

The Queen and I

As a romantic teenager, I was enamored of everything of the stage. The playbooks of Christopher Fry and T.S. Eliot sent my spirits soaring. Grease paint was in my blood. After all, I had to my credits the lead role of Oogie in our high school production of "A Date With Judy." At age 15, my acting career was launched. The local newspaper even reviewed the performance and took approving note of my warbling show stopper, whose lyrics skip across the years as if it were yesterday: "I've got a date with Judy, a big date with Judy, oh! jeepers and gee! . . ." My opinion of my potential knew few limits.

So I was primed for an invitation from an older cousin to drive with her to New York for a real taste of the Great White Way. A gangly Midwestern lad who had never laid eyes on the Big Apple, I took little convincing, although my high school principal did since it meant skipping some final examinations.

The real lure was not a Yankees game or a room in the Beekman Towers overlooking the UN. It was a matinee seat to watch the storied actress Gertrude Lawrence star in the role of Anna in "The King and I." The time was Spring 1952. The Rogers and Hammerstein musical had been playing at the St. James Theatre on 44th Street for a year and three months, the hottest ticket of that season. At 54, the British-born Miss Lawrence was a legend on both sides of the Atlantic, her place in the pantheon of stars already well assured.

Preparing for the trip, we encountered published speculation about the state of Miss Lawrence's health as she struggled to meet the demanding schedule of eight performances a week. But this made little impression. After all, I was on my way to see a real live Broadway hit musical. It's hard to describe the

excitement I felt. From the moment the curtain rose, my eyes couldn't leave Miss Lawrence. Those gorgeous Victorian gowns couldn't hide the fact that she was fraying a bit at the edges. But her age didn't matter. Her stage presence was captivating. Her every movement brought a kind of electricity I had never seen before. Even the assertive young king of Siam, Yul Brynner, seemed unable to command the audience's heart the way she did. Every step, every gesture conveyed a grace note hard to describe.

I was to learn later that these impressions of a first-time Broadway theater goer were widely shared, starting with her director, John van Druten, who wrote of her role that "the star quality was there - indefinable but intensely vivid, that comes from something other than the human or technical talents of the actress, giving her an iridescence, a power to move not only the audience but the very boards of the stage as she steps on them."

Given the magic Miss Lawrence was creating on that May afternoon of long ago, nobody seemed prepared for what happened mid-way in the first act. It occurred when Anna, the 19th century Englishwoman is beginning her work as governess and is meeting the children of the king. As she whirled into that wonderful production number, "Getting to Know You," Miss Lawrence's voice broke. For an instant the spell she had woven was broken as well. The audience gasped. She quickly regained herself.

But as the show proceeded, it became obvious even to a viewer experiencing his first taste of Broadway that Gertrude Lawrence wasn't herself. At times she seemed faint. As the king's affection for her warms and together they joyfully ask, "Shall We Dance?," again her voice failed her.

Despite the infirmities that became more and more obvious, or perhaps because of them, Miss Lawrence was greeted at the finale with thunderous ovation and

repeated curtain calls, this audience affirming her stardom as countless others had before.

What we had no way of knowing that day in May was that the great actress had barely four months to live.

At the very time I watched her she was writing her lawyers that "I am physically and mentally worn out" as she begged for a six-week leave of absence from the show. Helen Hayes and Noel Coward were among worried friends urging her to slow down from a schedule that included not only the most exacting role on Broadway but a teaching position at Columbia University and the seemingly endless social welfare causes she embraced.

Concerned about summer ticket sales, the producers of "The King and I" reluctantly granted her wish. Yet only three days after she returned to the cast on August 1st she fainted in her apartment. Her doctor ordered her not to go on that night but she did anyway for two more performances. After the final curtain fell on her Saturday matinee, she collapsed on stage, was rushed to New York Hospital and there, three weeks later, went into shock early one morning and never recovered, her system broken by pleurisy, hepatitis and fatigue.

Thus ended the career of one of the 10th Century's first ladies of the theater. Beautiful, brilliant, witty and charming, she was, in the words of her husband, "elusive as a moonbeam."

Cockney born, she seemed destined from the beginning for a life on the stage. Her father was a vagabond concert singer from Denmark and her mother a dancer and actress. Young Gertrude ran away from her mother's care at age 13 to join her minstrel-singing father. Soon she was finding jobs with touring musicals.

It was an American vaudeville team, Lee White and Clay Smith, vacationing in an English seaside resort,

who spotted her performing and told her she belonged on London's West End. After some weeks, they found a place for her in one of Andre Charlot's revues. The year was 1916 and she was 18 years old.

Her break into bright lights came when Beatrice Lillie was sidelined by an accident and Miss Lawrence stepped in as her understudy - even though she was well along carrying her first and only child, a daughter. That show eventually brought her to New York in 1924 - and to widening fame.

She starred in George Gershwin's musical, "Oh, Kay!," and a succession of dramatic roles. She was a special friend of Noel Coward's and they shared top billing in "Private Lives," the sophisticated comedy of manners which he said he not only wrote for her but about her.

She was beloved to theater goers on both sides of the Atlantic for her roles in "Tonight at 8:30," "Candlelight," "Susan and God," and Moss Hart's musical "Lady in the Dark." She co-starred with Raymond Massey in "Pygmalion," a role that led her to a whimsical friendship with George Bernard Shaw.

Her list of friends read like a catalogue of the theater - Charles Laughton, Helen Hayes, Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Maurice Evans and Daphne du Maurier, as well as Coward, Shaw and Bea Lillie.

Largely because of the penury she had known as a child, her zest for luxury became insatiable. At one point her spending habits led her to bankruptcy. She was known as vain and impulsive, always play-acting and ever dependent on affection and admiration. Her inner indecision and instability prompted Noel Coward to say she was "seven women under one hat." But her second marriage in 1940 to an American producer, Richard Aldrich, and her move to this country seemed to give her a real life and family for the first time. The war

years brought out a becoming patriotic ardor for her adopted land.

She had a special love for animals, including birds, the latter fondness developed during a stopover in Cincinnati of all places. When she was touring with "Skylark," she was hosted at a Queen City brunch by Alexander Woollcott, who entered with a canary on his shoulder, a gift from his friend Dr. Gustav Eckstein, a Cincinnati physiologist whose book on canaries had been publicized on Woollcott's radio program. That afternoon they visited Eckstein's bird laboratory. Then, as a wedding gift from Woollcott, she received a canary named Franklin - for FDR.

Although Gertrude Lawrence's name became synonymous with live theater, her derring-do nature took her to Hollywood after the war years. Proving her acting talents could transfer to the cinema, she played the role of the mother Amanda in Tennessee Williams' "Glass Menagerie" in a cast that included Kirk Douglas and Jane Wyman.

While in Hollywood, she happened to read Margaret Landon's popular novel, "Anna and the King of Siam," and then saw Irene Dunne and Rex Harrison in the 1946 film version. She asked her lawyers to find out whether rights could be acquired to make a musical of the plot. It had been almost a decade since her last musical, "Lady in the Dark," and she conceived the role of Anna as the vehicle for her return.

Thus was one of the theater's most enduring and endearing musical productions born. Set in Bangkok in the early 1860s, the story of the English governess, Mrs. Anna Leonowens, caring for the many children of the dictator, King Mongkut, and eventually falling in love with him seemed perfectly timed for a post-war world that was rapidly shrinking.

With the legal rights secured, Miss Lawrence turned to Cole Porter to write the score but he

declined. It was only then that she approached the team of Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, who, heartened by the enthusiasm of their wives, agreed to produce the show in 1951.

Finding a suitable king provided a unique footnote in theater history. The role was turned down by both Rex Harrison and Noel Coward, as well as Alfred Drake, before Marty Martin recommended a young dancer named Yul Brynner for the part. When he appeared at an open audition, Richard Rodgers said Brynner "plunked one whacking chord on his guitar and began to howl in a strange language. . . (and) we had our king." Over the course of the next 34 years, Brynner played the part more than 4600 times, first with Miss Lawrence on stage, then later in the movie with Deborah Kerr and in a television series with Samantha Eggar, followed by two Broadway revivals and finally a farewell tour in 1985, the last year of his life.

Some have argued that by the force of his personality Brynner turned the dramatic focus of the play from Anna to King Mongkut. Perhaps that was the way things evolved over time but not at the outset. It was not the way he saw it either. Once, when his leading lady was sidelined with her recurrent lung problems, he wired her: "My timing sick with hives cues sick with arthritis and atmosphere here whopping cough I miss you beloved Anna your very own king."

"The King and I" was readied for Broadway with a budget of \$360,000, one of the most expensive to that time, and its investors were betting chiefly on the drawing power of Gertrude Lawrence.

The show opened on March 29, 1951 and from the outset was acclaimed a modern classic - the themes of East versus West, civilization and barbarism, despotism and democracy, and man versus woman. The Rodgers and Hammerstein score that included "Getting to Know You," "The Small House of Uncle Thomas" and "Shall We Dance" set the world humming. And at the center of it all was

the legendary Gertrude Lawrence, proving that her standing as a star of the first magnitude was intact and enhanced. "She came on the stage with a new and dazzling quality," one critic wrote, "as though an extra power had been added to the brilliance of her own stage light."

It wasn't long, though, before her health began to falter, even as the honors cascaded on both the actress and the show. She continues to draw a growing sustenance from her happy marriage to a man her antithesis, a Harvard educated New Englander with a glittering social pedigree. But even his urging, as well as her closets friends', could not slow her frantic pace.

At 8:30 on the evening she died, the theater lights of Broadway and London's West End were dimmed in tribute to the great star. The flags at Columbia University flew at half staff. And halfway around the world on a battlefield in Korea, a British unit held a memorial service for her. As a bugler sounded the Last Post, a cockney soldier summed up the sentiments of a saddened world: "Goodbye, Gertie. You was the sweetest goddamed Limey I ever saw."

William R. Burleigh
