Once upon a time, when Broadway truly was the Great White Way and elegance rather than bling-bling chic was admired, there lived a Queen and King of the theater who ruled supreme for more than 40 years. Their friends were the great actors, directors, and critics of the day: Laurence Olivier, Helen Hayes, Alexander Woollcott, Robert Sherwood, Edna Ferber, and the Katharines Hepburn and Cornell. Their kingdom extended from New York City’s stages to the boards of London. When they were not glittering before adoring audiences, they were creating a paradisical estate called Ten Chimneys in the green and pleasant countryside of southern Wisconsin.

Their reign was marked by their extraordinary dedication to their craft, their demands for perfection in themselves and their casts, and their chameleon transformations in plays by such varied authors as Shakespeare, Frederich Dürrenmatt, and Jean Giraudoux. Their notorious behavior as artists and spouses inspired the musical *Kiss Me, Kate*. The King’s American humor and energy and the Queen’s cool English delicacy created a partnership that charmed both sides of the Atlantic. Known variously as Fabulous … Great … Lustrous … Magical … Incomparable … the Celestials and the Glorious Beloved Supremes

their lives were long, their influence upon acting, staging, and directing inestimable.

When they finally escaped this mortal coil (he in 1977 and she in 1983), their tombstone read that they were universally regarded as the greatest acting team in the history of the English-speaking theater. They were married for fifty-five years and were inseparable both on and off the stage.

Why so inseparable? As the Queen once noted, “I lied to everybody. I lie very well, being an actress, naturally.” And in the same vein, her King said, “It’s a terrifying business [the theater], but it has its compensations. Where else could I have found someone who for 50 years has given me sheer enchantment?”

This fairy tale of art, love, drama, and glamour did once exist, thankfully. In the personages of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, the perfection of dramatic performance and fabulous living was truly realized. Their legend is vividly, lovingly, yet objectively presented by Margot Peters in *Design for Living: Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, a Biography*, aptly named after the scandalous 1933 play written for them by their best friend, Noël Coward. Peters, an accomplished biographer who has also written about May Sarton, the Barrymores, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, almost seems destined to write about the Lunts (as they came to be known), having taught at the University of Wisconsin, just down the road from Alfred Lunt’s Milwaukee birthplace.

Because the theater’s essence is ephemeral, it is difficult to capture the Lunts’ magic in words, particularly as they made only one film—1931’s *The Guardsman*—and had only a few television experiences. But Peters’ thorough research, inclusion of more than 60 photographs, recognition of earlier biographies, and willingness to explore the complexities of the Lunts’ relationship—their rumored bisexuality, commitment to working only together, evolution of contemporary acting style, wit, and enthusiasm—revive this remarkable couple for the fortunate reader.

Ten Chimneys was restored in 2003 and is now open to the public for tours, reintroducing the actors to the public. Unlike many similar shrines to artists past, the scintillating spirits of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne seem to haunt the estate. Peters’ fascinating look at these two remarkable artists must also surely please the “Celestials,” making the fantastic design of their lives once again a reality.

REVIEWER: Victoria Amador is a freelance writer who, at 17, received a letter from Lynn Fontanne when the actress was a regal 86. She is based in Edinburgh, Scotland.

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