

was definitely Lancelot. “C’est Moi” was Goulet. He had an operatic voice but chose musical theater, and we were eternally grateful because without his “If Ever I Would Leave You,” we might never have had a Nathan Gunn. These two guys prove that an operatic voice in musical theater -- if it doesn’t sound too operatic -- is still the best way to win an audience. Couple that with great acting and moves, and, well, you’ve got a Lancelot to die for. Just watch Gunn reprise the song on YouTube. I mean – to die for.

So now you have a trimmed-down “Camelot” at the Pasadena Playhouse with a minimal set, minimal costuming, and an unknown young cast. I thoroughly enjoyed the performance when I wasn’t making comparisons. Burton and later Richard Harris and Gabriel Byrne showed that there is a place for great acting in musical theater. Byrne’s Act 1 King Arthur monologue is a showstopper. It’s on YouTube. Shannon Stoeke may be an excellent singer and actor, but he just couldn’t pull off the monologue.

Likewise, Shannon Warne’s Guenevere didn’t have any of the charm associated with Julie Andrews’ queen. She spouted out the spoken dialogue and lyrics in a direct manner without any finesse or refinement. And although she has a fair voice that can belt low and reach soprano highs, there is little beauty in it. She walked onstage, delivered her lines and walked off: one, two three.

Warne is quoted on a voice teacher’s website as having said: “I have never formally (or informally) trained in belting. I was always afraid to belt too high and injure myself. After one afternoon of working with [him], I was belting higher than ever. . . . The following week I was able to approach an audition with complete power and control knowing I could hit every note in a song I may have otherwise compromised and mixed. I look forward to using the many tricks I learned.”

That is precisely what is wrong with Warne’s voice. In musical theater, singers are amplified. There is no need to sacrifice beauty of tone by belting high. Singing over the passaggio with a mix is the normal progression. Belting too high is what is no doubt causing Warne’s voice to sound unpleasant. A mix of support with tones focused in the mask will secure Warne’s vocal longevity. Too much bottom in one’s top is in fact dangerous. With some careful classical vocal training and by investing more of her inner self in roles, Warne will find the beauty in her voice and learn to ingratiate her audiences.

The third principal actor, UCLA graduate Doug Carpenter, stole the show. He has a warm, mellow baritone with all the requisite qualities of becoming a star. Although impressive, his “If Ever I Would Leave You” didn’t always build when it should have, and his final note wavered between pitches. He had by far the best voice in the ensemble, plus he’s tall and good-looking. I’m betting that if he continues to work on his acting and movement, he will make his emotions more accessible to the audience and will soon find a Tony on his mantel.

The rest of the supporting cast was excellent. Richard R. Segall (Dinadan) and Andrew Ross Wynn (Sagramore) were especially effective.

The orchestral sound seemed to move swiftly and metronomically which made the singers less able to interpret and draw from the brilliant score.

Director David Lee's trimmed-down concept worked in part. I could watch a concert version of "Camelot" and still be quite content. But the totally young, bright-eyed bushy-tailed cast on a slightly drab set left me wanting.

Some of the action was silly, like the bow-and-arrow bird-on-a-string hunting schtick. And the one minute of nudity served absolutely no purpose except to shock us. Lee tried to move us into the 21st century by taking the characters out of the idealistic sugar-coated Camelot and by focusing on the more crude aspects of adultery. With his bare-bones staging, he tried to make us believe that less was more; but in the case of the Lancelot-Guenevere infatuation, the characters' naked openness brought us to the conclusion that his more was less. Moss Hart who staged the original "Camelot" allowed us to imagine. That was the magic of the 1950s and '60s. Lee has tried to turn this timeless musical into a reality show.

Nevertheless, the score stands on its own and I enjoyed the evening immensely. People long to hear the melodies of old. I still came out humming.

Book & Lyrics: Alan Jay Lerner

Music: Frederick Loewe

Based on "The Once and Future King" by TH White

Director: David Lee

Music Director: Christy Crowl

Choreography: Mark Esposito

Scenic Design: Tom Buderwitz

Costume Design: Maggie Morgan

Lighting Design: Michael Gilliam

Sound Design: Vikram Kirby

Pasadena Playhouse Artistic Director: Sheldon Epps

Executive Director: Stephen Eich