, signifying her arrival in heaven after her death.

A couple of scenes are set in the palace garden, where Tuptim and Lun Tha, the plot's forbidden lovers, meet. (She has been given to the King as a gift by the Burmese state, and isn't at all happy about it.) The garden is signified by a series of hanging strands of flowers. "It's a Kabuki idea," says Yeargan. "We went to Kanai Scene Shop in Japan. They're hand-made; when they arrived, they were folded up. My associate, Michiko Suzuki MacAdams, and I had to open them up by hand." A dinner party, staged for the visiting delegation, is represented by a long table upstage right, and a series of crystal chandeliers. At one point, the garden flies in downstage and the dinner party set is seen behind a scrim.

The fabrics, which loom large in this production, were supplied by iWeiss and Rose Brand. In addition to the

vanilla China silk Kabuki drop, they include the red Trevira silk show curtain, painted with gold leaf by Scenic Art Studios; the scrim mentioned above; a voluminous, swagged Bermuda Blue curtain seen in “The Small House of Uncle Thomas;” and a variety of bobbinet pieces that are used in the ballet.

Otherwise, locations are represented by key set pieces: a large bed for Anna’s quarters; a desk for the King’s chamber; an enormous bed in which the King lies in state, dying; and, in Anna’s schoolroom, a pair of maps—one showing the world as the Siamese imagine it and one an actual representation of the globe. The meticulously researched props were all built by Propstar and Showmotion. “They make the statement as to where we are in each scene,” Yeargan says.

Lighting

Holder’s lighting design fills Yeargan’s vast sets with a series of incisive looks that evoke the life of the palace. A line of Buddhist priests is carved out with sidelight, creating something like a human frieze. The garden scenes are flooded with blue-inflected moonlight. The number “Shall We Dance” is bathed in a warm, romantic glow as the King and Anna polka around the stage; when they are interrupted with bad news, the stage wash turns clinically cold. “It’s a huge production and the space was open right to the edge of the sightlines,” says Holder. “The size and scope of this project was daunting.”

The designer responded with a series of gestures, some bold and some remarkably subtle. For example, the first scene, the arrival of the ship, is played out against a sky that is the color of blood oranges. “I felt like the outside world needed to stand in strong contrast to the interior of the palace,” he says. “It’s late in the day, and I wanted it to feel exotic, as opposed to what we encounter in the royal realm. The first scene is colorful and fantastical in a way that the rest of the play avoids entirely, but the opening needed to be spectacular and engaging, so I pulled out all the stops.”

The ship arrives through a bank of fog (those “mists of time” Yeargan mentions above). “I used Martin [Professional] Glaciator units, which are amazing,” Holder says, “They’re a new way of creating ground fog without CO2 tanks. I also added in some effects from GAM Film/FX units on the floor and in front of the boat.” [MDG Atmosphere hazers are also used in the production.] Providing coverage for the ship took some doing. “It’s so tall, it’s almost up against the grid,” he notes. “I had to light the people on the boat without blinding the audience.”

For the rest of the show, Holder says, “The overarching image that Bart gave us, which informed a lot of the decision-making, was that he wanted the palace to look like a ruined Buddhist temple. It should be ancient. And none of the gestures should feel overt or self-indulgent. Some of the notes I got from him were that it was starting

to look too ‘Broadway.’ He wanted everything to feel organic and unified.”

Thus, he adds, “The palace’s color palette references candlelight, daylight, moonlight, and torchlight. The colors are influenced by the scenic treatments and Cathy Zuber’s costumes—rich indigos, purples, dark blues, dark golds, and lush reds. The exception is one moment in ‘Shall We Dance,’ when the King and Anna start to fall in love and you’re obligated to do something different.”

In terms of cueing, Holder says, “The set is very operatic, and, given the shifting architecture of the set, the lighting ideas needed to start with big, sweeping gestures, usually on the diagonal. [He also carves out narrow vertical spaces on the deck, using the lanes of teak wood.] These ranged from broad strokes on the wall to light that could cut through and create an interesting directional shadow on the floor to color changes that reveal the scene on the thrust stage. There are a few places where we diverge from this, such as ‘The Small House of Uncle Thomas’ [which features classic dance sidelighting],” but, overall, his approach sticks to the first principles articulated above.

Holder has worked with Sher many times and they have developed a fruitful working relationship. “Bart has a very clear sense of the big picture,” the designer says. “He likes scenery to reconfigure, and he likes the flexibility of developing things in tech. I have to be able to adapt to what can be a very fluid process. It’s not chaotic and it’s not about indecision; it’s about the specifics, and they can change. You have to have enough flexibility to light the space where it needs to be lit; he could have staged the entire show upstage of the thrust and I would have been prepared for that.”

Speaking of the thrust, which is where most of the key scenes take place, Holder says, “There’s enough sidelight to create layers of light for the activity there, and for the moments when the action flows from upstage to downstage. The idea of diagonal backlight was extremely useful for revealing the changing architecture of the room, making the space dynamic.”

Holder cites “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” as the most challenging assignment. “It was breathtaking from the moment I first saw it. It’s a metaphor for the whole show, a re-enactment of the entire evening. We revisited it the most; Bart wanted it to appear simple. I emphasized footlights and low-angle lighting, which is great for dance, but also what you’d see if you were seeing it in the palace. I figured out a way to get a head-high angle of sidelight on the thrust, which is something you don’t normally do because you run the risk of blinding the audience on the other side. I found a way to move it downstage a bit and bury it in the wings. A lot of it is on the balcony rail, which curves around and is almost head-high. There are also some substantial box booms between the panels on the house’s rails.”

In terms of gear choices, he says, “I really wanted to

keep the ambient noise level down. Most arc-source or discharge wash lights have big fans, so, with the exception of a few [Philips Vari*Lite] VL3500s placed way upstage or offstage, most of the backlight consists of [Martin Professional] MAC Quantums or Mac Auras; I could put the Auras in places where no other unit would fit. The hard-edge units are Mac Vipers, again, because they are relatively quiet and have superior animation effects. [These are used to create the “river” in “The Small House of Uncle Thomas.”] I use some [City Theatrical] AutoYokes for moving specials on actors’ faces. On the balcony rail, I have a few VL1000s; I needed their color temperature and shutter capabilities—and they have no fans.”

Many of the set’s vertical surfaces are lit using Chroma-Q Color Force LED strips. Speaking of his extensive use of LED units in the show, Holder, who was, arguably, the first designer to use LEDs on Broadway (in 2002’s *Thoroughly Modern Millie*), says, “Never once did I consider not using tungsten light on actors’ faces. I’ve been the guy ringing the alarm bell about LED versus tungsten; I wouldn’t do an all-LED show. But I have embraced this stuff because it makes a lot of sense in a lot of places. Even in a show set in the 19th century, you can massage it so it fits in.”

The rest of the lighting package includes over 400 ETC Source Fours in various models and degrees, MR16s, T3 cyc strips, approximately 120 Wybron scrollers, High End Systems Dataflash strobes, and four Lycian 1272 followspots. Control is provided by an ETC Eos Ti console.

Lighting gear was specified by PRG.

He adds, “What’s great about working with Bart is that he understands light very well, how it affects the staging and movements and where it should be coming from. We don’t have so many meetings about every moment in the show, but he communicates his ideas very clearly.”

Sound

Like Holder, sound designer Lehrer felt the challenge of covering such a vast stage space. “There’s an important moment in the show, when we first see the King, and he’s 80’ away from the audience,” Lehrer says. “And there’s the schoolroom scene, which is way upstage. During tech, I had a moment when I wondered, Do I have to hang a PA that goes all the way up there? But we were able to work it out without adding more technology.”

One technology that Lehrer took advantage of—as he did with *South Pacific*—is the SIAP system, which was installed in the Beaumont years ago to deal with the room’s acoustic deficiencies. “It’s an early version of what Meyer did with *Constellation*,” he says. [It is not a Meyer Sound product.] “We tore out some SIAP speakers because they weren’t being used at all and were kind of ugly. But the rest of the system is up there, 80 or 90 speakers, and we put the reverb into it; it makes the room feel bigger and more spacious. It was designed for reinforcement, but we use in a different way.”

The PA package consists of d&b audiotechnik





Opposite: “The March of the Siamese Children.” Lehrer notes that Robert Russell Bennett’s orchestrations support the vocals, helping him to create a natural and unforced sound design. Above: The large Buddha, carved from Styrofoam by Cigar Box Studios.

loudspeakers: C7s for the mains, T10s and E6s for the front and rear balconies, Q1s for the rear orchestra, and B4 subwoofers. “I say it over and over: I like the sound of d&b,” he says. Instead of line arrays, he uses a single C7 for each zone of the auditorium. “They can’t be in their regular position at the top of the show, because of the China silk; they’re on winches 8’ up from their final position; when the silk drops, they winch into place.”

Also, he says, “We have some subs in the grid and on some columns in permanent positions at the stage left and stage right edges of the thrust, for fill and low-end coverage. We use a little bit of reverb with SIAP, and there are also some effects—for example, nighttime sounds when Tuptim runs into the garden to meet her lover—but we don’t use the surround much, because it’s not appropriate. I wanted to make sure we had a good, clean system that allowed us to get the music and voices through in a good, clear way, to not overhype things.”

Lehrer adds that the production’s Studer Vista 5 digital live console was a key player in creating a natural, unforced sound. Also, as he and co-designer Drew Levy

did on the musical *Honeymoon in Vegas*, an Out Board Electronics TiMax system, this time supplemented by its Tracker system, was crucial in helping to move the sound around. “It really helps, helping you to hear the sound coming from the actors’ mouths, tracking the actors around the stage in real time. In *South Pacific*, we did all that manually; [production sound mixer] Marc Salzberg had 300 cues, tracking the stage time-wise. It gets to be too much; The TiMax Tracker automates the process.”

In the case of the opening scene, he says, “We realized that we had to create specific locations for the actors on the bow of the boat. We used TiMax Tracker in manual mode, setting up a space for them, much like Ken Travis did for the flying carpet scene in *Aladdin*. We did something similar when, in the schoolroom scene, the King makes his entrance from the back of the house. With this technology, we can address these issues, which is fun.”

In addition to mics, the actors had to be fitted with tags for TiMax Tracker. “They’re a bigger issue [than mics], because they transmit at a very high frequency with very low power,” Lehrer says. “We did a lot of experimenting to



get the highest quality signal; they don't transmit well through bodies or metallic fabrics. It's a new level of complication. Fortunately, [A2s] Bridget O'Connor and Adam Smolenski did a good job with all of that."

Mics include DPA d:screet 4061s on the actors, Sennheiser MKH-800s on strings, Sennheiser MKH 40s on reeds and percussion, and Royer R-121 Studio ribbons for the brass. Again, as he did in *Honeymoon in Vegas*, the output of radio microphones is 100% digital, with no analog audio from the Sennheiser EM-3732 RF receivers all the way to the speakers. The 48 channels of the Sennheiser EM-3732 receivers use DirectOut Technologies ANDIAMO devices that convert the 3732 AES outputs to a MADI stream and allow a digital cross patch so that the RF microphones can be patched in the digital domain.

The work was worth it; the production has a superbly natural sound. One might plausibly believe it isn't being reinforced. "The orchestrations [by Robert Russell Bennett] are so fantastic that when we got a balance with the orchestra, it fell into place. It's orchestrated like opera, so when the actors are singing, many of the instruments fall away; there may be a single instrument providing a

grounding tone. We used a strategy similar to what we did with *South Pacific*, with distant mics for underscoring and closer mics for 'The Small House of Uncle Thomas,' when you want to better hear all the details of the instruments."

Other personnel include Karen Spahn (associate lighting designer); Alex Neumann (associate sound designer); John Estep (associate props supervisor); Victor Seastone (moving light programmer); Reid Thompson (assistant set designer); Rachel K. Levy and Caroline Chao (assistant lighting designers); Eric Reynolds (assistant props supervisor); Catherine Small, Brandon Hardy, Samantha Shoffner, Sarah Bird, and Jon Knust (props artisans).

All three designers agree that working with Sher at Lincoln Center is about as good as it gets. "That's the great thing about Lincoln Center Theater: They support the work," says Holder. "It takes courage to invest in an idea as completely as they do. They've created a bar for themselves that they have to maintain. The budgets that they start with are realistic and make sense for the scale of a production. And they allow you to pursue an idea. That was true with *South Pacific* as well as this." 🎧