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Top amateurs make musical memorable

by **Pete Castle**

One of Rodgers and Hammerstein's most popular musicals, *The King And I*, is being given a welcome airing this week.

The show made famous in the 1956 Walter Lang film starring Deborah Kerr and Yul Brynner, contains some of Richard Rodgers' most memorable tunes, including getting To Know You, I Whistle A Happy Tune and Shall We Dance?.

The award-winning Cody Farnborough Amateur Operatic Society, although staffed by part-timers and amateurs, has put on another golden show which would be at ease alongside some of the professional productions at the venue.

The setting to the play, the clash of modern western ideas and a traditional eastern society, as society chairman Eric McLoughlin points out, is an increasingly relevant topic in the modern world.

But at the heart of the show, and far more important to an audience, is the relationship between the two principal actors, and in that respect this production undoubtedly hits the mark thanks to polished performances from Sue Prior (Anna) and Paul Tapley (the King),

Sue Prior, in her first role with CFAOS, shows why she won the best female performer award at the International Gilbert and Sullivan Festival. Her range, delivery and phrasing in some of the show's best-known songs do not disappoint, making the songs stick in the memory for the right reasons.

Highlights include Anna's soliloquy from her bedroom about the King, in which Prior effortlessly draws attention to Anna's complicated feelings, and the schoolroom scenes, in which the growing relationship between the western schoolteacher and her young royal pupils is both amusing and believable.

Paul Tapley aims his portrayal of the King of Siam carefully, and with good reason - he must display arrogance with a soft centre, be distant and yet caring, and still leave room for a burgeoning relationship with his new female employee.

His looks on stage are remarkably like Yul Brynner's, and Tapley even successfully apes some of the late actor's on-screen mannerisms. But this is not just an impersonation of the part, with Tapley bringing out the human and internal conflict of his character better than a mere impressionist.

Brynner won an Oscar for his performance in the 1956 film. Academy Awards may not be on offer for this show, but Tapley would be first in line for a gong for the best performance by an actor whose trousers are clearly about to fall off.

Providing shining support for the main pairing, Sue Sillett's beautiful vocal skills are brought to the fore as the King's principal wife, Lady Thiang, with a delicate rendition of *Something Wonderful* as a high point of the show.

It is perhaps apt that playing the role of the King's chief adviser is Haydn Thomas, recently-retired as CFAOS chairman, and the actor who played the King the last time the society put on this show, back in 1977. No doubt Paul Tapley will have been very happy to have a seasoned veteran by his side both in and out of their roles.

Danni Taylor, as Tuptim, batted her eyelashes as a dim but romantic young girl for the second production running, having played a similar role in *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* last year, but her vocal talent was backed up amiably by lover Lun Tha, played by Richard Young.

Teenager Callum Higgins, as Anna's son Louis, gave the part a genuine wide-eyed awe, bringing across the mysteries of the Orient as well as any of the costumes or backdrops. His eastern counterpart, Prince Chulalongkorn, was given a regal stature with childish uncertainty by Salesian College pupil James Dance.

June Thomas has directed a large cast, including a well-drilled corps of children, to create a romantic and likeable show. Sue Grosvenor deserves particular praise for the creation of the impressive ballet within a play, *The Small House Of Uncle Thomas*.

Back on familiar ground after last autumn's brave production of *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*, Cody Farnborough Amateur Operatic Society provided an enjoyable evening's entertainment and made three hours seem very short.