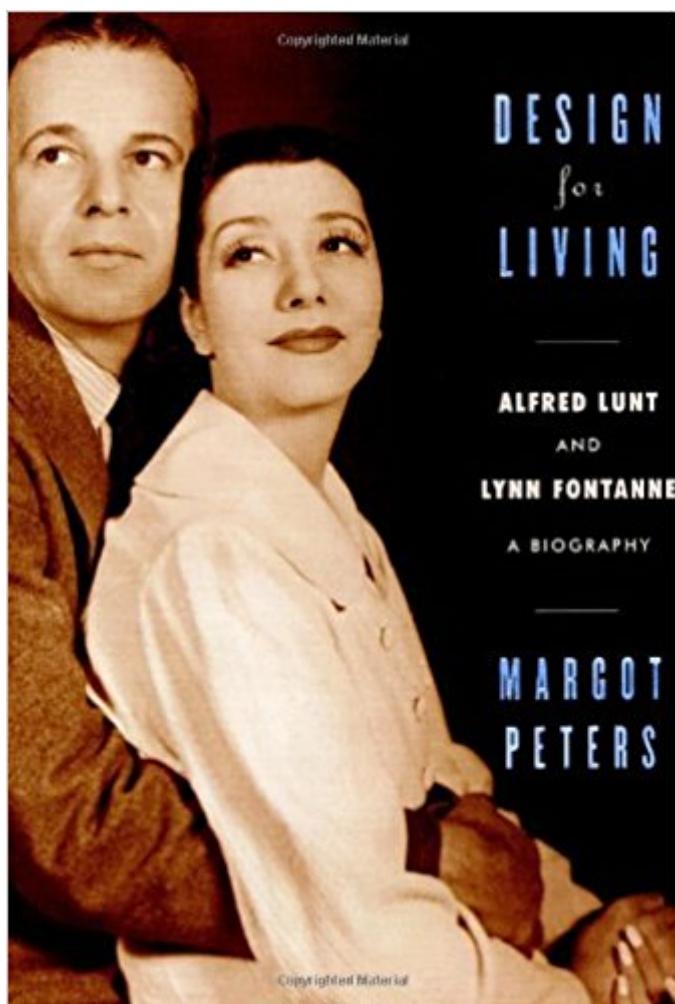


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# Design For Living: Alfred Lunt And Lynn Fontanne



## Synopsis

From the much-admired biographer of Charlotte Brontë, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and the Barrymores (Margot Peters is surely now . . . our foremost historian of stage make-believe • Leon Edel), a new biography of the most famous English-speaking acting team of the twentieth century. Individually, they were recognized as extraordinary actors, each one a star celebrated, imitated, sought after. Together, they were legend. The Lunts. A name to conjure with. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne worked together so imaginatively, so seamlessly onstage that they seemed to fuse into one person. Offstage, they brawled so famously and rauously over every detail of every performance that they inspired the musical *Kiss Me, Kate*. At home on Broadway, in London's West End, touring the United States and Great Britain, and even playing "the foxhole circuit" of World War II, the Lunts stunned, moved, and mystified audiences for more than four decades. They were considered to be a rarefied taste, but when they toured Texas in the 1930s, the audience threw cowboy hats onto the stage. Their private life was equally fascinating, as unusual as the one they led in public. Friends like the critic Alexander Woollcott (whom Edna Ferber once described as "the little New Jersey Nero who thinks his pinafore is a toga"), Noël Coward, Laurette Taylor, and Sidney Greenstreet received lifelong loyalty and hospitality. Ten Chimneys, their country home in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin, "is to performers what the Vatican is to Catholics," Carol Channing once said. "The Lunts are where we all spring from." In this new biography, Margot Peters catches the magic of Lunt and Fontanne— their period, their work, their intimacy and its contradictions—with candor, delicacy, intelligence, and wit. She writes about their personal and creative choices as deftly as she captures their world, from their meeting (backstage, naturally) when Fontanne was a young actress in the first flush of stardom and Lunt a lanky midwesterner who came in the stage door, bowed to her elaborately, lost his balance, and fell down the stairs—and the early days when an unknown and very hungry Noël Coward lived in a swank hotel in a room the size of a closet and cadged meals at their table to the telegram the famous couple once sent to a movie mogul, turning down a studio contract worth a fortune ("We can be bought, my dear Mr. Laemmle, but we can't be bored"). We follow the Lunts through triumphs in plays such as *The Guardsman*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Design for Living*; through friendships and feuds; through the intricate way they worked with such playwrights and directors as S. N. Behrman, Robert Sherwood, Giraudoux, Dürrenmatt, Peter Brook, and with each other. Margot Peters captures the gallantry of two remarkably gifted people who lived for their art and for each other. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne were once described as an

“amazing duet of intelligence and gaiety.” Margot Peters re-creates the fun and the fireworks.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1951, Alfred Lunt revealed insecurity when he said of his acting partnership with wife Lynn Fontanne, "I hope people don't get tired of us." Peters's penetrating biography shows why Lunt's fears were groundless and why theater audiences from 1909 to 1962 relished their work, individually and together, in such productions as *The Guardsman*, *Taming of the Shrew* and *Design for Living*. Fontanne (1887-1983), a protégé of Ellen Terry and Laurette Taylor, was critically applauded from the start. Lunt (1892-1977) overcame childhood scarlet fever and loss of a kidney to pursue acting. Peters portrays the pair as tempestuous beings (Lunt once screamed, in a fit of rage, "you're the rottenest actress I've ever worked with!"). Warned by Taylor that Lunt would make a terrible lover and a worse husband, Fontanne married him anyway, and they dedicated themselves to joint theatrical greatness. Peters laces her story with anecdotes about close friend Noël Coward, self-destructive John Barrymore and others. She handles the issue of Lunt and Fontanne's bisexual marriage thoughtfully, and perceptively analyzes their acting styles. Wit abounds throughout, and Peters points out the paradox that made Lunt and Fontanne—whose marriage may have been unconsummated—generate heat onstage, as opposed to sexually active married couples who had no acting chemistry together (e.g., Burton and Taylor; Cruise and Kidman). More poignantly, she quotes Fontanne as admitting Lunt's decision to lock himself into a team prevented

him from achieving full recognition of his stature. The book's blend of breezy humor, along with darker insights into complex personalities, make it a potent, provocative journey. 62 photos. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

As icons of the theater, few names are as illustrious as those of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Separately and together, they reigned as king and queen of the American stage for decades, revolutionizing dramatic performances with their innovative staging and delivery. From Shakespeare to Shaw to Sherwood, the Lunts had the power to revitalize classics and create new ones, and could catapult a fledgling playwright to instant fame by sheer dint of their appearances. As actors, their on-stage personas were perfection; as spouses, their off-stage lives were equally entertaining. At their beloved "Ten Chimneys" estate in rural Wisconsin, the creme de la creme of the theater world--Coward and Woollcott, Olivier and Hayes, Clift and Greenstreet--basked in the haven they provided. In a masterfully detailed examination of two very public lives, Peters reveals the behind-the-scenes chemistry that ensured their before-the-footlights success. Treating her subjects with a balanced reverence and learned recognition, Peters has penned an engrossing biography as stylish and charming as the Lunts themselves. Carol Haggas Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I have given this book three stars. It is a fun interesting read in the way these two shared their art, practiced their craft, amazed theater crowds and fellow actors and went home every night for over 50 years and slept in the same bed. but then the dirt with no name starts. He sleeps with men, she sleeps with women. How do we know this? Well someone once heard someone saying it in front of a theater putting on one of their plays. Shame on the writer for even adding this. Oh and let us not forget that even though the writer can find NO ONE of the same sex that had affairs with them she does have one piece of evidence...The Lunts had gay friends!?! In the arts? I am shocked! My husband and I are both in the arts and also have gay friends. To the best of my knowledge no one has ever accused them of being straight.

I love the Lunts and this was a most enjoyable book

I reviewed this book 2-3 weeks ago when it first came out. Why hasn't my review been posted?

This book probably deserves three-and-a-half stars, but I'll round it up to four. Margot Peters clearly

did a lot of research for this book, and it shows. If you're interested in learning about the Lunts, this book is more than adequate. But if Jared Brown's "The Fabulous Lunts" were in print, that would be my first recommendation for a biography of the couple. That having been said, this book is arguably superior in some respects. If you want to learn about the Lunts' private lives, Peters provides far more information than does Brown (even if some of her surmises about the couple's sex life, or lack thereof, are a bit of a stretch). In comparison with "The Fabulous Lunts," here we learn a great deal more about Lunt's family; Ten Chimneys, their estate in Wisconsin; and many of their friendships. (The downside is that some of this is not very interesting.) On the other hand, Brown is generally more thorough in discussing their professional lives, though Peters is more thorough on a few productions (including "The Taming of the Shrew" and Coward's "Design for Living"). To Peters's credit, there are relatively few factual errors (as far as I can tell), and there are extensive endnotes. Unfortunately, even with all the endnotes, there are still some things that didn't get them but should have, and some of the endnotes that are included are more confusing than informative. Indeed, one of the problems with this book is that Peters's writing is sometimes maddeningly convoluted, occasionally descending into incoherence. This is where Brown scores over Peters most of all: His writing is simple, straightforward, and clear, making "The Fabulous Lunts" a better read than "Design for Living." Still, for the most part this is a good book, and I can recommend it to those who want to learn about the Lunts. EDIT: Since I wrote the above, "The Fabulous Lunts" has come back into print.

Never having seen Alfred Lunt & Lynn Fontanne onstage, I, like the author, Margot Peters, cannot explain what made them exceptional. Ms. Peters, whose previous book, "The House of Barrymore", is a fascinating and definitive biography of the great theatrical siblings, Ethel, Lionel and John Barrymore, disappointed this reader with her dual portrait of the Lunts. The author thoroughly documents their triumphs, tours, friendships and quirks, yet their theatrical charm and power eludes her pen and is never found on the page. Unlike in the previously mentioned bio, here she simply cannot capture the vitality of the times, places and people she is writing about throughout this volume. The author might have checked with Shakespeare for more insight into the truth about actors on the stage: "These our actors,/ As I foretold you, were all spirits, and/ Are melted into air, into thin air...". I guess you had to be there during Broadway's great years to understand their alchemy.

DESIGN FOR LIVING is a biography of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, extremely popular husband

and wife stage actors in the first half of the 20th century. Author Margot Peters provides, in exhaustive detail, the histories of the Lunts many successful stage productions, mostly by now underremembered writers like Noel Coward and Robert Sherwood. Throughout their careers, the Lunts enjoyed good reviews from New York critics but were often chastised for choosing inferior plays. Even though I enjoyed learning about the Lunts, I didn't really understand what would have led them to make these choices after reading the book. Peters also comes up a bit short when discussing the Lunts acting technique... (she shouldn't be faulted too much or this though, working from secondary sources). Repeated references are made to how they made everything seem "fresh" and "spontaneous", but we don't know how they really got their teeth in a character. Peters notes that other biographers of the Lunts have claimed that both Alfred and Lynn engaged in gay relationships without providing any evidence. Peters also provides no evidence, but also provides no evidence that the Lunts had any intimate life with each other. After reading DESIGN FOR LIVING, I came away feeling that I knew the Lunts well as actors but very little as people. Probably how they would have wanted it.

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