

The Quest for Perfection:

Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, and the American Theater

By Jared Brown

The Lunts were my friends. They were my idols, my teachers, my mentors. I think of all the lucky things that happened to me in my life in the theatre, the Lunts were the luckiest.

Helen Hayes



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

Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. The names are familiar to many — the Lunts dominated the American theater for four decades. The names especially may be familiar in Wisconsin, for the Lunts maintained a home, Ten Chimneys, near Genesee Depot for more than half a century.

Few theater artists have so brilliantly realized their potential as actors, directors, and producers. As professionals, the Lunts refused to allow commercialism to dictate the course of their careers, even though they functioned within a commercial framework. All too often, the New York theater, which must appeal to a large number of people if it is to survive, tends to reduce the contributions of its artists to a level which appeals to the least demanding portion of its audience. It's the disease that also afflicts commercial television. But the Lunts viewed the art form in which they worked in idealistic terms. They were aware of the necessity of paying some attention to box office receipts, of course, but their goal was to balance pragmatism and idealism, and they dedicated themselves to furthering that vision. They deserve to be remembered and appreciated.

Lynn Fontanne was born in England, probably in 1887, and was fortunate to receive personal instruction from Ellen Terry, England's most prominent actress during the nineteenth century. Fontanne emigrated to America before 1920 and acted in Laurette Taylor's company in

New York for several years. She gained respect as a fine actress but always, in those early years, played supporting roles.

Alfred Lunt was born in Milwaukee in 1892 at 1701 Grand Avenue (now Wisconsin Avenue) and was educated at Carroll College in Waukesha. He began his professional acting career in a Boston stock company in 1912 and from there he moved on to vaudeville, then to Broadway.

In 1919, when they were both hired to perform a season of summer productions, Lunt and Fontanne met and fell in love. They were married on May 27, 1922. In the first two years of their married life, they occasionally appeared in the same play, but for the most part their acting careers remained separate.

That changed in 1924, when both of the Lunts were hired by the Theatre Guild, America's foremost "art theatre" — an organization that played on Broadway but defied Broadway [p. 5] conventions by offering serious and innovative plays, the kinds of plays that were regularly rejected by commercial managements — the kinds of plays the Lunts longed to appear in. They acted together in *The Guardsman* that season, prompting critic Brooks Atkinson to write that their performance "had the lightness of a dance and the virtuosity of a serenade." Thus early on they established themselves as brilliant light comedians.



Lynn Fontanne, Noel Coward, and Alfred Lunt in a scene from Design for Living, 1933.

Subsequent productions for the Theatre Guild demonstrated that they also were remarkably versatile, as capable of playing intense drama as sophisticated comedy. Furthermore, when they appeared together in the same production, observers noted that their styles complemented one another. Then, in 1928, they made it a condition of their employment with the Theatre Guild that they must *always* act together in every production. It was the beginning of a joint acting career which, as Atkinson put it, "became matchless in America and perhaps throughout the world." Neither ever appeared separately on the stage again. Only in her very last performance on television, in 1967, did Lynn Fontanne appear in a production without her husband. In all,

the Lunts appeared as a team in twenty-six plays, three films, and four television programs, winning Tony awards for their stage presentations, Emmys for their television performances, and Oscar nominations for their only sound film.

The Lunts were dedicated performers whether they were on Broadway, in Topeka, or in San Antonio. No effort was too great, no rehearsal too long, no detail too small in their unceasing attempt to do their best on every occasion. They brought undiminished enthusiasm to the stage whether they were giving the first performance of a play or the 300th. This attitude was exemplified by Fontanne's remark on the Lunts' closing day in Noel Coward's *Design for Living* in 1933: The play had been running for months in New York when time came for the last two performances on Saturday afternoon and evening. During the matinee, Fontanne managed to get a laugh she had been striving for since the play opened. She came offstage flushed with victory, thrilled at having finally achieved the desired effect. Noel Coward, who was co-starring in the play, was puzzled at the extent of her enthusiasm and asked her if it weren't a bit late to be experimenting. "Why, *no!*", she answered, "There's still tonight, isn't there?"

A similar event occurred in the 1940s, during the tour of *O Mistress Mine*, a play in which the Lunts acted for nearly four years — in London, on Broadway, and throughout the United States. The play's tour finally came to an end in Seattle, where, after the next-to-last performance, Lunt, who was directing, astounded the company by calling a rehearsal for the next afternoon. In many cases, no rehearsals will be called during the run of a play, on the assumption that the performances are firmly set and cannot be significantly improved. But with the Lunts it was taken for granted that improvements could always be made. That elusive goal — a perfect performance — might never be attained, but it was always to be sought after. Regardless of how good today's performance had been, tomorrow's might be better, which explains why Lunt would call a rehearsal of a play in which his company had been acting for years, with only one performance remaining.

The Lunts never failed to take that extra time, even when they were in opposition to the rules of Equity, the actors' union. Equity insisted upon an eight-hour work day (and, of course, Equity was justified in attempting to win favorable working conditions for performers), but the Lunts could not be bound by union restrictions. Because they were married to one another and in one another's company continually, they used their offstage hours to perfect what they hoped to accomplish on-stage, rehearsing endlessly while riding in taxis, while walking, while eating their meals together.

There was the illusion of effortless in their performances. In truth, immense effort was required. Their method was to try out hundreds of ideas for their characterizations, then select only those that showed the most promise and rehearse them painstakingly until the whole process seemed to the viewer to be effortless. One actor in the Lunts' repertory company watched them work out the details of a single entrance for more than six hours, during which they subtly varied each detail until they found precisely the mood, the tone, the attitudes they [p. 6] wanted to convey. Perfectionism, then, is perhaps their most significant legacy, but it is hardly the only one.



Ten Chimneys, Genesee Depot

The Lunts are not as well remembered as they ought to be precisely because their dedication was to the theater rather than to movies or television. We tend to equate stardom with the electronic media, and the same thing was true to a lesser degree in the 1930s and 1940s, when the Lunts were at their peak. But the Lunts loved the excitement that only the theater could provide: the personal contact with the audience; the thrill — and the danger — of acting before an audience which could be deeply moved to laughter or to tears or both, but from whom mistakes could not be concealed. The theater provided the Lunts with far greater satisfaction than they derived from appearing in the movies or from acting on the radio or, late in their careers, performing on television.

Still, actors who work exclusively (or nearly exclusively) in the theater pay a price: They not only forgo the greater financial rewards that movies and television can bring, they also risk being forgotten by later generations, for their performances only live in the memories of those who saw them. And if the Lunts haven't been entirely forgotten, the sad truth is that their greatness is remembered by all too few. By the time of Lynn Fontanne's death in 1983, at age ninety-five, television news people, who had obviously never heard of her, reported the death of Lynn *Fontaine* on various stations throughout the country.

In fact, the public's knowledge of the Lunts' place in history had faded at least a decade before that. In the 1970s Harold Clurman said that half the graduate students in his theater class at Hunter College looked at him blankly when he included Alfred Lunt as one of America's foremost twentieth-century actors. Other teachers of theater have had similar discouraging experiences. *The Guardsman*, their only sound film, made in 1931, is a comic masterpiece but, unfortunately, is rarely shown in movie theaters or on television.

Lunt's career as an actor spanned fifty-three years, from 1912 until 1965. Fontanne was active for a remarkable sixty-two years. They began their careers on Broadway before John F. Kennedy was born, were regarded as America's greatest acting couple before *The Jazz*

Singer became the first talking picture in 1927, and maintained that position until the mid-1960s.

Why did their careers last so long, and why were their performances eagerly awaited by audiences in America and in England, year in and year out? For one thing, they so often appeared in outstanding plays: *The Guardsman*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Sea Gull*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *Volpone*, *Design for Living*, *Amphitryon 38*, and their culminating triumph, *The Visit*. Toward the end of their careers, they appeared in plays of less distinction, but even then they brought wit, style, and grace to every performance.

When a roster of great new theatrical names, such as Montgomery Clift and Julie Harris, gained prominence after World War II, the Lunts became their mentors. Clift was in their production of *There Shall Be No Night*, and Harris appeared with Fontanne in the television version of *Anastasia*. Uta Hagen, whose attitude toward her profession was profoundly affected when she appeared in *The Sea Gull* with the Lunts in 1938, continues to this day as one of the foremost teachers of acting in New York, sharing with her students the discipline and craft she learned from the Lunts. Their techniques, passed on to the current generation of performers, continue in use, although few young actors are aware of their origins.

Thanks to the Lunts, actors now are free to experiment with techniques once considered too risky to attempt: overlapping dialogue, for example, or turning one's back to the audience at a strategic moment. The Lunts perfected the use of overlapping dialogue, improving on a technique that Lynn Fontanne had begun to explore in her performances with Laurette Taylor. Today the technique doesn't seem revolutionary, for other performers have adopted it. Some presentations — the film *M*A*S*H* is perhaps the best example — use it to great effect in nearly every scene. When Alfred Lunt was beginning his professional career in the theater, turning one's back to the audience [p. 7] was unheard of. But Lunt believed that, under certain circumstances, an actor could communicate feeling and emotion as effectively with his back as with his facial expressions. Eventually, he proved it, to the benefit of actors and audiences today.

Some of the other contributions the Lunts made to the theater should be briefly noted. Their eminence as actors had the almost inevitable result of leading them into directing. As a director Lunt was considered one of the best in America. And, as the Lunts extended their concern from their own performances to the performances of all the actors with whom they were working, they became eager to assume the producer's function as well: to select the members of their companies, choose and shape the plays in which they would appear, and determine where, when, and under what conditions they would perform.

During their careers the Lunts kept alive a long-standing tradition in the theater, that of the actor-manager, a tradition that dates back at least to the sixteenth century, when wandering troupes of *Commedia dell'Arte* performers in Italy were generally headed by the troupes' foremost actors. These individuals served not only as the companies' leading players, they also assembled the members of the companies, saw to their economic well-being, selected the dramatic materials they would play, and, because they had attained positions of such power and importance, were able to exert artistic control over the productions. The roster of actor-managers includes such historic names as Molière, David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, Edwin Booth, Constantin



***The Lunts at dinner at
Genesee Depot.***

[p. 8] Stanislavski, and Henry Irving, all of them revered for their many contributions to shaping the theatrical milieu of their time. Lunt and Fontanne were part of that tradition and inspired the same reverence.

The Lunts' achievements as actors induced dramatists to craft plays especially for them — such plays as Noel Coward's *Design for Living*, Robert E. Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night*, and S. N. Behrman's *The Second Man*, among others. Thus the Lunts created opportunities for playwrights who might never have written those plays had they not had the great acting couple in mind. The theater cannot survive as a significant medium without new plays, and the Lunts did their part to stimulate playwriting.



The Lunts and Noel

Coward at Genesee Depot in the 1930s.

Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne fought valiantly to re-establish repertory as a viable theatrical system in New York. This is the system of alternating productions under which the companies of Shakespeare and Moliere operated so successfully hundreds of years ago (and which is alive and well in Wisconsin today). At the time, their attempt was unsuccessful — it clashed *too* jarringly with the commercial necessities of Broadway — but it did have an impact, nevertheless, for the Lunts played *The Sea Gull*, *Amphitryon 38*, and *Idiot's Delight* in repertory on tour throughout the United States in the late 1930s. They also wished to maintain an ensemble company — a group of the same actors, who would remain with the Lunts play after play, season after season thus assuring a unity of performance that could not be matched by actors unfamiliar with one another's idiosyncracies. In this they were successful for years, despite the fact that the ensemble system is complex and expensive — often much more so than a system in which a new company is assembled for every play.

Surely one of their most significant accomplishments was their successful struggle to maintain the interest of audiences outside New York City in the legitimate theater. The Lunts invariably toured the country in the productions in which they had achieved fame in New York. Often they did so by playing in high school gymnasiums and other ill-equipped structures as well as in lavishly furnished theaters. Certainly their devotion to touring was physically and emotionally wearing and brought no greater financial reward than playing in New York would have done. But the Lunts toured because they felt a responsibility to the playwrights to keep their works and the underlying themes of their plays before the public for as long as possible. More importantly, they felt a responsibility to theatergoers outside New York, believing that the residents of Seattle or Houston or Minneapolis had as much right to see first-rate theater as those who happened to live in (or could afford to travel to) New York.

It may be reasonably argued that the decentralization of American theater today owes much to the efforts of the Lunts and a handful of other actors, such as Helen Hayes and Katharine Cornell, who refused to limit their appearances to New York. Had not these actors maintained the interest of audiences outside New York at a time when movies had replaced live theater as the nation's most popular entertainment medium and theater buildings around the country were being transformed or demolished at an alarming rate, the interest of the American public in the legitimate theater might have been extinguished. Instead, America is now experiencing a renaissance of the live theater, in regional companies and first-rate academic groups throughout the country.

In so many ways, then, the Lunts' contribution to the theater of their time — and of our time — was enormously significant. It may be that no other American theatrical figures of the twentieth century influenced theater so profoundly. Yet the Lunts' eminence as actors did not warp their personalities. They did not behave as if they were "stars," and they were noted for their fundamental decency. They were married to one another for fifty-five years, and there is every reason to believe that their marriage was a remarkably close and supportive one. They were known for their integrity, their compassion, and their dignity in the face of adversity and serious illness.

The Lunts were cosmopolitans who spent most of their time in New York and in other major cities, but they valued rural life at least in equal measure. They returned nearly every summer to their Wisconsin estate, Ten Chimneys at Genesee Depot, for relaxation and renewal. For Alfred, Ten Chimneys was *home* for most of his adult life — he bought the property in 1913 with a small inheritance when he was twenty-one. Over [p. 9] the years an amazing group of celebrities — Noel Coward, Helen Hayes, Sir Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Katharine Cornell, Alexander Woollcott, Robert B. Sherwood — enjoyed the hospitality of the Lunts' Wisconsin farm, and Lunt's talent, which transcended theater, found expression there. He was an amateur architect, interior designer, gentleman farmer, gourmet cook, artist, and accomplished musician.

In September 1972 the Lunts decided to make their retirement complete. They elected to sell the New York town house they had owned for twenty-three years, along with most of its furnishings. Books and a number of china tea sets were shipped to Genesee Depot. In January of the following year, in an auction at Sotheby Parke Bernet, the Lunts sold many of their precious antiques. Unsentimentally and with determination, they severed the last tie that bound them to New York and the professional theater. They would spend the rest of their lives in pleasant and fulfilling retirement in southeastern Wisconsin.

In Genesee Depot the Lunts spent their time reading, gardening, and playing Scrabble. Lunt kept busy in the greenhouse (“The greenhouse is a lovely sight and I have done over 400 pots in the last two weeks”) and cooking. In earlier years Lunt had donated food to the Waukesha fair — cookies, currant jelly, vichyssoise, Swedish meat pastries, veal-and-ham pie — to benefit the Waukesha Symphony Orchestra, and during their retirement both Lunts became even more involved in the activities of Genesee Depot. Fontanne said, “The best thing in a way about our marriage was retirement: after all those years of work we had a long, marvelously peaceful time in the garden.”



***A picnic on the farm at
Genesee Depot.***

Eventually their idyllic life was marred by Lunt's ill health. He suffered from an incredible array of diseases, culminating with the cancer that took his life. An avid reader, his eyesight failed in his later years. Fontanne had to read to him: “I can hardly complain,” he said, “since my reader is the world's greatest actress.” On August 3, 1977, Lunt died and was buried at

Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee. At 7:55 on the evening of August 5, the lights of all Broadway theater marquees but one were extinguished for one minute. The exception was the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, whose lights continued to blaze in Lunt's honor. At the same moment Fontanne was dining with a small gathering of close friends at Genesee Depot. When told that New York's theaters had just been darkened, the guests observed a moment of silence which was broken when Fontanne raised her glass, "To Alfred."

On December 6, 1980, Fontanne celebrated her ninety-third birthday in especially festive style as one of five recipients of honors bestowed by the John F. Kennedy Center for lifetime achievements in the performing arts. Jason Robards and Beverly Sills led an audience of more than 2,000 in singing "Happy Birthday" to her. She died at Ten Chimneys in July 1983.

Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne demonstrated that success is possible in the volatile world of theater without undue temperament or ambition so great that it overrides all human considerations. We are fortunate to have had them as examples of everything that artists in the theater can and should be.

Editor's note: A special Citation of Merit was presented to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne by the Wisconsin Academy at its 1966 annual conference at Lawrence University in Appleton.

Photos courtesy the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

The opening quote by Helen Hayes is taken from her foreword to The Fabulous Lunts, p. ix.

For further reading

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Ten Chimneys Today

The gently rolling, wooded landscape where young Alfred Lunt built his home in 1914 once again is a scene of activity, creativity, and vision projected by the founders and supporters of a recently-established theater company, American Inside Theatre. The group was formed in

Milwaukee in 1988 and now maintains offices in the Lunts' home at Genesee Depot. In 1990 the company became the resident professional theater of Carroll College in Waukesha, Lunt's alma mater. Under the leadership of its co-founders, artistic director Morigan Hurt and producer Mark Simpson, the company is committed to producing, exclusively, American drama encompassing a wide variety of plays from the classics to the works of developing playwrights.

Recent productions include the non-musical world premier of the stage version of *Its a Wonderful Life*, which will be an annual holiday offering. On May 20-23 at the Pabst Theatre in Milwaukee, the company will present the Neil Simon play *Broadway Bound* starring John Randolph, who performed in *The Visit* with the Lunts at the opening of the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre in New York in May 1958. On May 16 at Genesee Depot there will be an opportunity to meet John Randolph and other actors who were influenced by the Lunts at a special event which will include brunch and a tour of Ten Chimneys

American Inside Theatre soon will realize its dream. Plans are in place to establish a theatrical cultural center on the grounds of the Lunt-Fontanne estate. Twenty-one acres will be transformed to include an intimate outdoor theater , and indoor performing area, a theater internship program, and a theatrical museum in the Lunts' home. The dream also includes a shaded spot to sit outdoors and sip coffee or tea, a bed-and-breakfast, a restaurant, and a gift shop.

For additional information on American Inside Theatre's development plans, performance schedule, and special events call (414) 968-4770