

Camelot

Frederick Loewe music **Alan Jay Lerner** lyrics
Aaron Sorkin, Alan Jay Lerner book
Vivian Beaumont Theatre, New York 9 March 2023 – ongoing
 REVIEWED ON 19 APRIL 2023



Phillipa Soo as Guenevere alongside the Camelot company; swordplay with Jordan Donica's Lancelot and Andrew Burnap's Arthur; Burnap in West Wing mode

In the annals of Broadway musicals, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's *Camelot* has always been a curiosity. The original production, which starred Richard Burton, Julie Andrews and Robert Goulet, got mixed reviews and failed to even land a nomination for Best Musical at the 1961 Tony Awards.

While the show boasts some lovely tunes, Lerner's adaptation of the Arthurian legend suffered from a lumpy book that left little room for music. The 1967 movie, starring Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave, didn't exactly burnish its reputation.

But *Camelot* got an outsize boost when John F Kennedy's widow, Jackie, referenced the couple's love for the cast album and its underlying message of idealism – despite Arthur's reign lasting only 'for one brief, shining moment' – in her first interview following the 1963 assassination of her husband. *Camelot* became a metaphor for the short-lived JFK presidency, a neat bit of myth-making that trumped anything within the bounds of the show itself.

The new Broadway revival tackles *Camelot*'s shortcomings head on. Aaron Sorkin rebuilds Lerner's fixer-upper of a book into a more modern yarn about Arthur's efforts to remake his kingdom with a court of peers who use their 'might for right.' Not surprisingly, Sorkin focuses on *Camelot*'s West Wing: his new Arthur (played with boyish charm by Andrew Burnap) could be mistaken for a younger version of Martin Sheen's Jed Bartlet, an earnest man thrust into power but struggling to do good despite the dominant forces pushing against his best impulses.

Sorkin hasn't so much streamlined the script (the show still runs three hours) as bulldozed it. Out are all the magical elements: Merlyn is now a wise old man dispatched early on

(Dakin Matthews reappears as the geriatric advisor Pellinore); sorceress Morgan Le Fey (Marilee Talkington) is now a vaguely defined 'scientist'; and Arthur's scheming illegitimate son, Mordred (Taylor Trensch), lures Arthur to Le Fey's lair not via magic but a forged letter (Le Fey is now depicted as Mordred's mother and Arthur's jilted lover).

“Aaron Sorkin rebuilds Lerner's fixer-upper of a book into a more modern yarn”

Even Arthur's claim to the throne – removing the Excalibur sword from a stone after 10,000 others tried and failed – is explained away. 'Nine-thousand, nine-hundred and ninety-nine people loosened it,' Guenevere deflatingly suggests.

This Arthur is no longer the stuff of legend. What remains is a book that is just as dense and talky, but more in a Sorkinian way, with debates about good governance and lame, anachronistic jokes ('The Middle Ages won't

end by itself'). Despite the radical rethink, you wish Sorkin might have gone further, stripping away even more story so there would be less of a slog between the songs.

For when the cast sings, nearly 30 strong and backed by an equally sizeable orchestra under Kimberly Grigsby's skilful baton, you get a hint of the show's enduring appeal. Bartlett

Sher, who directed a seamless revival of Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* at the same theatre five years ago, creates striking tableaux and keeps the story moving seamlessly.

Phillipa Soo makes a glorious Guenevere, feisty and headstrong at first and then a real partner to Burnap's Arthur as he cobbles together his Round Table as a medieval Team of Rivals. Her smooth soprano shines brightly on songs like 'The Simple Joys of Maidenhood' and 'The Lusty Month of May,' the latter boosted by Jennifer Moeller's colourful costumes and Byron Easley's all-too-infrequent choreography. (The elegantly understated sets are by Michael Yeargan.)

Burnap, a less assured singer, carries himself with youthful earnestness throughout – even as he begins to suspect his wife may be falling for the French knight Lancelot (Jordan Donica, whose robust baritone matches Soo's vocals on the memorable ballad 'If Ever I Would Leave You').

But Sorkin even makes a hash of this love triangle, driving the queen into Lancelot's arms not out of passion but spite, in a flimsily set-up dalliance that Mordred quickly exploits to take down Arthur's kingdom. Where's the love – even the lust? It's merely an afterthought in this overlong production, cast aside along with the magic and much of the enchantment.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Andrew Burnap, Jordan Donica, Phillipa Soo, Anthony Michael Lopez, Dakin Matthews, Marilee Talkington, Taylor Trensch *et al*

Direction Bartlett Sher

Music direction Kimberly Grigsby

Orchestrations Robert Russell Bennett, Philip J Lang

Choreography Byron Easley

Set Michael Yeargan

Lighting Lap Chi Chu

Sound Marc Salzberg, Beth Lake

Costumes Jennifer Moeller

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