

ONLY A KINGDOM

YORK THEATRE & PASADENA CASTS

Original Cast Records

As a musical, the highly romantic true story of the man who gave up a life as the King of England in order to marry his true love, a "commoner" who was an American divorcee, demands a highly romantic score and it gets one. Composer-lyricist Judith Shubow Steir, who also wrote the book, brings a fresh sweetness that does not cloy for me on initial or repeat listenings. Those similarly willing to believe that maybe those fairy tale writers had it right all along and that perfect true love is real and is all that matters may, likewise, melt. Knowing that the story comes from well-documented history (with a non-regretted price to pay) helps convince and sweep one along. Unabashedly and unapologetically devotional, balanced with a kind of formality of language and attitude that suits that trademark British reserve, *Only a Kingdom* revels in its just-right tone. It has dignity and is full of elegance in its musical structures and language choices, with singer-actors who take the seriousness seriously and fervently without being at all mawkish, never winking, fleshing this out with warmth and rich singing that allows for heart-on-sleeve vulnerability.

The earnestness *might* have led to a stodgy, cardboard operetta pastiche, but the melodies are so graceful—instead of flamboyantly florid—and the singing on love declamations comes off as sincere, so that we have more of a real feel, albeit drenched in a "Love Conquers All and Nothing Else Matters" convinced mindset. The appropriately articulately tender lyrics of devotion and confidence swirl and flow and are balanced by some welcome comic relief from various characters and gossip and bewilderment that went along with the developments that led to the Prince of Wales's abdication of the throne.

An earlier CD issue of this score, directed by Scott Schwartz, with actors from a production at the Pasadena Playhouse, had escaped my attention. Although I did not see a Developmental Lab Production at NYC's nurturer of musicals, The York Theatre in midtown on the East side, I was introduced to the score when invited to some of the recording sessions. I was happy to have my ears reunited with its pleasures upon the release and to hear the Pasadena cast tracks for the first time. This mix of old and new—nine from the earlier cast and eight from the York (non-consecutive, so as to be in show order)—is not as distracting as one might expect, even though Pasadena had an eight-piece orchestra and those playing the leads in each cast don't sound like clones of each other. Even the first and reprise versions of the love ballads *not* sung by the same leads is not overly disconcerting.

The newly recorded tracks have in their lead roles, the formidable skills and soaring sounds of Max von Essen and golden soprano of Jill Paice (both in the cast of *Death Takes a Holiday* around the time of this recording). The strength and emotion of their vocals are a wonder to behold in the most passionate sections of their duets and they shine separately—in her lovestruck reveling in "In Wonderland" and his vibrantly virile proclamations and pensiveness in "David's Meditation" and his decisive sum-up of what counts: "Home Is Where the Duchess Is," which

she later joins in on. They also have a cute flirtation number together, "Uh-Uh," which, depending on your love for the style of innuendo as innocence, also might risk flirting too much with coy. But it's a nice change from the uber-heartfelt. Donna Lynne Champlin is a bright hoot as Elsa Maxwell, tossing about quips on society's obsession with youth, slimness and beauty in "Fashion Rules," wherein she sings with the leading lady and Becky Barta. Steven "Mo" Hanan (*Cats* and known for his channeling of Al Jolson) adds colorfully distinctive comic panache as Lord Bellimore, joined by Michael Marcotte on the strutting, deliciously hammy "A Most Reliable Guide." And the most reliable musical guides for accompaniment are pianist Milton Granger (whose regular job is over at *Mary Poppins*), bassist Ray Kilday, and percussionist Barbara Merjan. As noted above, the eight York tracks also appear on *Lost Broadway and More, Volume 4*.

The Pasadena tracks have Stan Chandler as Prince Edward and Kaitlin Hopkins as his beloved Wallis Simpson with a large ensemble. Peter Mansfield is the arranger (for both versions) and producer of the earlier tracks, with James Vukovich as musical director. Highlights are the lovers' exploration of their priorities, "What Would You Give for Love?," the feistiness and busybody attitudes of Elsa Maxwell, played by Mary Pat Gleason, and company in "What Does He See in Her?" and her joining the ensemble on the opinionated, trigger-judgment bustling "Unfit to Rule," which add spice and sizzle and heft to the proceedings. Occasionally one has to strain a bit to hear words in the denser ensemble singing with busier instrumentation, and occasionally a singer strains for a challenging high note, but such moments are quite brief. It's mostly an absorbing whirlwind for the attentive listener, with the buttery love songs woven in as stalwart opponents to the hurricane of objections and public opinion (and resistance from other royals).