

Camelot

The road to *Camelot* was rocky. Adapted from T.H. White's *The Once And Future King*, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's musical version was one of the most highly anticipated shows imaginable. After all, their previous show had been one of the biggest Broadway success stories in history – the huge smash hit *My Fair Lady*. And they'd had the big success of *Gigi* on the screen. Add to that a stunning cast of Richard Burton, Julie Andrews, Roddy McDowell, and Robert Goulet making his Broadway debut. Then Moss Hart as director, Oliver Smith for sets, costumes by Adrian (who died before the show went into rehearsals) and Tony Duquette, and with an advance sale that was the largest in musical theatre history, well, what could possibly go wrong?

For starters, Lerner's then wife left him, causing medical problems for Lerner and a delay for the production. At the show's tryout at the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto, the first performance lasted well over four hours. Lerner apparently quipped "Only *Tristan and Isolde* equaled it as a bladder endurance contest." The reviews were encouraging but noted the show still needed a lot of work if it was going to be a success. Then director Hart had a heart attack and Lerner took over the direction. Loewe was not thrilled at making changes without Hart's input, but eventually the show came into Boston an hour-and-a-half shorter. By Lerner's account, Richard Burton was a prince as well as a King regarding all the cuts and changes, and, according to Lerner, he calmed the fears of the cast.

In New York, Julie Andrews was told she was getting a new song, "Before I Gaze At You Again," for the first pre-

view. She famously said, "Of course, darling, but do try to get it to me the night before." After two previews (yes, you read that right – it was a very different Broadway then), the show opened on December 3rd at the Majestic Theatre, and the reviews were mixed. Hart got out of the hospital and he and Lerner made further changes to the show. But any danger the mixed reviews caused was alleviated by an appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, where an entire segment was devoted to the show, causing the advance sale to zoom up even higher. It went on to win four Tony Awards – Best Actor in a Musical (Richard Burton), best sets (Smith), best costumes (Adrian and Tony Duquette), and best musical direction (Franz Allers). Columbia's cast album was the top-selling LP for sixty weeks. The show had a healthy run of 873 performances.

After it closed, there was a national tour starring William Squire (who'd replaced Burton on Broadway) and Kathryn Grayson. That was followed by a bus-and-truck tour starring Biff McGuire and Jeannie Carson. Then, in 1964, yet another tour happened, this time starring Howard Keel and Constance Towers. Also in 1964, the show made its London debut.

Opening at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane on August 19th, producer Jack Hylton's production of *Camelot* sported a stellar cast, including film star Laurence Harvey as Arthur, Elizabeth Larner as Guenevere and Barry Kent as Lancelot. Critic Harold Hobson said of Harvey's Arthur, "I count this performance as amongst the big theatrical experiences of my life." The production was directed and choreographed by Robert Helpmann, with scenery and costumes by John

Truscott and lighting by Richard Pilbrow. The show ran 518 performances.

Since then, *Camelot* has been turned into a film (starring Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave), has had many revivals (with Richard Burton, Richard Harris, and Robert Goulet all taking turns at Arthur), including a recent tour with Michael York, Rachel York, and James Barbour. And the televised concert with the New York Philharmonic, which starred Gabriel Byrne, Marin Mazzie, Nathan Gunn, Christopher Lloyd, and Marc Kudisch.

What becomes clear in every revival or presentation of the show is that the score by Lerner and Loewe is one of the most glorious in all musical theater. Whatever deficiencies the book may or may not have, the score just overpowers them – and, of course, the story itself is just powerful.

The London cast album is a treasure. It feels quite different than its Broadway counterpart and includes "The Jousts" that wasn't on the original Broadway cast album. Harvey is a great King Arthur, and Lerner is a wonderful Guenevere. Their performances are reason enough to cherish the London recording, but the whole thing has a vibrancy and sheen that is terrific, and that score – one great song after another – I think it's safe to use the old saw that they don't write 'em like this anymore.

The CD was mastered from the original tapes from the EMI vaults in the UK.

— Bruce Kimmel