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Glimmerglass Festival's *Camelot* fit for a king

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What does any theatergoer want from a stage musical? For starters, beautiful singing, solid acting, striking costumes, clever direction, and characters to love and to loathe. A melodic score with a few toe-tappers and a smart book and lyrics. The new production of *Camelot* presented at the Glimmerglass Festival is that theatergoer's dream – a crowning glory, a royal treat. In the annals of musical theater, it's the bejeweled diadem, it's the crown jewels, it's a show fit for a king.

What made this production so extraordinary? The first nod must go to Lerner and Loewe, who wrote a charming musical together about a beloved and well-known tale – excerpting some of the most compelling (and juicy) episodes from the last two books of T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, in which Arthur loses his ladylove Guenevere to Sir Lancelot. Why *Camelot* was never as successful as *My Fair Lady* is difficult to tell from this production. The first act was as fine as any musical first act in terms of humor, songwriting, pacing, and quality musical numbers. The Glimmerglass production team wisely added back in several numbers to their version ("Take Me To the Fair" and "Fie on Goodness") that had been cut along the way, which lent the show an even richer texture than I remembered.

It also takes a medieval village to mount a memorable musical. Everyone needed to do their part to perfection and had to be equipped to do their parts well – the big difference-maker in this show. The caliber of talent involved was simply top notch. Let's start with the director, Robert Longbottom. A Tony Award nominee, Longbottom had a vision for the show to succeed on the festival stage and in that 900-seat house, and then executed it perfectly with the help of set designer Kevin Depinet and choreographer Alex Sanchez. The show needed to have pomp and sparkle. At times it demanded pageant and precision. It needed an affable, admirable

king, a lovely and equally clever queen, and a meltingly handsome Lancelot. It required a spirit of fun and occasionally ferocity. Because Longbottom conveyed his vision to all those working with him to produce this show, it evidenced all those things.

Moving on to my favorite character in the show – Sir Lancelot du Lac, winningly portrayed by opera great Nathan Gunn. From the moment he stepped on stage in his spit-shined armor, the audience fell in love with Gunn's virtuous, self-confident knight who's stronger, braver, and more courageous than the average knight errant. Gunn literally glowed onstage. His charisma and showmanship could scarcely be contained by the considerable chainmail they'd stuffed him into. He had the audience in the palm of his hand during "C'est Moi," in which he managed to alternately be endearingly funny and fiercely brave in one number. By curtain call, every woman in that audience wanted Gunn's valiant Lancelot to carry her handkerchief into battle.

The character Guenevere is no simple ingénue, and yet she must look and sound the ingénue. Canadian soprano Andriana Chuchman had plenty of authentic opera chops to her credit, yet adapted her sound to become a perfect musical theater heroine for this role. No easy task to be compared to the incomparable Julie Andrews and come out ahead. Chuchman found the emotional nuances while acting the role and sang Guenevere to crystalline perfection. With her long and shining red locks, she also looked like royalty. Costumer Paul Tazewell took full advantage of her figure and carriage, adorning her in one luscious, sparkling gown after another. It was a pure treat to see so many gorgeous, shiny, sparkly period costumes assembled on one stage, and Tazewell's costumes and his creative contributions to this show were simply incalculable to its success.

As King Arthur, Glimmerglass veteran David Pittsinger captured the audience's affection from his first stage appearance lurking about in simple tights and tunic. Pittsinger's Arthur was so free from affectation that his future bride didn't even recognize the once and future king (and perhaps not the audience either). Like Chuchman, Pittsinger also manipulated his well-trained bass-baritone to fit the musical theater genre, clipping the ends of notes to fit the mood of songs like "Camelot". While one expects anyone who portrays King Arthur to be an accomplished actor, it's a treat to hear an Arthur who can actually sing the role.

The show-stealing nod must go to musical theater star Jack Noseworthy as the loathsome Mordred, bastard son of Arthur. As the show is written, no-one puts the bastard in "bastard" better than Mordred, and you simply love hating him throughout. That has all to do with Noseworthy's ability to sing and dance his medieval boots off. In this role, he conveyed a scheming, conniving quality and at the same time a polished showmanship that reminded me of Joel Grey in his prime. Five out of five greasy, black banana peels to Noseworthy's Mordred whose "Fie on Goodness" was a bona fide showstopper. For his exemplary efforts as a baddie, he was robustly booed at curtain call.

What would any legend of Arthur story be without a Merlin? Wynn Harmon delighted as the lovable magician who goes through eternity backwards and again as Sir Pellinore, the dotty right-hand knight of King Arthur, who puts him wise to Mordred's villainous ways.

Of course, none would succeed in any American musical without loving and spirited musical direction and conducting, which James Lowe so capably provided. A final royal accolade goes to the ensemble, whose "Ascot Gavotte"-like number while viewing the joust was so engaging, among others.

Congratulations to the cast and crew of Lerner and Loewe's *Camelot* at Glimmerglass – a majestic success to be savored by simple folk, fancy folk, and everyone in between who loves great entertainment.