

## ARTS &amp; LIVING



Alicia Kaori plays Maria in Paramount Theatre's holiday season production of "The Sound of Music." LIZ LAUREN PHOTOS

REVIEW 'THE SOUND OF MUSIC' ★★★★★

## A perfect holiday outing

By Chris Jones  
Chicago Tribune

If, like me, you see the great Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals as national treasures to be loved by young and old and protected for generations to come, the beautiful, deeply emotional new holiday production of the iconic title "The Sound of Music" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora will fill you with a warm glow.

Paramount, as I have said many times before, is in a suburban class of its own when it comes to bespoke productions of family musicals, a consequence of the quality and scope of its production values, its remarkable level of consistency, its commitment to large acoustic orchestras (there are 17 players in the pit) and, of course, the beauty of its historic venue. Jeffrey D. Kmiec, the gifted designer bringing the Austrian Alps to Aurora, clearly understands that last point: his spectacular postcard rendition of the friendly mountains and protective abbey feels like a continuation of the Venetian aesthetic of this art-deco, Rapp and Rapp-designed venue, the crown jewel of Aurora's downtown.

But Amber Mak's production hardly feels stuck in some traditionalist rut. It's far too energetic and alive for that.

Alicia Kaori's inquisitive, searching Maria bounces around the hills and the cloisters, joining the von Trapp children like she is merely



Milla Liss as Brigitta, from left, Gage Richey as Friedrich, Julia Aragon as Liesl, Alicia Kaori as Maria, Savannah Lumar as Marta, Maddie Morgan as Louisa and Ezekiel Ruiz as Kurt in Paramount Theatre's production of "The Sound of Music."

the oldest member thereof. She's extraordinarily fun to watch: charming, vulnerable, tuneful and, most importantly, present. She's a fabulous contrast with Christopher Kale Jones' chilly Captain von Trapp: Jones, a highly experienced vocalist, plays the naval dissenter as wound tight from past trauma. That's not atypical, but the length

of the personal journey that Mak and Jones set up in order for the man to return to ethical humanity is atypically lengthy, adding depth to the whole affair, or rather courtship.

It's part of the magic of this particular musical (which has a book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse) that the audience

immediately and intensely pulls for the relationship to work and in order for that to happen, you have to believe that the kids will be safe and happy (you do) and that this militaristic man has sufficiently changed his ways so that he won't ever stifle Maria's freedom and

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Alicia Kaori, left, plays Maria and Susan Moniz is The Mother Abbess in Paramount Theatre's holiday season production, "The Sound of Music." **LIZ LAUREN**

## 'Music'

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spark. And, indeed, that feels like the case here.

Mak has found a terrific group of singing von Trapps, led by the vocally accomplished Julia Aragon as Liesl, and the longtime Chicago musical star Susan Moniz, who I've enjoyed watching for decades, is on hand as the Mother Abbess, the matriarch and moral guide star of the story. She knocks it out of the Alps, so to speak. And for a contrasting note of expedient cynicism, there is the old pro Stephen Schellhardt as the amoral Max Detweiler.

Ever since I saw Tom

Stoppard's luminescent "Leopoldstadt" on Broadway this fall, a play that argues vociferously that Austrians did far less than generally believed to stop the Nazis and the Holocaust, I've been thinking a lot about how much "The Sound of Music" both promoted and sanitized Austria's post-*Anschluss* image of mountain purity, as typified by Maria and the nuns, not to mention the handsomely patriotic von Trapp. Most Americans' view of Austrian behavior during the war is colored by this postwar show, edelweiss, favorite things and all. It has been even more influential than most people realize; throughout the latter years

of the 20th century, and now beyond, it has been like a singing commercial for the Austrian tourist board.

Musicals, of course, are not charged with historical accuracy, although Mak's strikingly joyful show, to its great credit, still doesn't run away from the darker themes of the second act, as some recent productions have. Traditional musicals like this one typically reflect people trying their best in difficult circumstances and strive to leave audiences with more hope that humans can find the courage to follow their hearts and make brave choices.

That's exactly what this production, a perfect holi-

day outing, makes you feel.

One final note: The populist Paramount does not indulge in Taylor Swift-style variable pricing. Even on peak holiday nights this season, you will find reasonable, family-friendly prices for a show of this epic scale and rich quality.

**When:** Through Jan. 15, 2023

**Where:** Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

**Running time:** 2 hours, 40 minutes

**Tickets:** \$38-\$79 at (630) 896-6666 or [paramountaurora.com](http://paramountaurora.com)

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