

Lighting & Sound INTERNATIONAL

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LOUISE BOURGEOIS

TATE MODERN: COLLECTION 2000

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- Christopher Renshaw's revival opens at the Palladium

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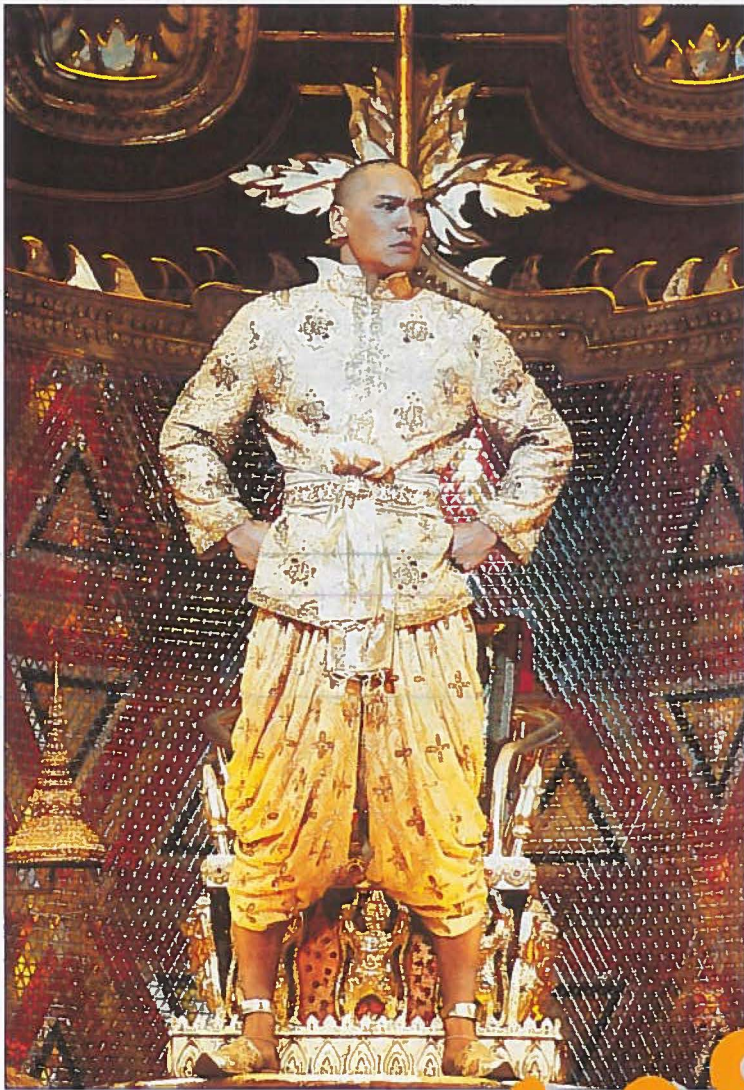
- Steps and Don Williams

Notre Dame de Paris

- A controversial new play opens at the Dominion

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The original production opened on Broadway on 29 March, 1951, where it proceeded to run for three years, racking up 1,246 performances. It received five Tony Awards, including Best Musical, and honours for both of its stars.

Christopher Renshaw's latest revival brings this



THEATRE

King & I

sumptuous

production to London's Palladium

I've been ravished - or so the posters promoting *The King & I* would have me believe. That statement conjures up images of Leslie Phillips and slightly improper suggestions to buxom blondes - not at all appropriate for one of Rodgers & Hammerstein's most popular musicals. But the slightly quaint language, redolent of *Morris Minors*, cravats and blazers, is actually spot on. This is a lavishly-staged production, presented in an opulent style surely not far removed from its forebear of 1957. Of course, part of that is predicated by the paternal hand of the R&H organisation, controlling casting, director and staging. Nonetheless, when the curtain opens you're quickly transported to another place, not through the use of some immense opening effect, but by the sheer luxury of the setting. It's Hollywood on the big stage and it's luscious.

There's been a lot of sniping at this show in the mainstream press, rather what we've come to expect from a production destined for success. Who cares if Elaine Page is beginning to show her years? She can sing, and acts passably better than most opera divas (whose acting inadequacies are somehow

overlooked in deference to their voices). And it's not beyond the realms of credulity to find Page attractive - a principal pivot of the plot - though in truth that attraction should be forged from the steel of her character - a trait

Page is not so adept at portraying. However, this is a populist show, its intended viewer 'the general public' - that's a reality the Americans have accepted and understood for years. The nay-sayers in the *Broadsheets* can stick their heads up their fundamentals all they like, this show looks destined to run and run.

So, nearly 50 years have passed since Yul Brynner made bald heads sexy and bushwhacked my parent's generation with his apparent ability to sing. Half a century that has seen post-war sentimental idealism replaced by a demand for more realism. Yet here is a show rooted firmly in the former, gentler idiom, that has reportedly advanced £5m in ticket sales. What are we supposed to make of that?

The sound for this presentation is designed by Paul Groothuis, designer in residence at the National Theatre for the past 14 years. Although not so well known in the West End, Groothuis does make forays outside the National from time to time: "It's good for me to get out," he explains, not unreasonably, "it stops me getting stale." A taste for variety that's surely a pre-





The Broadway production - photo: Joan Marcus

requisite for any designer keen to grow and develop fresh insights.

Groothuis is no stranger to R&H either, his Oklahoma at the National having been very well received - he's in no way a left field choice to design for this show. What he needed to bring to the Palladium was clear, in his mind at least. "I'm making it sound as lush as possible - the Palladium is quite a dry house. And I wanted to make it sound big - not loud - especially up under the overhangs of the balcony and the circle."

It's certainly the case that the two upper seating areas have their own architectural idiosyncrasies that can block sound. The void beneath the lower circle balloons up at the back, the view from the rear of the stalls being akin to looking through a letterbox. It's similar between circle and balcony above, narrow portals as it were, giving onto large airspaces, requiring plenty of speakers to ensure that the punters situated there get the coverage they deserve - and Groothuis hasn't skimped.

Richard Brooker, Groothuis's associate designer, took me around the theatre and explained the

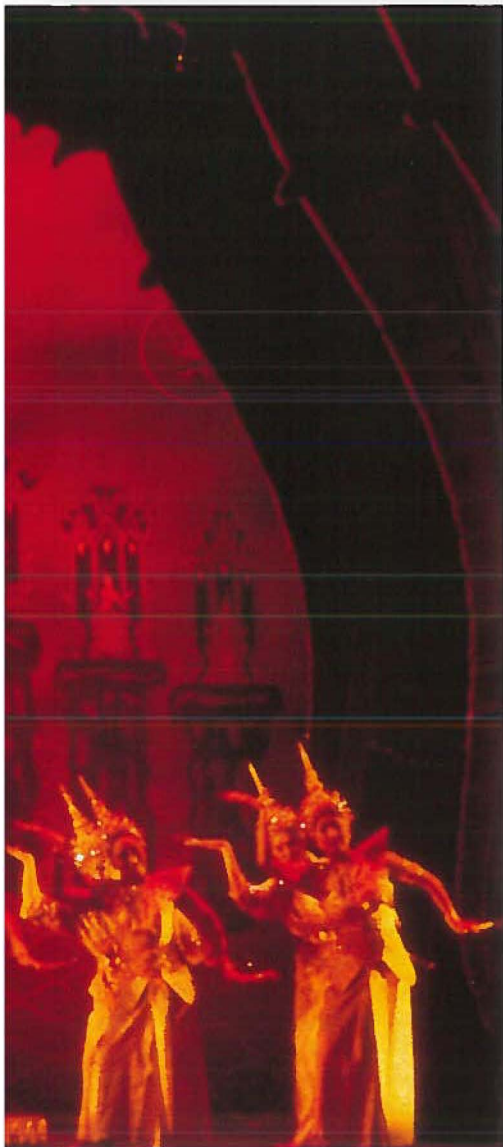
"Deans plays with this, too, throughout the show, sometimes subtly, setting up different orchestral 'shapes' for different numbers, and sometimes in a very deliberate and showy way as percussion sounds swirl up and down and - seemingly - around you, the latter most remarkable since there is no surround speaker system."

rationale behind each bit of the extensive sound system. "We've used John Owens from Aura Sound Design as our production sound engineer," he explained. "That's despite using Autograph as the equipment supplier." (Autograph still put a PSE on the show, in this instance Tony Gayle). "We do it that way because having someone in that position, independent of the supplier, is more effective," said Brooker.

Owens agreed, but added that: "Autograph had in fact been very responsive to everything

requested," not that Groothuis, Brooker or Owens appeared in any way demanding or unreasonable men. "The nice thing about working with Paul," said Owens, "is he'll talk it through with everyone. It's not quite democracy, but he does ask opinions. It's all open to discussion. He might tell me 'I want a particular speaker there', and so long as I know what it's got to do - to cover - then he'll leave it to me." Interestingly, and perhaps an indication of just how reasonable this affable Dutch designer is, Owens then pointed out: "If what I do doesn't give him what he wants, he'll still try to work with it, rather than re-wire the whole thing." Which is confirmation that Groothuis got to earn his spurs at the National doing his own fit-ups.

There are three elements to the sound system - vocal PA, orchestra and a surround-sound system, being d&b audiotechnik, Meyer and Canon respectively, with JBL and a few more exotic models dotted around as well. The main vocal system hangs on two trusses above the proscenium: balcony, circle, and stalls being covered by a mix of d&b C6s and E9s. "The front truss changed position several times before



Previews," said Brooker ruefully, lighting as ever being the culprit, "and the final position gave us a problem where combing was noticeable on half a dozen seats in the stalls." A one millisecond delay on the most central C6 solved the problem, such attention to detail being maintained by Groothuis throughout the theatre. Autograph's Tony Gayle confirmed that Groothuis spent three long nights moving around all over the seating areas setting system EQ and the delays. "That's when I step away," said a smiling Owens.

Orchestra PA is behind elaborate set pieces (abstracted elephants) which completely shroud the pros. Two Meyer MSL2s, a USW and a 650 per side make for a potent system that is gently applied - the 650 in particular only really makes its presence felt when the percussion warrants it.

The surround system, all Canon V100s, are deployed mainly up on the sidewalls of every level. "A retail environment speaker," as Brooker described it, "they have a very wide horn, making them ideal for a very low level, dispersed sound. They're delayed to the music system, have a touch of reverb, and are there just to lift the orchestra. To make it sound a bit more open." As for the rest of the delay and fill

system, comprehensive is the word: two rows under the Circle (d8b E3s and JBL Control 1s), two rows beneath the balcony (all JBL Control 1s), and a single row up on the balcony (d8b E3s) - 72 speakers in all when you add the odd fill tucked into an awkward corner. "Mainly it's to keep the energy levels up towards the rear," said Brooker, alluding once again to the big void up under the Circle, "the E3s on the balcony also help lift the low end."

One of the better-known songs 'Getting to Know You' best conveys just how natural the sound is. A light melody with powerful refrains, the song has all the spaces and dynamics to expose an unbalanced system, yet the image never strays from the stage. I do have to qualify that by saying L&SI was, as is so often the case, afforded generous seats in the stalls, just a few rows back from the stage, and certainly well outside the shadow of the Circle.

Unlike a rock show, it would be impolite to start wandering around the auditorium during the performance and check out coverage and imaging everywhere. However, Groothuis obviously spent the time setting the system (as evidenced by all on the production side) and if the sound in the open part of the Stalls was anything to go by, then I would expect it to be similarly naturalistic. The show is so good that I for one, would not be averse to visiting several times, sitting somewhere different each time. I don't believe I'd be disappointed.

Set designer Brian Thomson has presented Nigel Leving's with the most sumptuous of stages on which to marshal his lighting skills. Opulent and majestic, the predominant décor manages the skilful trick of overflowing with gold and jewels, without falling into the trap of being gaudy and vulgar. The sheer depth of the staging is breathtaking. While little of the action takes place upstage, the sense of palatial space is never wasted: we are at home with Siam's senior potentate, make no mistake. Leving's exploits this depth with gusto, the prevailing dusky blue against the blackened starcloth and faint fog, provides the backdrop to Anna's ship-borne arrival in the opening scene. It lacks nothing in conveying a

hot, humid Far Eastern harbour. The Palace, which appears in scene two, is lit in a reflection of its colours - reds and golds predominate. But it's the mise en scène I enjoyed most. A thin gauze would waft across mid-stage, lightly pleated and lifted at one corner, like a peek beneath the flap of an envelope. Alternating between strong side and soft overhead lighting, the gauze could change from translucent to a rich velvety solidity in the twinkling of a fader.

Front light is distant and dispersed, caressing the set, with most power from overhead. Often it's like watching a TV show in that there are few shadows, the softer front light smoothing them away. Then, an intimate scene twixt Anna and the King will be starkly isolated by ETC profiles tucked in under the sides of the Circle, which hit the principals at head height, adding dramatic sharp relief to the intensity of the scene. And Leving's gives himself plenty of angles to draw upon and build other contrasting dramatic looks. The complete rig is big, but then there's an awful lot of set and stage to light, over 270 of the ETC Sils, and even more of the Source 4 Pars, many fitted with Wybron scrollers, plus an Arri 4kW and a dozen High End Studio Spots.

The lighting rig, as well as being sizable, is a bit of a coup for PRG, this being their first ever West End production. Fortune ever favours the bold for PRG serviced the contract out of the soon-to-be-defunct SpotCo warehouse in Ealing, using SpotCo and LSD technicians. "The Ealing guys, and the chaps at LSD in Birmingham, did a fantastic job," said Alan Thomson of PRG.

Readers will no doubt recognise now the efficacy of PRG snapping up Thomson last year: his connections to the West End run deep, not least to King's production manager Richard Bullimore. "Of course, we did have one or two hiccups," admitted Thomson candidly, "but you do with any production." Thomson made the shrewd move of putting an experienced West End LX, Peter Lambert, on the PRG payroll for the build period and fit-up. "We told him 'come to Ealing, put your team together, and prep' the gear as you'd like to see it arrive.'" It proved a good model under the circumstances, as



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Bullimore explains: "It was obviously a learning curve for them. Certain practises they were used to were not appropriate for theatre. But on the whole it worked very well, there was nothing we couldn't resolve easily."

Many of the lanterns were shipped over by PRG from their US stocks, requiring re-wiring and CE certification, a task undertaken by AC Lighting; the remainder, plus cabling and control, came from both LSD's and SpotCo's inventories. Frazer Hall was Bullimore's on-site production LX – another useful choice as Hall knew Lambert professionally, having previously worked together on *Lion King*. Hall too found little to fault, certainly not with the kit. "It was just the small details, things like cable lengths, and staggered spiders. Their standard lengths didn't conform exactly to what I'd asked for, but they soon learnt, and built everything I needed exactly to spec'."

On the control side, Hall did encounter one quite tricky conundrum: "We were originally going to programme the moving lights on a Hog II and then download that onto the Obsession II which would run the show. The Obsession website documentation says you can download DMX into it, it even has the input port, but we discovered you can't. [ETC has now corrected that information.] Fortunately, the moving lamps are only used as refocusable (sic) instruments, nothing flash, and Andy Voller, our programmer, was easily able to just programme straight into the Obsession. It's OK, but the Obsession, being only 8-bit technology, is a touch slow for a moving light console. Luckily, the show doesn't call for any slow pans." That aside, Hall declared himself well satisfied: "On the whole it was fine."

If the reports of ticket sales are credible then success is assured. Will promoters now jump on the 'classic' bandwagon, and fill the West End with the R&H canon? Well, of course, to an extent they have always been there – *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, and many more; these shows have never really left us. But nothing has exploded onto the London stage with quite so much vigour as the *King* just has. There's a sea change going on in audience tastes, and only the canny surfers will learn to ride it.

Photos: Michael Le Poer Trench

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