



Lunt, Alfred (1892-1977), and Lynn Fontanne (1887-1983)

by Linda Rapp

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Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne delighted Broadway audiences with their masterful stagecraft. They became known as the first family of the American theater, but theirs was a lavender marriage (that is, a marriage of a gay man and a lesbian designed to create and sustain the illusion of heterosexuality), and their presentation of themselves as the ideal American couple may have been their most skillful performance.

The public was enchanted by what seemed to be a storybook tale--romance, Broadway stardom, and a marriage of over fifty years for a farm boy from Wisconsin and a delicate English beauty.

Lunt's Early Years

Alfred David Lunt, Jr. did not actually grow up on a farm. He was born in Milwaukee on August 12, 1892. His father, Alfred David Lunt, a lumberman and land agent, died when the younger Lunt was only two. Five years later his widow, Harriet Washburn Briggs Lunt, married Carl Sederholm, a doctor.

Lunt was educated at the private Milwaukee Academy and then at the Carroll College Academy in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Upon graduation, he enrolled at Carroll College. He considered studying set design or architecture but soon realized that theater performance was his true calling. He became a member of the Carroll Players under the direction of May Rankin, whom Lunt consistently praised in later years for the excellence of her teaching and for her encouragement of her students.

While at the Carroll Academy, Lunt became friends with Ray and Andrew Weaver, fellow students who boarded for three years at his mother and stepfather's house. The three wrote a play, *The Greater Love*, which they hoped to have staged at the college, but the work was never produced.

Lunt and Ray Weaver remained close even after their students days. The exact nature of their relationship is unknown, but in letters Lunt called Weaver "honey" and "my hero of delight."

Jared Brown, whose biography of Lunt and Fontanne portrays them as strictly heterosexual, acknowledges that such effusiveness was inconsistent with Lunt's usual writing style but attempts to explain it away as "a florid rhetorical style typical of the period." As Sam Abel states, however, such was not the way that young men generally addressed each other in 1914.

After two years at Carroll College, Lunt transferred to Emerson College in Boston, but he attended only briefly before joining the repertory company of the Castle Square Theatre. He made his professional debut in their production of A. Baldwin Stone and Frederic Ranken's *The Gingerbread Man*.



Alfred Lunt (top) and Lynn Fontanne (above) in costume for *The Guardsman* (1924).

Lunt toured for a few years in theater and vaudeville. Along the way his talent caught the attention of George C. Tyler, and Lunt subsequently became a member of his company. It was in a 1919 Tyler production of Richard Washburn Child's *Made of Money* that Lunt first worked with Fontanne.

Fontanne's Early Years

Fontanne was named Lillie Louise when she was born in Woodford in the English county of Essex on December 6, 1887. Her mother, Frances Ellen Thornley Barnett Fontanne, quickly decided that she disliked the choice, and began calling her Lynn.

Fontanne's father, Jules Pierre Antoine Fontanne, was a type designer and ran a printing factory that he had inherited from his father. An inept businessman, Jules Fontanne eventually lost the factory, and his family faced hard times. Each of the couple's four daughters was taken out of school at around the age of fifteen so that the girls could find jobs and bring in much-needed money.

Lynn Fontanne, however, had long dreamed of becoming a professional actress. She talked a family friend into writing her a letter of introduction to the legendary actress Ellen Terry so that she could audition to be her student. Fontanne's rendition of Portia's "quality of mercy" speech from *The Merchant of Venice* impressed Terry, who trained her for two years.

Fontanne began her professional career in 1905 at the age of eighteen. She found some roles in London and, as a member of Weedon Grossmith's company, toured in England. Grossmith took his troupe to North America, and they performed at Alla Nazimova's 39th Street Theater in New York. The play, R. C. Carton's *Mr. Preedy and the Countess*, was poorly received, however, and the production soon closed.

Although Fontanne had had some good notices, she was discouraged because she was acting mostly minor parts in forgettable plays. Even after success in a leading role in Arnold Bennett and Edward Knobloch's *Milestones*, her career languished until she met American stage star Laurette Taylor and her husband, English playwright J. Hartley Manners.

Taylor and Manners, who had seen Fontanne in *Milestones*, offered her a role in Manners's *The Wooing of Eve* in New York.

Taylor soon became a close friend and influential advisor of Fontanne. The two often spent weekends together at Taylor's home, but it is not known if they engaged in a physical relationship. According to theater insiders, Taylor's marriage was "a business arrangement," and she had extramarital affairs of which Manners was aware and to which he apparently did not object. Alla Nazimova was said to be among her conquests.

Taylor reputedly "stage-managed" Fontanne's romance with Lunt, but then became jealous of their relationship. The friendship did not survive the marriage; finding Taylor's vindictive behavior toward Fontanne intolerable, the couple soon dropped her from their circle.

Working Together

Following their appearance in *Made of Money*, Lunt and Fontanne worked together in John T. McIntyre's *A Young Man's Fancy* in 1919. When that show closed, each went on tour in other plays. Lunt's performance in the title role of Booth Tarkington's *Clarence* and Fontanne's in George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's *Dulcy* established the two of them as stars.

After their marriage in 1922 they continued working in separate shows for a time. Both were dissatisfied with the light comedies in which they were appearing, and yearned to do more serious, sophisticated theater.

Accordingly, in 1924 they joined the Theater Guild, which produced plays of greater literary merit. In their years with the Guild, they appeared in such works as George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1925), *Pygmalion* (1926), and *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1927), Franz Werfel's *The Goat Song* (1926), and Robert Sherwood's *Reunion in Vienna* (1931-32 in New York, 1934 in London).

The favorable public and critical reception of their first Theater Guild production, Ferenc Molnár's *The Guardsman* (1924), established the Lunts as an acting team. From that time on, they always performed on stage together except for once, in 1928, when Fontanne, at Lunt's urging, appeared without him in Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*.

The Lunts' project of performing in more sophisticated and sexually-daring plays came at a time when such material was gaining in popularity with audiences. The era of light-hearted musical shows and the extravaganza of *The Ziegfeld Follies* was waning as dramatists such as O'Neill offered more controversial fare and Mae West challenged notions about propriety with her plays *Sex* and *The Drag*.

Gay New York

During the 1920s New York experienced what George Chauncey has called the "Pansy Craze," a fascination with the gay communities of Greenwich Village, the Upper West Side, and Harlem. Attending drag balls was a fashionable entertainment for straight couples.

There were strict limits to the tolerance, however. Throughout the period, the police raided businesses catering to a gay clientele. Patrons were subject to arrest and imprisonment, and, even if not convicted, could find their careers ruined.

Since theater folk tended to be more accepting than the general public, many gay men and lesbians chose to live in neighborhoods of "theatrical boarding houses." Rents were reasonable, and residents tended not to complain about neighbors who might be considered unconventional elsewhere.

In the early years of their marriage Lunt and Fontanne lived in a theatrical boarding house. To what extent they participated in the life of the community is unclear, but they certainly would have been aware of it.

Over the years, their social circle included gay playwright and actor Noël Coward, gay photographer Carl Van Vechten, and the sexually ambiguous critic Alexander Woollcott.

Rumors

There were rumors about the sexual orientation of Lunt and Fontanne in the theater world.

In 1933 an item entitled "Stage Stars in Queer Action" in the gossipy tabloid *Broadway Brevities* did not name the Lunts but clearly seemed to target them, saying "This little fact concerns two of the greatest stars of the legitimate theatre and who are supposed to be happily married. The pair, however, are as queer as a couple of bugs. He is a pansy who is conducting an affair with his male secretary, while she is a lesbian and has several girls acting as her lovers. Cute, eh?"

The rumors never became fodder for the mainstream press, though. Marriage seems to have shielded their reputations.

Marriage as Shield

Their image as a respectable married couple also permitted them to take on sexually adventurous parts, as they did in *Design for Living*. Written by their friend Coward, who costarred in the 1933 production, the

play deals with a *ménage à trois*. Although the physical nature of the relationship between the two men was made clear in the play, the censors and most critics somehow decided that the pair were just good friends.

Even the Lunts had their limits, however. When they and Coward were discussing how to stage the play, they considered using a gigantic bed as a set, at least until, as Coward recalled, "Alfred . . . suggested a few stage directions which, if followed faithfully, would undoubtedly have landed all three of us in gaol."

Other risqué plays in which the Lunts appeared were *Point Valaine* (1934), which Coward wrote for them, and Jean Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38* (1938). Fontanne also tested boundaries in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1928), which Lunt called "a six-day bisexual race."

The Climate of Homophobia

In the late 1930s, as New York prepared to host the 1939 World's Fair, public authorities began a campaign to eradicate all visible signs of the city's gay community. The State Liquor Authority targeted gay bars, sending covert agents to look for "disorderly" conduct there. Police raided gay enterprises and arrested patrons, many of whom were sentenced to jail. Newspapers published the names of those who had been detained.

In this climate of homophobia, Lunt and Fontanne began taking less controversial roles, although, as they were no longer young, fewer may have been available to them in any event.

Montgomery Clift's *Real* Parents

In 1940 they appeared in Robert Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night* as the middle-aged parents of Montgomery Clift. The Lunts were not known for taking young actors under their wing, but they did so with Clift, inviting him to their home, where they coached him in acting.

Lunt and Fontanne seem to have had a genuine affection for the young Clift (although they broke with him later). They gave him a photograph of themselves, inscribed "From your *real* mother and father." Clearly, they were engaged in a project of redefining the family.

At the time, Clift was in a gay relationship, and Lunt worried that Clift's career might suffer if that fact became known. The Lunts' "parental" advice to Clift was to marry a young actress, Phyllis Thaxter, and to establish themselves as an acting team, as Lunt and Fontanne had done.

The Ideal Couple

In the early 1940s the Lunts began an aggressive campaign to promote themselves as the picture of the ideal couple--quite literally. They granted interviews to magazines with a domestic slant such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, and had themselves photographed in homely pursuits at their farm--where they had a lavish house called Ten Chimneys--in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin. In several variations of a posed photograph, the two are seen carrying a basket of vegetables, each of them holding one of the handles.

Lunt and Fontanne were able to control the access of journalists and photographers to their home, and thus to control their image. Other people rarely appear in photographs of them taken at this time; the Lunts are generally seen in isolation, a couple complete unto themselves and content.

With their image firmly in place, the Lunts continued their successful stage career. They also did some work in radio and appeared on television in Emmett Lavery's *The Magnificent Yankee* on the *Hallmark Hall of Fame*, for which both won Emmy Awards.

Last Years

On July 4, 1964, Lunt and Fontanne were given Presidential Medals of Freedom. Six years later, both received special Tony Awards for lifetime contributions to the theater.

Lunt and Fontanne retired in 1972. Lunt died on August 3, 1977, and Fontanne on July 30, 1983.

The inscription on their tombstone states that they "were universally regarded as the greatest acting team in the history of the English speaking theater" and that "[t]hey were married for 55 years and were inseparable both on and off the stage."

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