Passing Performances
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Staging Heterosexuality
Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne’s
Design for Living

Sam Abel

The husband-and-wife acting team of Alfred Lunt (1892–1977) and Lynn Fontanne (1887–1983) dominated the serious Broadway theater for the central decades of the twentieth century. From their first success as a couple in *The Guardsman* in 1924 through their 1958 production of *The Visit* their marriage was hailed as the ideal union of life and art. To the adoring critics, Lunt and Fontanne’s onstage rapport reflected the offstage harmony of their marriage. Publicly, and with enthusiastic help from the press, the names Lunt and Fontanne became synonymous with artistic achievement, personal integrity, and the nobility of the acting profession. While other actors gave in to the lure of Hollywood and became the objects of public scandal, the Lunts, through their marriage on and off stage, symbolized moral purity and selfless devotion to serious theater.

But if the Lunts appeared in public as the perfect married couple, their private lives did not correspond to this idealized portrait. While Lunt and Fontanne were discreet about their lives offstage, clearly they were not an average married couple. They socialized with New York’s large gay clique; both were rumored to have engaged in same-sex affairs, and some of their contemporaries have begun to confirm these rumors. They were notoriously difficult people who squabbled frequently; Lunt was prone to bouts of depression. He cooked; she did not. They had no children, but they virtually adopted the closeted Montgomery Clift. They played husband and wife onstage, but often in plays that disrupted normative views of heterosexuality, most notably *Design for Living*, written by Noël Coward for himself and the Lunts. Despite these deviations from heterosexual norms, however, the public belief in the sanctified image of their marriage remained intact.

According to current definitions and the available information, Alfred
Lunt and Lynn Fontanne would probably be described most accurately as bisexual. But the central issue is not whether Lunt and Fontanne were “really” gay or bisexual, or whether they engaged in specific same-sex acts. To frame the issue this way would, as recent analysis has argued, essentialize a notion of gay identity and oversimplify both the shifting social constructions of same-sex desire in the twentieth century and the Lunts’ own perception of their sexual identity. The more important question is why, in the eyes of the public, such a clearly nonnormative pair as the Lunts had to appear, at all costs, perfectly straight. The Lunts created their mystique of heterosexuality against the background of New York’s gay subculture, both in their private lives and their stage performances. Early in their careers, in the relatively open atmosphere of gay life in New York, the Lunts evoked both “normal” and “deviant” sexuality to further their popularity. After 1930, as George Chauncey documents in Gay New York, gay life in the city shifted from comparative openness to intense repression, a move reflected in the Lunts’ choice of roles and in their publicity. The Lunts initially used their marriage to further their careers; later, their union protected them from the public’s increasing hostility to gay sexuality.

Lynn Fontanne settled in New York in 1916 at age twenty-nine; Alfred Lunt, five years her junior, arrived in 1919 at age twenty-seven. Fontanne, British by birth, began her professional career at age eighteen, and until 1915 she played small roles in London and on tour through England. In 1916 the actress-playwright couple Laurette Taylor and Hartley Manners invited her to join their company in the United States. As London during World War I offered little opportunity, she accepted and moved to New York. Interestingly, Fontanne was engaged to be married when she emigrated. The Lunts’ biographer Jared Brown questions Fontanne’s seriousness about the engagement, since she left her fiancé behind to pursue her career with little intention of returning. (Or perhaps she left England to avoid the marriage; the issue became moot soon after, when he was killed in the war.) Fontanne remained with Taylor and Manners until 1917, when she left the company to take a leading role in a Shubert production. Lunt’s professional career began in Boston in 1912 while he was a student at Emerson College. Between 1915 and 1919 he acted with a number of touring companies, including a few brief stints in New York; in 1919 he was offered the title role in Booth Tarkington’s Clarence, and the play’s success established his Broadway career. Lunt and Fontanne met in 1919; according to their biographers, they fell immediately in love, though Brown says that Laurette Taylor “stage-
managed the romance.” They were married in 1922, shortly after both had returned to New York from playing on the road.

Lunt and Fontanne, then, established their careers playing mainly in popular works of minimal literary pretension. Both actors came to New York with a strong desire to perform in more sophisticated drama. Fontanne had learned the classics in London, and her first encouragements in acting came from no less a personage than Ellen Terry; Lunt received a strong classical theater training in college, had traveled to Europe, and had performed in Greek tragedies in one of his early professional tours. Once they had made a name for themselves on Broadway, they worked actively to claim the title of New York’s serious acting family. From 1924 to 1932, early in their careers, they associated themselves with the Theatre Guild and its reputation for drama of artistic merit; they chose for their vehicles plays either by European authors (Molnár, Shaw, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Werfel, Giraudoux, Coward, and Dürrenmatt all figured prominently), or “art” plays by American playwrights.

But before they could become the leading actors of serious drama in New York, Lunt and Fontanne had to contend with the performers who already had solid claim to the title: Broadway’s “royal family,” the Barrymores. The stage performances of John, Ethel, and Lionel Barrymore in the first quarter of the century offered a rare taste of serious theater for New York audiences. Their private lives offered another, equally interesting public entertainment: Ethel Barrymore’s contentious marriage, and her divorce in 1923; John Barrymore’s obsessive love affairs, drunkenness, and periodic breakdowns; the family’s notorious egos, their wealth, and the eventual departure of the whole clan to Hollywood (all satirized by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber in 1927 in The Royal Family). Broadway audiences loved the Barrymores but loved even more to gossip about their troubled lives. Lunt and Fontanne, in setting themselves up as rivals to the Barrymores, aspired to the opposite image: a stable, happily married pair, modest in their lifestyle and retiring in their personal habits, devoted selflessly to each other and to the theater, shunning Hollywood and scandal in the service of their art. They succeeded brilliantly, and by the thirties the Lunts, not the Barrymores, were the first family of Broadway.

The Lunts’ goal to claim the position of Broadway’s serious acting family was abetted considerably by the shift in American playwriting that coincided with their arrival in New York. Brooks Atkinson has character-
ized the New York theater of the 1920s as the first time Broadway consistently offered “Theater for Adults.” Broadway in the teens had banked heavily on the tomfoolery of the Jerome Kern–Guy Bolton–P. G. Wodehouse Princess musicals, the lavish display of the Ziegfeld Follies, and the comforting domesticities offered by playwrights such as Manners, Avery Hopwood, and Owen Davis. As Kim Marra mentions in her essay on Elisabeth Marbury and Elsie de Wolfe in this volume, the Princess musicals made considerable advances in the form of the American musical comedy. Their subject matter, though, stuck firmly to romance and light-hearted intrigue, and rarely broached subjects that the audience might find troubling or controversial. But in the 1920s the parameters of Broadway theater were expanded by the alumni of George Pierce Baker’s 47 Workshop—Eugene O’Neill, Sidney Howard, S. N. Behrman, Philip Barry—along with contemporaries Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, George Kelly, George S. Kaufman, and Marc Connelly. Prompted by the success of the Little Theatre movement, which saw the founding of the Provincetown Players (1914), Washington Square Players (1915), and Theatre Arts Magazine (1916), dramatists in the 1920s began to incorporate Freudian psychology and its underlying sexual tensions in their plays. Most notable of these experiments was O’Neill’s Strange Interlude (1928), starring Fontanne as Nina Leeds.

Broadway audiences of the twenties developed a distinctly ambivalent attitude toward this kind of sexually daring material. Audiences accepted and even encouraged images of sexual “deviance” that only a few years before would have been unthinkable. The idealized images of marriage and womanhood drawn in popular pre–World War I melodrama, and the titillating but equally idealized images presented by Ziegfeld, were replaced by the adultery and sexual obsession of Desire under the Elms (1924), They Knew What They Wanted (1924), and Machinal (1928) and the blatant sexual come-on of Mae West. Yet when West tried to bring her sexually explicit plays to Broadway—in particular her gay-themed The Drag in 1927—the theater was shut down and she and her cast arrested. Broadway audiences wanted to see sexual “deviance,” but the limits of toleration for such experiments were both very real and largely unpredictable, and it was hard to know in advance when a production might be deemed to have gone too far.

Broadway’s response to sexually daring material strongly parallels the same public’s response to overt displays of homosexuality. The New York public was fascinated in the twenties by sexual abnormality, especially homosexuality. Greenwich Village and the Upper West Side harbored ac-
tive and visible gay communities, including many men who wore drag in public; a gay subculture also flourished in Harlem. Straight couples flocked to drag balls or traveled to gay haunts to watch the passing show. But as with the same public’s attitude toward racial difference, the fascination with public displays of sexual “deviance” did not always translate into tolerance. It was fashionable for wealthy people to go slumming in Harlem or to attend drag balls, but not to live in a slum or to be gay themselves. Police still raided gay establishments, newspapers printed the names of those who were arrested, and many lives and careers were still ruined as a result of the ensuing scandal.

In order for the Lunts to fulfill their dream of dominating the serious Broadway theater, they had to maintain their pristine public image. Even more than avoiding the heterosexual peccadilloes of the Barrymores, it was imperative that they steer clear of same-sex scandal, which could lead to arrest and an abrupt halt to their careers. They could, and did, perform in plays that explored the edges of sexual propriety, but they had at all costs to keep these stage roles distinct from their private lives. The task was not always easy. Even though the Lunts did their best to craft their image as Broadway’s happy couple, during the twenties and thirties gossip about their private lives perpetually threatened to draw them into scandal. They maintained an intense discretion about their sexual lives (they left few traces of their sexual activity, with each other or anyone else, even in personal letters), yet rumors of same-sex affairs hovered persistently about them. Broadway gossips said that they had a marriage of convenience and that they carried on same-sex affairs in private. Rather than mentioning the Lunts by name, however, scandal mongers published statements such as the following item from 1933, a clear reference to the Lunts that appeared in the tabloid *Brevities* under the headline “Stage Stars in Queer Action”:

It’s a great old world and it takes all kinds of people to make the wheels go round. 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?

But these rumors never bloomed into scandal. The mainstream press rarely mentioned the rumors, and the two early adulatory biographies of the Lunts do not acknowledge them.

Jared Brown’s exhaustive, though equally adulatory, biography, pub-
lished after their deaths, does discuss the rumors, but only to deny them fervently. Brown’s denial, however, raises more questions than it answers. He says, late in the book and after asserting the happiness of the Lunts’ marriage,

Rumors were rife: their union had begun as a “marriage of convenience,” they were said to argue furiously in private; they never shared the same bed; Lunt engaged in homosexual relationships; they saw as little as possible of each other offstage. If any of these rumors had been remotely true, however, some confirmation would surely have been found; they were married for fifty-five years—ample time for the dark underside of their marriage to be seen by someone, at some time, somewhere.9

Brown acknowledges that the Lunts quarreled occasionally and insists that they slept in the same bed. He then softens his denial, saying that if Lunt had gay affairs, no one he interviewed could confirm the rumors. (He does not entertain the possibility that no one he spoke to was willing to confirm them, as some recent interviewees have done). He quotes one company member.

If Lunt was homosexual, I must have been very unattractive, because he never made a pass at me. And there would have been plenty of opportunity to be surreptitious about it, to invite me out, or to do something or other to indicate that he was interested—but it never happened. And if he was having a relationship with anyone else in the company at the time, he was awfully discreet about it.10

Brown’s evidence is hardly convincing. The fact that Lunt failed to make a pass at one unidentified actor—who presumes egotistically that Lunt would have desired him—does not support Brown’s claim of unsullied heterosexuality. It is clear from all accounts that the Lunts were close, but such closeness might arise from factors other than sexual attraction, for example, a shared experience of sexual transgression. And even if they were bound by sexual attraction, that fact does not preclude other sexual interests. In fact, Brown offers a range of evidence for the “dark underside of their marriage”: Lunt’s erotically evocative letters to a male friend, Fontanne’s close association with Laurette Taylor, the couple’s intimacy with Noël Coward, their quarrels. And while Brown’s biography is exhaustive, it omits or downplays information that corroborates rumors of same-sex interest. If rumor mongers were intent on showing the Lunts as desiring the same sex, Brown is equally invested in proving their heterosexuality.
For example, Brown mentions, but does not discuss, evidence suggesting that the Lunts considered their marriage as a means of self-promotion. Brown quotes Coward, who recalls a time when he, Lunt, and Fontanne, all single and largely unknown, plotted their careers: “Lynn and Alfred were to be married. That was the first plan. Then they were to become definitely idols of the public. That was the second plan. Then, all this being successfully accomplished, they were to act exclusively together. This was the third plan.” In other words, the Lunts’ marriage was a career move, and Coward their facilitator. This story does not preclude their fondness for each other, but it suggests that the Lunts’ marriage in 1922 had been inspired not by starry-eyed romance, as the biographers claim, but from career concerns, and largely for public show. The Lunts made heterosexuality into a performance, perhaps the most successful one of their careers.

When Lunt and Fontanne moved to New York, the city had an active and visible gay community. Chauncey documents that homosexuality was a largely accepted part of city life from the 1890s through the 1920s and a central element of New York’s bohemian culture. Unlike earlier manifestations of bohemian culture in New York, this fringe culture in the early twentieth century revolved around an explicit and often public gay sexuality. In particular, during the years of Prohibition (1919–33), Chauncey identifies what he calls the “Pansy Craze,” a public fascination with homosexuality in which large crowds, gay and straight, frequented gay bars, restaurants, and drag balls. Gay life in New York centered in Greenwich Village and the theater district around Times Square, where same-sex couples and men in drag were visible on the streets and in entertainment and dining establishments. The connection between the Pansy Craze and the theater world was discussed prominently in the press, especially in tabloids such as Broadway Brevities, which ran a series of articles in 1924 called “Nights in Fairyland,” detailing gay life in the theater district and especially among theatrical personalities.

Lunt and Fontanne arrived in New York at the beginning of the Pansy Craze, and their work put them in the middle of New York’s bohemian gay theater scene. Brown writes that they initially lived in a “theatrical boarding house.” As Chauncey records, these boarding houses were central to gay life. Young gay men and women coming to the city flocked to these transient living quarters, which offered low-cost housing, privacy, and relative anonymity. While many residents of theatrical boarding houses did, in fact, work in the theater, others came to them specifically to be with other gay people. Given their living arrangements...
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and their work in the theater during the Pansy Craze, Lunt and Fontanne could hardly have avoided an active knowledge of gay life.

More importantly—despite Brown’s protestations—both Lunt and Fontanne arrived in New York with intimate same-sex relationships in their immediate past. Lunt’s closest friend as a boy was Ray Weaver, who boarded for three years with Lunt’s mother and stepfather. Weaver shared Lunt’s interest in theater, and the two boys became close. Brown quotes Weaver: “[Lunt] never dated any girls. Neither did I . . . We were a world unto ourselves.”16 In 1914, when Lunt was twenty-two, he traveled to Europe; in his letters to Weaver he addressed his friend as “dearest boy,” “honey,” and “my hero of delight.” Brown admits that such emotionality is uncharacteristic of Lunt’s otherwise perfunctory writing style; nevertheless, he denies the erotic implications of these letters, arguing that they reveal “only an intense emotional closeness, expressed in a florid rhetorical style typical of the period.”17

Brown’s refutation is problematic on several counts. First, as Chauncey observes, the pathological model of homosexuality and its connection with “feminine” emotionality was well established by 1914; such effusiveness was not considered masculine at this time. Second, as Chauncey also argues, if such effusions do not necessarily indicate homosexuality in the modern sense, then they also cannot be used to show heterosexuality, because the two ideas are mutually dependent.18 If the letters do not prove that Lunt was sexually attracted to Weaver, neither can they disprove it. Brown attempts to counter this “incriminating” evidence with another letter to Weaver, intended to prove that Lunt had a sexual encounter with a woman. This letter, however, further undermines Brown’s argument. Lunt describes admiringly a woman he met named Anne. He then says: “It was the privilege of the young lady to teach me a good deal & this knowledge I hope some day I may impart to you.”19 If this statement suggests that Lunt had sex with Anne, then Brown fails to draw the obvious conclusion from Lunt’s subsequent remark that he intended to pass this sexual knowledge on to Weaver, presumably by equivalent means.20

The biographers offer another suggestive story from Lunt’s pre–New York days. In 1915 he was hired by director Margaret Anglin to act minor roles in a tour of Greek tragedies. In Electra, Anglin asked Lunt to lead a procession of revelers that would suggest decadence. Anglin told Lunt his first attempt was too wholesome. In his second attempt, as biographer Maurice Zolotow reports,
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Alfred gilded his hair and his nipples, painted his fingernails and toenails red, and draped vineleaves in his hair. He got two members of the company to be his assistant deviates. He painted their fingers, toes, hair, and breasts. Now he came on obviously drunk and embracing two Grecian boys.

"I am sure we shall all be arrested," Miss Anglin said, laughing. "But we will do it—though it is a bit more fin de siècle than I had in mind, Alfred."21

If Lunt had not engaged in homosexual acts, the young man from Wisconsin knew enough about sexuality between men to evoke homoerotic images, and to perform them in public.

Evidence for Fontanne’s early same-sex experience is more circumstantial, primarily through her relationship with Laurette Taylor while a member of her company. The Taylor-Manners marriage was, it was rumored, a business arrangement. According to Zolotow, Taylor had affairs at home with her husband’s knowledge; he does not specify the gender of her lovers. As Robert A. Schanke notes in his essay on Alla Nazimova in this volume, Taylor had relationships with women, including Nazimova.22 Zolotow reports that Fontanne and Taylor had a close and troubled relationship, that Fontanne spent weekends at Taylor’s home, and that Taylor became the dominant influence in her life. He remarks, “Laurette criticized Lynn for her ‘shyness’ and her ‘fidelity’ and said that one could not blossom into a great actress without periodic bouts of great passion to vitalize one’s erotic energies.”23 Zolotow, like Brown, observes that Taylor tried to stage-manage Fontanne’s relationship with Lunt and then turned bitter and jealous when it became too close.24 In 1923, the year after the Lunts were married, Taylor broke with Fontanne, and they rarely saw each other in later years.

In 1924 the Lunts appeared in their first hit together, Molnár’s The Guardsman, cementing their identity as a married acting pair. After this production they rarely acted apart, and not at all after 1928. But while their reputation as a couple grew, in private they associated with the city’s gay social scene. The Lunts’ biographers cling to the story that the couple had a limited social life in New York, especially when performing. They rarely went out, Zolotow and Brown relate, avoiding parties and seeing only a few friends for quiet evenings at home. “Never invite them for dinner during the run of a play unless it is for a Sunday dinner,” Zolotow warns his readers.25 Yet they participated, as the biographers also relate, in an active social circle, which included some of New York’s most prominent
gay men. Their most intimate friend was Noël Coward; they spent time with him and his circle, in New York and abroad. They were also close with Carl Van Vechten, the gay photographer associated with the gay and lesbian subculture in Harlem. Other regular guests, according to Brown, included Gilbert Miller, director of the lesbian-sympathetic play The Captive, and the critic Alexander Woollcott.

The Lunts’ relationship with Woollcott presents an intriguing enigma. The Lunts were regular visitors to Woollcott’s Vermont retreat, and Woollcott was a frequent guest at the Lunts’ Wisconsin home. (In 1914 Lunt purchased a house in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin, near his childhood home; as the Lunts’ fame grew, “the farm” became their refuge from the New York press and a place to entertain friends in private.) Woollcott was a man of ambiguous sexuality who enjoyed putting on drag and playing “Aunt Aleck” with his friends. Rumors about Woollcott’s sexuality were rampant; he confided with the Lunts, but they refused to reveal his secret. Zolotow quotes Lunt:

> Those stories about Aleck being cruel... Well, he was a very unhappy man... I think only Lynn and I knew how brave he was. And knew why he suffered. He never talked about his problems to anyone but us. Can you see how hard it is to be charming, to be amusing, when you’re in so much pain?

Zolotow speculates whether this pain was physical or emotional and questions Harpo Marx’s explanation that Woollcott was impotent because of the measles. Whatever the cause, the Lunts were very protective of him; when, in 1939, the New Yorker published a profile of Woollcott that implied he was homosexual, the Lunts canceled their subscription.

Through the early years of the Lunts’ career, then, they worked within New York’s gay community and were intimate with many of its members. After 1929, however, gay life in the city underwent a significant shift. While police occasionally raided gay bars during the Pansy Craze, most were left in peace if they kept within clear geographical bounds. As Chauncey reports, however, in the early 1930s several newspapers, together with newly rejuvenated moral-reform societies, began to attack public manifestations of gay life. Under increased pressure, the police raided gay clubs and bars, especially in the theater district, eventually using the new liquor laws that were passed after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933.

These raids not only drove gay bars underground; they also had a chilling effect on the individual expression of gay sexuality. Newspapers...
stepped up publication of the names of people arrested in the raids. These revelations proved disastrous for public figures and the wealthy, who often lost their careers and social positions when their sexuality became known.\textsuperscript{31} Noël Coward, writing in his diary in 1955 in response to an antigay court ruling in England, articulates the repressive effects of such crackdowns: “for as long as these barbarous laws exist it should be remembered that homosexuality is a penal offense and should be considered such socially, although not morally.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, under the threat of police raids, anyone engaging in homosexual activities must make an external show of heterosexuality to maintain a place in society.

In fact, the atmosphere of antigay repression had affected the theater well before the renewed bar raids. In 1926 Gilbert Miller opened his production of Edouard Bourdet’s \textit{The Captive}, a play dealing overtly with lesbian issues; in the same year Mae West premiered her play \textit{Sex} and announced plans to open another play, \textit{The Drag}, with a sympathetic view of gay men. On February 9, 1927, when \textit{The Drag} was in tryouts in New Jersey, the police shut down \textit{The Captive}, \textit{Sex}, and a third play called \textit{Virgin Man}, and arrested many members of the casts, including West. The motivation for the raids seems to have been West’s intention of bringing \textit{The Drag} to Broadway; the action successfully prevented West from presenting her play. These raids were covered extensively in the New York press.\textsuperscript{33}

Following these raids, the New York State legislature, which already prohibited gay “lewdness” in public, revised the public-obscenity law to ban from the stage all plays “depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion.”\textsuperscript{34} Similar measures were adopted privately in the entertainment industry. In 1931 the R.K.O vaudeville circuit disallowed the words \textit{fairy} and \textit{pansy} on stage; in 1934 Hollywood established the Production Code Administration to enforce the existing 1930 studio policy preventing the depiction of immorality on film.\textsuperscript{35} The Lunts were aware of the impact of these new laws. Coward relates his early plans with the Lunts for the play that became \textit{Design for Living}; they initially planned a play modeled on Schnitzler’s \textit{La Ronde}, with the setting an enormous bed. They dropped this plan, however, when they realized the stage business they envisioned might lead to their arrest.\textsuperscript{36}

In spite of this growing antigay atmosphere, however, the Lunts did not shy away from controversial sexual subject matter in their stage work. On the contrary, they embraced sexually daring roles. While promoting themselves as a happily married couple, through the late 1920s and early 1930s the Lunts embarked on a series of performances,
many in conjunction with Coward, that tested the boundaries of the new regulations. These performances did not depict "deviance" in the direct manner of The Captive and The Drag; instead, they discussed homosexuality and other kinds of "degeneracy" obliquely. By veiling their subject, and with the protection of their marriage, the Lunts explored issues of sexuality in ways unavailable to other performers.

These sexually daring productions occupied the Lunts' career for a decade. In 1928, Fontanne starred as Nina Leeds in the Theatre Guild's production of O'Neill's Strange Interlude; Lunt referred to the play as "a six-day bisexual race." In the early 1930s the Lunts planned a production of Twelfth Night in which Lunt, playing Orsino, would have been aware of his apparent homosexual attraction to Viola/Cesario; Coward was slated to play Malvolio. According to the Lunts' friend Alan Hewitt, the production was ready to go, "but their producers of the time could not be persuaded to accept the financial risk." (Brown, notably, makes no mention of this production, although he had read Hewitt's account, as he reveals in a letter to Hewitt.)

In 1934, Coward wrote Point Valaine for the Lunts, a play that Brown calls "a lurid study of sexual obsession." And in 1938 the Lunts triumphed in Giraudoux's Amphitryon 38, a mythical story of marital infidelity with Lunt playing Jupiter; it featured a notorious scene with Jupiter in the clouds, Lunt's face emerging from a bare-bottomed plaster figure of the god.

The most daring experiment, however, was Design for Living, written by Coward for himself and the Lunts, which opened in New York in January 1933. Coward's play differs from Mordaunt Shairp's The Green Bay Tree and Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour, two other plays dealing with homosexuality that appeared in New York in 1933–34. In these serious plays homosexuality is a destroyer of human lives; Design for Living offers a comic celebration of sexual bohemianism. In the play, Otto (Lunt) and Leo (Coward) both love Gilda (Fontanne), but they are also in love with each other. Each of the play's three acts has a scene in which two of the three lovers emerge from the bedroom: first Gilda and Leo, next Gilda and Otto, then, climactically, Leo and Otto. At the end, they vow to live together in a three-way relationship. Coward fills the play with references to Otto and Leo's love and its physical nature and includes enthusiastic defenses of those who defy sexual norms. Many critics expressed discomfort with the play's rejection of traditional marriage, but most assumed that Otto and Leo were just close friends. The gay audience members who saw the play, however, had no doubt about their true relationship.
Later critics have discussed the double entendre in *Design for Living*, and Coward’s skill in allowing heterosexually inclined viewers to ignore the play’s homosexual content. What has gone unmentioned, though, is the possibility of reading the play as autobiography. Coward wrote the play specifically for himself and the Lunts. The character Coward wrote for himself is clearly autobiographical: he is a playwright who scores a huge success with a play that the critics find scintillating but shallow. He even inscribes his first name into his character’s, backward: Leo for Noël. Gilda and Otto are, like the Lunts, in the same artistic line, though Coward makes them visual artists rather than actors. Coward even dedicated the play to the trio’s other sexually enigmatic associate, Alexander Woollcott.

There are several well-known photographs of the play’s final scene, with the three characters erotically intertwined on a sofa. But in December 1932, a month before the play opened, the Lunts and Coward posed for a similar studio photograph, in street clothes rather than in costume. Coward sits nestled against Lunt, who rests his hand on Coward’s shoulder; both men gaze longingly toward Fontanne. This intriguing photo invites the viewer to blur the lines between stage and reality and suggests that the play’s bisexual triangle spills beyond the frame of fiction. It would be problematic to push this argument for autobiography too literally; there is no evidence to suggest that Coward had slept with either Lunt or Fontanne. But it seems reasonable to read the play’s defense of bohemian sexuality as a reflection of the trio’s own views. Just as the play’s homosexual content was readily apparent to gay spectators in 1933, it is plausible that Coward wanted to suggest, at least to certain audience members, that he and the Lunts were not what the press made them out to be, sexually speaking.

A fictional profile of the Lunts that appeared in 1930 in *Theatre Guild* magazine also invites readers to look beneath the surface of their marriage. This piece, which Brown again fails to mention, is titled “Lord Alfred and Lady Lynn: An Interview to Prove That Marriage is No Hindrance to Art.” It is supposedly an interview of the couple, written in an ironic, overblown heroic style, by lesbian author Djuna Barnes. In this mock interview, Barnes visits the Lunts in their separate dressing rooms and asks them whether being married makes their acting more convincing. Fontanne argues that she must forget her marriage while on stage; Barnes has her say, “Any life we portray in public; any lines we speak on the stage; any glance we cast in a professional capacity, must of necessity be impersonal.” Lunt conversely effuses over their close relationship, to which Barnes remarks that “here is the very corpse
of discrepancy!" The actors unite and discuss how they rehearse their roles day and night, even in bed, and how they are always searching for the perfect roles; the "interview" concludes with Lunt's remark to his wife: "One of these days, my girl, you shall be a titled hussy, and I your charlatan!" The article is accompanied by a cartoon drawn by Barnes of Lunt and Fontanne, glaring unpleasantly at each other from separate single beds, framed by theatrical curtains. The ironic tone of this "interview" strongly suggests that the Lunts' marriage was as much a performance as their appearances on stage. Like Design for Living, it opens cracks in the idealized image, while leaving the public myth of the Lunts' marriage undisturbed.45

The Lunts, and the people who wrote about them, then, could play with hints of nonnormative sexuality in a period when public censure of
homosexuality was intensifying.\textsuperscript{46} This freedom came about because their image as a married couple was planted so firmly in the public mind. Even Brown admits that their stage performances were sexually daring, and that their marriage allowed them to push the limits of sexual propriety on stage. Brown relates a story of an elderly audience member, uncomfortable about a particularly erotic scene; her companion, reassuring her, was overheard to say “Isn’t it nice, my dear, to know that they really are married?”\textsuperscript{47} What was important, in other words, was not that the Lunts were in fact happily married to one another, but that their audiences believed that they were.

Public life for gay men and lesbians in New York took a turn for the worse in 1939. In that year, as Chauncey reports, police stepped up their raids on gay establishments in an attempt to eliminate all visible manifestations of homosexuality before the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Chauncey details the raid of the Times Square Garden and Grill, and the concern expressed by police that “fairies” were seen associating there
with off-duty soldiers. Again, arrests were made, jail sentences handed out, and names published in the newspapers. These raids, and the wartime atmosphere that followed, successfully drove gay life in the city underground, where it would remain for several decades.

Following the 1939 crackdown, the sexual daring of the Lunts’ performances diminished considerably. This shift can certainly be attributed in part to the couple’s advancing age, and consequently to the more mature and less sexually active roles available to them. But the increased antigay repression also took its toll, as demonstrated by the Lunts’ relationship with the young Montgomery Clift. In April 1940 the Lunts starred as middle-aged parents in Robert Sherwood’s *There Shall Be No Night*; Clift played their son. The Lunts, who had no children of their own, virtually adopted Clift, bringing him to their home and instructing him in acting and dramatic literature. Brown relates that the Lunts gave Clift a photograph of themselves signed, “From your real mother and father.” Patricia Bosworth, Clift’s biographer, says that Lunt took Clift alone to the theater; at postperformance dinners at the Lunts’, while Fontanne played games with the other guests, Clift and Lunt would do the dishes and have heart-to-heart talks.

Brown explains that the Lunts had no children because they were too busy, and that their relationship with Clift substituted for their thwarted parental desires. But the Lunts had not developed similar relationships with other young actors, and Bosworth suggests that the Lunts took interest in Clift specifically because of his homosexuality, trying to protect him from a hostile public. Bosworth reports that Clift at the time was involved with a man she identifies only as “Josh.” She quotes “Josh” as saying that Lunt feared that this relationship would become public and ruin Clift’s career.

Up until a few years ago it would have been career suicide for us to have confessed our homosexuality. Now it doesn’t matter. Then it was crucial to hide everything. I remember Monty telling me how Lunt scolded him sometimes. Lunt adored Monty, but he was afraid he was turning gay. He never said anything direct about it, but alluded to Gielgud, and then he said, “Well, y’know Noel Coward’s an exception. You can’t ordinarily be a pansy in the theatre and survive.”

Lunt’s statement reflects the growing suppression of public gay life; less than a decade before he had been eager to defy sexual norms in *Design for Living*. The Lunts encouraged Clift to marry an actress named Phyllis...
Thaxter so that they, too, could become an acting team.\textsuperscript{53} In later years, when Clift began to drink, and as rumors of his sexuality spread, the Lunts broke with him, possibly to protect their own reputation.\textsuperscript{54}

As the attacks against homosexuality increased, so did the number of high-profile articles portraying the Lunts as a happily married couple. These features created an increasingly uniform portrait of the Lunts as the ideal of American domesticity. The earliest of these articles, appearing in the 1930s, focused on the Lunts’ stage work. In 1937, \textit{Life} ran a feature about the Lunts’ appearance in \textit{Amphitryon 38}, with the statement, “Despite their stage laughter at married love, the Lunts are conspicuously happy in their married life.”\textsuperscript{55} A career retrospective appeared in the \textit{New York Times} in 1939 commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the couple’s appearance in \textit{The Guardsman}, with pictures of their major productions.\textsuperscript{56}

Beginning in 1940, immediately after the antigay crackdown, the tone of these profiles changed significantly. Rather than focusing on the Lunts’ stage career, these articles dealt with their domestic life, featuring images of the Lunts at home, especially on their Wisconsin farm. Rather than theatrical publications such as \textit{Theatre Guild} magazine and \textit{Stage}, or general-interest magazines such as \textit{Life}, these articles appeared in home and family magazines: \textit{Vogue}, \textit{Coronet}, and \textit{Ladies’ Home Journal}. Their titles advertised the Lunts as the model married couple: “Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt, of Genesee, Wisconsin”; “Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lunt”; “Far from the Crowd: Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Take Up the Muse of Agriculture”; “Lunt and Fontanne: First Family of the Theatre.”\textsuperscript{57} These profiles portrayed the Lunts as a “normal” couple, the kind of stars (as one article emphasized) who eat corn flakes instead of caviar. A 1940 \textit{New York Times} profile asserted hyperbolically: “Their marriage is as happy as any marriage ever has been or ever will be.”\textsuperscript{58} And the \textit{Ladies’ Home Journal} offered this question, though the author seems unaware of its irony: “Married eighteen years, still magically young, successful, in love—how do they do it? What is the Lunts’ design for living?”\textsuperscript{59}

Photography played an important part in these articles and was used by journalists to further the Lunt myth. The pictures show them living a quiet, secluded life on their Wisconsin farm. Lunt happily tends the garden and makes dinner in the well-equipped kitchen, while Fontanne sews and writes letters. Rarely do the photos show houseguests; the couple seem to live entirely by themselves. The pictures are heavily posed, looking very like the earlier pictures of the couple in their famous stage roles.
Unlike New York, in Wisconsin the Lunts could control the access of the press to their lives, and thus promote a controlled image of domestic serenity. By the start of World War II, then, the press had firmly planted in the popular mind the idea of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne as the perfect married pair, with plenty of visual documentation in high-profile family publications. This idealized image transformed into a perceived reality and became cemented in the two early biographies of the Lunts, by George Freedley and Maurice Zolotow.

In the early years of their acting careers, then, Lunt and Fontanne’s marriage allowed them to experiment with sexual subjects that pushed the limits of public tolerance and permitted them to travel freely in the openly gay subculture of New York. As that subculture came increasingly under attack, they could rely on the public perception of their marriage. They used the power of the press to quell the rumors that they were homosexual and to present themselves not only as a happily married couple, but as the ideal domestic pair. Lunt and Fontanne were nothing like Ozzie and Harriet or Ward and June Cleaver, the heterosexual icons of 1950s television. But after 1940, in the public eye the Lunts came to represent the American ideal of marital bliss just as powerfully as the famous couples on television did in the 1950s. They enhanced the myth of their marriage by linking, paradoxically, the glamour of the Broadway stage to the image of idyllic domesticity. The Lunts turned normative heterosexuality into a spectacularly successful theatrical performance, a performance that continued beyond their deaths, inscribed for posterity on their joint gravestone.

Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne were universally regarded as the greatest acting team in the history of the English speaking theater. They were married for 55 years and were inseparable both on and off the stage.60

NOTES

1. Graham Payn, a close associate of Noël Coward and the Lunts, comments in an interview with Philip Hoare that “Lunt was ‘a bit of a freelancer’ sexually” (quoted in Philip Hoare, Noël Coward: A Biography [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995], 96). Kaier Curtin recalls an actress named Isobel Elsom who, he says, had a close relationship with Fontanne that he presumes was sexual; she visited Fontanne regularly at the Lunts’ Wisconsin home. Elsom, toward the end of her life, denied in print any knowledge of Fontanne’s sexuality (Curtin, “We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians”: The Emergence of Lesbians
and Gay Men on the American Stage [Boston: Alyson, 1987], 112), but Curtin believes she was attempting in this remark to disguise her own proclivities (Billy J. Harbin, interview with Kaier Curtin, September 4 and November 21, 1996, conveyed to the author by correspondence with Harbin). Rumors are, of course, notoriously difficult to document. Curtin reports, “Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, the illustrious husband and wife co-stars, were rumored to be discreetly gay,” along with the husband-wife pair Katharine Cornell and Guthrie McClintic, and others including Talullah Bankhead, Alla Nazimova, Estelle Winwood, and Eva Le Gallienne (Curtin, 57, 112). Brendan Gill, reviewing Jared Brown’s biography of the Lunts, remarks, “Brown takes it for granted that it was a conventionally heterosexual marriage, and this astonished me, for I had always assumed that it was one of those ‘white’ marriages so common among people in the theatre. (One thinks of Cole and Linda Porter, of Katharine Cornell and Guthrie McClintic, and many others).” Gill, “The Perfectionists,” New Yorker, October 13, 1986, 155. Axel Madsen mentions the rumors about Fontanne in his gossipy The Sewing Circle: Hollywood’s Greatest Secret—Female Stars Who Loved Other Women (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995), 45.

2. The biographies of the Lunts all mention their fights and Lunt’s depression. Jared Brown, in The Fabulous Lunts: A Biography of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne (New York: Atheneum, 1986) provides the most thorough documentation; see in particular his discussions on pp. 206, 252, 255, and 289. Evidence of the Lunts’ unpleasantness is also found in letters (dated December 27, 1970, and January 6, 1971) to Alan Hewitt from Fitzroy Davis (both acted with the Lunts) in which Davis expresses his intense dislike of the Lunts and describes what he feels was their ruthless use of other people to further their own careers. The vicious tone of Davis’s letters, however, may call their objectivity into question (Alan Hewitt Papers, Baker Library, Dartmouth College).


5. Ibid.


8. The earliest biography is George Freedley’s The Lunts (London: Rockliff, 1957). This was followed by Maurice Zolotow’s more extensive Stage-struck: The Romance of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965); the title indicates its emphasis on the Lunts’ idealized marriage.
10. Ibid., 396. Brown does not identify the speaker.
12. Brown quotes George Bugbee, Lunt's brother-in-law, as saying of the couple that they acted constantly, on stage and off (*The Fabulous Lunts*, 397).
13. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, esp. chap. 11. “Nights in Fairyland” is discussed on p. 321. Chauncey limits his analysis to New York’s gay male subculture; at this time there is an equally active, though perhaps less public, lesbian subculture in the city.
16. Brown, *The Fabulous Lunts*, 26. Brown also quotes a college classmate of Lunt’s, Adaline Burchart Hoag, who testifies that while many female classmates fell in love with Lunt, he never dated them, and that he was always too busy to have time for women (25–26).
17. Ibid., 62–63.
20. Brown says little about Lunt’s later relationship with Weaver. He mentions that Weaver, who taught theater at the University of Michigan, criticized Lunt for acting in trivial comedies with Noël Coward (ibid., 210). This statement could be interpreted as motivated by jealousy, especially given the implied gay relationship between Lunt and Coward in *Design for Living*.
22. Zolotow, *Stagestruck*, 25. Zolotow does not specifically mention these rumors, only implying them by his vague gender reference; Madsen asserts them as fact (*The Sewing Circle*, 25, 117–18, 136), but he provides no documentation.
29. Ibid., 150. Hoyt presents a whitewashed view of Woollcott’s life in his biography. A more probing biography of Woollcott needs to be written.
31. Ibid., 335–49.
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35. Ibid., 353.
37. Ibid., 167.
41. Chauncey interviews an audience member who reports that gay viewers understood the double entendre (*Gay New York*, 288 and note). Curtin documents the critical response to the play (*Call Them Bulgarians*, 170-76).
42. See Curtin’s discussion (*Call Them Bulgarians*, 170-76) and John Clum’s analysis in *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 99-104. One point they miss is Gilda’s line in act 3, scene 2, describing how she left Leo and Otto and “sat in Childs weeping into glasses of milk” (Noël Coward, *Plays: Three*, London: Methuen, 1979, 120). Childs restaurants, especially in the theater district, were noted gay cruising areas (Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 166).
43. Coward suggests in his autobiography that all of the ideas he and the Lunts toyed with for this play dealt with nonnormative sexuality.
45. It is unclear whether the Lunts approved of this article. When it appeared, they were under contract with the Guild and so presumably could have stopped publication had they so desired. A similarly suggestive, though less ironic, fictional conversation by Sargent Armstrong appeared in *Stage*, October 1935, 29.
46. Alan Hewitt recounts that the Lunts’ 1935 tour of *The Taming of the Shrew* was “a fantasy of sex in every possible combination,” though he claims innocence of the sexual activity in the company at the time (Alan Hewitt, private letter, April 5, 1986, Alan Hewitt Papers).
47. Brown, *The Fabulous Lunts*, 178. Both Clum (*Acting Gay*, 100-101) and Curtin (*Call Them Bulgarians*, 175-76) also suggest that the Lunts used their marriage to get away with sexual liberties on stage.

53. Ibid., 80.

54. Ibid., 276, 321. Later, as Brown reports, the Lunts developed other ties with young men. They became intimate with the young Dick Van Patten, who performed with them in the late 1940s (*The Fabulous Lunts*, 356). Brown reports that Lunt hired a series of "summer boys" to work on their Wisconsin farm; Brown emphasizes how much the Lunts enjoyed having the boys around (374).


59. Moats, "Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lunt," 14.

60. Headstone engraving as reported in undated news clippings in Alan Hewitt Papers.