

Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



Camelot

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Anne Newhall (left) as Billie Dawn and Craig Spidle as Harry Brock in *Born Yesterday*, 2003.

Camelot

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Synopsis: *Camelot*

On a frosty morning centuries ago in the magical kingdom of Camelot, King Arthur prepares to greet his promised bride, Guenevere. Merlyn the magician, the king's lifelong mentor, finds Arthur, a reluctant king and even a more reluctant suitor, hiding in a tree. Arthur reveals exactly how nervous he is as he sings "I Wonder What the King Is Doing Tonight."

Guenevere, equally nervous, has avoided the welcoming committee and is hiding in the forest. At the conclusion of her song "The Simple Joys of Maidenhood," Arthur falls out of the tree. Guenevere is unaware that she is sparring with the king, and Arthur, captivated by her, sings of the many magical qualities of "Camelot." Soon, his identity becomes evident, and, already having charmed one another, they go off hand-in-hand to be wed. Along with his new Queen Guenevere, Arthur settles into an idyllic life of peaceful ways, might for right, and the eventual formation of his famous Round Table.

As news of Arthur's new order spreads across the continent, Lancelot finds his way to Camelot singing "C'est Moi" and proclaiming himself to be the most obviously suited of all knights to sit at Arthur's table. As Lancelot arrives, Arthur's court, led by the beautiful Guenevere, is enjoying "The Lusty Month of May." Guenevere finds him insufferable and even mocks him and arranges to have three of Arthur's best knights oppose him in a jousting contest.

But before the jousting contests can begin, the comic Pellinore arrives, rusted up in his armor and looking for a cause. The old knight soon sees that the Round Table is the perfect place for him and quickly becomes a favorite of the king.

The contests now begin, and Lancelot proves the victor. In the process, however, Sir Lionel is killed. Lancelot, through his strange powers of purity and faith, revives Lionel as the court looks on. Guenevere is profoundly moved. At the same time, Lancelot finds himself secretly falling in love with Guenevere. Her new and mixed feelings are expressed as she sings "Before I Gaze at You Again." Arthur insists that Lancelot be knighted immediately.

Two years pass.. Lancelot and Guenevere must now deal with feelings they can no longer deny, as Lancelot sings "If Ever I Would Leave You." The once innocent and happy mood darkens even more as Arthur becomes aware of the growing and obvious feelings between his beloved queen and his trusted knight.

Next, to add to the mood, Mordred, Arthur's illegitimate son, arrives with the intention of discrediting his father and winning the throne for himself. His opinion of Arthur's dreams of honor and peace are revealed as he sings "The Seven Deadly Virtues."

Guenevere, still faithful to Arthur, tries to lighten the burdens of her disillusioned husband as they sing "What Do the Simple Folk Do?"

Arthur's knights, having grown weary of talk and inaction, cry "Fie on Goodness!" Mordred confronts Arthur in the forest and Arthur agrees to spend the night away from Camelot to prove his trust of Lancelot and Guenevere. However, Lancelot's ill-timed visit to Guenevere's bedchambers that evening suits Mordred's trap perfectly. Guenevere is quickly arrested for treason, while Lancelot escapes.

Guenevere is sentenced to burn at the stake under Arthur's own code of justice, and he is helpless to intercede-although he cannot bring himself to give the order to light the flames. Lancelot rescues her at the last moment and takes her to France. Alas, Arthur is now forced to make war upon the friend he so dearly loves.

Just moments before going into battle, Arthur finds a stowaway boy whose only desire is to grow to manhood and become a knight of the Round Table. Arthur sees in the boy that his dream of peace and right has not died. He knights the boy and sends him running behind the lines with a charge to tell the story far and wide in order that generations to come might remember that once there was a wondrous place called Camelot.

Characters: *Camelot*

Merlyn: Arthur's long-time magician friend and mentor, Merlyn lives "backward." He can predict the future because he has already lived it. Alas, he is soon to be imprisoned by a nymph named Nimue, and the hapless Arthur will be left to depend upon his own wisdom and experience.

Arthur: Raised and tutored by the magician Merlyn, Arthur, known when a boy as "Wart," has grown accustomed to having Merlyn do his thinking for him. Then, as a squire for Sir Kay, Arthur innocently pulls a magical sword from an anvil and becomes the somewhat reluctant King Arthur. To complicate matters further, Merlyn soon is imprisoned by Nimue and is no longer around to do Arthur's thinking for him. Soon, however, Arthur proves wiser than he may have ever supposed.

Guenevere: A radiant princess at the play's beginning, Guenevere has reluctantly come to Camelot to accept her fate as bride to King Arthur, whom she has never met. Later, as a loyal and devoted wife, she brings out all the best in her husband. She continues to love and support him in spite of her love for Lancelot.

Sir Dinadan: A knight in Arthur's court, Sir Dinadan is chosen by Guenevere to joust against Lancelot in hopes of humbling the seemingly arrogant knight.

Sir Lionel: An imposing, strong knight in Arthur's court, Sir Lionel also is chosen to attempt defeating Lancelot at jousting.

Sir Sagramore: Another of the knights of Arthur's court.

Lancelot: Often perceived as arrogant, Lancelot initially wants only to serve at Arthur's fabled Round Table and further the cause of might for right. Unfortunately, along with his dedication and devoted friendship he brings unforeseen problems and the seeds of disaster to the courts of Camelot as he falls in love with Queen Guenevere.

Squire Dap: Lancelot's squire.

Pellinore: A comic, elderly knight, Pellinore is in search of a cause. Rusted up in his armor, he and his dog Horrid appear at the courts of Camelot inquiring about a young lad named "Wart." He soon becomes Arthur's valued and trusted friend.

Mordred: Arthur's son as the result of youthful folly, Mordred hates all the good that his father has created; indeed he hates anything that is good, and is bent on its destruction.

Tom of Warwick: A lad who appears at play's end, Tom of Warwick enchants King Arthur who sees in the boy the fulfillment of his dreams for Camelot.

Lords and Ladies of Camelot

About the Playwrights:

Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe

When Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe met in 1942, Lerner was busy writing radio sketches and performing other odd jobs in the musical entertainment industry and Loewe was struggling to gain attention for his work on musical plays such as *Salute to Spring* (1937) and *Great Lady* (1938). Then one day during lunch at the Manhattan's Lamb's Club, Lerner got the attention he had been craving and Loewe got the partner he needed. Loewe walked up to Lerner's table. "You write good lyrics," he said "Would you like to do a musical with me?" Lerner replied: "Yes, I happen to have two weeks off."

The rest is musical theatre history. Their collaborations yielded a collection of musicals that generations of theatre-goers and classic film buffs continue to honor with the highest praises: *Brigadoon* (1947), *Paint Your Wagon* (1951), *My Fair Lady* (1956, film 1964), the film *Gigi* (1958), and *Camelot* (1960). Personal differences during the writing of *Camelot* caused them to end their collaboration but not their friendship.

The score and lyrics for *Camelot* are among the most successful to emerge from American musical theatre. It is hard to resist such songs as "If Ever I Would Leave You," "Camelot" and "How To Handle a Woman."

Alan Jay Lerner was born on August 31, 1918 in New York to a wealthy owner of a chain of dress shops (the Lerner Shops). Lerner's musical education began with piano lessons as a child. He later studied at the Julliard School of Music, the Bedales Public School in England, and Harvard University. Although he had an impressive educational background, Lerner had to work his way to the stars. He spent time as a journalist and radio scriptwriter before he met Loewe.

Along with his successful collaborations with Loewe, Lerner wrote the Oscar-winning screenplay for *An American in Paris* (1951). After Loewe's retirement, Lerner's collaborators included Burton Lane, Andre Previn, and Leonard Bernstein. But his greatest triumph would always be *My Fair Lady* which had a run of 2,717 performances on Broadway and 2,281 performances in London before it was filmed with Audrey Hepburn as Eliza. The Broadway cast album hit number one in the U.S. charts, selling over five million copies and staying in the top forty for 311 weeks.

Lerner had a knack for writing romantic lyrics; he also had a knack for romance: He married eight times (one colleague commented that "I never met a Mrs. Alan Jay Lerner I didn't like"). Unfortunately, Lerner also had an addiction to amphetamines which he battled for over twenty years. In June of 1986 he lost his battle with lung cancer, yet he left behind a collection of legendary plays and songs that shaped musical theatre in his era.

Frederic Loewe was also destined for musical greatness from the moment he was born in Vienna, Austria in 1901 to a father who was a professional singer.

By age five Loewe was a child piano prodigy. At age seven he was composing his father's presentations, and at thirteen he became the youngest soloist to appear with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. At age fifteen, he wrote the popular song "Katrina" that eventually sold one million copies of the sheet music.

In 1924 Loewe came to America where he failed to find work in the classical musical scene. Instead he found himself playing piano in restaurants and bars, and doing other odd menial jobs throughout the country, including boxing, prospecting and cow punching. By 1936 he managed to find his way back to New York City where he started writing music for Broadway revues. But he received little acclaim. After hearing some of Alan Jay Lerner's lyr-

ics he boldly asked him to help him revamp the lyrics to “A Salute to Spring.”

Loewe retired to Palm Springs, California where he died in 1988. Loewe led an extraordinary life, sharing his gift of music with millions. With his death he continued to share his largesse. He left one-half of his musical royalties to the Desert Medical Center in Palm Springs. As partner Alan Jay Lerner once said, “There will never be another Fred Loewe.”

One Brief Shining Moment

By Christine Frezza

From *Insights*, 2005

Camelot! The sound of that word evokes in many Americans an instant remembrance of the opening notes of the musical's title song, coupled with a poignant feeling of loss for what was once a golden time in America.

Two weeks after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, author Theodore White was told by his widow, Jacqueline: "At night before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records; and the song he loved the most came at the end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were: 'Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot'. . . there'll be great presidents again. . . but there'll never be another Camelot. . . . This was Camelot. . . . Let's not forget." (*Life*, Dec. 6, 1963). This sense of innocence lost and hope blighted is echoed in the musical's story.

Camelot is based on T.H. White's novel, *The Once and Future King*, and focuses on the love triangle of King Arthur, Queen Guenevere, and Sir Lancelot, one of Arthur's greatest and most trusted Knights of the Round Table. Since all three principals are equally appealing, this limitation of storyline has a bittersweet effect. Indeed, the evil of Mordred and the loss of Arthur's kingdom seem merely to support this doomed love story.

Lerner and Loewe's final success (after *Brigadoon*, *Paint Your Wagon*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Gigi*) opened at the Majestic Theatre in December 1960 and ran for three years, finally closing in January 1963 after 873 performances. Directed by Moss Hart, it starred Richard Burton as King Arthur, Julie Andrews as Guenevere, and Robert Goulet as Lancelot.

A glorious example of the "non-spectacle" musical, Camelot's historically accurate costumes and simple sets allow the audience to concentrate on all the emotion poured into the songs and the characterizations. More than the love story played out, Camelot is an appealing symbol of hope, of truth, and of loyalty to another above self. In *Deconstructing Harold Hill*, Scott Miller tells us: "Alan Jay Lerner wrote that at its core it contains the aspirations of mankind, and despite its shortcomings, that's [*italics Miller's*] what keeps the show from crumbling" ([Heinemann Publishing: Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 2000], 2).

Miller finds fault with the play's structure: "Act I seems to be almost a romantic comedy. . . . Act II seems to be a reality-based romantic tragedy" (3), but I think that this structure is why audiences make such a link between the musical and the Kennedy years, from sunshine to rain, laughter to tears-as the musical changed, so changed the nation, a case of life imitating art.

What is miraculous about Camelot, other than its otherworldly foreshadowing of national tragedy, is its powerful romantic spirit. Echoing the popularity of the Arthurian legend, Loewe's melodies are lush, smooth, with the full warmth and fruition of summer, a definite evolution of style from the sprightly, playful, and elegant world of *My Fair Lady*. Lerner's characters as cast are the same age as Eliza, Higgins, and Freddy Eynsford Hill. (However, critics point out that, despite the original casting of Burton and Andrews, the real Arthur was twenty-five and Guenevere seventeen when they met, and by the events of Act Two, the principals would be only five years older). However, the tragic events of Act Two age the three beyond this chronology, aided by the effects of the triangle on the Round Table and on England itself.

These principals are not living up to society: this is a king, a queen, a knight-medieval society is living up to them. Their actions reverberate throughout the play-no one is left untouched. In Act Two, Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot are free to express all the passion they possess-without consequence or disapproval, and the musical numbers support this freedom of spirit. We hear Camelot

mature from “I Wonder What the King Is Doing Tonight” and “Simple Joys of Maidenhood” to love triumphant in “It’s May” and “You May Take Me to the Fair.” In contrast, Act Two’s music, when triumph turns to tragedy, is not the wistful world of *My Fair Lady*’s “The Street Where You Live” and “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” but instead the full-blown anguish of “How to Handle a Woman” and “If Ever I Would Leave You.”

In this period, American tragedies always insist on a hopeful ending, and *Camelot* has several. Guenevere is sentenced to be burned at the stake for loving someone other than the king; of course, Arthur has difficulty giving the order for her execution; of course Lancelot tries to rescue her. And of course, when Arthur is at his lowest—Round Table destroyed, country, best friend, and Queen lost—a young boy arrives to continue the story. Arthur gives Tom the sword Excalibur and sings him the title song, echoed by an unseen chorus. Though all has been lost, the future will have its own shining moments. Revived both on the New York stage and as a Hollywood film, the show has in modern times featured such luminaries as Edward Asner and Madeleine Kahn in lead roles. In their most recent film reincarnations, Billie Dawn and Harry Brock were played by Melanie Griffith and John Goodman, with Griffith’s then-husband Don Johnson appearing as Paul Verrall.

In conclusion, *Born Yesterday* is far from an old warhorse in revival. It is a true chestnut, maintaining both strength and substance as a play. In tribute to Kanin’s monumental talent and forethought, it proves that, even in today’s world, we can learn valuable lessons concerning ethical behavior, the value of teaching and learning, and human relationships.