

## Checkmate!

Ft. Worth theater's 'Chess' no stalemate

By Timm Doolen

The scene is the 1988 chess world championship and the top Russian is facing the top American in a best-of-eleven series in Bangkok, Thailand. As the lives of those involved in the chess tournament become intertwined, the game of chess becomes a metaphor for the game of life and love, the game of international politics, and the games continually going on inside our heads.

The Casa Manana production of "Chess," the musical by Tim Rice (who also wrote "Evita"), is a stunning theater-in-round production with a talented cast and wonderful staging. The Casa Manana theater, located in Fort Worth, kicked off its summer season with the musical on June 11, and it will run until Sunday.

The story centers around three main characters: the American champion Freddie (Romain Fruge), Florence (Jodi Benson), Freddie's second, and the Soviet champion, Anatoly (Keith Rice).

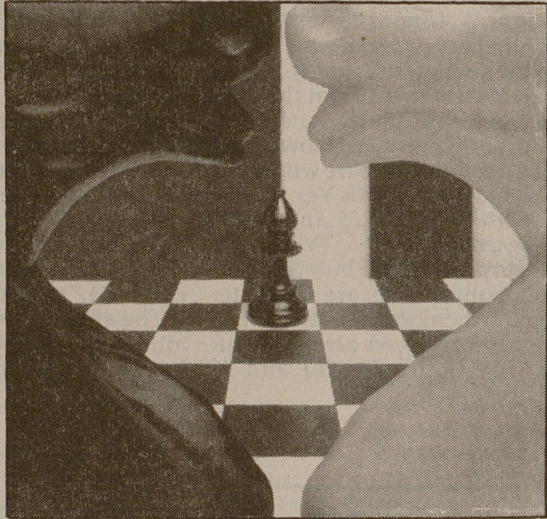
Soon after the tournament begins, Florence falls in love with Anatoly, and at the conclusion of the first half of the series, Anatoly decides to defect to America.

Eight weeks later the match resumes in Budapest, Hungary, now with the two leading "Americans" going against each other—Anatoly has the lead, but Freddie is catching up, eventually coming to a 5-5 tie.

Meanwhile, Anatoly receives pressure from his wife and the KGB to return to the Soviet Union. As the final game approaches, Anatoly must decide whether to return to the Soviet Union or stay with the woman he really loves.

This version of "Chess" was interesting being a theater-in-the-round production, which has a tendency to make the audience feel like they are a part of the play. Cast members can be as close as a few feet away, and the props and sets are brought in and out on runways that run along the aisles.

The music and singing quality was marvelous—you might remember the 1984 hit, "One Night in Bangkok," which is from this musical. Other standouts are "Arbiter's Song," "Anthem," the duet "You and I," and the climax song "Endgame."



On an interesting note, the lead actress, Jodi Benson, was the voice of Ariel in Walt Disney's "The Little Mermaid." Her voice wonderfully shines on "Nobody's on Nobody's Side" and "Heaven Help My Heart."

The costuming and stage design were almost as marvelous as the singing, with stage manager Richard Laster keeping the scenes flowing smoothly, despite 19 scenes during the play.

The only real flaw I saw with the production was an occasional bad amplification of the voices, but that is to be expected with theater-in-the-round productions, where it is not as easy to control all the technical elements as a regular theater.

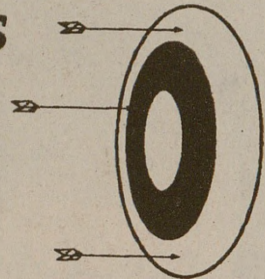
This production, which is a premiere for this region, is one that should not be missed. I had some reservations about it because it is a local production (as opposed to a Broadway tour), but the performances were all of great quality with no exception.

The Casa Manana theater is a little over a three-hour trip from A&M, and with showtimes at 8 p.m., make sure you have plenty of time to get there. There is also a Saturday matinee at 2 p.m.

Tickets are \$20, but students get a 10 percent discount. Phone Casa Manana for more details at 817-332-6221.



## Costner misses target with 'Robin Hood'



By Julia E.S. Spencer

"Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves" is an unwitting time travel fantasy. This is the unlikely scenario: Somehow a 20th Century American movie star complete with '90s sensibilities and vocabulary, a midwestern accent, and a taste for buddy-movie wisecracks has been kidnapped by alien producers and plopped down in 12th century England. He is being forced to pretend he's a local nobleman's son just returned from a 6-year stint in a Turkish prison, with a Moorish escapee whose life he saved. Due to a spell cast by these same aliens, none of the other characters seem to notice that he's an impostor. Despite the gross discrepancies in hairstyle, diction, comportment, vocabulary and politics, they never bat so much as an eyelash. I, on the other hand, was batting at around .300.

This isn't to say that this revisionist retelling of the Robin Hood legend isn't entertaining. It is, very much so. There are enough stunts, tricks, catapults, zinging and flaming arrows, explosions, quarterstaff fights, sword fights and one-man-against-10 fights to please any armchair swashbuckler. As long as you don't think too hard or examine the script too carefully, you'll have a good time, but this is definitely not a film for purists.

Kevin Costner plays Robin of Locksley, a young nobleman who returns from the Crusades, and finds his castle in ruins and his father dead, executed for alleged devil-worshipping. The evil, megalomaniacal Sheriff of Nottingham (Alan Rickman) has seized his property as well as that of many poor people. Feisty Marian Du Bois (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), a childhood playmate of Robin's, who happens to be King Richard's cousin, has so far escaped a similar fate, but she may be next... Outlawed for defending a young poacher, Robin joins a band of robbers in Sherwood Forest, becoming the ringleader as they steal from the rich and give to

the poor, and vowing spectacular revenge on the Sheriff and his henchmen.

Costner, who has made a highly successful career out of playing average American guys, makes a pitiful attempt at a British accent, but never comes near it—and finally just abandons the effort. Costner and his dialogue coach get an F. Funny for a guy so adamant about his actors learning to speak Lakota Sioux for "Dances With Wolves," and insisting on using subtitles to increase authenticity. He has no such scruple here. He lacks the presence and bearing to play a larger-than-life legend, and fails to be a believable leader of his men, cajoling them instead of commanding them. He mumbles dialogue Brando-style, instead of speaking with the dignity and gravity befitting a greatly wronged nobleman. His manner and deport-

ing to be included, why not hire Mel Brooks, "Airplane!"'s ZAZ team or better yet, Monty Python, to make it an all-out action comedy gag-fest, and get Bruce Willis to reprise his wisecracking Petruccio role from Moonlighting's delightfully silly "Taming of the Shrew" episode. Or maybe sign on the comic brilliance of that other Kevin, Oscar-winner Kevin Kline. Instead, we have an uncomfortable hybrid that can't decide whether to be serious or silly, and ends up being neither fish nor fowl.

Apart from Costner, the supporting players are pretty good. Freeman's quiet, imposing presence as straight man to Costner's smart aleck is everything Robin should have been. Mastrantonio plays a feminist Marian, displaying the considerable talent for comedy hinted at in "The Abyss." Christian Slater is an exception to the above; as Will Scarlett he overacts and fares only slightly better with his accent than Costner. Alan Rickman's Sheriff, however, is wonderfully over the top. He plays his well-practiced villain ("Die

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Hard") to the hilt, stopping his scenery-chewing progress only to wax Freudian on the parental origins of his problems.

This movie is already shaping up to be a summer blockbuster; the lines were as long as those for "Batman" two years ago, and people seem to love it, despite its cartoonishness. It could have been a really all-round splendid picture, but unfortunately the dollar signs in the producers' eyes prevented them from going the route of a more serious, credible drama and hiring a classically trained actor like Timothy Dalton. The result is a shamelessly commercial film which has the audacity and impertinence to claim Robin Hood as an American, weakening the legend in the process.

Robin Hood is rated PG-13 for frequent violence and for yet another shot of Costner's now-famous derriere.

## Casa Manana begins summer season of musical productions

Casa Manana is one of the leaders of theater in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and has a strong summer program to support it. For more information on any of the productions, call the box office at 817-332-6221.

"On the Town," July 9-21 — This became a Broadway hit in 1944 and tells the story of three American sailors looking for the perfect woman. The production will feature eight dancers from the Fort Worth Ballet. Among the songs in the musical are "New York, New York" and "Some Other Time."

"Les Miserables," July 23-28 — A few years ago this became an international hit based on Victor Hugo's novel of the same name. This is the Broadway tour of Les Mis and as such is sure to be wonderful.

"Les Miserables" tells the story of a man who faces a number of disappointments and trials in his life and somehow manages to keep going. The second half of the musical revolves primarily around an attempted French revolution in the mid 1800s by a handful of college students.

I am a big fan of this musical and believe it contains some of

the best music to ever reach the stage. This one should not be missed.

"Best Little Whorehouse," August 6-18 — A local production of the story of the Chicken Ranch, probably Texas' most famous brothel.

"A Little Night Music," August 20-Sept. 1 — Featuring the song, "Send in the Clowns," this Stephen Sondheim musical deals with four couples and how their loves and illusions affect their lives.

-T.D.

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