



ENCHANTED

APRIL

2022
SEASON

PLAY

PRODUCTION NUMBER 241

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“Now she had taken off her goodness and left it behind her like a heap of rain-sodden clothes, and she only felt joy.”

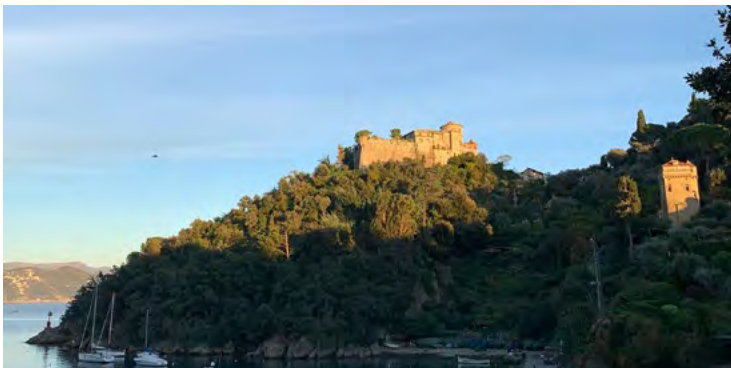
—Elizabeth von Arnim, *The Enchanted April*

Inspired by and written during a month-long vacation in Italy, Elizabeth von Arnim's novel *The Enchanted April* is her most widely read work, becoming an immediate bestseller in England and America on its release in 1922. Born in Australia, she lived in London, Switzerland, Poland, and Germany at various times and had a prolific career as an author. Many of her works include her love of gardening, seen throughout *The Enchanted April* in lush descriptions of the gardens at Castello Brown where she both wrote and set the novel.

Castello Brown is located in the port city of Portofino, raised high above the harbor. The location has been used for military fortifications at least as far back as the Roman Empire, with archaeological ruins dating back to 400 CE. Fortifications there protected the harbor in many battles dating from the 13th Century to the Congress of Vienna in 1815. It was purchased in 1867 by the English Consul in Genoa and transformed into a comfortable residence with gardens and artwork purchased

from many local churches that were being closed in the 1880s. In fact, Castello Brown is still active to this day. While you can't stay there for the month anymore, it hosts weddings and civil unions, conventions and conferences, and catered private events on the very same grounds as the characters from *The Enchanted April*.

Castello Brown was the filming location for perhaps the most famous adaptation of *The Enchanted April*, the 1991 film directed by Mike Newell and featuring Joan Plowright as Mrs. Fisher. It wasn't the first adaptation, however, as a play based on the book hit the Broadway stage in 1925, just a few years after the novel's publication. There was also a film version based on that script released in 1935 directed by Harry Beaumont which featured Frank Morgan as Mellersh just a few years before he would take on his most famous role as *The Wizard of Oz*. Tonight's adaptation is written by Matthew Barber and made its Broadway premiere in 2003, garnering multiple Tony nominations and winning the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding New American Play.



Castello Brown



Elizabeth von Arnim

Magical and filled with light and joy, it's worth remembering that *The Enchanted April* takes place in a very specific time and place where the world was changing in fundamental ways. The old order of Europe had been overturned by the ravages of World War I, with approximately a million casualties in the United Kingdom (around 2% of the population). Following this, over 50 million people died worldwide during the influenza pandemic of 1918/19 and a quarter of the British population were affected. The death toll was 228,000 in Britain alone. While a war death haunts Lady Caroline, it's reasonable to assume that everyone in this play has lost someone in their lives over the past decade.

Even as Europe was recovering from these twin cataclysms, the shadows of World War II were already beginning to gather. The same year *The Enchanted April* was published, 30,000 Fascist blackshirts marched on Rome, leading

to Benito Mussolini's appointment as Prime Minister, moving Italy one step further towards fascism and an alliance with Hitler's Germany.

Critic Kathy Hamilton of *The Female Scriblerian* sees this dark backdrop as a vital part of the story we see onstage: "The accepted order of things had been swept away (possibly for the better) but had left a chasm in its wake. This is the space we find our four main characters, women of varying ages, occupying. All four women have, in their own way, conformed to society's expectations of them. But now that the society that placed these expectations on them has been altered, each finds themselves unsatisfied with their allotted roles. Unable to name this dissatisfaction, each finds themselves drawn to the escape that the castle in Italy offers. [...] In making the decision to travel alone, each woman becomes the agent of her own life for the first time. Rather than an object."

Knowing the world surrounding these women, the joy and light they find on the grounds of Castello Brown becomes a rebellion against the darkness of the world and an expression of hope and change manifesting itself even in troubled times. The location itself is part of a story leading from centuries of war as a military fortification to a place of peace and love where today weddings are celebrated instead of military triumphs. As much as their trip is an escape *from* their lives, it is an escape *into* a future that is freer and more fulfilling than was possible even a few years before. Perhaps *The Enchanted April* is a reminder that even in times of strife and suffering, joy and hope and love is still somewhere to be found if one goes looking for it.

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA