

Enter the Guardsman

book by Scott Wentworth

music by Craig Bohmler

lyrics by Marion Adler

based on *The Guardsman* by Ferenc Molnár

Enter The Guardsman is an intimate musical about love, sex, marriage, adultery, role playing, truth telling, and keeping your performance fresh in the long run.

Based on the Molnár play, it is the story of an actor and an actress—married six months—who find that the matrimonial bloom is off the rose. Fearing his wife will betray him, the actor disguises himself as a mysterious guardsman to test her fidelity; but in so doing a scenario is set in motion where both husband and wife can explore their marriage, and exercise their deepest fantasies.

As seen through the eyes of a playwright, the action takes place in the timeless world of "backstage": in dressing rooms, in the wings and on the empty stage, lit only by a ghost light. It recalls a theatre of wit, style, melody, and romance. It is a celebration of Musical Comedy. But beneath the glittering surface, the play is also a serious comedy, an exploration of marriage that asks the eternal question: how do you keep a monogamous relationship erotic?

We began our collaboration with *Gunmetal Blues*, a hard-boiled lounge act, that premiered Off-Broadway in 1992. Hailed in the *New Yorker* magazine as "the best small-scale musical we've seen in a long time," the play has subsequently been produced over fifty times across the United States and Canada. *Enter The Guardsman* received the Bernice Cohen Award for Outstanding Presentation by ASCAP, and was given readings at the Dramatist Guild, the National Alliance of Music Theater Producers' Festival of New Works, the Manhattan Theater Club, and the Roundabout Theatre Company. It took top prize at the international Musical of the Year 1996 competition, and was produced at London's Donmar Warehouse, in association with the Really Useful Group, where it received a 1998 Laurence Olivier Award nomination for Best New Musical.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

In addition to his writing, **Scott Wentworth** is an actor and director. He has starred on Broadway opposite Rosemary Harris in Neil Simon's award-winning *Lost in Yonkers*, as Count Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*, in Shaw's *Getting Married*, and in Cy Coleman's *Welcome to the Club*, for which he was nominated for a Tony Award. A leading actor at Canada's Stratford Festival, he has performed such roles as Iago in *Othello*, Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls*, and the title role in *Macbeth*; this summer at the Festival he directs *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*. He has directed *Othello*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Speed-the-Plow*, and world premiere adaptations of *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and *Ghosts* for the Indiana Repertory Theatre. His production of *Much Ado about Nothing* was awarded Best Production of 1994 by the *Detroit News*, and both the *News* and the *Detroit Free Press* named Mr. Wentworth Best Director. That same year, Mr. Wentworth was invited by Robin Phillips to co-direct his production of *Macbeth*. He has directed *The Winter's Tale*, *Henry V*, *The School For Scandal*, *As You Like It*, and *Enter The Guardsman* for the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival.

Other **Adler-Bohm** collaborations include *Songs of Stone*, a song cycle for soprano and orchestra commissioned by the San Diego International Symphony; *The Pied Piper*, commissioned by the Cambiata Soloists of Houston; their own version of *A Christmas Carol* commissioned by the Musical Theater of Arizona; and *Chiarasciu* and *Little Red Ridinghood*; both commissioned by the San Jose Chamber Orchestra. "The Blonde Song" from *Gunmetal Blues* is featured on Alison Fraser's CD, *A New York Romance*.

Craig Bohm was a conductor and member of the faculty at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. He has served on the staffs of the Aspen Music Festival, the Musicians' Club of America, the Texas and Nashville Institutes for the Arts, and the Houston Grand Opera. He has conducted the Calgary Philharmonic and the Houston Symphony. His commissioned opera *Achille's Heel* was premiered by the Houston Opera in 1993, and he is currently at work on an opera version of *The Nutcracker* for Opera San Jose.

Marion Adler (with Caroline Sloan) wrote "Life Lines" for A ... *My Name is Still Alice* (directed and conceived by Joan Miklen Silver and Julianne Boyd) and "Dear Max" for the Off-Broadway review *Pets* (conceived by Helen Butleroff). As an actress, Ms. Adler was a leading member of Canada's Stratford Festival where she played Goneril in *King Lear*, Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Audrey in *As You Like It*, all directed by Robin Phillips. She is currently at work on the new Broadway musical, *The Big Street*, with Alan Menken and Warren Leight.

From Molnár to Musical

About Ferenc Molnár

Ferenc Molnár, one of the most popular and enduring playwrights of the last century, lived a life worthy of one of his characters. He was born on January 12, 1878, in Budapest, where he spent the majority of his life. He originally went to school to study criminal law and statistics, and in fact published a few essays on the subjects in a political magazine. He also spent a great deal of his time in the New York Café, a major gathering place for Budapest's literary, intellectual, and social elite. In fact, the group of composers, painters, sculptors, novelists, and playwrights that sat at Molnár's table at the New York Café became known as the "Molnár Gang."

During this time Molnár was rapidly making a name for himself as a journalist and playwright. He achieved worldwide theatrical success with *The Devil*, the first Hungarian play ever to be performed in Rome, Paris, and New York. When World War I broke out he became a war correspondent, sending back reports from the front. In the years after the war, however, the social and political environment that Molnár was used to began to change.

For the two decades after World War I, a time in which his books and plays were current all over the world, Molnár took up residence in what he called his "five-room apartment"—hotel rooms in Budapest, Vienna, Karlsbad, Venice, and Nice. Hitler's rise to power changed Molnár's easy-going lifestyle: he was Jewish. Fearful of the rising tide of fascism and anti-Semitic sentiment, he left Budapest in 1937. When war broke out he was living in Switzerland but soon moved to New York. Molnár traded in his five-room apartment for one room in the Plaza Hotel, and his cafés for a delicatessen on 58th Street. There the great novelist, journalist, playwright, and entertainer lived out the years before his death in 1952.

The Journey of *Enter the Guardsman*

It has been a long journey for *Enter the Guardsman*. The play's saga began in 1910 in Budapest, when Ferenc Molnár, Hungary's leading dramatist, first wrote *A Testor*, known today in English as *The Guardsman*. Molnár was something of an international sensation thanks to sophisticated but substantial plays like *The Devil* or *Liliom* (later turned into the musical *Carousel* by Rodgers and Hammerstein). When *The Guardsman* first came to America, though, it was not a great hit. The initial New York production opened in 1911 under the title *Where Ignorance Is Bliss* and was a complete failure, running for one week. Only George Bernard Shaw, working on a 1911 production in London, predicted the play would outlast its peers.

Over a decade later the play reappeared in New York, this time with a new translation that eliminated some of the former version's awkwardness, and a new title: *The Guardsman*. Produced by the legendary Theatre Guild in 1924, the production

featured Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne as the leading man and leading lady who must deal with real-life marriage on and offstage. Both actors were already well-established as brilliant comedians and major stars, but they had never before appeared on stage together as a married couple.

Lunt and Fontanne, possibly the most famous theatrical duo of the last century, were known for their glamor, impeccable timing, and amazing on-stage chemistry. Ironically, the Lunts were actually the last choice for the parts of the Actor and Actress in the Theatre Guild production. Many stars of the day turned down the offer to work on this production: Actors turned it down because they felt that the actress's part was superior to theirs, while actresses turned it down because they were afraid of being outshone by the actor. The producers finally turned to Lunt and Fontanne. Having none of their colleagues' qualms, the Lunts signed on to play the theatrical couple who has grown bored with married life, but not with each other.

After accepting the roles, the Lunts immediately sailed for Paris in order to obtain the wardrobe for their production. Fontanne felt strongly that the Actress should be outfitted in clothes appropriate to her character, that of a wealthy and sophisticated actress, so it was absolutely necessary that all of her costumes be designer originals. Though the Theatre Guild restricted the Lunts to spending \$50 per costume, the Lunts refused to accept this limitation. Together the Lunts spent \$4,000 from their own savings on costumes in Paris.

Meanwhile, Alfred Lunt was having trouble believing in the reality of the main conceit of the play. That is, he was not convinced that the Actor might be able to disguise himself so well that his wife would not be able to recognize him. To test this notion, Lunt himself dressed up as the Guardsman and went to the grocery store. There he had a conversation with the grocer, whom he knew very well. Detecting no sign of recognition, Lunt determined that the disguise was effective and the ruse possible. After that, rehearsals could begin.

The Guardsman received rave reviews and went on to run for 248 performances in New York, becoming the most successful play the Theatre Guild had ever produced. The Lunts continued to be associated with the play throughout their careers, appearing in two more productions of *The Guardsman* in 1927 and 1928 and starring in a radio broadcast of the play in 1945. They also made their one and only starring film appearance together in the movie version in 1931. The Lunts' work in *The Guardsman* became the signature performance of their careers.

The Guardsman continued to appear in different guises throughout the century. In 1941 there was a movie musical version of it, starring Nelson Eddy, called *The Chocolate Soldier*. The songs had not been composed specifically for Molnár's script, though. Originally *The Chocolate Soldier* appeared as an operetta version of George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*, with music by Oscar Straus and lyrics by Rudolph Bernauer and Leopold Jacobson. However, Shaw refused to give MGM rights to use his script in filming the movie. So MGM substituted a play they already had the rights to, *The Guardsman*, and kept the songs by Straus. Another musical version of the play toured in 1951 with Jeanette MacDonald and her husband Gene Raymond.

Enter the Guardsman, however, goes back to the Lunts for its inspiration. Scott Wentworth, who wrote the book, wanted another collaboration with his wife, lyricist

Marion Adler, and composer Craig Bohmler; the trio had previous success with their first work, an off-Broadway musical titled *Gunmetal Blues*. As Wentworth told C. W. Walker of the *New Jersey Home News Tribune*, the subject matter was obvious: "We'd been married about six years and we thought it would be good to write about people in the midst of a relationship. I also wanted to write about something I knew. I knew about trying to make a marriage work, and I knew about the theatre." Fortuitously, at the same time, Wentworth happened to be reading a biography of Lunt and Fontanne and learned about the success they had with the production. He got a copy of *The Guardsman* and read it. "I liked the central idea of a husband disguising himself to fool his wife. So we just took the ideas and the characters and wrote a new piece."

This new piece went on to win the Musical of the Year Award for 1996 in Aarhus, Denmark. The award attracted the attention of London producers, and in 1997 *Enter the Guardsman* appeared in London at the Donmar Warehouse in association with Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group. The play enjoyed a successful run and was nominated for an Olivier Award (the London equivalent of a Tony Award) for Best Musical. The play has since been produced Off Broadway and at several regional theatres throughout the United States. Some ninety years after Molnár first penned his tale of marriage and jealousy, Wentworth, Adler, and Bohmler have given it new life in their clever and romantic adaptation, ensuring that Molnár's story will continue to be enjoyed well into the twenty-first century.

—adapted from material
courtesy of Northlight Theatre

Changing of the Guard

by playwright Scott Wentworth

Like most Americans, my first encounter the theater was with musicals. In my case it was the original cast recording of Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* with Robert Preston, Barbara Cook, and the Buffalo Bills. That score's wit and energy thrilled my young ears, and the musical form continues to thrill me. (I still know all the words to "Trouble" and will unfortunately prove it at the drop of the proverbial hat or after a couple of drinks.) So, when I first sat down to work on the libretto of *Enter the Guardsman*, the new musical version of Ferenc Molnár's 1910 play *The Guardsman* it wasn't much of a surprise that I found myself trying to recapture and celebrate those memories of classic musical theatre.

As source material, Molnár's comedy (with its famous theatrical marriage and pre-World War I Vienna locale) certainly lends itself to such an enterprise. Composer Craig Bohmler and lyricist Marion Adler set about to create a score that was decidedly "non-pop," using as their influences turn-of-the-century art song, European operetta, and pre-Sondheim Broadway. Meanwhile, I began to fashion a book in the classic "scene-song" structure (exemplified by Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, which was adapted from *Liliom*, another Molnár play) rather than the current "through-sung" model (Such as *Les Misérables* or *Rent*). We took liberties with Molnár's original material, retaining only the central characters and the basic situation of the actor-husband disguising himself as a fictitious guardsman to test his actress-wife's fidelity. Our play, as it began to emerge, was less dark than Molnár's, more romantic. More like ... a musical. A bit old-fashioned, perhaps, but with its look at the role of sexual fantasy in marriage, we hoped it had a contemporary appeal as well.

As I watched rehearsals, I realized that what really made *Enter the Guardsman* feel like an old-time musical was its insistence on the primacy of the actor. There has been a trend on Broadway of late to downplay the individual performance in favor of production values, ensemble, or, in some cases (as with the great "franchise shows"), sameness of experience. Of course it's all about perception. Performance is at the heart of all theatre. But I think it's interesting that even the most avid musical theater buff will have a hard time telling you who's playing the title role in *The Phantom of the Opera* at the moment. Maybe because Marion Adler and I are both actors we wanted to create roles that could really be played, to create a musical that was all about acting and performance.

At the end of each writing session we would read through the day's work, testing the material—not as writers, but as actors. What worked and what didn't? Where is the writing clear? Where is it too "head on"? What's hard to speak? What if that "but" became an "and"? And so on. This continual workshopping of the script as it came out of the printer, this tailoring of the text to the performance, connected us to the great tradition of musical theatre, where the work is not in the writing but in the rewriting;

where the show is not finally written but constructed. By working this way we found the characters' voices emerging more clearly. And they began to make demands on us.

We all felt, for instance, that Molnár's actress character was too much of a cipher in the play: a blank page for the men to write their fears and fantasies upon. Through Marion's work as an actress we were able to give voice to that character's needs and to give the stage over to her story. So the craft of the actor was informing the craft of the writer.

I had a "writerly" idea about how the play ought to sound. To show the degree of intimacy, self-absorption, and sheer routine that go into the backstage life of a long-running play, I wanted all the speeches to seem to be overlapping and interrupted. It would be a stylistic approximation of the Lunts' famous acting style (Molnár's *Guardman* was the couple's first great success) in which they would get caught up in the rhythms of repetition, treat wordplay as a game, and really have to work in order to speak from the heart. On the page this turned into a series of short sentences separated by a series of dots and dashes. It made sense, but it wasn't until the actors worked out this interplay on their feet that the rhythms began to swing.

When I think of the play now, it is not my own words that first come to mind, or even Craig and Marion's score; it is actors acting. It is Alex Hanson's wonderfully improbable leap from the stage at London's Donmar Warehouse. It is Robert Cuccioli gripping a skull with white-knuckled nonchalance. It is Janie Dee and Dana Reeve, an ocean and two years apart, coming up with the identical gesture of sexy practicality for the lyric "weapons ready." It's Nicky Henson's smile and Mark Jacoby's twinkle. It is their voices I hear. And all the voices that are hopefully—thankfully—going to come.

The theatre is all about collaboration, and in a play that is so much about the theatre, it seemed right somehow to let the actors have their say.

***Scott Wentworth is an actor, director, and playwright,
and is married to fellow actor and writer Marion Adler.***

—courtesy of Northlight Theatre