



MICHAEL
YORK

THE
NEW
KING
ARTHUR

By Tom Provenzano
Photos: Gabriel Goldberg

FIFTY YEARS AGO the American musical theatre was stunned with the phenomenal success of Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe's *My Fair Lady*. Four years later the artistic team set out to replicate that triumph with another very British tale, that of King Arthur. The show caught the imagination of the country as well as its youthful new President John F. Kennedy and *Camelot* was forever entwined with progressing American values of egalitarianism and human rights.

Camelot captured the largest ticket pre-sale in Broadway history; however, it never equaled the artistic or commercial success of its predecessor. Though it possesses some of the best music and lyrics in theatre history, there were structural problems with the book that have never been solved. None of the hundreds of international productions since 1960 seem to have the same script and no one has been able to perfect the work. Still it remains one of the most popular standards of the musical stage and became a life-long vehicle for original stars Richard Burton and Robert Goulet.

Ocurring again during a major shift in national politics, *Camelot* is about to embark on its most important revival ever. Under the steady hands of producer Tom McCoy of McCoy Rigby Entertainment and the rich imagination of director Glenn Casale, the show has been heavily revised with the help of the heirs to Lerner's estate and artistic skills, the lyricist's son Michael and daughter Liza. All involved insist they are not dismissing the original show, merely helping it become more relevant for today's audiences.

The vital casting of the pivotal roles will bring the production notoriety while the new concepts will ultimately make the show work or not. McCoy and Casale scored a coup when they landed stage and screen actor Michael York to play King Arthur. His early swashbuckling roles as Tybalt in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* and D'Artagnan in *The Three Musketeers* made him a matinee idol. His starring turn with Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* as an articulate aesthete made him a superstar. His subsequent four decades of renown, however, have never filled him with hubris.

For this interview I was invited to York's beautiful and warm home in the Hollywood hills, where I was greeted by one of the great gentlemen of the world, whose generosity of spirit is manifest.

Part of York's humility is his discomfort with the culture of celebrity. While he is perfectly happy to use the power of stardom to help various charitable causes, he is leery of its caustic power over one's personality. He explains with a favorite quote from John Updike: "Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face. As soon as one is aware of being

somebody to be watched and listened to with extra interest, input ceases, and the performer goes blind and deaf in his over animation. One can either see or be seen." To which York adds his own personal concern, "People used to be celebrated for their achievements. The whole thing about celebrity was so well encapsulated by Andy Warhol: 'Everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.' There are so many irrelevancies today."

York's personal battle against relevancy has been to never stop learning or trying new aspects of his art. His extraordinary film career has spanned the lushness of Shakespearean tragedy to the absurdity of being Austin Powers' boss Basil Exposition and he continually moves from televi-

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sion to stage, but musical theatre has never been his strong suit. He did jump into the Broadway musical world in 1981 as the Aviator in a musical rendition of *The Little Prince*.

By all accounts the production was a disaster that ran for 16 previews and never officially opened. Of course in his gentility York says only, "The *Little Prince* didn't really work." Still the experience left him scarred enough that his immediate reaction to an offer to revise *Camelot* was in the contrary. "My instinct was to say no. I always go on gut instinct. You have nothing else to guide you. But the more I thought about it the more appealing it became. It is an established work of art."

He also loved the social and political implications of the musical. "There is a reason *Camelot* was so connected to the Kennedy time. It seemed to me people needed to be reminded that government of your fellow man can be a positive thing. This musical captured that in such a wonderful way. I thought it was a good time to do it."

Also the lure of an American national tour grasped him. "I am a great fan of this country. I am very curious to see the great heartland of America. To actually go there. At the end of it all I don't want to rue the sins of omission. By the same token I realize I have sort of indulged myself over the decades; doing movies is like flitting from flower to flower."

The idea began to blossom in his mind. But he was concerned most of all that the role not be a piece of stunt casting that might embarrass him or the creative team. He underscores that he has never been known as a song-and-dance man. He says, "When offered the role, I told them I wanted to audition. I was not going to presume, unless it was pre-approved by people who knew what they were doing."

Impresario McCoy was touched by York's insistence on auditioning. He recalls, "It was exciting he thought enough of the piece that he didn't want to hurt the show and frankly thought enough of our organization to make sure we all felt it was the right choice. The moment he opened his mouth and read a couple of lines from the show, you knew immediately it would be something special. This version of *Camelot* with him on stage would be something exciting."

Since his initial agreement to star as Arthur, York has thrown himself into intense musical training. He has been studying closely with the show's musical director Craig Bana and spent valuable hours in New York with celebrated singing coach Joan Lader. York tells us, "She basically links singing with speaking. She felt I had a nice speaking voice and that it should sound the same with music." When asked whether he is succeeding, York grins sheepishly and demurs, "I have learned I have grounds to be optimistic."

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York's brand of gentle optimism is one of the traits that have made him so successful and well-liked in the business. His generosity both of spirit and time has been to give back to young people what he was given in his childhood. York's life came into focus when he discovered the National Youth Theatre in his native England. York recalls, "My interest in theatre sprang from my own personal experience when I was 16 and joined the youth theatre in Britain. We had a teacher named Michael Croft principally using boys from London and putting on large cast Shakespeare productions, giving a very vigorous reading of the text. It was very successful. Soon it opened up to girls and became a rather big deal in Britain's cultural life. The work was not about turning out actors, although it happened. It produced Daniel Craig, the new James Bond, Helen Mirren and so many more—it is sort of inevitable."

York has turned his artistic fortune to good use by supporting the local version, the California Youth Theatre. Since its founding in 1962 by a former teacher at the British version, CYT has been constantly active. When approached to help, York was only too happy to join with the organization. York explains, "The idea was to bring kids from all over the LA area from every socio-economic background. The plan was to turn out better citizens, not actually actors. We wanted to give them self-esteem, enthusiasm and discipline. That's what is required putting on a play, whether you are sweeping the stage or acting."

York's name and charm brought in some generous patronage. "People at Paramount were very kind to us, letting us use old sound stages which we would clean up and clear out. The significant thing was getting the Ivar Theatre as a home for the performing arts." This is the positive side of fame that York is willing to embrace. "Hopefully I am an enabler. I hate to use the phrase but the 'celebrity culture' will get your foot in the door. If it can be used for that positive end then I am all for it. Speaking from experience I know what youth theatre did for me so I am very high on the whole thing. It is also very cost effective. What kills me is that these programs tend to be cut from the schools. It is so short-sighted. You need to have this."

York's progressive energy and his fascination with the possibilities of America made him decide to become a citizen. He was pleased with the enormous passion shown during the last election and believes these changing times are the perfect backdrop for his upcoming national tour of *Camelot*. The show's director Glenn Casale



is equally optimistic about the show. As a veteran of musical theatre, Casale has seen a great many *Camelots* but, along with McCoy, is convinced this new version will revolutionize the show.

Casale describes the new *Camelot*: "We have exciting new ideas of King Arthur and Guenevere and Lancelot. That triangle is deeper than physical love, much deeper. My whole concept is the three of them are one being. Arthur represents the mind, Lancelot represents the spirit and Guenevere represents the sexuality. They are one person. Without each other they can't survive, so it becomes much more of a sizeable tragedy in scope."

The intensity in the new book is expected to remove some of the storytelling obstacles that have been problematic since its inception. Casale explains, "First of all, we want to tell the story in

a more streamlined way than it has been told before. King Arthur's time was not medieval, it was darker. He would have existed 400 to 600 AD, right out of the dark ages. That'll mean more leathers, more furs as well as just a way of behaving. But I never forget there is a lot of good in the play. It has a great score and wonderful dialogue. It still offers great insights into our aspirations for what society should be. It is perfect for our political climate: Put down your swords! Stop the war! Its political layer is why Kennedy was so fascinated with it in the '60s."

Over the past 20 years Casale has become one of the most sought after directors in Southern California. Two years ago he was hired by a Boston theatre-in-the-round to stage Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney had released the rights to the script and songs but to none of the production

The Other Two Sides of the *Camelot* Triangle by Tom Provenzano

JAMES BARBOUR'S LANCELOT

James Barbour, soon to play Lancelot to Michael York's Arthur in *Camelot*, recalls his first moment meeting the star. "Everyone I had spoken to prior to meeting him said, 'You are going to be in heaven. He is this very sweet, spiritual, loving very non-assuming man.' I did meet him and I am in heaven."

Barbour is a star himself. Among the current crop of Broadway musical theatre leading men, Barbour is well-known for bringing sensitive machismo to song and dance. He leapt into stardom 12 years ago as Billy Bigelow in a brilliant new rendition of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, giving a career altering rendition of the character's signature "Soliloquy."

This will be Barbour's fourth outing as Lancelot and he is extremely pleased to be part of a production that is reworking the show. He says, "I think Glenn has great ideas. *Camelot* has been done so many times but never have I seen it approached as a new piece of theatre."

Casale's description of Lancelot's place in this new *Camelot*, requiring nuanced acting as well as magnificent singing, fits perfectly into Barbour's artistic desires. He explains, "I started as a classical actor. I studied Shakespeare my whole life. My high school was filled with musicals and straight theatre. I fell in love with classics. I read every-



thing about Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton, John Gielgud. I went to London for workshops with the Royal Academy."

So how did this classically trained actor become one of the major players in the American musical? "Because my sister sang and my mother would drag me to her lessons. I used to make fun of her and imitate her singing opera. By making fun of her I learned how to sing. When I got to New York I had to decide between play-

ing Lysander in *Midsummer* for \$75 a week or Cornelius in *Hello Dolly!* for \$250.

I had student loans. I started doing musicals and realized if I was going to compete I had to really study. I also saw how important classical training is to contemporary work. My girlfriend danced ballet with Mikhail Baryshnikov and later did Broadway. I look at Shakespeare and classical vocal training as a way into new work."

Barbour is one of those few young performers who burst quickly into stardom. But like York, he looks at the success not as something to make him prideful but as something to be grateful for. "I am so lucky. Sometimes I feel so unworthy. It is like a dream and maybe one day I'll pinch myself and wake up driving a cab in Newark. It is surreal."

Though his youth still lets him feel as if he is in a dream, the maturing artist in him has been able to learn.

"When I started, I always wanted to please. Then during *Carousel* this wave hit me. I realized what I am doing is bringing my ability and my choices to my character. The choices are always going to be right because this is who I am as an individual. At that moment I stopped trying to be the good boy and please everybody. I just sort of existed. So, if this is a dream, I relish every moment of it."

concepts. If Casale wanted to do the show he had to reconfigure it from the ground up. It was a task he was at first frightened of but soon his imagination became incredibly engaged. When Disney's theatrical boss Tom Schumaker popped in to see the results he was so impressed he determined this would be the new definitive version of the play; now, Casale's vision will be showcased in five major cities around the world.

It is with this sense of accomplishment and confidence that Casale is approaching his reworking of *Camelot*. He is excited about the possibilities of a New York run and that it just may become one of Broadway's more important revivals. If Casale's vision does succeed it will be with the enormous support of producer Tom McCoy who, with his wife Cathy Rigby, has created an increasingly large theatre empire, based at the

La Mirada Center for the Performing Arts.

Like his *Camelot* partners Casale and York, McCoy is joyous about his ability to enjoy a life in the theatre. "I feel very comfortable with my place in the theatre world. Not only does La Mirada provide us with a great place to present a full season of plays and musicals but it is a wonderful state-of-the-art midsize house where I can mount national tours that have been highly successful. It also allows me to mount a show like *Camelot* for \$2 million; in New York, it would take \$7 million."

McCoy's ideas for the show coincided well with Casale's. They agreed on a darker, sexier version. He says, "In 1961, cute was fine but that was 45 years ago. We wanted permission from the Lerner family for whatever changes we thought were appropriate. We've accomplished that." ■

CAMELOT

Opens Jan. 12;
plays Tues.-Thurs., 7:30 pm;
Fri., 8 pm; Sat., 2 & 8 pm;
Sun., 2 & 7 pm;
Closes Jan. 28
Tickets: \$37.50-\$45
La Mirada Theatre for the
Performing Arts
14900 La Mirada Blvd.,
La Mirada
562.944.9801 or 714.994.6310
www.lamiradatheatre.com

RACHEL YORK'S GUENEVERE

Michael York and James Barbour were set for this ambitious new version of the classic *Camelot*. No one doubted this perfect casting for King Arthur and Lancelot. But who would complete the trinity? If, as in Casale's concept, Arthur was the intellectual aspect, Lancelot the spiritual, then Guenevere needed to be someone who embodied sensuality. When finally the choice was made public it was clear this *Camelot* was already on its way to brilliance. Rachel York was the ideal choice to realize the triumvirate.

Like her co-star Barbour, York burst onto the scene early. At 19 she arrived in New York, walked into an agent's office, demonstrated her remarkable voice and extraordinary acting and was signed on the spot. She quickly debuted to critical acclaim in Broadway's *City of Angels*. The next 15 years saw her career climb quickly in theatre, film and television.

She was immediately intrigued by the idea of playing Guenevere. She recalls, "I grew up listening to it on one of those eight-track tapes. Julie Andrews is always in my ear!"

She loved the show and always thought about how she'd like to see it recreated. "About four years ago I did *Anything Goes* with Glenn Casale. I had always had the dream to do an updated version of *Camelot*. I thought it was a wonderful book and score but needed a lot of revi-



sion. Then I overheard Glenn talking to somebody about his ideas. I said, 'Wait, I have had the same idea!' We talked about how it needs to be sexier, more sensual and explore the chemistry between these three people." She is excited about finding depth in the character of Guenevere. "I think she is just young and playful and a little naughty and there is an innocence to that actually. She hasn't lived a full life yet. So she is playing with fire. I think a lot of us do when we are very young."

She recalls her own time as a teenage performer. "I used to want to turn and twist myself into a pretzel and be clay for a director to mold. I was willing and open to anything. Through the years, I tortured myself emotionally to play all these different types of characters. It was about experiencing life—being addicted to experience. Through these various characters I would educate myself and have empathy. I still have that desire. However, it is now more about expressing what I already have. I have so much life and experience and emotion inside."

York thought of herself as an actor before a singer but it turned out singing would be her salvation. "In school when I had a bad day I would come home and sing for hours. It was almost like a meditative healing. I'd sing for three hours a day after school, partly because I was lonely, partly to perfect my sound. I did my own personal coaching by emulating artists like Julie Andrews, Carol Lawrence, Ella Fitzgerald. The mold I saw myself in strangely enough was as an actress. I always loved to sing so it made sense to do musicals. Singing was the expression of the acting. It's been a constant companion."

Like her co-stars, the other York and Barbour, she expresses an amazing joy in her work. When she met them for dinner and a photo shoot she was instantly entranced. "It's even more than I expected. There is a wonderful energy between all of us. I can tell the chemistry is going to be lovely."