

# CNY Café Momus

## Glimmerglass premiere of ‘Camelot’ chivalrous, but hardly a knight to remember

*David Pittsinger, as King Arthur, provided most of the magic in this pleasant but unspectacular production of the Lerner and Loewe musical*

July 13, 2013

### David Abrams

Francesca Zambello’s courageous marketing decision to produce a blockbuster Broadway musical each season is not without its challenges. Unlike opera, where audiences hope to be artistically engaged, Broadway musicals draw crowds expecting to be entertained. As such, the pressure is on for the Glimmerglass Festival Artistic Director to provide musicals that keep pace with — or exceed — the entertainment appeal of the Festival’s prior efforts.

Judged by the yardstick of its past successes, Glimmerglass’s latest venture has come up short. Its current production of *Camelot*, though enjoyable, pales in comparison both to last season’s stunning production of *The Music Man* and the prior year’s *Annie Get Your Gun*.

The finger pointing rightly begins with Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe — whose 1960 collaboration can hardly be considered the pair’s best effort. *Camelot* lacks both the depth of story and the number of memorable tunes of *My Fair Lady*, produced some four years earlier. Still, it was Glimmerglass’s new production, not the story and the music, that ultimately *underwhelmed* those in the crowd who, like I, left the theater unfulfilled.

The story, adapted from T.H. White’s novel *The Once and Future King*, centers on a medieval love triangle involving the enlightened King Arthur, his handsome wife Guenevere and the love-smitten knight, Sir Lancelot. Themes of chivalry, romance, adultery, battle and ultimately forgiveness run through the nearly three-hour show. Baby boomers no doubt will remember *Camelot* as all but having defined the Kennedy presidency. According to Jackie Kennedy, JFK’s favorite line came at the end: *Don't let it be forgot/ That once there was a spot/ For one brief shining moment that was known/ As Camelot.*

The “one brief shining moment” in this production is David Pittsinger, whose stunning singing and acting throughout the performance as King Arthur is alone worth the price of admission.

Pittsinger, who from my seat in the theater looked curiously like political humorist Bill Maher, sang beautifully and carried himself well onstage — capturing the attention of the listener at all times. His crisp speaking voice spread his lines across the theater with ease and grace, while his clean diction obviated the need for supertitles (which in this production accompanied the singing but not the dialogue).

Pittsinger’s full-strength bass-baritone and strong delivery, which at times overshadowed the other singers, was apparent from his opening number, *I Wonder What the King is Doing Tonight*, and his signature tune, *Camelot*. Even his whistling (during the charming duo with the Queen, *What Do the Simple Folk Do?*) projected well. The tender side of King Arthur’s character came out, loud and clear, in

Pittsinger's earnest and sensitive delivery of *How to Handle a Woman*, as the confused King seeks guidance and wisdom in dealing with his beloved Guenevere.

As an actor, Pittsinger captured the essence of Arthur as a well-meaning King seeking to make sense of the world and trying to do the right thing at any cost — even if that means watching Guenevere slowly slip away into the arms of Lancelot. He forged a character whose ultimate decision to forgive the two greatest loves in his life (Guenevere and Lancelot) we may respect or reject. Either way, Pittsinger's Arthur is a flesh-and-blood character with whom we can empathize.

As Guenevere, Canadian soprano Andriana Chuchman has the looks to sustain the love triangle drama throughout the lengthy production, and her handsome voice — while by no means large — made for a pleasant listening experience during her principal numbers.

Chuchman's opening song, *The Simple Joys of Maidenhood*, set the bar high for those that followed — culminating in what I thought her best effort of the show: the sweetly expressive *Before I Gaze at You Again* at the end of Act 1. Unlike Pittsinger, however, Chuchman could never quite abandon her trained operatic voice for something better suited to musical theater. And the mellowness of her speaking voice made me wish that supertitles had been used for more than just the singing.

Next to Pittsinger, the most commanding performance of the evening came from Jack Noseworthy — a first-rate actor whose suave and calculating presence as Arthur's nefarious illegitimate son, Mordred, was unforgettable.

Noseworthy's high-pitched tenor projected exceptionally well, and his diction was beyond reproach. (He sounded the most "British" of the cast.) Like Roddy McDowall in the original Broadway production, Noseworthy spoke his melodic lines during *The Seen Deadly Virtues*, shifting to pitches when singing along with the knights in *Fie on Goodness*. But whether singing or speaking, Noseworthy maintained an imposing presence befitting his role as the show's only true villain — staying in character even as the audience began hissing him, if only affectionately, at the curtain calls.

Nathan Gunn started off with a bang, using his handsome baritone to capture the moment in his opening song, *C'est Moi*, where he defines his character as the cocky, self-centered would-be knight to Arthur's newly created Round Table. But Gunn never again sounded this good during the remainder of the show, and his signature song, *If Ever I Would Leave You*, sounded shaky and rushed, as well as lacking in any meaningful degree of expression.

Glimmerglass Young Artists Clay Hilley (Sir Dinahan), Wayne Hu (Sir Sagamore) and Noel Bouley (Sir Lionel) deported themselves well as the triumvirate of knights and interacted playfully with Chuchman in *Then You May Take Me to the Fair*. I especially enjoyed the boys' horsing around with Mordred in the Act 2 *Fie on Goodness* — which I thought was going to end as a Bud Light commercial.

Wynn Harmon, in the non-singing dual roles as Arthur's mentor, Merlyn, and the eccentric old knight, Pellinore, projected his lines well but sounded rather hoarse — making it difficult at times to hear his every word. Young Richard Pittsinger, the real-life son of David cast as the young and impressionable Tom of Warwick, was a fitting choice to carry on the dream of his hero King Arthur, as the latter heads to France to battle Lancelot's armies.

Director Richard Longbottom deserves praise for his charming staging of the joyous *Then You May Take*

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*Me to the Fair* — a delightful number in which Guenevere coyly coaxes the three knights to thrash newly arrived Lancelot in the upcoming jousting match, promising whoever succeeds a good time in her company at the Fair. Longbottom nevertheless wasted several opportunities to enhance the action of this mostly static production.

The second-act dueling scene between the knights and Lancelot, performed in slow motion, was utterly lacking in tension and anima. The lightly choreographed dance scenes by Alex Sanchez, while visually appealing, had none of the pizzazz that ignited the stage in last season's unforgettable production of *The Music Man*. Lancelot's miraculous healing of the fallen Lionel, which could have been milked for all it's worth as a dramatically vibrant moment, was reduced to a simple touch of the wounded man's chest — as if an abbreviated medieval version of CPR. Longbottom's decision to begin Gunn's delivery of *If Ever I Would Leave You* from the very back of the stage was ill-advised, since the baritone could barely be heard until making his way to the front.

Kevin Depinet's abstract minimalist sets don't do much to enhance the drama, either. An imposing structure in the shape of a right triangle anchors the set, with a Disney-like mural of a seemingly far-off castle resting below the top of the hypotenuse. Standing at the base of the triangle is an oddity sprouting what appears to be a stack of giant linguini. When King Arthur is seen hiding within the strands of linguini, we realize this is actually a tree. Cooked *al dente*.

Depinet is less abstract in his design of the King's chambers. A pair of thrones sits on a lengthy tapestry, over which a large chandelier of candles, suspended by chains, hangs overhead. In the final scene this chandelier will fall to the ground, if only slowly and deliberately, ostensibly to signal the demise of Arthur's vision of the perfect Camelot. (I much prefer the scene from *Phantom of the Opera*.) Paul Tazewell's colorful costumes, while easy on the eyes, more closely resemble early Renaissance than the story's sixth-century medieval period dress.

The 42-piece orchestra, directed by James Lowe, had a rough time fighting pitch problems during the instrumental ensemble sections. There were also a few sloppy ensemble moments during the transitions into new tempos during the Overture and Entr'acte to Act 2, which I expect will disappear after another performance or two.

Audience reaction at the curtain calls sounded genuinely excited, particularly with respect to the three lead roles. But it wasn't until Pittsinger (the elder) came onstage that the crowd took to its feet in tandem — and justly so. He was the knight in shining armor who almost single-handedly brought this production out of, well, the Dark Ages.

#### **Details Box:**

**What:** *Camelot*, music by Frederick Loewe and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner

**When:** July 13, 2013

**Who:** Glimmerglass Festival

**Where:** 7300 State Highway 80, Cooperstown, N.Y.

**Time:** 2 hours and 45 minutes, with one intermission

**Call:** Glimmerglass Box office: (607) 547-2255

**Ticket prices:** \$10 to \$132 (discounts for students, educators and seniors)

**Website:** <http://www.glimmerglass.org>

**Remaining performances:** 7:30 p.m. July 19; 1:30 p.m. July 22 (sold out); 1:30 p.m. July 28; 7:30 p.m. August 1; 1:30 p.m. Aug. 3; 1:30 p.m. Aug. 5 (sold out); 1:30 p.m. Aug. 11 (sold out); 1:30 p.m. Aug. 13 (sold out); 7:30 p.m. Aug. 15; 1:30 p.m. Aug. 17; 7:30 p.m. Aug. 23; Special Young Artists performance 1:30 p.m. Aug. 23