

Lyric

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#LyricKing



Chicagoland children's ensemble announced for Lyric Opera's grand-scale production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's ***The King and I***

April 29 – May 22, 2016

CHICAGO—Lyric Opera of Chicago announced today an all-Chicagoland children's ensemble for its grand-scale production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's ***The King and I***, featuring Broadway stars **Kate Baldwin** and **Paolo Montalban** as Anna Leonowens and the King of Siam. Children's ensemble casting includes: **Sophie Mieko Ackerman**, **Alexis Aponte**, **Lilly Fujioka**, **Avonlea Hong**, **Leila Koss**, **Evangelyn Lee**, **Liliana Martens**, **Lucy Martens**, **Rika Nishikawa**, **Ana Joy Rowley-Mathews**, **Benedict Santos Schwegel**, **A'naam Singh**, **Zachary Uzarraga** and **Sophia Woo**. These young performers range in age from 5 through 14. Lyric Opera's ***The King and I*** runs April 29 through May 22 (press opening April 30) at the Civic Opera House, 20 N. Wacker

Drive, Chicago. Tickets start at \$29 and are available now at lyricopera.org/king or at 312-827-5600.

As previously announced, principal casting for *The King and I* also includes Broadway artists **Ali Ewoldt** (Tuptim), **Alan Ariano** (The Kralahome) and **Rona Figueroa** (Lady Thiang), along with **Sam Simahk** (Lun Tha) and Chicagoland artists **Charlie Babbo** (Louis Leonowens), **Jomar Ferreras** (Interpreter), **John Lister** (Captain Orton), **David Parkes** (Sir Edward Ramsay), **Peter Sipla** (Phra Alack) and **Matthew Uzarraga** (Prince Chulalongkorn). All but Lister make their Lyric debuts.

The King and I is the fourth Rodgers and Hammerstein musical to be presented as part of Lyric's American Musical Initiative. **Lee Blakeley**, who staged the production's 2014 premiere at Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, makes his Lyric debut teaming up with distinguished Broadway conductor **David Chase**, who conducted Lyric's acclaimed *Carousel* last season. The creative team also includes choreographer **Peggy Hickey** (*A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*), costume designer **Sue Blane** and scenic designer **Jean-Marc Puissant** (both making their Lyric debuts).

BIOS

Sophie Mieko Ackerman is making her professional theatrical debut in this production. Although she has been acting for less than a year, she has already been cast in commercials for T. Rowe Price and Mondelez International. Sophie spends most of her days singing, playing the piano, looking for unicorns, and getting into trouble with her sister Isabel.

Alexis Aponte has appeared at The Marriott Theatre as a Royal Child/*The King and I* and Ngana/*South Pacific* (a portrayal subsequently seen at Light Opera Works). She has also performed at Wilmette Children's Theater (eight productions) and Skokie's Devonshire Theater. Alexis appears in Four Productions' official trailer for Malcolm Bridges's book *Cry the Fables*.

Lilly Fujioka has appeared as a Royal Princess in the Marriott Lincolnshire Theatre's *The King and I*. She has trained with numerous Chicago-area organizations, including the Metropolis School of the Performing Arts, where she has played Tiny Tim/*A Christmas Carol*, Heart Child and White Flower/*Alice in Wonderland*, and Munchkin, Ozian, and Flying Monkey/*The Wizard of Oz*.

Avonlea Hong's first name may sound familiar to fans of *Anne of Green Gables*; it is the beautiful, idyllic town where the story is based. *The King and I* is the ten-year-old's first professional production, but she has performed onstage as a member of the Chicago Children's Choir and the Frances Xavier Warde School choir. She also loves sports and is a purple belt in taekwondo.

Leila Koss, who is making her professional debut in this production, is a student at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. She has performed in *The Nutcracker*; in ballet, violin,

and cello recitals; and as a participant in the Emerald City Summer Camp. She is currently a member of the Pre-Team of CITY Club Gymnastics.

Evangelyn Lee has been seen in numerous commercials (BMO Harris Bank with the Blackhawks, Art Van Furniture, Brookfield Zoo, safety video for United Airlines), and in *Disney's Beauty and the Beast Jr.* (Elk Grove Village's Spotlight Theatre). She has studied cello for two years, is skilled in taekwondo, loves to draw, and speaks fluent Cantonese.

Liliana Martens, who is making her professional debut, appeared last summer with Chicago's Forevermore Dance and Theater Arts in *The Little Mermaid Jr.* (Ensemble member). A St. Vincent Ferrer Parish School student, she studies both cello and violin at Gasse School of Music, piano with Priscilla Mendoza, and gymnastics at Tri-Star Gymnastics.

Lucy Martens, who is making her professional debut, appeared last summer with Chicago's Forevermore Dance and Theater Arts in *The Little Mermaid, Jr.* (Seagull #3, Ensemble member). A St. Vincent Ferrer Parish School student, she studies cello at Gasse School of Music, piano with Priscilla Mendoza, and gymnastics at Tri-Star Gymnastics.

Rika Nishikawa portrayed Princess Ying Yaowalak/*The King and I* at The Marriott Theatre. She has also been seen at Griffin Theatre, the Ruth Page Civic Ballet, and with DePaul Prelude Choir, Compass Creative Dramatics, and Urban National Academy. Her work in print advertising includes projects with the YMCA and The Second City.

Ana Joy Rowley-Mathews is making her professional debut in this production. She is currently a member of the DePaul Neighborhood Choir division of the Chicago Children's Choir. Ana Joy has trained in theater in Chicago in the summer camps of the Emerald City Theater (2009) and Louisa May Alcott School (2010, 2011, 2012).

Benedict Santos Schwegel (u/s Louis Leonowens) has been seen in *Gypsy!* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater), *The Rose Tattoo* (Shattered Globe), *The Nutcracker* (Ballet Chicago), and *Oliver!* (Light Opera Works). Film, industrial, and voiceover credits include Happy Hour, Kmart, Whirlpool, and Kindermusik. Benedict was recently treble soloist/*Elijah* with the Apollo Chorus and Elmhurst Symphony. He attends Skinner North Classical.

A'naam Singh (u/s Prince Chulalongkorn) has appeared on television's *Noodle and Doodle* and in *The Story of Us* for Chicago's Independent Films. He portrayed the Enlightened Boy/*The Life of Gautama Buddha*, directed by Lushin Dubey, and played a soccer star in a 2013 commercial for Child Abuse of America. In concert he has opened for Nickelodeon TV star Drake Bell.

Zachary Uzarraga debuted at Lyric earlier this season as Marie's Son/*Wozzeck*. He has been seen as Tam/*Miss Saigon* (Paramount Theatre); in *Billy Elliot* (Drury Lane Oakbrook) and *The King and I* (The Marriott Theatre); in Toys R Us industrials; and in commercials for Build-a-Bear, National Children's Hospital, Kmart, and Ronald McDonald House, among others.

Sophia Woo previously appeared in *The King and I* at The Marriott Theatre. She has been seen in numerous productions at Chicago's Edge of the Wood Theatre (Choir and Ensemble/*The Man Who Came to Dinner*, *Lady Merrill/Once Upon a Mattress*, *Lamb/Charlotte's Web*, *Kanchi/The Secret Garden*) and Raven Theatre (title role/*Minnny Pinny*, *Mouse, Cousin, Fox/Aesop's Fables*, Ensemble/*The Mitten*).

The Lyric premiere of *The King and I* is generously made possible by **The Negaunee Foundation**, two **Anonymous Donors**, **Robert S. and Susan E. Morrison**, and **Northern Trust**.

About Lyric

Lyric Opera of Chicago's mission is to express and promote the life-changing, transformational, revelatory power of great opera. Lyric exists to provide a broad, deep, and relevant cultural service to Chicago and the nation, and to advance the development of the art form.

Founded in 1954, Lyric is dedicated to producing and performing consistently thrilling, entertaining, and thought-provoking opera with a balanced repertoire of core classics, lesser-known masterpieces, and new works; to creating an innovative and wide-ranging program of community engagement and educational activities; and to developing exceptional emerging operatic talent.

Under the leadership of general director Anthony Freud, music director Sir Andrew Davis, and creative consultant Renée Fleming, Lyric strives to become The Great North American Opera Company for the 21st century: a globally significant arts organization embodying the core values of excellence, relevance, and fiscal responsibility. Visit www.lyricopera.org for more information.

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