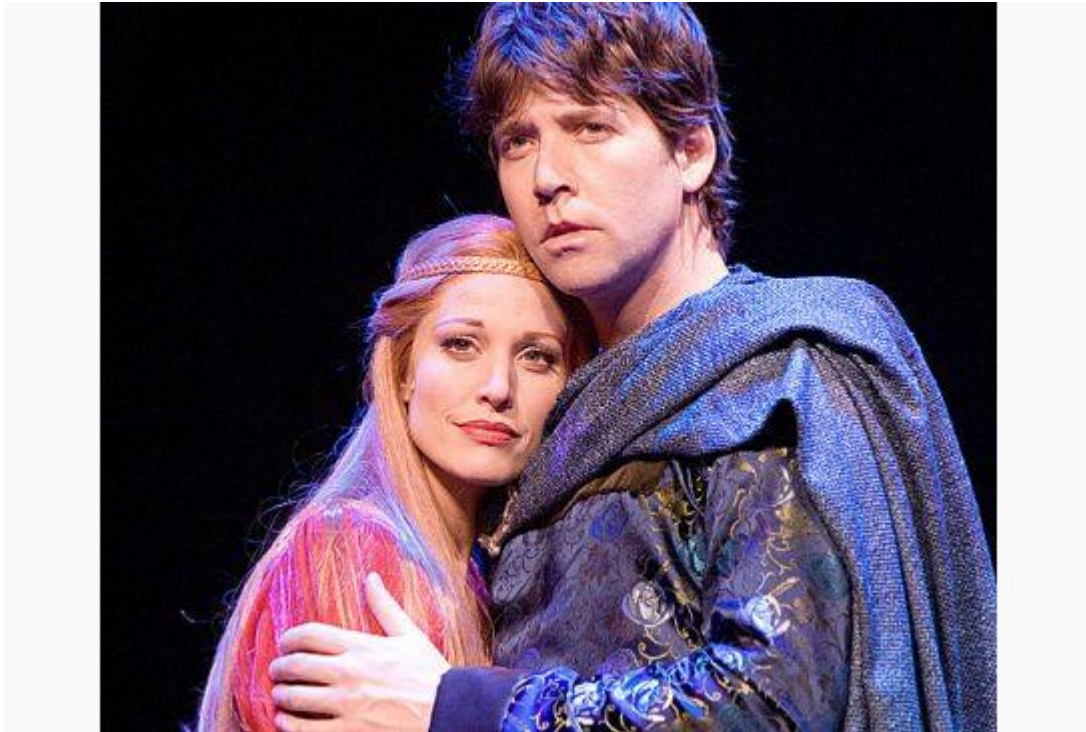


Love story

It's not the sword in the stone, it's the arrow through the heart.



By: [Richard Ouzounian](#) Theatre Critic, Published on Sat Jun 23 2007



Rachel York as Guenevere and James Barbour as Lancelot in *Camelot*, which opens Wednesday night at the Hummingbird Centre.

It's not the sword in the stone, it's the arrow through the heart.

Camelot opens Wednesday at the Hummingbird Centre, nearly 47 years after its premiere there. And what becomes increasingly obvious as the years roll by is the enduring popularity of the musical stems not from its Arthurian setting, but from its romantic storyline, in which Guenevere is torn between her love for her husband, King Arthur, and the attraction she feels for the dashing Sir Lancelot.

It's certainly the feeling of the three people playing the leads in the current production, whom I interviewed earlier this year when the show was trying out in San Jose, Calif.

"That's what I believe is the show's secret," says Michael York, who plays King Arthur in this revival. "Most of us have known – or wish we had known – a love so great that you'd give up everything you believed in for it."

"Almost every one of us hopes that someday we'll meet that one perfect person," admits Rachel York, who is of no relation to Michael, but is portraying his wife Guenevere. "My character has two men like that in her life and she finds it's not a blessing, but a curse."

"What does it mean to give yourself completely over to a passion that you can't explain?" asks James Barbour, the production's Sir Lancelot. "Do you lose yourself in feelings like that? Or perhaps do you learn instead what's really important?"

These sentiments all reflect a point of view that's different from the long-standing take on *Camelot*: that it was essentially a show about the struggle to hold on to ideals in a cynical and troubled world.

The Round Table was supposed to be the United Nations and, to many people, King Arthur was equated with John Fitzgerald Kennedy, even though the show was conceived long before he started his 1960 campaign for the presidency.

That school of thought largely stems from an interview Jacqueline Kennedy gave journalist Theodore White shortly after JFK's assassination, in which she remembered his fondness for the title song of the show and its dream of a perfect world.

And that was all it took. Suddenly, JFK's time in office was dubbed "The Camelot Years" and the musical acquired a lot of psychic baggage that it probably would have been better off without.

The irony of the whole situation is that while Kennedy may have liked *Camelot's* title song, he never saw the show. No, on his infrequent theatre trips to New York, he was fonder of saucier fare, like the ribald Wall St. musical *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*.

But for more than four decades and through countless stage revivals, *Camelot* was "the Kennedy show" and people went to it looking for a memory of that golden time.

The truth is, apart from a few selected scenes, the political vision isn't really what the show is about.

"Look at the song titles," says Barbour, "they're full of things like 'How to Handle a Woman' and 'Before I Gaze At You Again,' barely anything political at all. And in a musical, what you sing about is what you are."

Those thoughts must have been already echoing inside the heads of the producers of this current revival when they brought Michael Lerner on line to do some rewrites.

Lerner is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker, but – more importantly – he's the son of Alan Jay Lerner, who wrote the original book and lyrics.

"They asked me to tackle some problems and streamline some issues that had been there since the very first production," said Lerner, who was just a child during *Camelot's* Toronto premiere.

Indeed, there were a lot of "problems" and "issues" when the show opened what was then known as the O'Keefe Centre on Oct. 1, 1960.

To begin with, it ran well over four hours. ("Longer than *Parsifal* and only half as funny," sniffed Noel Coward.) Then director Moss Hart was stricken with a heart attack and Lerner was felled by an attack of bleeding ulcers.

"My father never had a chance to get the show into the shape he wanted," says Lerner, "and had often spoken of trying to attempt one last rewrite of *Camelot*."

Alan Jay Lerner died in 1986, but 20 years later, his son began the rewrite his father had never been able to finish.

One of the first things he realized was that the show's romantic elements were among its most powerful weapons – and he sought to maximize them. He moved Lancelot's famous ballad, "If Ever I Would Leave You," from its former place at the top of Act II, to the climactic scene near the end of the show when Lancelot and Guenevere are driven apart.

"It was a matter of marrying the strongest scene with the strongest song," explains Lerner. "Originally, Lancelot stopped the show with this giant ballad and then just vanished for a while. Now, you feel how enormous their passion is for each other just before their relationship is forced to end."

It also was a way of giving even greater prominence to a key moment in the life of the Lerner family. In the summer of 1960, Alan was trying to finish writing *Camelot* when his fourth wife, Micheline, announced she was divorcing him and was taking their son with her.

That son was Michael, although he now says, "I was so young I don't remember any of it. I slipped just under the bar."

The event proved traumatic for Alan Jay Lerner. He suffered a complete nervous breakdown and had to receive psychiatric help. When he recovered, he was finally able to complete the song that he had been working on when his wife walked out.

It was "If Ever I Would Leave You."

"There's an incredible power in that song," confesses Barbour. "Every night when I sing it, I can almost feel the audience reaching out to it, connecting to it. The depth of the feelings Lerner must have gone through before writing it found its way into the song. People may not necessarily know that, but somehow, they sense it."

"I stand on stage every night," adds Rachel York, "and I can feel it, too. There's an absolute longing from people today to be part of something so grand, so meaningful."

Let's leave the final words to King Arthur.

"Camelot will always touch audiences, because it's the kind of show that's about things which last – friendship, idealism and love. Yes, most of all, love."