

## 1971 The King & I

### ***Packed houses see Society's 'King and I'***

"HOUSE FULL" signs for all six performances of the East Surrey Operatic Society's production of "The King and I" at the Market Hall, Redhill, greeted many people who had failed to book in advance. This is some measure of the popularity enjoyed both by the Society the show itself. In any case it was a challenge, because with the audience almost certainly familiar with the film version of this musical starring Yul Brynner, subconscious comparison is almost inevitable. Therefore it is all the more to the credit of Elsie Rendell, who has produced this group for many years, that she succeeded in creating this colourful show so effectively within the limitations of the Market Hall.

Brilliant costumes were grouped and, moved imaginatively to produce vivid visual effects and the essential atmosphere of Siam was captured by the deportment and typically oriental movements of the chorus and dancers. The simple grace and delicacy of these movements were particularly well used to provide a pleasing if unusual background to Anna's song "Hello Young Lovers". The plum part in this show is obviously that of the King himself and, here Frederick Harrison considerably enhanced his reputation in his best role for years. The effectiveness of his character depends not only on a commanding personality and a good bass voice, but also on an understanding of the conflict between the King's natural barbarism, and the influence on him of Western culture. This subtle development of the character was well paced so that the final mental battle between oriental tradition and Western attitudes when the King finds himself unable to whip the young Tuptim, was a believable climax. He went on to display a fine sense of humour in the hilarious "Shall We Dance?" number when he is taught to polka by Anna. But Molly Greaves, as Anna, was by no means overshadowed: In fact, for her too, it was undoubtedly her best role since we saw her as "The Merry, Widow". This was a radiant performance that was sympathetic and sincerely moving in her conflict with the King, and she brought a lyrical quality to her songs, particularly "Hello, Young Lovers", that clearly delighted the audience.

Gillian Jarvis scored particularly well in a most detailed study of the King's favourite wife Lady Thiang, combining a well conceived interpretation of the oriental character with a good singing voice. Not once did she slip back into Western mannerisms, but maintained a delicate Eastern charm that added to the effect of her amusing song "Western People funny", and brought a moving dignity to "Something Wonderful".

"The King and I" leans heavily on the effectiveness of the ballet sequence for the development of the story and the East Surrey Operatic Society must

consider themselves extremely lucky to have as Ballet Mistress and Choreographer Shirley Knight who herself danced with the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden and on European tours before devoting herself to teaching in Redhill and Reigate. Her choreography not only showed an understanding of oriental form and idiom but the traditional movements were cleverly adapted to suit the technical competence of the dancers themselves, so that one felt they were able to give of their best because they were dancing well within their capabilities. Notable was the miming of Angela Terrible, the *pas de deux* performed by Corinne Pratt and Elizabeth Leet Cook, and the character roles danced by Penny, Lambert. Ann Spurrett, Serena and Fiona May, and Angela Hurst.

It was interesting to note several newcomers to the ranks of principals. Trevor Muller played the ill-fated young lover with an eager tenderness sharing the lovely duet "We Kiss in a Shadow" with Janet Trembath as Tuptim, who coped well with the particularly high register in which this part is scored. In a cast of this calibre it must have been a great ordeal for the two, young boys, Robert Orrett, who played Ann's son, and Alister Smith in the role of the King's son, but they were never overawed. In fact, they earned well deserved applause when they held the stage alone in their duet, and it was interesting to see Alister Smith gaining in stature at the time of the King's death, when he realised he was becoming King himself.

The part of the Kralahome is not an exacting one although an important one. but Ralph Chapman was well cast because he had the essential quality of being able to command authority and attention by his physical presence and personality which came over very strongly. A vibrant speaking voice made one wish that the part had called for singing. Peter Adams was a crisply efficient naval captain, and Dennis Pratt made the most of his amusing moments as the interpreter. Far from being a newcomer, Douglas Chantler played a nicely understated interpretation of the English diplomat, relaxed and dignified and contrasting effectively with the flamboyant King.

The 17 Royal Children obviously delighted the audience, particularly in a well rehearsed and well controlled presentation scene to the music of "March of the Siamese Children", in which the individual characteristics of each one were amusingly used.

The singing of the chorus and principals, supported by an excellent orchestra, bore testimony to the experience and skilled coaching of Musical Director Christopher Slater who controlled the stage and musicians with firm authority. His additional scoring for chorus voices in several numbers where the original score is written for solo voice only was an effective innovation.

Stage management and lighting was slick and efficient which is a tribute to the stage technicians under the direction of John Holman, because a large cast and tricky scene changes are certainly not easy to deal with on such a confined stage but one was never conscious of these limitations. Altogether this was a production that must swell the numbers of the, Society's faithful

followers, and it augers well for "Kismet" which has been chosen for production next year.

**JACK BROUGH**