

THEATER REVIEWS: A deeper story surfaces in Chanhassen's 'Camelot'

BY DOMINIC P. PAPTOLA, Theater Critic, Sun, Oct 27, 2002

"The best thing for being sad," the wise old Merlin tells a young King Arthur early on in "Camelot," "is to learn something."

That's a powerful sentiment in a very sad Minnesota these days, but it's also an apt analogy for the very smart, very passionate staging of the Lerner and Loewe musical at Chanhassen Theatres.

Structurally speaking, "Camelot" is a problematic musical. The score is not the strongest effort of the composing duo, with almost all of the best songs front-loaded into the first half of the show. The second act drags. And with the passage of time and the increase in cynicism, the show's ideals — so resonant in the Kennedy era during which it was first staged — are trickier to convincingly convey.

But the Chanhassen production, under the direction of Michael Brindisi, has much to teach audiences about this show. Beneath the familiar tunes and the surface plot of the love triangle between Arthur, Guenevere and Lancelot lies a deeper, more resonant story: This is a tale of order versus chaos, a chronicle of inter- and intra-personal struggle, and a poignant, powerful sermon that preaches the hopeful lesson that a good idea can still change the world.

Brindisi brings these elements to the fore in a richly textured and revelatory staging that is anchored by two of the most powerful performances seen at Chanhassen in recent years.

Steve Hendrickson plays King Arthur, and after seeing decades of miscellaneous hams and hacks roiling this role, it's nothing short of astonishing to see what an actor of merit can do with it. Hendrickson runs the spectrum in all sorts of ways — young to old, naive to wise, idealistic to pragmatic. It's a surprisingly delicious journey, and one that Hendrickson rides well.

He's not a particularly mellifluous singer, but silk-coated vocal chords are not what this role necessarily calls for. It needs the ring of truth and the solid sound of



**Capsule:
The Arthurian legend rings sweet
and true in Chanhassen's staging.**

sincerity, and Hendrickson has all of that and more. When he delivers a monologue at the end of act one in which he agonizes over the relationship between his wife and his best friend, it's a throat-tightening, spine-tingling moment.

Norah Long has as lovely a



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voice as could be hoped for in Guenevere, but there's more to her performance than merely a crystalline soprano. Long is adept at conveying character through both song and dialogue, a tricky and not always complimentary set of techniques that allow a musical theater performer to transcend the genre.

Though Chanhassen veteran Keith Rice is certainly capable as Sir Lancelot, he doesn't have quite that same ability — the bridge between his singing and his acting is not as transparent. Against performers such as Long and Hendrickson, his presence feels a bit thin.

But the cast is sprinkled with other sparkling performances — David Anthony Brinkley's wise yet vulnerable Merlin, Henry Gardner's lovably befuddled Pellinore, Janet Hayes Trow's irresistibly sweet siren song as Nimue, the enchantress who robs Merlin of his powers.

Set on an evocative, slightly menacing, windswept landscape designed by Nayna Ramey and costumed with wonder by Sandra Nei Schulte (special kudos for Merlin's robes, adorned with astrological signs), this "Camelot" sometimes seems like a *fata morgana*, shimmering in our imaginations.

That's the way I suspect Brindisi wants it. History doubts that there was ever the kind of King Arthur offered by the romantic legend, but for one brief shining moment on the Chanhassen stage, it almost seems possible.