

More About **ARTHUR: KING!**

In the spring of 1979, I went down to Mexico to climb its two highest volcanoes, Orizaba and Popocatépetl. One of the other climbers in my group was a law student from Portland named Gerri, with whom I hit it off and we quickly became buddies.

One evening in camp, Gerri and I got to talking about our other interests besides climbing. This was over 40 years ago, so I don't recall the exact details of our conversation, but somehow we hatched an idea to create a ballet. She would provide the concept and write a scenario, then I would compose the score and try to find a home for it. She even had an idea right away: the King Arthur legend.

After we both returned home, true to her word, within a week or so Gerri sent me the scenario for a ballet which she called **Arthur: King!** I didn't have any other projects going at the time, so I set to work on it and by the end of the summer I had a 2-piano score completed and ready to get recorded so I could start shopping it around while I worked on the orchestration. Those were the days before we had electronic musical notation and realistic virtual recording (MIDI or VST) technology, so I had to hire a pair of pianists and record their performance to get a demo and later use for rehearsal.

I lived in Austin, Texas at the time, so without going out of town, my choices were limited to the two local ballet companies. But the winds were favorable and the project was accepted by Stanley Hall and his company, Austin Ballet Theatre.

Prior to then, ABT had always performed to recorded music, but for this project they got a grant and brought the Austin Community Orchestra on board. This kind of collaboration was a first for both organizations!

The production was given two performances in October 1981 and was a big success, so much so that ABT commissioned another ballet score from me the following year and eventually paired it with two more performances of **Arthur: King!** in February 1983. Please see my notes about **Paisano Suite** for that story.

Below is Gerri's scenario for **Arthur: King!**

The story of Arthur, Guenivere, and Lancelot is a story of passion and loyalty. The fire of lust and the ice-stiff tension of loyalty conflict in every person: the challenge is in each of us. Arthur, who in Tennyson's poem is the embodiment of Christ (while the nation becomes a symbol of humanity), may not function as a man; he is (and knows he is) a mirror to a people's ideals. He loves: his nation, Gueneviere, Lancelot. To each he is perfect. and in his perfection lies isolation. He is a public figure--and, as such, has not the privacy for private sorrowing.

Gueneviere, his queen, is beautiful. Despite her great beauty, she feels honored to be loved by Arthur (who is much older than she). He is as gentle as a father with her. She is protected from every discomfort. Her youth, more than her beauty, dazzles Arthur.

After a short scene where the Court Jester pretends he is king, Lancelot, dedicated to purity and to his king, comes to seek permission to search for the Holy Grail. He finds the king and queen walking together in the Great Hall, and goes at once to kneel before the king; the king loves Lancelot as a mirror of his younger days. Lancelot is brave, gentle, strong and pure. His eyes meet Gueneviere's, and at once, they are swept into a tremendous passion for each other.

Courtiers (the chorus) arrive. Arthur and Gueneviere pass among them. They entreat Arthur to ascend his throne, which he does. Then the crowd passes into dimness as light fades and Lancelot and Gueneviere dance, pas de deux, their need for one another. They want each other, but are already suffering guilt. Perhaps something could come of such a love; but (they look at Arthur), someone will be hurt, badly hurt, if they give in to this passion.

The dance fades as the lights come up on the bustling crowd who are dancing and feting the king. Lancelot and Gueneviere are immediately ashamed on their act of betrayal--of which the king is mercifully (apparently) unaware. Gueneviere takes her seat beside him as pages bring Arthur a chalice, which he raises in prayer. Lancelot looks at the chalice--looks at Gueneviere, and falls on his knees before Arthur, ostensibly to leave but really to beg forgiveness. Arthur is, after all, not only a man they both love, but he is also the nation.

Gerri Lent