



Camelot

2022
SEASON

MUSICAL

PRODUCTION NUMBER 239

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*"Don't let it be forgot
That once there was a spot
For one brief shining moment that was known
As Camelot"*

When I think of *Camelot*, I think just as much of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy as I do of King Arthur. Perhaps it was growing up in a large Irish-Catholic family where JFK's portrait was proudly displayed in my grandmother's dining room well into the 1980's. It hung to the left of the cross with a portrait of the Pope hung to the right: a kind of trinity. As the first Catholic President, and an Irishman at that, he was practically "St. Jack" in her household. It was in that same house where I had first encountered the Arthurian myths, in a leatherbound collection gathering dust in my grandfather's den, and first heard the Camelot soundtrack on an 8-track tape in the living room.

Growing up in the 70s, the Kennedy mystique still held sway over the popular consciousness, as did its association with Camelot, King Arthur's legendary castle and court and the home of the Knights of the Round Table. I never questioned where that association came from or why it held so much power, but it certainly did.

In hindsight, the tie between Camelot the musical and the Kennedy era was inevitable. Lerner and Lowe's follow-up to their smash hit *My Fair Lady* opened on Broadway only a month after the 1960 election of a young,

glamorous President and his beautiful wife in what seemed like an American fairy tale. Though the Broadway production, anchored by Richard Burton and Julie Andrews, initially received mixed reviews and lagging ticket sales, an appearance by the cast on the Ed Sullivan show just six weeks after the Kennedy inauguration transformed it into a smash hit. The production ran until 1963, closing 10 months before Kennedy's assassination in November of that year.



President John Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy

It was mere weeks after that fateful day in Dallas when interviews with Kennedy's widow Jackie were published in Time Magazine, creating and instantly cementing the link between Kennedy, King Arthur, and Camelot:

"But there's this one thing I wanted to say... [...] I want to say this one thing, it's been almost an obsession with me, all I keep thinking of is this line from a musical comedy, it's been an obsession with me... At night before we'd go to sleep... we had an old Victrola. Jack liked to play some records. His back hurt, the floor was so cold. I'd get out of bed at night and play it for him, when it was so cold getting out of bed... on a Victrola ten years old—and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record, the last side of Camelot, sad Camelot... 'Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.'... There'll never be another Camelot again... [...] history made Jack what he was ... this lonely, little sick boy ... scarlet fever ... this little boy sick so much of the time, reading in bed, reading history ... reading the Knights of the Round Table ... and he just liked that last song. [...] There'll be great Presidents again [...] but there'll never be another Camelot again."

Camelot's lyricist, Alan Jay Lerner, tells this story in his 1978 autobiography of a performance about a week after that interview's release which illustrates how a grieving nation immediately took that connection to heart:

"Camelot was then on the road, playing the Opera House in Chicago, a huge barn of a theater with over three thousand seats. I was told later what happened that night: The theater was packed. The verse quoted [in the interview] is sung in the last scene. Louis Hayward was playing King Arthur. When he came to those lines, there was a sudden wail from the audience. It was not a

muffled sob; it was a loud, almost primitive cry of pain. The play stopped, and for almost five minutes everyone in the theater – on the stage, in the wings, in the pit, and in the audience – wept without restraint. Then the play continued. Camelot had suddenly become the symbol of those thousand days when people the world over saw a bright new light of hope shining from the White House."

It is chilling to me to think of Kennedy listening to this song, not knowing what would eventually come. The story of Camelot cannot be separated from its downfall, just as the story of Kennedy's Camelot is inextricably linked to its tragic end.

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA



Julie Andrews as Guenevere and Richard Burton as Arthur in Camelot