

An Artistic Analysis of the 2023 Revival of *Camelot*: Inspired by the style of the ***New York Times***

Much like the show's plot, "Camelot" strives for perfection: a congenial and convivial spot, blissfully unaware of its own shortcomings; Beautiful and thought-provoking but unsure.



Andrew Burnap as King Arthur and the company of "Camelot."
(Photos by Joan Marcus)

By David DiMarzo

Bedazzled with breathtaking scenery, costumes and stagework, with a stunning cast to match, Lincoln Center's 2023 revival of "Camelot," based on the T.H. White classic, "The Once and Future King," leaves something to be desired.

A lush recreation of the original 1960 Lerner and Loewe score, a fresh book by “The West Wing” writer, Aaron Sorkin, with the added genius of Lincoln Center’s revival connoisseur, Bartlett Sher, this new “Camelot” has all of the necessary prerequisites to be a newly-interpreted smash hit. The execution however, is not so certain.

Michael Yeargan’s set transforms the Vivian Beaumont stage into a vast landscape with rolling fields of snow, grassy moors and spacious castle chambers, all under grand stone arches that line the expansive thrust stage. Jennifer Moeller’s costumes provide a sense of ‘neither here nor there,’ a “Camelot” with stylish chaps and armor, lush velvet and frothy gowns. Moeller’s designs have a particular ambiguity that allows pieces to exist either in ancient England or a modern runway. Lap Chi Chu’s lighting and projections by 59 Productions create an atmosphere of grandeur and sophistication, leading the audience through the beguiling, foreordained, windswept air of medieval England.

Robert Russell Bennett, Phillip J. Lang and Trude Rittman honor the original Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner score with their orchestrations and arrangements with help from a rare 30-piece orchestra. As always, Lincoln Center Theater boasts the best of Broadway, showcasing tunes as they were meant to be heard.

Completing the creative team, Byron Easley’s choreography is both relaxed and charmingly lyrical; a perfect combination for the show’s earthy interpretation of such a sprightly score. With a diverse and fluid ensemble, this “Camelot” sings and dances for a world of now.

The production, led by Tony Winner, Andrew Burnap, Tony Nominee and two-time Grammy winner, Phillipa Soo, and Tony Nominee, Jordan Donica, boasts an exceptional cast...and rightly so!

Burnap, unlike his notable predecessors, Richards: Burton and Harris, plays King Arthur as boyishly charming; still finding his footing as King after pulling the sword ‘Excalibur’ from its lofty stone only a decade prior. Burton and Harris were

known to play the role with more kingly astuteness, as they both performed the role well into their seasoned years.

Burnap gives Arthur an everyman persona, unaffected by his monarchical status. At times, this new Arthur may be interpreted as weak or a likely target to be usurped, especially as conflict and disdain arise from his *mostly* loyal Knights of the Round Table. Although I prefer the humanity of Burnap's Arthur, providing the role with clear indication that he stumbled into the burden of power, rather than having a lifetime of preparation, one may see this interpretation as cloudy when attempting to justify his Round Table's unfaltering loyalty.

An equal match and perhaps the soul of the show is Phillipa Soo as Queen Guenevere. Soo is relentless in Guenevere's effort to remain who she once was, despite her lack of autonomy upon her arranged marriage to Arthur. Where Julie Andrews might have had to walk, in an attempt to give Guenevere an independent voice and self-importance in a world of men (as per the societal expectations and musical tropes of 1960, of course)... Soo runs.

In this production, Guenevere is an undeniable equal to King Arthur, oftentimes lending insight and perspective when Arthur inevitably succumbs to blind idealism. So much so that Arthur refers to Jenny (as she is known) as his 'business partner.'

Just as she did in her star-making turn in "Hamilton," as well as her recent performance in "Into the Woods," among others, Soo cannot help but sink a hook into her audience and keep them swimming along for the ride. With a great deal of heart, buried turmoil, unwavering strength and her sweet and soaring soprano, Soo makes Guenevere the most compelling character, stacked up against her male counterparts.

The problem Guenevere faces, however, is that no matter which way you spin the story, she remains the object of affection that ultimately splits a kingdom, as the show's leading men, King Arthur and Lancelot forgo their life's work and give in to temptation. On the flip side, King Arthur and Lancelot will always be symbols of the flaws of human nature. Honor and goodness will never be immune to our deepest desires.



Jordan Donica (left) as Lancelot and Phillipa Soo as Queen Guenevere.

Lancelot du Lac: the dreamy, robust, and stoic figure, famously recruited from France to serve as a Knight of the Round Table is consummately played by Jordan Donica (the only member of the leading trio to be nominated for a 2023 Tony Award as Best Featured Actor in a Musical).

The most perplexing choice original lyricist and “Camelot” book writer, Alan Jay Lerner made when crafting the elusive Lancelot was the abrupt shift in character between his introduction in “C’est Moi,” as a cocky, rather oafish warrior and the Lancelot who would adopt a more stoic and respectable demeanor, swearing loyalty to Arthur at the end of the first act.

Donica manages to bridge the gap between the dueling personas, as his Lancelot retains an assured sense-of-self from beginning to end. Unashamed of his feelings for Guenevere, Donica’s Lancelot makes his best effort to lead a life of humility, bound by honor, in order to win over his unwilling beloved. This conscious and carefully crafted character arc gives Lancelot a sense of balance

and dedication that he might have otherwise lacked. One cannot mention Donica's performance without praise for his rafter-shaking baritone, carrying some of the show's most iconic ballads with poise and chivalric force.

Now, back to 'business partners.' In an attempt to modernize the text, while appealing to the timeless sensibility of the show's themes, Sorkin's book might function better as an entirely new work. Harkening back to the show's [historic comparison to the Kennedy Administration](#) and former First Lady Jackie Kennedy's use of the title song as a symbol for what the world could have been and what we lost, "Camelot" is met with many expectations.

Sorkin and Sher's production eliminates any preexisting elements of magic. Merlyn is no longer a wizard, instead a sage and Morgan Le Fey is no longer a sorceress, but now a bereaved scientist. Some may miss this element, however, the story does not suffer without it. With an attempt to make the show more akin to a history play, the book, music and staging feels disjointed. The score remains an enduring delight, however it is still trapped within the confines of a Golden Age Musical Comedy.

Cheery melodies and poetic, rather simplistic lyrics do not always pair well with the modernized text. The story could benefit from a few new songs (although, relatively impossible) to support the excavated interpersonal relationships of the characters and their relationship to the larger than life themes: goodness for the sake of goodness, legacy and the corruption of power. Severe tonal shifts become the show's greatest enemy.

When Arthur refers to Guenevere as his equal— a *'business partner,'* while discussing the nature of their marriage, the audience is immediately transported back to the present day. We are now fully aware that we are sitting in the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center in the year 2023. Rather than toying with elevated language that one might expect from a period drama or in this case drama-pseudo-musical comedy, Sorkin chooses to have his characters speak as modern beings who may be placed in any time at any place.

While I respect the notion that the effects of Arthurian lore are universal, it becomes unclear whether we are watching a remounting of a 1960 musical

comedy, a modern drama or a history play with Barlett Sher's grand, Shakespearean-esque staging.

While Sorkin and Sher draw a hard line of betrayal when Guenevere and Lancelot go to bed with one another, in opposition to the original 1960 production (perhaps to preserve Andrews' virginal persona), there is still a sense that some things just do not add up. Arthur decides to visit his former mistress, Morgan Le Fey, whom he fathered a child with at the tender age of 15. This is after his illegitimate son, Mordred makes an abrupt first appearance a third of the way through the second act, which stirs an unresolved and tepid conflict between Arthur and Jenny. This is perhaps an attempt to motivate Guenevere's decision to go to bed with Lancelot after much anticipation.

For two characters that are bound by honor, their actions feel irrational and out of character (a heavy-handed nod to the flaws of human nature). How can one choose between a love triangle when all parties are loved equally? An incurable plot device, indeed.

Taylor Trensch as Mordred and Marilee Talkington as Morgan Le Fey serve their roles well. Trensch as the resentful, angsty, troublemaking bastard and Talkington as the aloof and embittered former mistress. The mother and son duo do their best to flesh out what are otherwise one note characters.

A standout performance: Dakin Matthews, who plays both Merlyn and second advisor to the king, Pellinore. Dakin offers true comedic relief, chiefly as Pellinore, who though at first appears to be without his marbles, comes to be a true voice of reason.

Rounding out the principal cast are Anthony Michael Lopez, Fergie Philippe and Danny Wolohan as Sirs Dinadan, Sagramore and Lionel, respectively. The three gentlemen fill out the Round Table as they offer varying degrees of loyalty and disdain for their King and Queen. Solid performances all around, the three knights along with the rest of the ensemble cast are nothing short of capable and intriguing talents.

A puzzling change comes when Lancelot sings, "I Loved You Once In Silence." The song, traditionally performed by Guenevere, is instead Lancelot's testimonial

after finally wooing his Queen. Although the lyrics suggest a forbidden love, the song seems like it could have a larger impact if Guenevere were to direct its sentiments towards Arthur, especially after consummating her relationship with Lancelot.

Guenevere, unsure of Arthur's feelings, after being referred to as a 'business partner,' might sing, "Trying so to keep my love from showing, all the while not knowing you loved me too," when discussing her relationship with her husband during an otherwise rushed *Finale Ultimo* sequence.

Famously, Guenevere and Lancelot receive a death sentence after their adulterous affair. In typical, classic Musical Theatre fashion, the pair lives to tell the tale after Arthur and Guenevere attempt to resolve their emotionally ambiguous marriage. As it turns out, they both love each other. Yet, neither one of them decides to reveal their true feelings until the bitter end. It is evident from top to bottom that Lancelot is infatuated with Guenevere.

Handing "I Loved You Once In Silence" over to Lancelot feels like a missed opportunity. A slight reworking of the song would suit a more pleasing resolution to Arthur and Guenevere's doomed union as a last confession.

Sorkin and Sher undoubtedly make a beautiful attempt to quell the trouble here in "Camelot." It is undeniable that Lincoln Center Theatre has produced yet another striking and aesthetically pleasing revival, filled with opulence and uniquely refined talent. How does a simple, yet ambitious musical comedy of 1960 become a think-piece worthy of 2023 audiences? With certain difficulty.



Phillipa Soo (left), Andrew Burnap (center), Dakin Matthews as Pellinore, Jordan Donica and the company of “Camelot.”

A British mythological tale imbued with the sentimental ideology of 1960 America is frozen, unable to thaw into the nuanced, multilayered epic that modern audiences expect of “Camelot.” At times riveting (especially B.H. Barry’s thrilling fight choreography and daring sword fighting sequences), seldom boring and an undyingly beautiful score, “Camelot” has certainly improved. But the question remains, *how much farther can it go?* Could it be that Jackie O was right?

“Don’t let it be forgot, that for one brief, shining moment there was Camelot.” Is “Camelot” only ‘once was,’ never to be recreated? Did sentimentality perish with J.F.K.? Or does “Camelot” endure? Perhaps there can be goodness for the sake of goodness, honor for the sake of honor and duty for the sake of country. Even with the flaws and inconsistencies that rattle human nature and art.

