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# An American Myth in the (Re)Making: The Timeless Fantasy Appeal of 'The King and I'

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**AN AMERICAN MYTH IN THE (RE)MAKING: THE TIMELESS FANTASY APPEAL OF *THE KING AND I***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
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“Then tell me how this fairy tale began, sir. You cannot call it just  
a poet’s trick...”

ANNA LEONOWENS, *THE KING AND I*

“If you would tell me the heart of a man, tell me not what he reads,  
but what he rereads.”

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

“This is the dream! It’s conflict and it’s compromise, and it’s very,  
very exciting!”

SEBASTIAN WILDER, *LA LA LAND*

### **An American Myth: A Lady, a Story, and a Nation**

*The King and I* looms large in the American imagination. The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical and its movie adaptation have reached generations of viewers, and to each, its indomitable heroine, Anna Leonowens, must loom as least as large. For who can forget that incredible woman, that nearly lone traveler who arrived in 1860s Bangkok to teach some children and ended up transforming a nation? The musical presents an unforgettable character, remarkable in part for being based off the life of the real Mrs. Leonowens. To this brave young British woman many a great achievement has been attributed, not the least of which is her tutelage of the boy that would become one of Thailand's most important kings.

If the story of Anna's life seems legendary, that is because it is. Like *The King and I*'s British governess, the real Anna Leonowens served as a teacher to the royal children of the king of Thailand (then called Siam); the rest of her life story, particularly her backstory and later memoirs, was an invention. Anna was born in India in 1831, a "poor army brat" likely of mixed heritage (Morgan 7). Her father was an English military man of little means, and her mother herself the child of a woman who was "most likely... Anglo-Indian (of mixed race), born in India" (Morgan 23). In 1849, she married Thomas Leon Owens, an Irish military clerk of small salary living in Bombay. He died only a few years later, in 1859. Upon arriving in Singapore that same year, a poor young widow and mother of two, Anna "simply made up a new 'history' of her origins and identity" (Morgan 1). By her own account, she was gentlewoman born in Wales to a distinctive family. Her life was supposedly a series of misfortunes: her father a military captain "who died heroically in the Sikh rebellion," her fortune "lost in the bank failures after the terrible Indian Mutiny," and her husband a major who fell "dead at her feet after a tiger hunt" (Morgan 70, 71, 5).

Because of the intentional erasure of her past and the creation of her sensational new identity, Anna's real life going forward became inseparable from this fiction. It was, after

all, “On the basis of her self-invention” that she found success and even fame: her new status as a genteel woman furnished her with a suitable background and education to open a school in Singapore, “quite the right sort of person” trusted to mold young minds (Morgan 1, 71). This very same reputation was what enabled her recommendation as governess to the royal children in the palace of Siamese King Mongkut. She eagerly accepted, and the rest, as they say, is history—of a sort. As her invented identity was “never unmasked,” Anna “went on to perform that new identity for the rest of her life, actually becoming the character she had made” (Morgan 1). Following six years in Siam, and the death of King Mongkut, Anna published several memoirs of her time in Siam. They are widely believed to be exaggerated, “profoundly inaccurate” accounts of the people and ways of life in Siam (Skloot 170). Nevertheless, they found great success in America, as reviewers praised their “rich flavor of the East,” even embracing with “credulous enjoyment” the seemingly fabulous parts of her work (*New York Times* reviews qtd. in Morgan 175, 176). She spent much of the rest of her life making a living as a “well-known travel writer and public lecturer,” prospering off her inventions (Morgan 1).

Anna’s life was in many ways a never-ending performance, a fantasy role she created for herself and never stopped playing. Even her own children knew only this performance of their mother, and nothing more. With her memoirs, she wrote this fantasy into a type of reality, one that was later “immortalized by all the standard dictionaries of biography” and her own obituary (Morgan 6). In the multiple adaptations of her story since— one novel, three movies, one failed TV show, and one Broadway musical—her life of fantasy has been resurrected again and again, each time reborn a little more transformed. Yet if her story is not true, what is it about Anna’s life that ceaselessly draws American audiences? The truth, as it turns out, is in the fiction. Broadway actress Kelli O’Hara, who won a Tony Award for her portrayal of Anna in the 2015 revival production of *The King and I*, gets quite near this truth. Of Anna, she says:

She made herself up in order to have a job, in order to take care of her children after her husband died. She was of mixed race; she did things that she had to do. And then she wrote books about it and about who she wanted to be. She was a valuable woman, a respectable woman — inspirational. And so, we're still playing the woman that Anna Leonowens wanted to be. And I love that for her." (Lunden, par. 10)

In making up her identity and constantly striving to become who it was that she wanted to be, Anna Leonowens was able to choose her own identity, and to transcend the limitations of her origins. That even now in 2017, this ideal Anna—this mythic Anna, if you will—is traveling the nation, appearing onstage for audiences every night in a touring production of the 2015 revival, serves as a testament to the mythic power of her chosen identity.

Chosen identity is something near and dear to the American heart: for what is American identity but a chosen identity, a conscious decision to embrace all that America stands for no matter one's origins? Indeed, though the real Anna was of a British background, Rodgers and Hammerstein's Anna is reinvented as "an Americanized figure" in her avid advocacy of the American democratic ideals of liberty and equality (Klein 151).<sup>1</sup> The American myth of reinvention is written into the nation's very foundation. Every story of upward mobility, of "the correspondence between talent and effort and achievement, [and] of the self-made man" promises that "unlike those tradition-bound Europeans (or Asians or Africans), an American's origin does not determine identity, that heredity does not predict status," that, as an American, "we can create a future that can rewrite the past" (Morgan 9). The fabrication of Anna's identity and her ascendance as a myth thus reveals much about American identity. Behind the fascination of American audiences with Anna's tale lies their belief in certain founding American ideals that her fantasy employs: those of freedom and

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<sup>1</sup> R&H's Anna always "uses the politics and culture of the Civil War—Lincoln's struggle to free the slaves, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" in her antislavery discourse (Klein 151). Furthermore, though Anna maintains a British propriety in her conduct, she abhors the hierarchical nature and indignity of bowing, preferring the thoroughly democratic, confident American handshake instead.

equality, which form the foundation of such myths as American exceptionalism and American multiculturalism.

### **An American Musical: Broadway, the Cold War, and *The King and I***

The ways in which Anna's tale, as popularized in *The King and I*, appeals to Americans as a type of cultural fantasy can be illuminated by looking more closely at the era in which *The King and I* musical was first created. The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical premiered on Broadway on March 29, 1951; Oscar Hammerstein spent much of 1950 creating the musical's libretto, writing both the dialogue and lyrics to shape the musical's narrative (Kempfskie 3). These years were not quiet ones in U.S. history. America was in the midst of the Cold War: at home, McCarthyism and the fear of communism were in full swing; abroad, the Korean War began. The musical as a work of fiction must be considered within its historical context, for as scholar Christina Klein notes in her book, *Cold War Orientalism*,<sup>2</sup> "meanings do not reside exclusively within the texts themselves" (13). Rather, works of popular culture can be understood as "component pieces of larger cultural formations," as works that both shape and are shaped by current events and attitudes (Klein 13). Thus, the "wall" thought to exist between real world events and fictional works of art, often dismissed as mere "fantasy," must come down.

Such a mindset opens up works like *The King and I* to many new and interesting analyses. Klein argues that "the realm of culture... offers a privileged space" where in which politics can be introduced and debated, and "where shared values can be affirmed and contested" (13). Theater director and critic John Bush Jones agrees in his book *Our Musicals, Ourselves*,<sup>3</sup> seeing musical theater in particular as a form of entertainment that "variously dramatized, mirrored, or challenged our deeply-held cultural attitudes and beliefs" (18). If, as Jones claims, a musical is successful because something about it "captures the

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<sup>2</sup> *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (2011).

public imagination,” then *The King and I*, with an original run of more than 1,000 Broadway performances, certainly succeeded in presenting the very themes, values, and beliefs that preoccupied the minds of 1950s Americans (18; Kempfskie 3).

These themes were not presented neutrally, however. Oscar Hammerstein was open about the political aims and liberal leaning of his musicals. Renowned as innovative masters of the musical form, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein had powerful tools in their arsenal to bring audiences over to their point of view. The seamless integration of dialogue, song, music, and dance in their musicals works powerfully to deliver the show’s message by creating “a narrative story with more depth and more dimensional characters than seen before” (Kempfskie 23). Their songs, which achieved an unmatched “level of ubiquity in the late 1940s and early 1950s,” translated “controversial ideas into easily absorbed emotions” whose ideas could “infect” you unconsciously (Klein 150; Harburg qtd. in Klein 150). Yet despite the overwhelming ideological power of their musicals, Klein suggests that no cultural work is “unambiguous or internally coherent” in its ideology (15). Instead, most works express multiple viewpoints, sometimes reflecting dominant ideas and other times airing alternative and even utopian impulses.

This pluralistic expression was certainly true of Cold-War era works. Jones insightfully asserts that “the mixed moods of the American people... inspired a wide range of socially meaningful shows” during this time period, though he does not claim the same pluralism to be present within the scope of one work (144). These “mixed moods” stem from the domestic and international upheaval of “the postwar and cold war years” which inspired an ideological “dichotomy within both the American government and the American people” (Jones 144). World War II had been both a triumph and an awakening for America. American soldiers returned from abroad victorious, sure they had been the “liberator of oppressed peoples” in a way that confirmed their American ideals of democracy and freedom (“The American Identity,” par. 3). There was a definite strain of progressive idealism



in America's view of the world as the U.S. was emerging as a global power post-WWII. It seemed an American duty to share "the blessings of liberty with less-favored peoples"; a justification of American expansion abroad was born amidst a surge of belief in American exceptionalism (Kaplan, par. 11).

When communism began to emerge as a competing ideology following the war, the U.S. took an increasing interest in Asia. Southeast Asian countries in particular, as noted by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, were seen as "the forward positions against which the waves of Communism" were advancing, and therefore of strategic importance in winning the Cold War (qtd. in Klein 153). In the years of the Korean War, when there was a clear need to support the U.S.-backed, anti-communist south of the Korean peninsula, works of popular culture like *The King and I* "imagined and facilitated the forging of a new set of affiliations... between the United States and the noncommunist parts of Asia," portraying Asia as a space of friendship (Klein 14). This mission of global friendship developed during a time of changing ideas about race and the East-West divide. Klein observes that Edward Said's theory of Orientalism<sup>4</sup> fails to fully explain these benevolent representations of Asia that surfaced in the U.S. following WWII. Said's theory defines Western representations of the East as functioning on an "ideology of difference" which portrayed the East as "an inferior racial Other to the West" in order to justify Western superiority (Klein 16). However, new representations of Asia, rather than adopting this rhetoric of "difference and hierarchy" that Said marks in older Orientalist works, often relied on a discourse of "racial tolerance and inclusion" (Klein 17, 19).

Ideas introduced by anthropologist Franz Boas induced this shift in America's understanding of racial difference: cultural thinkers began to consider that perhaps "intergroup differences resulted from relatively superficial cultural factors rather than essential biological ones" (Klein 16). If so, through cultural re-education, democracy could

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<sup>4</sup> Set form in his highly influential, eponymous 1978 work, *Orientalism*.

become a “universal political philosophy applicable to all peoples regardless of race” (Klein 16). Such an idea of American democracy lent support to the myth of a harmonious, multicultural America united in freedom and equality—a most wonderful fantasy that the approaching Civil Rights movement would thoroughly shatter. At the same time, it promoted the Cold War idea of integration as an alternative to the dominant policy of containment.<sup>5</sup> Integration championed a “discourse of racial tolerance and inclusion,” seeking to create an “integrated ‘free world’” in a sentimentalist tradition of creating bonds and “transcending [read: erasing] particularity by recognizing a common and shared humanity” (Klein 18). However, this sentimental knitting together of East and West produced a new “Cold War Orientalism” in which the need for a democratic education justified the U.S. expansion of power in Asia (Klein 20).

Yet not all strains of Cold War thought were so allegedly idealistic and progressive as integration claimed to be. Domestic policies in the U.S. took a decidedly conservative and isolationist turn. According to theater critic Jones, “The war made isolationists or xenophobes of Americans who never were before”: war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote that soldiers abroad grew “impatient with the strange peoples and customs” and yearned to return to the familiarity of America (145; qtd. in Jones 145). Many believed that “[t]he business of America was America,” and sought to isolate the nation from foreign influence (Goldman qtd. in Jones 145). This backlash against what was foreign and Other abroad concealed an insidious fear of foreign ideology dividing the nation at home. The threat of a communist penetration and takeover resulted in “a period of suspicions, accusations, loyalty oaths, loathings, [and] extreme American chauvinism” (Miller and Nowak qtd. in Jones 146). Americans turned on their fellow citizens, fearing traitors to the nation, non-believers of American ideals, and “imposter” Americans in an era that saw the initiation of government

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<sup>5</sup> Containment, as pursued by the U.S. during the Cold War, was a global political strategy that sought to halt the spread of communism by restricting the Soviet Union’s territorial expansion.

loyalty reviews, McCarthyism and its “erosion of civil liberties,” and the arrest of the Rosenbergs as Soviet spies (Kaplan, par. 57). This paranoia “over a clear and present danger *within* the United States” revealed a deep anxiety about the instability of American identity (Jones 146). Being American was little more than a belief, a common state of mind—something intangible, tenuous, and invisible to the eye. In many ways, it was nearly a fantasy. American identity required a constant performance to be recognized, and any apparent nonconformity or dissension—even dissension well within the guaranteed freedoms of an American—could be construed as “un-American,” as in the trials and hearings of McCarthyism.

### **The Original Myth: *The King and I* in 1951**

Dealing in these Cold War fantasies, *The King and I* in many ways presents not Siam as it was, but a fabricated Siam that appealed strongly to Americans. In fact, the extent to which the original 1951 musical dealt in fantasy cannot be overstated. Not only is the musical’s narrative based on inaccurate accounts of life in Siam, but in the sound and spectacle of the show, Siam is clearly Orientalized. As scholar and Thai national Chalerm Sri Thuriyanonda Chantasingh adeptly points out, everything from the music to the dance “resembles a ‘melting pot’ of [Asian] cultural styles” rather than the “*individuality* of Siamese culture and people” (Chantasingh 201, 199). The stylistic choices made in “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” Siamese ballet include an amalgamation of Ramayana, Siamese, Japanese Kabuki, and Shintoist elements (Chantasingh 201). Jerome Robbins’ celebrated choreography in this scene incorporated styles of dance from Laos and Cambodia (Kempeskie 25). *The King and I*’s Siam is not a country, but a fantastical, exotic setting. As Klein noted, Asia became important to America during the Cold War as a sort of dike or barrier against the “waves of Communism” (qtd. in Klein 153). Especially with the Korean War as the most pressing issue in Southeast Asia at the time, there was an overwhelming

need to portray a Siam that could stand in as a representation of any and all Asian cultures in “need” of Western re-education.

Furthermore, as other culturally inaccurate elements of the musical reveal, this Orientalist style served American audiences well. Thinking Western audiences would find the unfamiliar sounds of Siamese music jarring, Rodgers instead used more relatable, Western sounds in his music, portraying a Siam “as seen through the eyes of an American artist” (qtd. in Chantasingh 190). Perhaps most shockingly, the Siamese language was originally never portrayed onstage; when Siamese characters needed to speak their own language, their speech was vocalized by “certain sounds made in the orchestra,” like bells (Hammerstein 9). In the music, Siam is portrayed as oddly familiar and yet completely Othered to the point that its people are not allowed to speak freely like their Western counterparts: instead, their voices are reduced to a fairy-like, non-threatening tinkling. Besides pandering to what Americans found comfortable, it served American interests to paint this Siam in as exotic a manner as possible. The set and performances, as noted in a 1951 review in *Time* magazine, were “all scent and glitter, ritualized movement and high barbaric style,” accentuated difference and suggested the desperate need for Western democratic re-education (qtd. in Chantasingh 225). American audiences could not get enough of this exotic fantasy. Nor could they get enough of the King, played by Russian-American actor Yul Brynner in yellowface and an inexplicably bald head—he went on to play the King more than 4,600 times (Kempkie 3). His loud, domineering rendition of the King “met the audience's expectation of an Oriental king,” despite being ahistorical and more typical of “an American quarterback stereotype,” as Chantasingh points out (227, 201). Altogether, these Orientalist elements underscore the desire of American audiences to see not history but fantasy unfold onstage, something that would assuage their fears and fit their preconceptions.

These fantastical, Orientalist elements portray a Siam not irreconcilably different from America, one primed for the integrationist vision of bonding across the cultural divide. *The King and I* in many ways fits nicely within integration theory, especially in the musical's aims so overtly claimed by its creators. Seen as stemming mainly from Oscar Hammerstein's liberal leanings, Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals promote "the need for eradicating racial, ethnic, and cultural prejudices, promoting tolerance and acceptance of differences, and bringing about reconciliation" (Jones 128). Hammerstein saw *The King and I* specifically as demonstrating ideas of integration in the recognition of a common humanity, in which "all race and color has faded in their getting to know and love one another": the erasure of difference (Wallace, par. 20). In his view, the show epitomizes this in the musical number "Getting To Know You." If the song lives up to the ideal of integration, the process of getting to know each other would be "characterized by reciprocity and exchange" in which "the paired acts of giving and receiving" bridge difference in a thoroughly equal manner (Klein 18).

Even from the outset of the song, however, the audience is reminded of the hierarchical relationships involved. Immediately preceding the musical number, the audience sees Anna in her role as a teacher, instructing her pupils—the King's children and wives alike—in a modern geography very different from their traditional beliefs. As a teacher, Anna is already an authority figure ranked above her students. To teach, quite simply, is to "impart or convey the knowledge of"; to give knowledge only, without any implication of a reciprocal receiving of knowledge ("teach, v."). As the King says himself, Anna is part of the "general plan I have for bringing to Siam what is good in Western culture" (Hammerstein 19-20). At the King's request, Anna is present in Siam expressly for her capacity to *give* knowledge. Hammerstein, however, would like to portray her teaching role otherwise. In "Getting to Know You," he gives her a rather clever aphorism:

It's a very ancient saying,

But a true and honest thought,  
 That "if you become a teacher  
 By your pupils you'll be taught." (Hammerstein 39)

By espousing this supposedly ancient saying, Anna suggests a reciprocal relationship between herself and her students. The saying's ancient origins seem to bestow it with a natural truth; yet Hammerstein "actually made up this 'very ancient saying'" (Nixon 210). Perhaps this is an instance of how Hammerstein's libretto "downplayed the notion of unbreachable cultural differences and heightened the message of tolerance and mutual understanding" from what was previously found in the novel<sup>6</sup> the musical is based on (Klein 152). Nevertheless, Anna claims she has been learning from her students, joking that she is now an "expert" in her knowledge of the children (Hammerstein 39). Though she says it teasingly, Anna ironically undermines her message of reciprocity by again making herself an authority figure. Anna's failure to place herself on an equal level with her students pervades their interaction in the musical number.

In getting to know her students, Anna wishes for an equal exchange, "getting to hope you like me" as well (Hammerstein 39). However, neither her words nor her actions suggest a true equality; the song is clearly not a duet between her and the children. In expressing her joy in getting to know them, Anna always puts things in her own terms, both personally and culturally: she feels "free and easy," "bright and breezy" because the children are "precisely" her "cup of tea!" (Hammerstein 40). Instead of contributing new lyrics on their own experience in getting to know Anna, however, the children parrot her words right back to her in the refrain. As Klein notes, the number "work[s] through mimicry": the children "reproduce her words and movements" "uncritically," as an animal might (Klein 157; "mimic, v."). Her students are only able to simulate similarity, and never reach real equality with Anna.

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<sup>6</sup> *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944) by Margaret Landon.

Such is characteristic of the process of cultural exchange exhibited throughout the number: rather than Anna and the children finding cultural common ground that brings their two peoples together, much of the number seems to take place within the sphere of Anna's Western culture. Anna initiates this process of cultural exchange by teaching her pupils the Western custom of handshaking.<sup>7</sup> Anna goes around the room, shaking hands with each student to teach them the motions. Under her direction, the students are soon shaking hands with each other and eagerly approaching her to test their knowledge. Anna's introduction of this Western social custom communicates many things about Western culture, particularly in the eyes of the American audiences watching the show. The action of the handshake—its firm grip, confident shake, and mutual action—communicates the sincerity and dignity of this egalitarian greeting. Learning this customary greeting literally initiates the children into Western culture, and they begin to behave as Westerners while also imbibing Western values.

In exchange, one of the King's wives demonstrates a Siamese fan dance and later teaches Anna its movements. While this cultural exchange seems touching in its reciprocity, the "equality of the exchange... is deceptive" (Klein 158). While Anna introduces handshaking by inviting all to participate, the Siamese fan dance begins as a solo performance. Anna, and by extension, the American audience, takes in this exotic spectacle with delight. Yet little about Siamese culture can be gleaned from the intricate flourishes of this fan; the wife's performance reveals little but smiles. Anna learns the dance by imitating her, but without knowing its meaning or context, she learns little more than a parlor trick. As Chantasingh notes, the dance is not even authentically Siamese: it is "Chinese in origin,"

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<sup>7</sup> These actions are described briefly in the stage directions of the 1951 musical libretto, but the 1956 movie adaptation provides useful context for how these stage directions might have played out visually in the original musical.

and even then nearly unrecognizable (201). Thus, Anna does not gain intimate, or even superficial, knowledge of Siamese culture.

But since both sides have seemingly gone through the motions of an exchange, doing so playfully and with smiles to spare, an emotional bond is created across these peoples of different cultures. Everyone dissolves into giggles as the song ends, and “sentiment and pleasure work” to unite all (Klein 158). Better still, this process of cultural re-education lacks the patronizing tone of clearly Orientalist works; as such, the audience is falsely allowed to believe that there is no motive behind the song. They can indulge in this scene’s beautiful fantasy, this vision in which difference melts away in the face of a universal humanity.

Indeed, the number is a powerful fantasy that plays on the heartstrings. It remains a favorite today; even people otherwise unfamiliar with the musical love the song and its message. Just as Hammerstein believed, “Getting to Know You” has become emblematic of the entire show, painting the meeting of East and West as the coming together of a big, happy family. Amidst all its smiles and giggles, Klein remarks that “*The King and I* made the transition to modernity seem *painless*” (171, emphasis added). Certainly, if this song were to be taken alone as representative of the musical, it would seem to be so. Everything about the number appears delightful, even effortless, and so the process of adopting Western ideas seems likewise. The musical number’s simple, repetitive lyrics and many impromptu dances belie the complex choreography of so many different bodies taking place on stage. In mere seconds, the entire classroom of children and wives can assemble and disassemble, gathering around Mrs. Anna or scattering to the edges of the room.<sup>8</sup> Anna learns a part of the fan dance by performing it alongside the Siamese dancer, never having previously seen it but dancing along flawlessly. In a simplification so blatant it is almost

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<sup>8</sup> Again, most of these actions are described in the 1951 stage directions, but I often look to the 1956 movie.



comical, the King's head wife, Lady Thiang, correctly learns to curtsy by imitating Anna, placing one foot behind the other, despite not being able to see Anna's feet at all under her enormous hoop skirt. The false ease with which each party learns new dances and customs surely makes cultural exchange seem "painless."

Yet taken as a whole, *The King and I* can hardly be described as a "painless" meeting of two worlds. The entire musical is riddled with spats, conflicts, and tensions between Anna and the King; indeed, "the core of the musical is the ongoing conflict" between Anna and the King, as they continually disagree "on every conceivable subject" (Jones 136). Each believes in their own cultural superiority: that their cultural values represent the only "right way" to do things. The King is "born with a conviction that the absolute power of a king should not be questioned" because a king knows all, and so his will should always be followed (Wallace, par. 21). Anna is raised in the tradition of Western culture, and believes that every person is entitled to dignity and freedom of choice, be they man or woman, common or royal. Anna, just as the King, has grown up believing these values to be the "truth" and thus never to stray from them. Whenever the two disagree—as is inevitable, Anna notes, "when two people are as different as we are"—they do so loudly and obstinately, issuing proclamations and ultimatums in defense of their views and generally refusing to yield to anything less than their own "truth" (Hammerstein 136). Such scenes seem impossibly far from the idealized vision of integration theory. Rather than attempting to bridge their differences, Anna and the King turn inwards and cling even more tightly to their values. They let their differences become barriers between them, sheltering them from strange ideas and protecting their apparently fragile values.

This intolerance seems to fly in the face of everything Hammerstein promoted. In several scenes throughout the musical, as a rather perplexed Jones observes, "Hammerstein undermines his critique" of cultural intolerance in others by seemingly engaging in it himself, being ultimately "guilty of valuing Western mores... over Eastern

ones" (138). If Hammerstein contradicts his own message, he would only be expressing the same "mixed moods" felt by many in postwar America, albeit in a manner with much farther reach (Jones 144). The way Anna and the King turn inwards, seeking to preserve "the integrity of the self when that integrity is threatened" by the foreign and unfamiliar, mirrors the isolationism and xenophobia that took hold of the U.S. in domestic matters following the war (Skloot 175). Then, just as in the musical, the shutting out of outside ideas proved to be a reaction to an internal fear—that cultural values could be swayed. If values can be changed, then they are not founded in some absolute, fixed truth. Cultural identity is rendered inherently unstable, resting not on a foundation of natural truth, but on a continuous pretense, a faultless performance that refuses its audience any glimpse of uncertainty.

Along these lines, Anna and the King's rather excessive disagreements—almost always occurring with an audience of wives, children, or advisors—become elaborate performances masking the instability of cultural values and identity. Anna and the King continually keep these walls up whenever they are together, each never allowing the other to see their moments of weakness. Yet in several scenes throughout the musical, the audience is privy to each character's doubt. Amidst confessions, pleas, and musical soliloquies, the audience is allowed a glimpse behind their walls, seeing the cracks in their less-than-perfect performances. At times they appear aware of their own cultural performativity, and at others they seem to reflect "if only briefly, on whether his or her way is the only way" (Jones 136-137). These cracks, these small admittances of fear, cut at the heart of some of America's most persistent myths, eroding away at ideas of cultural superiority and of a harmonious, multicultural America.

The musical's first number engages interestingly with these questions of fear and performance. "I Whistle a Happy Tune" results from an encounter with a fearfully exotic Other, and consists of Anna revealing the secret of how she copes with this fear. Still on the

ship that brought them to Siam, anchored in the Bangkok harbor, Anna and her son Louis note the approach of the royal barge. Their ship is a space of cultural liminality, neither solidly immersed in Siam nor entirely severed from a connection to England;<sup>9</sup> as such, Anna and Louis are allowed to glimpse Siamese culture while still secure in a marginally Western space. Peering through a telescope, Louis gives a shout about the prime minister being naked—he wears only bottoms, displaying a bare chest.<sup>10</sup> This “rather horrible” appearance seems an affront to English propriety, scaring the boy (Hammerstein 6). Anna responds that she too is sometimes frightened, showing that she recognizes the threat Siamese “nakedness” poses to her sense of Western cultural superiority: if not everyone subscribes to her ideas of Victorian modesty, then the absolute “truth” of her cultural values are necessarily jeopardized. Hence, she whistles so that “no one will suspect/ I’m afraid” (Hammerstein 7). She intentionally puts on an act, striking a “careless pose” to this “happy tune” in order to “cover up her fears” and appear as a perfectly careless and composed Englishwoman (Hammerstein 7; Skloot 170). She conceals the extent to which this fear of the Other shakes her sense of self, preferring instead to perform her identity flawlessly—all so that no one can see that she really is *performing* her identity, feigning a confidence in her own cultural values.

Anna’s confession divulges an awareness that culture must be performed in order to maintain its mythic power: for “You may be as brave” (or as steadfast and stubbornly British) “As you make believe you are” (Hammerstein 7). As long as Anna can believe in her own cultural superiority as a Westerner, she will be able to persevere as a teacher and moral paragon, though an outsider in Siam, outnumbered and hedged in by cultural Others. This performed deception appears able to deceive Anna herself and make her forget her own uncertainty, “For when I fool the people I fear/ I fool myself as well!” (Hammerstein 7). Yet

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<sup>9</sup> Though the ship arrives from Singapore, its captain and passengers are staunchly British.

<sup>10</sup> Chantasingh suggests that this attire is historically inaccurate (182).

when the ship's captain comments on her whistling, she apologizes: "Oh, was I whistling? Sorry, I didn't realize" (Hammerstein 9). Following the song's explicit lesson on whistling, her words ring insincere. Anna, rather ironically like the real Mrs. Leonowens, is wrapped in several layers of deception—deceiving others in order to deceive herself while remaining quite obviously aware of her own act of deception. She is a talented cultural performer.

The King, however, is the first to truly break in the performance of his role. In his musical soliloquy, "A Puzzlement," he opens up about his many internal conflicts as both a ruler and a man. As essayist Floyd Skloot observes, the King "rules at a time of cultural upheaval" as Siam is "threatened by British colonial expansion," forced either to leave behind traditional values and modernize or be accused of barbarism by the British, "who would use this as excuse to steal my country" by making Siam a protectorate (176; Hammerstein 68). In the palace, his newly-arrived Western schoolteacher becomes the first to openly challenge his proclamations and beliefs; though he seeks her help in making Siam a modern country, he perhaps naively believes his authority will remain untouched. Following an episode in which his son and heir, Chulalongkorn, "challenges the time-honored Siamese view of astronomy with Anna's explanation of the earth's rotation," the King admits privately to himself that that which he *believes* to be true he does not really know to be true: "I am not sure. I am not sure of anything" (Jones 137; Hammerstein 32). Before the song even begins, he concedes that his cultural beliefs may not be founded in any truth. The confusion deepens as he sings:

There are times I almost think  
I am not sure of what I absolutely know.  
Very often find confusion  
In conclusion I concluded long ago.  
In my head are many facts  
That, as a student, I have studied to procure.  
In my head are many facts  
Of which I wish I was more certain I was sure! (Hammerstein 33)

In this verse, the King admits to the uncertainty of his knowledge. He does so reluctantly, qualifying his doubt by saying that he is “almost” questioning what he “absolutely” knows. Yet his doubt remains clear: any hint of uncertainty necessarily destroys the notion of “absolute” knowledge. This doubt jeopardizes the King’s absolute power, for if he does not know all then perhaps his commands should be questioned. In a few lines, the King confesses that the very cultural values that make him who he is—a powerful king—may not be true. The fantasy is laid bare: the King’s belief in his own omnipotence inspires reciprocal belief and devotion from his subjects, which in turn help sustain his belief. The King’s identity rests on a cycle of myth.

Such a realization would seem to be a crippling blow—but it is not the King’s only realization. As he begins to acknowledge the instability of his own beliefs, the King realizes that he may not be the only one doubting himself. Interactions with his son and dealings with foreign diplomats give him reason to think that “nobody” can be sure of their own knowledge: that “everybody” experiences confusion in their beliefs (Hammerstein 34). And yet, no one seems to publicly air these doubts as the King now does in private. Instead, “though a man may be in doubt of what he know/ Very quickly will he fight/ He’ll fight to prove that what he does not know is so!” (Hammerstein 34). Others project only a bravado of certainty, loudly defending their “truths” to maintain the illusion of their superiority; they care not if real truth falls by the wayside. The King finally sees himself as being surrounded by performers.

As Anna recognizes the value of performance long before she steps off the boat, the King comes to this understanding quite late. His delayed epiphany thus makes him out to be a more innocent, infantile character: the comfortable, American image of the Oriental as

ignorant. Yul Brynner's whimsical delivery of the song further supports this image.<sup>11</sup> His tone of voice is contemplative rather than distraught; his facial expressions are quizzical, with raised eyebrows and a few near-smiles; his hand gestures can only be described as jaunty, with a seemingly practiced flair that betrays confidence, not confusion. Despite the mature deliberations of the lyrics, Brynner's performance of the song makes it seem as if the King merely toys with these questions. He does not seem all that unsure of himself. In fact, he almost appears oblivious to the gravity of his own confessions. In the end, however, the King clearly chooses to perform confidence rather than reveal his vulnerability. He is aware that he "must go on living life," and as both a leader and father he must "go forth" confident in his power, feigned or not, so that his country and children will follow in his example (Hammerstein 34-35). The King, like Anna, passes on this "legacy of deception" (Skloot 170).

"A Puzzlement" represents a momentary falter in the King's certainty, a misstep in the dance of his otherwise absolute cultural performance; he appears to recover and return to his performance, albeit with new awareness of his actions. In her own musical monologue, "Shall I Tell You What I Think Of You?"<sup>12</sup> Anna seems to drop all pretense and performance entirely, venting her true feelings about the King in a spasm of bitterness. Yet while usually conscious of her own performance, by the end of her solitary rant Anna appears unaware of the way she continues to deceive herself, even when she is alone onstage. It is a bizarre song; not only does it feel out of place in the generally good-natured musical, but it would seem to be quite out of character for Anna, who presents herself as a dignified, if sometimes morally righteous, British lady. The song was even cut from the 1956

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<sup>11</sup> Once again, the performance referenced is the 1956 movie; however, as Yul Brynner plays the King in both the 1951 musical and in the movie, there is good reason to believe that the performances would be similar.

<sup>12</sup> Named "Shall I Tell You What I Think?" on the 1951 soundtrack, but "Shall I Tell You What I Think of You?" on the 1956 movie soundtrack; appears as "Shall I Tell You What I Think of You" on the 2015 soundtrack.

movie.<sup>13</sup> when the movie premiered, a *New York Times* critic declared that the “acrimonious” song is “not missed” in the “general extravagance” of the film (Crowther, par. 3). Despite its apparent incongruity with much of the musical, however, the song is vital to understanding Anna’s conflict of character in the show, and indeed, to understanding the show’s overall conflict and tragic ending.

Much like the King, Anna believes that she can effect change in Siam without being herself affected; her musical monologue results when this illusion is shattered. Before she even meets the King, Anna discusses her employment with the Kralahome, seeing her presence in Siam as strictly professional. She rebuffs questions about her private life, stressing that she “came here to work” and expects to be regarded only in her “capacity of schoolteacher to the royal children” (Hammerstein 12, 10). She expects to impact the King’s children and to otherwise remain apart from Siamese society, as evidenced by her unrelenting desire for “a house of my own,” “where I can go at the end of the day when my duties are over” (Hammerstein 12). But Anna’s fantasy of living a proper British life in Siam is dashed at every turn. The King “places mercurial and sometimes humiliating demands on her, demands that seem aimed at shattering her pretensions”: he demands that she bow and kneel (“grovel,” in Anna’s words) on the floor “like all other subjects,” and that she live in the palace if she expects to teach there (Skloot 175; Hammerstein 66). The final straw comes when, in a desperate attempt to maintain his kingly authority, the King shouts, “I do not know anything but that you are my servant” (Hammerstein 45). Anna rejects this outright, insisting that she will return to England if not given a house—yet her stay in Siam has already affected her. Anna nearly cries at the thought of leaving the children whom she loves “quite extraordinarily” (Hammerstein 47-48). Anna is clearly torn: she rejects the label of “servant” to preserve her Western sense of an independent self, but part of her heart lies with these Siamese children.

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<sup>13</sup> It was still recorded for the movie’s soundtrack, however.

Her confusion, anger, and distress all erupt in “Shall I Tell You What I Think of You?” As the song begins, Anna is alone in her room, partially undressed as she prepares for bed. She is finally without an audience (excepting the one in the theater, of course), and so can drop her act as a proper British lady and finally speak her mind; it is almost as if she takes off a costume as she takes off her clothes. Suddenly lost in thought, she “*glares at an imaginary adversary*” and begins to shout at him as she wishes she could shout at the King (Hammerstein 54 [stage direction]). She denies being the King’s servant, claiming instead to be a “free and independent... employee”: remaining staunchly Western, she must see herself as being in control of her own destiny (Hammerstein 54). She proceeds to disparage the King by calling him names, but also begins shaming him for his many wives and concubines. As if he solicited her criticism, Anna begins to inform him of his many wrong behaviors:

I do not like polygamy  
Or even moderate bigamy  
(I realize  
That in your eyes  
That clearly makes a prig o’ me)  
But I am from a civilized land called Wales,  
Where men like you are kept in county gaols. (Hammerstein 55)

Within the parentheses, as Jones notes, Anna appears to “half” admit that “British cultural norms may not be the only ones” (137). Momentarily she considers whether “her inculcated Victorian prudery” is what makes polygamy so distasteful to her, rather than a certainty of its inherent immorality (Jones 137). Yet in one stroke she dashes away such doubts, proclaiming her homeland to be the “civilized” one, where the King’s acts would be considered criminal.

Instead of dwelling on her doubt, Anna favors thoughts of the royal children. They are what finally give her pause in her tirade, for she cannot forget “Those little faces looking up at me” (Hammerstein 55). While seemingly tender, this thought reveals the pleasure



Anna takes in being a superior, authority figure for the children. The children are dear to her because of their innocence and willingness to learn: they are Siamese, yet still culturally malleable. Westernizing the children is the closest she can get to taming what she sees as the inappropriate and profligate behavior of the King.

And yet, one child in particular causes her to hesitate. Prince Chulalongkorn, she observes, is “stubborn—but inquisitive and smart”: in this way, “very like his father” (Hammerstein 56). The prince serves as a double for the King throughout the show. In speaking of the prince, then, Anna also speaks of the King. Chulalongkorn is perhaps flawed in his stubbornness—a trait, it should be noted, that Anna herself shares—but really has many quite admirable qualities. The prince, and by extension, the King, are cultural Others, models of traditional Siamese authority, and yet they are not irredeemable. They would seem to possess qualities that deserve recognition rather than reeducation—yet such an allowance is irreconcilable with Anna’s sense of her own cultural superiority. The severe doubt that this realization induces is clearly reflected in the song’s musical accompaniment. In it, Anna appears to be of two minds: when she confidently puts down traditional Siamese values, the music features many brass instruments and is bold and unrelenting, with sharp, staccato notes; but when Anna seems uncertain, the music changes into a soft, melancholic violin and harp. As the music reaches an aching sentimental crescendo, Anna cries, “I must leave this place before they break my heart!”<sup>14</sup> (Hammerstein 56). While departing is what normally leaves one heartbroken, Anna fears that staying will break her heart—or more accurately, her worldview. Lingering among the Siamese would only serve to increase their esteem in her eyes and to heighten her confusion. Anna seeks to leave Siam and all the agony it has caused behind her, hoping to preserve the stability of her cultural superiority through escape.

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<sup>14</sup> This line and the lines concerning the prince appear in the script but not in the 1951 soundtrack recording.

Her musical monologue takes another turn before it concludes. Anna pivots yet again, dismissing her doubts and returning to her disparagement of the King. This time, she homes in on the obsequious way in which he requires his subjects to submit to him by prostrating themselves on the floor. Anna finds “All that bowing and kowtowing/ To remind you of your royalty” to be a “most disgusting exhibition,” beneath even the place of animals (Hammerstein 57). In highlighting the bow as an “exhibition,” Anna recognizes the performativity of the gesture. She sees how necessary this public display is towards maintaining the King’s fragile sense of royalty, and scorns him for relying on it so completely.

Ironically, she fails to see herself as depending on similar means to sustain her own cultural beliefs. Anna stresses the indignity of the bowing position, which requires a person to play “the part of a toad,” “crawling around on your elbows and knees” by demonstrating it herself (Hammerstein 57). Anna “*sinks to her knees in scornful imitation of the ‘toads’*” while spouting ingratiating pleas that she imagines the King’s subjects saying (Hammerstein 57 [stage direction]). From Anna’s theatrical tone of voice, she clearly gets very involved in this performance. She finally, as an imaginary subject, asks the King to “Give us a kick if you please Your Majesty,” then “*Taking an imaginary kick*” cries in a pleasure dripping in sarcasm, “Oh! That was good, Your Majesty!” (Hammerstein 57). With no one else on stage, Anna performs for herself alone, and for once appears duped by her own performance. She gives the performance her all, thinking that it proves exactly how demeaning traditional Siamese culture can be—yet the over-emotionality of her last lines betrays the emotional stake she has in the performance. Her rant serves primarily as a means to vent and thereby relieve her own stress, brought on by culture shock. The King’s traditional values threaten to destroy “Anna’s sense of independence, authority, and purpose,” and so she chooses to “disparage what [she]... [does] not like or understand” rather than trust in the strength of her supposedly superior cultural values (Skloot 176; La Brack). Anna’s rant is not just wish-fulfillment, it is a matter of self-preservation. Her final, solitary performance is a catharsis

necessary to the survival of her own cultural beliefs, though she deceives herself into thinking it a justified critique of the King's values. For the audience in the theater, Anna is finally cut down to size: stooping to such means to cling to her cultural identity makes her just as human as the King.

The musical's final scene brings an awareness of performance to the forefront, ultimately portraying the tragedy as the inability to reveal one's true feelings because of the continuous performance demanded by upholding one's sense of cultural superiority. In the final scene, the King lies on his deathbed: harsh words have passed between Anna and the King, and he seems to lay dying of a heart rent in two. Just as Anna sought to leave Siam to avoid a broken heart, the King is unable to resolve the conflicting desires within himself for both traditional values and modern ways. He declares to Anna that he is not afraid to die, and to prove it, he whistles the melody of "I Whistle a Happy Tune," much to Anna's surprise. That he knows and embraces the song's ideas—"Make believe you brave'—is good idea, always"—suggests that the King, too, understands the performative nature of culture (Hammerstein 139). In this moment, the King reveals his own bravado to Anna, just as he recognizes that Anna, too, must be performing, though both their doubts remain buried beneath their facades. He commands that she teach the song to his children, and she does so, though unable to give a perfect performance: her tears betray her weakness. Though his strength begins to fail him, still the King urges Anna and the children to whistle, to continue to pretend. Despite an awareness of performativity, it seems as if Anna and the King do not know how to stop pretending; nothing remains but to play out their parts.

And so the King quietly passes on, while his son carries out his first proclamation as king by commanding that the wives and children learn to bow in the dignified, European fashion. By all rights, Anna should be watching proudly as her star pupil endorses Western values. Yet all her attention is fixated on the King, and she is drawn, as if helpless, to his side. With all the life finally gone from him, Anna takes his hand and kisses it. The audience

is struck with an overwhelming sense of misfortune and great loss, the loss of what could never be—for despite this postmortem display of affection, the “personal and cultural implications” of a relationship prevent Anna and the King from ever acting upon their feelings (Green, par. 5). These two performers stick by their principles to the very end; Anna and the King repress their personal emotions and doubts, sacrificing connection to preserve their cultural identities.

What to make of such a tragic, mournful ending that permanently divides its two main characters? *The King and I*'s finale speaks volumes about the true mechanisms at work in the show and in American society at the time. On the surface, Hammerstein's integrationist fantasy very clearly fails. The King's death and the rise of a new, Westernized king show that “Anna and her values... triumph” in Siam (Jones 138). There is no middle ground, no compromise or reconciliation: the West dominates the East. The promise of integration fails to deliver, for American ideals do not unite these disparate people as equals. Its failure abroad suggests that integration back home is similarly unsuccessful. The idea of America as a place of harmonious multiculturalism is a myth: no such America exists. Coexistence between people of different races and cultures in America depends on the erasure of their differences, on the insidious dominance of white, Western values which *The King and I*'s ending reveals. Put simply, the musical's finale implies that there is no place in the fictional world of the show, nor in the real world, for a true union between people of different races.

Yet an undercurrent of emotion between Anna and the King, while seemingly a sideshow, steals the scene. Though Anna's Western values prevail, she appears unable to savor her victory: her tears betray her inability to completely applaud what her values have wrought. Rather than wholeheartedly embracing the new, Westernized king, Anna turns from Chulalongkorn and his spectacle of European bowing to face the King, lamenting his passing. Her fantasy of cultural superiority plays out behind her, and yet she cannot face it. Anna's aversion from the scene indicates that something about it is wrong, amiss. In the

end, her triumph seems to matter little, for she is able to think only of losing the King: for the moment, at least, it seems that superiority demands too costly a sacrifice. *The King and I* stages and plays out America's principle fantasy of exceptionalism. But its bittersweet ending leaves the audience with a question: is cultural superiority really a desirable fantasy, or are its consequences too great?

### **Waking from the Dream: America, Fantasy, and Theater in the Trump Era**

"Oh my god. I think—America is *racist!*" So announces Cecily Strong's character in a rather shocked tone, in the middle of *Saturday Night Live's* post-November 8th skit titled "Election Night." She looks around the room, full of her fellow white Hillary Clinton supporters, with the glazed eyes of someone waking up out of a wonderful dream to face a nightmarish reality. "Oh my god!" cries Dave Chappelle's character to Chris Rock, both also in the room but standing apart. The two black men exchange expressions of mock surprise. "You know, I remember my great-great-grandfather told me something like that. But, you know, he was like, a slave or something, I don't know..." ("Election Night - SNL").

*SNL* has always succeeded in using theatrical sketches to comment comically on real-life events, and this skit digesting the reactions of liberal Americans to the election results does so stellarly. It captures, perhaps uncomfortably well, the loss that liberal America never saw coming, a loss that felt impossible. Riding the wave of eight years under the progressive Obama administration and its message of hope had lulled much of left-leaning America to believe that the country would unite to elect a candidate that believed in protecting the rights of all Americans. Waking up on the morning of November 9th, "that illusion was shattered" ("The Trump Era," par. 1). No longer could the fantasy of America as a country always striving for greater equality continue. The election of Donald Trump, who campaigned on the idea of putting "America first" and solving the nation's problems through exclusion and a "fear of the 'other,'" proved that "we can no longer pretend that we are free

of racism” (Calamur, par. 2; powell and Menendian, par. 24; @jes\_chastain). Suddenly, Trump’s seemingly outlandish campaign promises were poised to become reality. His promise to “build a wall along the United States-Mexican border to keep out ‘criminals and rapists,’” as well as his demand for “a ban on Muslim immigrants” pinned America’s problems on perceived outsiders and promoted an idea of America as superior (powell and Menendian, par. 19).

Even with the dream of a post-racial, united America thoroughly shattered, lingering shock can make the rise of xenophobia and white supremacy that elected Trump appear to be an entirely new phenomena. Yet to believe so is merely to trade one fantasy for another. Indeed, “The idea of stoking anxiety, resentment, or fear of the “other” is not a new... strategy in American politics” (powell and Menendian, par. 24). In fact, it eerily recalls the isolationism and fear of foreign ideology that swept the nation following WWII and during the Cold War. Today, just as during the Cold War, ““Some people’s sense of who we are as a country is threatened to the core”” by the anxiety that foreigners, with their strange ideologies and cultures, jeopardize the safety, superiority, and familiar values of America (Sharry qtd. in Ball, par. 34). American identity as a political concept has long prospered off this privileged idea of the American as distinct from Others. The victory of Trump and everything he stands for is thus only the most recent eruption of fears and anxieties that have historically troubled America: in the words of author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, “It’s lamentable, but it’s predictable. And no one should be surprised” (Goodman, par. 16).

As liberal America awoke from this fantasy, it needed somewhere to turn. American theater has willingly taken up the mantle, serving as “conduit for critiques of an administration that the vast majority of artists look upon as a threat” (Marks, par. 3). Many new plays have taken to blatantly representing Trump on stage: two recent controversial shows, *The Mark of Cain* and a restaged *Julius Caesar*, transform their title characters into a “familiar-looking guy in a solid red tie who’s obsessed with his smartphone” (Marks, par. 2).

Shows like *Building the Wall*, meanwhile, have devoted themselves to making Trump's campaign promises into a horrible onstage reality, imagining a nightmarish "prison interview in the near future in which a white supremacist details the brutalities he inflicted on Muslims and people of color rounded up after the declaration by Trump of martial law" (Marks, par. 6). While some shows have sparked backlash, others have been received lukewarmly, often closing early. As *Washington Post* critic Peter Marks observes, these reactionary pieces feel flat and somewhat wanting, coming across as "brittle and no more profound than the subject himself" (par. 11). Merely throwing Trump lookalikes or America's worst fears on stage for shock value, it seems, is not enough: "The first time you see Trump or his administration's ideas sent up on a stage, there's a jolt," but little else (Marks, par. 5). These "early attempts" "whipped up in a 'white hot fury'" show little depth, and are "too facilely a reverberation off the cultural echo chamber, or mere excuses for getting something off one's chest" (Marks, par. 5, 6).

What the hollow echoes of these works lack is a deeper, more meaningful resonance, as in Stephen Greenblatt's theory of cultural resonance. Greenblatt defines resonance as "the power of a displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged" and from which it draws meaning (42). Thus defined, resonance places a work in a larger context, opening up its fictional world to the wider reality of the real world, just as it collapses the perceived distance and barriers between history and the present. A culturally resonant work finds meaning in analyzing uncanny parallels; in doing so, it "closes the distance between yesterday's fights... and today's" (Dargis qtd. in Harris, par. 4).

If resonance requires a larger context and a longer history to give meaning, perhaps these "passionately intentional," reactionary works of theater are doomed to fall flat (Marks, par. 11). In some ways, *SNL* and its theatrical skits fall into the same category. The show "understands that its mission is to reprocess the week's events... via satire that 'destroys,'

for a weekend, all the things we know will rise again” (Harris, par. 1). *SNL* very literally puts yesterday’s “history” on screen the next day: “To watch *SNL* in the Trump era is to judge it on the spot, in real time” (Harris, par. 2). There is almost no distance at all, no space to process events. Many of the show’s political skits do little but reproduce current events on screen, using comedy to “release some pent-up audience desire to engage in communal scorn” (Marks, par. 12). Viewing these year-old skits now, while some skits like “Election Night” still seem to shed light on a greater truth, others missed the mark, predicting as inevitable events that never came to pass.

Ultimately, audiences desire something more from their art, something that takes them out of the present moment to provide perspective. *Vulture* writer Mark Harris, in looking at Trump-era pop culture that has been hailed as “prescient,” theorizes that this is “our collective (and unreasonable) desire for art to have figured it all out in advance” (par. 2). He examines in particular Hulu’s current award-winning adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but the theory applies well to any recent work with much older roots. In seemingly seeing a coming future from years back, these works surprise us with their foresight, and give audiences “faith at a time when it feels in short supply” (Harris, par. 3). This is, of course, a myth of sorts: if these works feel prescient, it is because their creators were attuned to how these issues have long been brewing. Like Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock in “Election Night,” these artists were “looking at the world, not at a Ouija board” (Harris, par. 4).

Nonetheless, the apparent timeliness of these retrospective insights provides relief, soothing as a bedtime story might. Resonance proves that today’s issues are not new but rather part of a longer struggle; it grounds present anxieties by allowing viewers to see themselves as belonging to a larger history. But this reassurance leaves viewers vulnerable to a new fantasy: the spell of complacency. If current issues stem from age-old problems—and no apocalypse ensued—then it can be assumed that today’s issues will eventually



resolve themselves. A naive, unshakable faith in progress breeds inaction, allowing viewers to believe that their participation is not needed to right the real-world wrongs that onstage problems reflect. A work of fiction that realizes its audience's fears thereby gives a false sense of resolution: its fictionality serves to purge real anxieties, as in Aristotle's idea of catharsis.<sup>15</sup>

Resonance, then, has an unintended double-effect, in that it quells the very urgency that its relevance seeks to incite. The comforting aspect of resonance gives it an air of fantasy. And yet, resonance aims to use fantasy to reduce the isolation of present conflicts, to cut across boundaries of history, and to open up the world by restoring the very "openness" and "permeability of boundaries" that creates art in the first place (Greenblatt 43). Resonance both opens up the imagination to forgotten possibilities at the same time that it encourages disengagement, a closing of the mind to future action. In the case of theater, it is up to the director, creative team, and performers to ensure that a show employs resonance to the desired effect: their artistic choices regarding design, staging, and delivery determine whether a show captivates and moves an audience or merely enchants, holding them spellbound.

### **The Myth Revived: Lincoln Center Theater's 2015 Production of *The King and I***

Undoubtedly, a deep resonance animates the new revival production of *The King and I*. Countless interviews attempt to parse its relevance, while numerous reviews praise its "enduring and affecting power" (Brantley, "Review" par. 4). Its resonance always seems to surprise. With a Rogers and Hammerstein show as familiar as *The King and I*, audiences believe they know what to expect: "great music," a "sweeping, big story," and "warm and cuddly" characters ("Meet Director"; Lemon, par. 5). Yet the "strangeness, seriousness, and

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<sup>15</sup> Aristotle described catharsis as the effect of dramatic tragedy on a viewer: "the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art"; "through experiencing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the spectator's own anxieties are directed outward" ("Catharsis").

loveliness” of the revival production catches viewers unaware, reminding them that “the themes of *The King and I*... are even more resonant today” (Green, par. 2; “Meet Director”). Director Bartlett Sher perfectly captures this resonance in pinpointing the show’s essential theme: “In one sentence... *you do not have to be afraid of the Other*” (“Meet Director,” emphasis added). Little else could feel so resonant today, when the idea of a superior America is upheld by a fear of the Other.

Sher’s vision for the revival never attempts to claim the myth of prescient genius, nor does it set the revival apart as a transformed work. Instead, he remains very open about the excellence of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s original work, its resonant potentiality, and the efforts he has taken to bring out its very contemporary themes. Combing through earlier drafts of the musical, Sher found controversial lines that deepened the show’s themes “had been cut along the road, and we put them all back” (“Meet Director”). As he notes, “Strangely, a lot of these issues have not gone away”: bringing them once more to the forefront draws out the show’s natural resonance, enriching both the experience of the show and an understanding of today’s times (Cattaneo 11). In fact, Sher claims that “the farther you get from the original production, the deeper you can look... [at] what they were beginning to understand in... 1951” (Cattaneo 11). For Sher, the revival benefits not only from an “awe” of “what Rodgers and Hammerstein were able to accomplish way ahead of their time,” but also from the chance to “pull even more out of the piece than people had ever understood could be there,” thanks to the perspective provided by historical distance (Cattaneo 11). The director’s job is to make these themes apparent to the audience: to bring the show’s original content “unaltered, moral scruples and all... into the current day” while making artistic choices to increase resonance, adjusting visuals and performances to bring to the fore these relevant themes that should capture the audience’s attention (Tabakis, par. 9).

Indeed, a rather blunt review of the revival production's stop in D.C. this past summer opens with a pointed question: "... how do you solve a problem like *The King and I*?" (Tabakis, par. 1). The question's playful reference to the lyric of another Rodgers and Hammerstein musical<sup>16</sup> reminds just how important a place their shows have in popular culture, for they have become cherished classics. And yet, how to bring such a classic, steeped in 1950s attitudes, into the present day for modern audiences to enjoy? Indeed, Sher takes on a daunting task in today's world, when generally left-leaning theatergoers demand strict "cultural authenticity" in the shows they see, desiring that the visual elements (such as costuming, set design, and casting) be historically accurate to the culture portrayed onstage. His challenge, as *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley points out, is to "educate 21st-century audiences in the enduring and affecting power of a colonialist-minded musical that, by rights, should probably embarrass us in the age of political correctness" ("Review" par. 4). If not staged thoughtfully, the musical's message risks getting bogged down in exotic and ornate Orientalist aesthetics, its visual design "a kind of fantasia of what we thought the Far East was like" (Himes, par. 5).

Sher rises to meet this challenge admirably. His approach to the revival production combines research, restoration work, and a general simplification of the show's visuals to dispel much of the original production's air of fantasy—though in striving to match reality, a new kind of fantasy is born. Promotional interviews released by the Lincoln Center Theater reveal the extensive research done to inform the revival production's new design. Sher mentions that the production team worked with a Thai history expert, as well as with various other people from Thailand ("Platform Talk"). Sher, along with costume designer Catherine Zuber and set designer Michael Yeargan, conducted research of their own, determined to maintain "a respect for Thai culture" "without [the] unnecessary appropriated decorations" that have characterized past productions, as well as the 1956 movie (Cattaneo 10). Sher

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<sup>16</sup> "How do you solve a problem like Maria?" from the song "Maria" in *The Sound of Music*.

nicely sums up the revival's approach: "In this production, we have to try to strike a sparer tone that reflects something truthful about the inner life of the people rather than putting them in big exotic clothes for a kind of dress parade or a big gallery of exoticness" (Cattaneo 10).

Sher's approach certainly reflects honorable sentiments, but in endeavoring for "authenticity" or historical accuracy, the revival production unwittingly introduces a new fantasy of realism. True, Sher's production does not appear to offend the Thai by visually misrepresenting their culture as gaudy or clownish, as in past productions. The 1951 musical and 1956 film were unconcerned with historical accuracy, preferring instead to portray the Orient as familiar and non-threatening to facilitate politically-interested bonds between the East and the West. Their "big gallery of exoticness" relied on humor and the idea of a universal humanity to endear Asian peoples to Western audiences, ultimately confirming Western superiority (Cattaneo 10). Yet the meticulously-researched revival production still cannot avoid putting "Asianness" on display for Western audiences, despite—or perhaps, *because of*—its visual accuracy. "Authentic" elements, such as period costumes and ethnically appropriate casting, invite the audience's gaze with the seductive promise of accuracy. Seeing what appear to be Thai people in Thai clothing onstage suggests that the show has a true story to tell, even when the show's content and many layers of fantasy remain essentially intact. The fantasy of historical accuracy is that it allows its audience to believe that they may learn something "real" about Thai people from the show, if only they can, like good students, study the Siamese characters<sup>17</sup> hard enough.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I use the term "Siamese characters" to refer to the show's characters said to be from Siam, such as the King and Lady Thiang. I also mean to differentiate between these fictional characters from modern Thai people, for it is a mistake to think that the show's stereotyped portrayals truly reflect on Thai people, whether the characters wear historically accurate clothing or not.

<sup>18</sup> Oddly, this reverses the teacher-student hierarchy of "Getting to Know You" though it is still patronizing, privileging the superior Western gaze and ability to extract knowledge.

The audience's gaze Others the Siamese characters, putting them under a microscope for the viewing pleasure of their Western "superiors."

Though likely well-intentioned, Sher's comment that historical accuracy "reflects something truthful about the inner life of the people" encourages Western scrutiny of the Siamese characters, as if they can somehow be "figured out" or optically dissected to discover what lies at the heart of Thai national character (Cattaneo 10). This desire to understand these Others, to categorize and thereby control them, still seems motivated by a fear that they are foreign and unknowable. In this sense, Sher's remark that the show proves "you do not have to be afraid of the Other" recalls old portrayals of the Siamese as nonthreatening ("Meet Director"). Hence, the new fantasy feels much like the original fantasy: sparked by American fears, and thus revealing more about Americans than about the Thai. Like the fabled wolf in sheep's clothing, the timeless fantasy of Western superiority pervades today, only in a different guise: the same wolf, but in a more "authentic" costume. The fantasy is all the more insidious today, for in making claims to realism, it entangles dangerously with ideas of truth.

This fantasy of realism runs like a thread through the restaged production, impacting everything from the costume and set designs to the casting choices. While the costumes in the revival remain stunning,<sup>19</sup> the costumes of the Siamese characters in particular are toned down to reflect a more historically accurate simplicity. In contrast to the overwhelming sparkle of the wives' costumes in the movie, and the "quite ridiculous and impractical" Western hoop skirts of the era, costume designer Catherine Zuber remarks that Thai women wore sari-like garments that were "much more modern than what Westerners were wearing at the time" (Cattaneo 10). While Zuber seeks to restore a sense of accuracy to the costumes by stripping away the fantastical glitz and glitter, the admiration she expresses for

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<sup>19</sup> Catherine Zuber's costumes won the 2015 Tony Award for Best Costume Design (Musical).

the “modern” practicality of antique Thai dress reveals the Western lens she brings to the design process. Calling the garments “modern” equates them with the comfort and freedom of movement provided by contemporary Western clothing, and is surely meant to be complimentary. Yet the comparison seems to commend the Thai for conforming to a current, Western standard of good dress. The “authentic” Siamese costumes, then, are evaluated in terms of a Western style held to be superior. As with the fantasy of realism, this “authenticity” shows little about the modern Thai, exposing instead the bias of contemporary American perspectives.

Set designer Michael Yeargan, while conscious of the powerful effect a set can have on a show, seems unaware of the way his design furthers this very same fantasy. Yeargan’s original vision aimed to do away with the “garish, ornate, shiny stuff” of past productions by constructing a more historically accurate set, hoping that doing so would help rid the show of its Orientalist feel (Fraley, par. 16). Yet many past sets *were* in fact based off the Royal Palace of Siam; the palace’s many colorful patterns, as seen in historical photos, prompted Yeargan to describe it as “an explosion in a tile factory” (Cattaneo 9). Sher and Yeargan worried that a set design accurately reflecting the palace would war with the performances for the audience’s attention, ultimately deciding that “you couldn’t do the play in that rich world. You had to strip it down” (Cattaneo 9). The resulting set design is “very spare and very pure”: inspired by photos of Buddhist temples with “big, bare floors of wood panels,” Sher claims it has an “abandoned temple in a mountainside” feel (“Platform Talk”; Fraley, par. 16; “Platform Talk”). Thus, the new set design sacrifices rigid historical accuracy to produce the right “feel” for the show. Yet in doing so, it trades the explicitly Orientalist fantasy of an ornate East for a subtler fantasy. In “purifying” the scenery such that it resembles a Buddhist temple, Yeargan’s new design plays into a stereotype of the East as spiritual and pristine. Whether truly accurate to the palace or not, the design’s simplicity suggests an “authenticity” that sets the stage for Western scrutiny of the Siamese

characters, perhaps to seek the “pure” nature of their “inner life” behind the layers of decoration (Cattaneo 10). Still, the stage design merely suggests the tone of a scene—a show’s actors determine how performances impact an audience.

Indeed, the new set’s sparsity “clears away the clutter” of past productions to allow the actor’s performances to “register all the more vividly” (Teachout, par. 5). Yet even amended visuals cannot overcome the patronizing tone and stereotypes that have plagued the Siamese characters in the show, particularly the King; the role is haunted by the popularity of Yul Brynner’s “spoiled, willful man-child” portrayal (Teachout, par. 2). Unsurprisingly, casting Asian-Americans in these Asian roles goes a long ways towards changing the musical’s tone. As Bartlett Sher observes, “Only two people in the 1951 cast were Asian... We would never do that now” (Himes, par. 5). And with good reason: when a non-Asian actor was cast as the King in a 2015 Dallas production of *The King and I*, there was incredible backlash. The Asian American Performers Action Coalition released a statement on yellowface: “Asian impersonation denies Asians our own subjecthood. It situates all the power within a Caucasian-centric world view” (Culwell-Block, par. 13). Even in a potentially offensive role, yellowface injures twice-over, denying Asians and those of Asian descent the power to control their self-representations.

If yellowface inherently robs the Asian community and impoverishes a role to a single dimension of stereotype, then restoring the power of representation to Asian actors has the potential to expand and reimagine the impact of a role. Even just visually, the verisimilitude of such casting is powerful: seeing an Asian role returned to an Asian actor restores the control of self-representation and aligns more closely with the show’s professed values of equality and acceptance. The revival production has cast four kings, all of Asian heritage. Sher stumbles in explaining his choice of casting Japanese actor Ken Watanabe as his original King, yet insists that he would “bring something very new to it... without sounding political, [something] *authentic* to it, in a way” (“Platform Talk,” emphasis added). He feels

that Watanabe “understood something about the world of Asia, in a way” (“Platform Talk”). Sher points out the obvious—Watanabe is, after all, a foreign, Asian actor. What he seems unable to articulate is that Watanabe can draw on his own experiences to bolster and subtly reshape the role to “make it into something...[that] can be brought freshly into the current world” (Cattaneo 11). The assumption that a modern Japanese man understands something about nineteenth century Thailand misguidedly amalgamates all Asian peoples under one culture: it Others and Orientalizes in refusing to recognize individual peoples, histories and cultural identities. Although it is a fantastical identity, many Americans still believe in the idea of a common Asian identity and attribute many offensive stereotypes to “Asians” as a whole based on their appearance. Sher’s ambiguous remarks suggest that Watanabe, an Asian actor who has likely faced stereotypes in his work in Hollywood, can channel any experience he has had with discrimination into his role as the King and thereby push back against modern Asian stereotypes—not by understanding a past Thailand, but by making the role his own.

Though this production’s focus on historical accuracy and ethnically appropriate casting undeniably helps correct past injustices, the fantasy effects of verisimilitude must be considered. There is danger in conflating “authenticity” with reality, particularly in the symbolic world of theater, where artistic choices often speak to larger truths than to direct realities. “Authentic” or no, *The King and I* is still a work of fiction, albeit a “fiction so well crafted and so profoundly emotional” that even a whiff of truth endears the show to its audience all the more (Green, par. 2). Near the end of a long interview on restoring historical accuracy to the show, Bartlett Sher fields an audience question about the show’s reception in Thailand. He answers unequivocally that “The one thing you can be certain of is that they do not like *The King and I* in Thailand...”<sup>20</sup> eliciting disappointed moans from the audience

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<sup>20</sup> As Sher later notes, this is because “the royal family is very sacred there, so any portrayal of the royal family *of any kind* is considered very not cool there.”



("Platform Talk"). Sher's audience desperately wants this work of fantasy to be real, for its sentimental vision of global friendship to be reflective of real U.S.-Thai relations. The audience mistakes the show's historically accurate visuals for the trappings of a true story about the Thai, rather than as an American fantasy with Siamese characters. What gets overlooked in seeing the show as truly real, though, are the problematic power dynamics of Western cultural superiority that still exist within the show. That Sher's audience wishes this fictional vision to be real says infinitely more about an enduring American desire for superiority than it does anything about actual Thai people. Thus, to accept the show as reality and to look at it uncritically, rather than as a reflective work of art meant to be thought-provoking, is to fall prey to fantasy once again.

Moreover, confusing fantasy with reality makes reality all the more harder to swallow, as proved by an incident surrounding Japanese actor Ken Watanabe's performances as the King. Many reviewers, including the *NYT*'s Ben Brantley, have commented that Watanabe's diction "is not always coherent," making him an "underdog... in his standoffs with Anna" ("Review" par. 18). This slight mention is pounced upon and magnified into a huge problem by readers in the *NYT*'s comment section. While some claim his accent *adds* authenticity to his character and another points out that "expectations that an Asian actor portraying an Asian character speak American English is [a] tad chauvinistic," many seem offended that their money did not buy them perfection (Commenter "odm"). What many in the audience appear to want is a King that can bring real or "authentic" emotion to the role without displaying any of his own "pesky" realities. After Brynner's fantastical precedent, a real portrayal can seem lacking, insufficient, and not up to "par." Brynner's portrayal popularized an offensive stereotype of Asians. Yet because of his authority as a white actor, his portrayal is granted the superior status of a "standard": his fanciful portrayal of the King is thus cemented as the ultimate truth in the minds of audience members, a "truth" against which all other portrayals must be measured. Ironically, if an Asian actor does not deliver his

lines in the same, clearly-enunciated broken English that Brynner used, then it is the Asian actor who is deemed inadequate.

Hence, not all of *The King and I*'s problems can be solved through "authentic" design and casting alone; historical accuracy can create a confusing tangle of fantasy and reality that too often serves to privilege Orientalizing Western views. Be that as it may, the revival production works with the show's material in inventive ways to "pull even more out of the piece than people had ever understood could be there," reimagining its boundaries and potential while restoring its lost sense of gravity and urgency (Cattaneo 11). Sher's logistical choices in restaging the musical, as well as the nuanced and highly self-aware performances of the show's Asian and Asian-American actors, bring the audience face to face with the show's principal Siamese characters, the King and Lady Thiang. An intimacy between actor and audience permits viewers to see the "shadowy emotional depths" these characters contain, as well as the deeply resonant global events and cultural conflicts that trouble them: in such a manner, they are broken out of the shallow Oriental stereotypes that for so long confined them (Brantley, "Review" par. 6). At the same time, resonance works to connect viewers to the characters, and more broadly, to connect the show to the real world, destabilizing the audience's fantasy of superiority by collapsing the very distance that allowed the illusion to form. As ever, though, some part of the fantasy still remains: this same sense of intimacy risks once again placing the Western audience in a position of dominance by inviting them to probe the depths of these Siamese characters. Yet both the King and Lady Thiang demonstrate in key moments that they are aware of the way Westerners view them; in returning the audience's gaze, they awaken viewers to the very fantasy that they continue to hold onto.

One of the most noticeable shifts in the revival production is a significant change in the portrayal of the King. As previously noted, Brynner's King came across as a "spoiled, willful man-child," making him a difficult character to root for (Teachout, par. 2). Arguably,

such a King needs and deserves to be chastised and reformed by the Western Anna; thus, Brynner's portrayal lends itself to Orientalism. While remaining the same character, the revival production's King possesses "a tickling wit and a flickering self-awareness that balances on the brink of tragedy" (Brantley, "The King and I" par. 3). This portrayal grants the King both a seriousness and a cleverness that restore the balance of power between Anna and himself, presenting the two as "equally matched sparring partners"; their equality, and the sense that these "kindred spirits" share a stubbornness and a lively mind, only heighten the show's tragic conclusion (Brantley, "The King and I" par. 6, 11).

The revival production's touring King, Jose Llana, gives a particularly well-rounded and sensitive performance. His "greater regal vulnerability," rather than discrediting him, adds depth and humanity to the King (Jones, par. 12). As the revival production's youngest King,<sup>21</sup> Sher remarks that Llana "brings such joy and virility and strength to the King" (Wong, par. 3). By Llana's own account, this informs his performance: "I approach him as a young leader trying to figure things out. It feels really healthy" (McGonnigal, par. 4). Llana's youthful vulnerability opens up the role's rigidity, permitting the audience to see the King as a quick-witted, passionate, and mindful character capable of change.

Such a talented actor is fully capable of taking on the King's weightier role in this new production. Many of the restored lines directly concern the King and his deliberations over foreign matters of state, and they help to "bring out the political tension of the time" ("Jose Llana"). In a scene that does not appear in the 1951 libretto, the King and the Kralahome trade lines that "detail Siam's place in Asia at the time," and in particular the way countries bordering Siam were falling to foreign influence (Kempskie 31). The King bemoans that "Cambodia is lost to the French," made a protectorate, while "English ships [swarm] like

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<sup>21</sup> Youngest of four revival kings, as he is currently only forty-one years old. Past Kings: Ken Watanabe (58), Hoon Lee (44), and Daniel Dae Kim (49).

fishes in Eastern seas”<sup>22</sup> (“A Puzzlement”; Sher). Such lines show the King as knowledgeable of world events and concerned about the welfare of his country. At the same time, they set up the tumultuous global reorganization of the region at the time, while giving a sense of the high stakes and real danger involved. The lines “gave the King an importance politically” that establishes his following musical soliloquy, “A Puzzlement,” as having a worldly scope beyond merely the King’s self-doubt (Kempskie 31).

Already primed to view the King as a more significant character, one of these restored lines brings the entire show into an urgent immediacy with its audience. In this same conversation with the Kralahome, the King announces, “One day I wish to build fence around Siam” (McGonnigal, par. 9). The King seeks to protect his country from foreign influence. He soon dismisses the idea, but the damage is done. When Llana delivers this line, “the audience just erupts”: “It stopped the show in some cities with a laugh,” but in the especially politically-minded city of Washington, D.C.,<sup>23</sup> the audience very audibly gasped (Himes, par. 7; McGonnigal, par. 9). The reactions of audiences to this line, both laughs and gasps alike, show their distinct recognition of the idea. That a fictional character, speaking of the 1860s by way of the 1950s, would voice sentiments now in prominent circulation, is at once eerie and shocking. The line resonates strongly today, when fear and desperation have driven some to support President Trump’s proposal of a Southern border wall to keep migrants from Mexico and Latin America out.

Yet this powerful intrusion of reality into a seeming fantasy, unlike the idea that sparked it, succeeds in opening up the work to the world by breaking down the fantastical barrier thought to divide art and reality. As Llana himself observes, the “production challenges you a little bit... there’s real tension, and there’s real teachable moments in it” (“Jose Llana”). The historical distance between these two moments is suddenly collapsed;

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<sup>22</sup> This line is recalled from notes I made after seeing *The King and I* on tour in San Antonio, TX. It is by no means a perfect transcription.

<sup>23</sup> Where I first saw *The King and I* on tour, prior to seeing it again in San Antonio.

despite the geographic dislocation, each moment illuminates the other. In bringing today's times into a perception of the show, the audience may anticipate the futility of such isolationism, perhaps pitying the King. The show gives its audience a crucial look behind such a proclamation, helping reveal the mix of trepidation and concern that prompted it. Still, some of the fantasy lingers. As in the previously detailed double-effect of resonance, there is a cathartic relief in recognizing that isolationism has long been a tempting solution for solving domestic problems. Such a recognition has the potential to forestall the very pressure towards action so needed to overcome the isolationist moment America finds itself in right now. That the King is able to overcome this urge towards isolation, Llana thinks to be vital: "it's important for audiences to see a young leader who's trying to figure things out and rather than build walls, he's extending hands of friendship" (McGonnigal, par. 4). This exchange of ideas between fiction and reality imagines a way forward for America.

Back in the fantasy world of 1860s Siam, however, the King finally launches into his song "A Puzzlement." With a lead-in that has taken its audience outside the show and back again, their own reality permeating the show's storyline, each line of the King's song now imparts its meaning with urgency. The sentiment behind "When I was a boy/ World was better spot" is hauntingly recognizable, recalling a happy era before our collective dream was dispelled (Hammerstein 33). Rid of a stanza on concubines from the original musical that clutters the song's direction, the King's anxieties about the "identity of a nation challenged by changing times" and the dilemma of global alliances stands out all the more (Brantley, "The King and I" par. 10). The dangers of trusting and welcoming outsiders are considered seriously, but even the King realizes that "unless someday somebody trust somebody/ There'll be nothing left on earth excepting fishes!"; the line echoes the threat of "nuclear annihilation" which haunted the Cold War-era just as it does today (Hammerstein 34; Klein 153). Gone are Brynner's half-smiles, his odd confidence; Llana's performance delivers the song in all its agonizing uncertainty. His shaking hands reflect his desperate

tone, accentuated by frustrated groans and clenched fists. Not just puzzled, his lowered eyebrows betray his utter bewilderment and consternation. Nervously pacing, his shoulders tense and hunched forward as if confessing, Llana beseeches his audience as if aware of their presence.

As Llana's performance returns weight to the song, its resonances reach out across boundaries just like the King's searching gaze. That the King agonizes so in deciding what relationship his country should have with the rest of the world, that the uncanny parallels between Siam's situation and America's continue to surprise, and that the King's decision to reach out to the West does not end happily for all prevents, it would seem, any true sense of catharsis or resolution for American audiences. If audiences recognize their nation's issues within the show, they must also recognize that the same conflict between competing ideals which the King experiences has likewise always been at the heart of the American experience; indeed, a freedom of ideas is central to the very ethos of the American Dream. There is a continuous need for action, a need to struggle and strive, to ensure that one's ideas help shape America's path forward: thus, the spell of complacency is thwarted.

In another memorable scene, Sher's staging choices and Llana's mix of vulnerability and self-awareness continues to let down the King's walls and expand the role's potential by drawing the audience's attention to the show's fantasy rather cheekily. The King summons Anna to his side late at night, seemingly just to discuss the Bible. When she enters, from his spot on the floor he declares, "Mrs. Anna, I think your Moses shall have been a fool," pointing out that the six-day miracle of creation told of by Moses is scientifically impossible (Hammerstein 63). The moment of interest occurs as Anna tries to explain her Western idea of faith to the King. In the 1956 movie, Yul Brynner looks up at Anna as she explains, his expression of confusion open to her as she smiles at his naivety; Anna's sense of superiority is cloying, and the King's deficiency seems on display.

With a simple staging change, however, Sher shifts the scene's dynamics and exploits the scene to the fullest by using it to give the King's character more depth. Sher places Llana with his Bible at the edge of the stage, facing the audience (and rather close to them). Llana keeps his back to Anna as she enters behind him and launches into her explanation. This time, as the King expresses his doubt—but maybe also his agreement—it stays hidden from Anna, becoming a gift for the audience alone. Only they are allowed to see behind the walls he keeps up around her. His exquisite vulnerability, shared in an intimately private moment with the audience, briefly connects the King with the viewers that sit before him; at the same time, he need not lose face with Anna. Seeing this usually guarded side to the King humanizes him, while leaving his back to Anna rids the scene of its patronizing tone. Though it could be argued that the scene still plays into a fantasy of Western superiority by encouraging the audience to study the King's character in order to understand him, certain aspects of the scene suggest otherwise. Chief among them is the scene's focus on the King himself: the King's reading of the Bible late into the night, and his mulling over of philosophical questions, seem to portray his actions as a very personal endeavor. Though the power dynamics of an all-knowing West and a questioning East still remain, the scene's intimacy reveals more about the King as an individual, as a curious and inquisitive man, than it seems to suggest about him as an "Oriental" or as a Siamese person.

Soon after, the King dictates a letter to Anna intended for President Lincoln. He very suddenly interrupts his own dictation, though, to comment on Anna's disrespectful position; the King lies on the floor, while Anna looms over him. He insists that she conduct herself "like all other subjects" and follow the rules of Siam, where "no one's head shall be higher than King's" (Hammerstein 66). She at first refuses on account of her Western sense of freedom and equality, those "truths" that assure her that every individual has the right to make their own choices—but she finally relents in the face of the King's obstinacy. Anna

must mirror the King's movements: "If I shall sit, you shall sit. If I shall kneel, you shall kneel..." (Hammerstein 66). The King returns to dictation, but as he moves from sitting to lying, he pauses, repeats his last line, and "*gives Anna a significant look*" while waiting for her to follow (Hammerstein 67 [stage direction]). She does so, but awkwardly, returning an equally significant look. The scene, viewed from a Western—and modern—standpoint, can feel uncomfortably degrading to Anna as a woman.

Yet it plays out a bit differently in the revival production, due to Llana's self-aware performance. Llana deliberately draws out the scene: he goes from kneeling to sitting, from sitting to propped up, and from propped up to lying down, forcing Anna to follow his lead. He does so mirthfully, once again sharing his open smile with the audience and leaving his back to Anna. His gleefulness seems to have edge to it, a knowing wink of sorts. Llana himself comments on his self-aware performance, acknowledging it as his approach to the show's "white savior" aspect: "The King is not trying to save himself thinking 'I'm going to bring in this white woman to save me.' He knew they were going to invade" (McGonnigal, par. 12). Llana sees the King as highly aware of the danger foreigners posed, as a man who chooses to invite Anna to Siam in order to arm his children with the tool of English to protect their country from invaders.

Hence, Llana's King, with his impish smile, shows himself to be very aware of how he toys with this Westerner. He seems conscious of how Anna thinks herself superior to him—he sees it and pokes fun at it, literally bringing her down to his level. In a scene where the audience believes that the King "needs her" [Anna], as just told by Lady Thiang the scene before, the King's private laughter restores the balance of power between the two (Hammerstein 62). It is as if he looks askance at Anna's—and indeed, the show's—fantasy of Western cultural superiority and laughs at it. In so overtly enjoying Anna's humiliation, the King ridicules the West's belief in its own superiority, showing it to be contingent on circumstance and not on inherence. His laughter communicates secretly with the audience,



working within the limited space of the show's "vintage material," to comment meta-textually on the show's original fantasy of superiority, as written into Anna's character (Brantley, "Review" par. 6). The real magic is the way he makes the audience laugh at it, too.

Though not nearly as prominent a character as the King, head wife Lady Thiang displays similar moments of vulnerability and self-awareness that resonate with her audience and refer to the show's own fantasy meta-textually. The unassuming nature of her character only amplifies the power of her performance as she becomes an intermediary figure of compassionate realism, and eventually, the musical's most sharply perceptive character. Lady Thiang is already a marginal character: she briefly appears in the background of many scenes, stepping onstage only to soon step back off. Ruthie Ann Miles, who originated the role in the revival, emphasizes this feeling of Lady Thiang's invisibility, stressing that she holds her tongue more often than she speaks, and that "Her head is always down. Her eyes are always lowered" (Purcell, par. 9). Her character is often portrayed as "a subservient woman with quiet, inner strength, but who still is another servant in the King's palace" (Purcell, par. 8). The meek, dewy-eyed performance of Lady Thiang by white actress Terry Saunders in the film, replete with pleading smiles, only further consigns her character to a benevolent oblivion.

But Miles won a Tony award<sup>24</sup> for her performance as Lady Thiang for good reason. In her hands, Lady Thiang becomes "a quiet leader," constantly aware of what is happening and knowing "her tactics," when to intercede and when to not ("Get to know"). She "rules the roost," but not loudly like her husband (Lemon, par. 1). Instead, she does so by being "always there": in the new production, "You see her presence more" (Sutton, par. 6). Though often still walking on and off stage, she does so with a pointed look that refuses to disengage its audience. As her stage presence in her two musical numbers asserts, Lady Thiang's sagacity and self-awareness prove that "her ears are always going," and that,

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<sup>24</sup> 2015 Tony Award for Featured Actress in a Musical.

indeed, “she may be the smartest person in the room,” though reserved (Purcell, par. 9). Her replacement in the touring production, Joan Almedilla, captures much of the essence of Miles’ performance while bringing a powerfully “real stoicness,” to the role (Wong, par. 15). Recognizing the role’s subtle complexity, Miles gushes that the role is “the most intriguing and powerful thing that I’ve had the chance to play” (Purcell, par. 11).

If Lady Thiang is normally muted in her speech and presence, a true enigma, then her solo, “Something Wonderful,” brings her into a brilliant and arresting visibility. The song is, essentially, an attempt to reconcile Anna and the King; the two have quarreled, and refuse to see each other. Lady Thiang feels the King needs Anna’s advice on a pressing matter of foreign affairs, and so she must convince the stubbornly proud Anna to go to him (knowing the King will not). To do so, she humbles herself before Anna, slipping into the role of a beggar: like Llana in “A Puzzlement,” Almedilla hunches over a bit, looking earnestly at Anna. Lady Thiang’s song, her form of persuasion, becomes a defense of her husband, that man who “stumbles and falls,” whose “heart is not always wise,” yet who, nonetheless, “is a man who tries” (Hammerstein 60). That Lady Thiang should of her own volition choose to vindicate her husband so eloquently begs the question: who is this woman who can stand by such an overbearing man? Lady Thiang, the head wife of the King’s many wives and therefore a symbol of complicit subservience, embodies the “despicable” aspects of Siamese culture that Anna so abhors. She thus becomes an intensely curious figure to the audience: in many ways, the most “fascinating” Siamese character, who, if only puzzled out, might reveal something about “Asianness.” Lady Thiang must withstand the most invasive share of the audience’s demeaning, Orientalizing Western gaze. “Something Wonderful” immerses the audience in her mind, seemingly giving an inside look at an “Asian” worldview.

Truly, “full marks” must go to the “first-rate Ruthie Ann Miles”<sup>25</sup> for the remarkable performance she gives, wondrously capable of tearing down both the boundaries between Anna and the King and between the audience and herself (Brantley, “Review” par. 17). Her body language and vulnerability succeed in turning “Something Wonderful,” a song often presented as a wife’s pitifully heartrending apologia, into “an exquisite expression of romantic realism that could be the show’s anthem” (Brantley, “Review” par. 17). As she sings of her husband’s mistakes and marvels alike, she sometimes approaches Anna, imploring. More often than not Anna turns away in refusal; she perks up only once, when Lady Thiang sings of the dreams the King has “That won’t come true,” yet which his wife admires nonetheless (Hammerstein 60).

Towards the end of the song, Lady Thiang begins to move away from Anna, and it is here that everything shifts. She turns to face the audience to sing her last lines: it is not so much what she says to them, but how she does it. Her face is suddenly animated, churning with more emotions than she allowed Anna to see. As the music swells, Lady Thiang lets both her grief and the strength of her belief, her purpose, mark her face. No longer looking to persuade Anna, she slips unconsciously from her role as beseecher into simply expressing her most intimate feelings. This incredibly personal sincerity, this rare and wonderful thing glimpsed by the audience, bypasses their defenses, their disbelief (like Anna’s) at her words, and puts them in the palm of her hand. Though Anna cannot see her face, she too must sense her genuine emotion, for she slowly turns and approaches Lady Thiang as if helplessly drawn in by her magnetism. As with the vulnerability that Llana’s King reveals to the audience, this emotion that Almedilla’s Lady Thiang<sup>26</sup> shows viewers subjects her to an Orientalizing Western gaze: the audience gets to watch and interpret Lady Thiang’s seemingly unconscious overflow of emotion. In spite of this intrusive gaze on her,

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<sup>25</sup> Or similarly, Joan Almedilla in the touring production, whose performance is comparable.

<sup>26</sup> To clarify, as I saw the show on tour, the only portrayal of Lady Thiang that I witnessed first-hand was Joan Almedilla’s portrayal.

however, with “Something Wonderful” Lady Thiang inverts the power dynamics of the scene by bringing the audience under her control. The beauty of her song enchants her audience, and they surrender all their attention up to her: spellbound, they listen intensely to her words. Lady Thiang’s “accidental” display of emotion seems in fact to be purposeful, for it places her audience exactly where she wants them. With all their focus on her, Lady Thiang has “staged” the audience precisely for her next trick—her next song. Lady Thiang finishes “Something Wonderful” as if a spell cast was broken, suddenly remembering Anna’s presence and turning back towards her. There seems to be no bounds to the power of Lady Thiang’s heartfelt emotion, for she conquers both the audience and Anna in one fell swoop: Anna finally agrees to see the King. If this, and not “Getting To Know You,” is the revival’s anthem, then it is Lady Thiang’s pragmatism, openness, and sincerity—rather than Anna’s pretense—that truly bridge worlds.

Lady Thiang is perhaps at her most brilliant, however, in the number that has historically been the most controversial, “Western People Funny.” Joan Almedilla’s self-aware performance is fundamental in turning this potentially offensive song completely on its head so that it emerges as a sly commentary on Western superiority. Director Bartlett Sher insists that the song “is really one of my favorite numbers in the whole show,” and indeed, its ingenuity shines through when restaged well. In the number, Lady Thiang and the wives prepare for a ball hosting Western visitors; by Anna’s suggestion, they are sewing and clothing themselves in Western dresses, hoopskirts and all. The wives appear uncomfortable in their skirts, and they sing and laugh about how odd it all is, costuming themselves “like savages” in a “funny skirt” “to prove we’re not barbarians” to their visitors (Hammerstein 82). Revival productions have almost always cut the song, believing it to be “an extremely stereotyped song of the Thai, in their naïveté,” baffled by Western clothes and giggling like kids (Cattaneo 10). These assumedly Western producers feel justified in cutting a song that they see as being racist and offensive to another culture.

Yet Sher, working with Almedilla, shows just how simple it is to bring out the song's essential critique so that the number reflects not on the Siamese characters, but on the audience and what they *believe* about the Siamese characters: the number points out the audience's fantasy of realism. Gaze and perspective define this change. Important to note is that "Western People Funny" is "the only time the wives sing without the white people around"—or so it first appears ("Platform Talk"). The audience assumes that everything the wives say and do in this number is completely uninhibited because they are alone onstage, and that the song thus reveals some "inner truth" about the Siamese. The assumption gives the audience free rein to judge them as they like: the San Antonio audience, for instance, laughed when one of the wives falls over in her hoopskirt at the beginning, no doubt thinking her silly and cute, like a child flummoxed by simple things. But their laughter noticeably died out when Lady Thiang first sings one of her many "Western people funny" lines; suddenly they seemed uncertain of what to think, of who the song was about (Hammerstein 82). The audience in D.C., meanwhile, did not laugh, though the tension in the house was palpable.

The key to this perplexing song is in Lady Thiang's steady gaze. As she and the wives sing what sounds like a lighthearted song, the wives floundering about in the hoops, Almedilla keeps her eyes fixed purposefully out at the audience. Never wavering, she keeps a knowing, secretive, Mona Lisa-like smile on her face all the while. Her smile breaks through the metaphorical barrier between the stage and the house, suggesting that the song and its sentiments are meant directly for the audience. If the audience is confused, it is because they mistake the stage for a self-enclosed world, one they get to peek in on. Lady Thiang's gaze shatters this illusion, and reveals their own Western voyeuristic fantasy: the audience desires to scrutinize and dissect Siamese behavior, watching on as only a superior culture can. With respect to the perceived subject of the song, "all you have to do is flip it... [and] look at it from the point of view of the dominant culture instead of the subordinate culture... [and] it becomes ironic" (Cattaneo 10). The wives, in particular Lady

Thiang with her self-aware gaze, do not think they are alone; thus they laugh not amongst themselves, but at the assumedly Western audience, who, in a daze of Orientalist fantasy, are “Too funny to be true!” (Hammerstein 83). Without cruelty, the wives’ laughing tone directly points out the fantasy:

They feel so sentimental  
About the oriental,  
Always try to turn us  
Inside up and outside down! (Hammerstein 82)

Turned topsy-turvy, “inside up and outside down” by the Western voyeurs, the wives draw attention to the way the audience Orientalizes them in picturing them as they fancy, distorted and not true to life, much less to any “inner” truth or national character of the Siamese people. That their gaze attempts to control the foreign, inscrutable Siamese unveils once and for all how the fantasy of Western superiority lives on. The continued need for this fantasy exposes a fundamental weakness in the American identity—for if it relies upon such voyeuristic spectacles of the Other as this in order to maintain the illusion of American exceptionalism, then perhaps there is not anything about America that is truly exceptional.

To be unseated so, to have one’s fantasy desires thrown back in one’s face as ridiculous, is surely disturbing. Sher thinks modern audiences to be “capable of a kind of irony and an understanding of these issues that are very complex and layered in American culture between ethnic groups,” but perhaps he overestimates America’s readiness, judging from the discomfort in the house (“Platform Talk”). Yet it makes the number all the more crucial to the musical: for all the fantasy that may still hang over *The King and I*, Sher ensures that audiences cannot leave the theater as they came in, for something in their fantastical worldview is not quite right, something is shifted and not as they last saw it. Lady Thiang’s enigmatic smile, neither cruel nor entirely unfathomable, patiently awaits the day her audience will understand the full scope of the fantasy they live in, when they may share her smile and be in on the joke, laughing together at the idea of cultural superiority.

### **Conclusion: The Show Must Go On**

*The King and I* captivated audiences when it first premiered on Broadway in 1951, just as previous adaptations of Anna Leonowens' mythologized tale had fascinated the generations of Americans that came before them. For 1950s Americans, however, Anna's fantastical story held special appeal, for it played out the very myth of American exceptionalism that so preoccupied Americans at the time. Cold War America was a divided place: facing the threat of communism, many sought to further this myth abroad by converting new peoples to a belief in the superiority of American democratic ideals, thereby lending the myth credence; others sought to isolate America from the very outsiders whose foreign ideology threatened an absolute belief in American ideals.

*The King and I* became so dear to its 1950s audience because, on the surface, it presents a beautiful vision in which people of different cultures are united by a common belief in freedom and equality: it seemed to confirm their fantasy belief in the superiority of American values. Yet a closer look at the tension between Anna and the King that animates the musical shows no such simple vision. Both Anna and the King refuse to yield to a belief in cultural values different from their own—not because they can be certain of the truth of their own values, but because they seek to preserve a view of the world that they have lived by for so long. As each character clings to their values, performing certainty in public even as they privately come to doubt themselves, they reveal the fantasy of cultural superiority in all its falsity. Nonetheless, both characters continue to perform in order to maintain the myth.

Lincoln Center Theater's 2015 revival production of *The King and I* proves to come at a critical turning point in America's recent history. After eight years of progressive reforms under former President Barack Obama, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 shocked many liberals who believed that America was a country always striving for greater equality. Yet Trump's campaign won over voters with messages of isolationism and superiority: in simplified terms, he promised that America could become the great nation that it once was if

foreign immigrants, those “dangerous” people who “corrupt” American values, could be prevented from entering the country. He blamed America’s problems on outsiders, cultivating a fear of Others in order to preserve the myth of American superiority. Over sixty years after the beginning of the Cold War, the very same fears and desires that defined that bygone era resonate more than ever with current events; today’s Americans are thus just as vulnerable to the fantasies that *The King and I* puts before audiences, though they may not realize it.

The revival production attempts to dispel the musical’s fantasy of Western superiority by restoring historical accuracy to the show’s visual representations of Siamese culture, thinking that doing so rids the musical of the very Orientalism that seemed to justify American superiority. However, the apparent realism of these updated visuals misleads audiences into believing that they can gain real insight into Thai people and culture from the show. This new fantasy encourages Western scrutiny of the Siamese characters, once again relegating them to the status of Other while privileging the superior Western gaze. Hence, the revival inadvertently helps to bring the fantasy of Western superiority into a new era. Nevertheless, this new production does not allow the fantasy to persist unchallenged: both the King and Lady Thiang meet the audience’s gaze, showing that they are aware of the way their Western audience views them. Their knowing smiles meta-textually point to and mock the musical’s fantasy of Western superiority; their steady gaze on the audience forces viewers to confront their own fantasizing of the show’s Siamese characters, and to realize that they still cling to positions of superiority that they perhaps never relinquished.

An analysis of both the original and revival productions of *The King and I* brings to light many crucial insights into American culture. The musical is shown to be both a product of its time, reflecting the conflicts of the Cold War era in which it was created, and yet also a timeless cultural fantasy, appealing to fears and desires that never completely vanish from the American mentality. The show’s meditation on American cultural identity in relation to to



a foreign Other reveals the instability of this identity: in depending upon fantasies about a social out-group to sustain the myth of American superiority, American ideals such as freedom and equality are devalued. Understanding the historical movements that shaped these themes in the original musical is thereby necessary to grasping its significance in current times: much of the revival's attraction lies in the way it re-engages with many of the same enduring questions of American ideals, confronting how these ideals have been both honored and abused by society. Looking at the original and revival musicals in conjunction, then, shows how Americans continue to fall under the fantastical spell of cultural superiority. A show like *The King and I*, though often implicating its audience in the very fantasies it draws their attention to, maintains a connection to America's past that is vital towards creating a new American future, towards imagining an America that can turn its mythical ideals into a reality for all. As long as the fantasy persists, America needs *The King and I* to go on reminding them of the conflict and struggle that always has, and always should, define America.

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