



Coward, Sir Noël (1899-1973)

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Noël Coward in 1928.
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Noël Coward occupies a unique place in twentieth-century theater. An accomplished playwright, actor, composer, and lyricist, he was also a singer and cabaret performer, as well as a writer of short stories and an accomplished amateur painter. Most of all, he was a consummate man of the theater, whose wit and sophistication belied his humble origins and helped define the role he played as heir to Oscar Wilde: a brilliant observer who both mirrored and satirized the dominant society that had, in a real sense, co-opted him.

After earning success at a very early age, he was both the epitome of upper-class English manners and a satirist who exposed the foibles and hypocrisies of his age, especially in regard to heterosexual courtship. Although he was a popular playwright, whose intent was ostensibly merely to amuse and entertain, he nevertheless challenged surprisingly directly many of his society's assumptions about love and sex, imbuing his work with a camp sensibility that disdained conventional sexual morality as the product of small-minded individuals and groups.

For most of his life homosexuality was a criminal offense in England; hence, it is not surprising that Coward was not openly gay. Yet, his homosexuality was an open secret among the cognoscenti in the world of the theater and in the cafe society in which he held sway for five decades. Moreover, in his plays, particularly *Private Lives* (1930) and *Design for Living* (1933), he rejected normative sexual values, which are presented as stultifying and unsatisfying, in favor of more adventurous, unconventional arrangements; and in his songs and cabaret performances he often intimated, through double entendre and allusion, his own unconventional sexual preference.

Life and Career

Born Noël Pierce Coward on December 19, 1899, in Teddington, a village near London, he was the son of an ineffectual piano salesman and a doting mother.

Although his formal education consisted of only a few years at the Chapel Royal Choir School, he was a voracious reader who in effect educated himself. Near the end of his life, Coward mused, "how fortunate I was to have been born poor. If Mother had been able to send me to private school, Eton and Oxford or Cambridge, it would probably have set me back years. I have always distrusted too much education and intellectualism."

After participating in amateur and community theatricals, Coward launched his professional acting career at the age of 12, debuting on the West End in 1911. Having appeared frequently in West End productions during his adolescence, he made his film debut in D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1917), starring Lillian and Dorothy Gish.

He was introduced to high society as a fourteen-year-old protégé of artist Philip Streatfield, who died during World War I, but it was Coward's wit and charm that bought him entrée to a world of upper-class

privilege that would otherwise have snubbed him because of his lower middle-class origins and rather suspect profession. Exposure to this society helped shape both his own persona as the cosmopolitan bon vivant and the settings and characters that he would employ in his plays. Coupled with his early absorption of the bohemian attitudes of the world of the theater, his experience in British upper-class society also helped free him from the bonds of middle-class sexual morality and manners.

Coward, who had a genius for friendship, would later count among his friends such members of the British aristocracy as His Royal Highness George, Duke of Kent (with whom he may have had an affair), Lord and Lady Mountbatten, and Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. His close friendships in the theatrical community included Gertrude Lawrence, Beatrice Lillie, Lawrence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Alfred Lunt, and Lynn Fontanne, all of whom appeared in his plays. Perhaps more surprisingly, he maintained a close friendship with novelist Radclyffe Hall and her partner Una, Lady Troubridge.

Enormously energetic and prolific, Coward dominated British theater between the two world wars. His first full-length play, *I Leave It to You* (1920), was produced when he was only 21. He soon began writing songs for both his own shows and those of others. He alternated between producing and writing (and often starring in) musical revues and operettas, the genre pioneered by his friendly rival Ivor Novello, and writing (and sometimes appearing in) more serious comedies. Among the works of these decades are *The Vortex* (1924), *Hay Fever* (1925), *Bittersweet* (1929), *Private Lives* (1930), *Cavalcade* (1931), *Words and Music* (1932), *Design for Living* (1933), and *Tonight at 8:30* (1936).

These works, which often featured Coward paired with actress Gertrude Lawrence, established the playwright and actor as a leading figure among the younger generation of popular entertainers. Although from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the works of this period may seem merely light and amusing, they were with some justification viewed by many of Coward's contemporaries as threatening. One reviewer protested that the characters of *Private Lives* were "four degenerates" and described the play as "a disgusting exhibition of moral and social decadence." Such a reaction is one indication that Coward succeeded in raising questions about his society's complacent morality and smug certainties.

In the politically charged 1930s, many intellectuals dismissed Coward's plays and musicals as breezy entertainments irrelevant to the momentous events that would culminate in social revolution and world war. But to see these works as completely non-political is to miss their subversiveness.

In a manner similar to Wilde's comedies, Coward's plays amuse, but they also expose his society's often concealed tensions and anxieties, especially in regard to sexual matters. Moreover, given the censorship imposed on the popular stage during this time, particularly regarding sexual matters, Coward's penchant for pushing the envelope is remarkable.

During the years of World War II, Coward not only entertained British troops around the world, but he also produced such characteristic works as *Blithe Spirit* (1942) and *Present Laughter* (1942). He also produced, directed, wrote, and starred in the patriotic film *In Which We Serve* (1942). One of his one-act plays is the source of David Lean's acclaimed wartime film *Brief Encounter* (1945).

The years following World War II were difficult ones for Coward, at least as a playwright. To many theatergoers, he had come to seem old-fashioned, representative of a particular period--the years between the world wars--that was now long gone. His plays repeatedly failed in the West End. Moreover, when he relocated, first to Bermuda and then to Jamaica, to avoid crippling post-war taxes, he was regarded as unpatriotic. In addition, he was recovering from a personal crisis: soon before the war his long-time romantic relationship with American stockbroker and business manager Jack Wilson had come to an unhappy end.

In the post-war years, Coward both found his life partner and redirected his career. In 1945, he fell in love with South African actor Graham Payn, who had as a boy appeared in some of Coward's revues. Although

Coward attempted to make a star of Payn, casting him in several shows, Payn, though talented, lacked his partner's charisma and ambition and never achieved the stardom that Coward sought for him. Nevertheless, theirs was a close and satisfying relationship that lasted the rest of Coward's life. Among their theatrical and society friends, they were accepted as a couple.

Although Coward continued to produce plays on the West End, he more and more oriented his career toward America, frequently appearing on American television and--at the suggestion of his friend Marlene Dietrich--launching a successful cabaret act that, rather improbably, took Las Vegas by storm. He also prepared successful screenplays for films of such earlier works as *The Astonished Heart* (1950) and *Tonight at 8:30* (1952), and acquired a large house at Les Avants in Switzerland.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Coward was in effect "rediscovered," with several major revivals of his work in New York and London, and a belated recognition of his achievement. During this time, he also wrote his most daring play on the subject of homosexuality, *Song at Twilight* (1966), a play that features a gay novelist, Hugh Latymer (perhaps based on Coward's old friend W. Somerset Maugham), who weighs the costs of coming out and decides to remain in the closet.

Coward himself made a decision not to come out publicly, even after homosexuality was decriminalized in England in 1967 and New York's Stonewall Riots of 1969 ushered in the period of gay liberation. When friends urged him to come out, he refused, saying, not altogether facetiously, "There are still a few old ladies in Worthing who don't know." Perhaps the real reason he refused to declare his homosexuality is that he knew that such a declaration would preclude the knighthood that he richly deserved but that had been withheld from him for so long.

The knighthood was finally awarded in 1970. In 1971, Coward received a special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the theater. In 1972, musical revues based on his songs and sketches began successful runs in both London (*Cowardly Custard*) and New York (*Oh Coward!*).

During this period of renewed appreciation, on March 26, 1973, Coward succumbed to a stroke. He was buried on the grounds of Firefly, his home in Jamaica. Later a plaque in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner was erected in his honor.

On December 9, 1998, with Graham Payn at her side, Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, unveiled a statue of her long-time friend in the foyer of Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London.

Theater Music

Coward's contribution to musical theater is primarily that of songwriter. Although his fully realized musicals seem dated, his songs (often written for revues) have a life beyond their original contexts and continue to charm by virtue of their wit and sophistication.

Songs such as "A Room with a View" (1928), "If Love Were All" (1929), "Someday I'll Find You" (1930), "Twentieth Century Blues" (1931), "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" (1932), "Mad about the Boy" (1932), "Mrs. Worthington, Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage" (1935), "A Marvelous Party" (1939), "Matelot" (1945), and "Sail Away" (1950) have become standards.

Coward's songs are notable for their diversity, ranging as they do from comic patter songs rooted in the English music hall tradition to witty, often sardonic observations on twentieth-century life, to sophisticated, bitter-sweet ballads that express loss and longing and loneliness. Coward's signature as a songwriter is his peculiar balance of humor and pathos.

In an essay entitled, "How I Write My Songs," Coward explained that, although he had very little formal training as a musician, he had "a perfect ear for pleasant sounds." In writing music, he generally worked

with a professional musician who wrote down the notes for him.

But what is distinctive about a Coward song is not its melody, but its lyrics. As a lyricist, Coward ranks with such songwriters as Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, and Stephen Sondheim. Since most of his songs were written for characters in musicals or sketches or operettas, they usually express emotions rooted in particular situations or plots, but they often transcend those situations to give voice to universal feelings.

Some of his songs have become particularly identified with Coward's own persona, though they were originally sung by women. For example, "Mad about the Boy," particularly when performed by Coward himself, captures the giddiness and hopelessness of an infatuation with an unobtainable object of desire. "It's pretty funny but I'm mad about the boy, / He has a gay appeal, that makes me feel, / There's maybe something sad about the boy." In songs such as this, Coward both reveals and conceals the desire that cannot be named openly.

Coward began writing songs for his own plays and, having a slight voice, he intentionally made them vocally undemanding. His style of singing--really dialogue with music--exerted considerable influence on American musical theater.

Indeed, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe wrote the part of Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* (1956) with Coward in mind, tailoring the songs assigned to Higgins to Coward's style. Because Coward refused to make commitments of more than three months to any role, the part actually went to Rex Harrison. However, all of Higgins's songs, such as "Why Can't the English" and "A Hymn to Him" echo earlier Coward classics such as "Mad Dogs and Englishmen."

Ironically, Coward's later musicals, *Sail Away* (1960) and *The Girl Who Came to Supper* (1964), were criticized for sounding too much like *My Fair Lady*.

Cabaret Performer

Coward was a journeyman actor who frequently took roles in his own plays. He sometimes appeared in the works of others, such as a 1953 London revival of Shaw's *The Apple Cart* and in Carol Reed's 1959 film of Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*. But his greatest role was always himself, the suave British sophisticate.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Coward often appeared on American television, usually in specials such as the show *Together with Music: Noël and Mary Martin* (1955) for which he wrote several new songs. But his paramount success as a performer may have been in his cabaret act.

Developed quickly for what was to have been a four-week booking at London's Café de Paris in 1951, the act was an unexpected success. It was revived many times during the 1950s, most famously in Las Vegas in 1955. For the Las Vegas opening, Frank Sinatra chartered a plane to bring such Hollywood celebrities as Judy Garland, Lauren Bacall, and Joseph Cotten. The cabaret act not only solved Coward's money problems, but also made him known in America as someone who--British sophistication notwithstanding--could entertain ordinary people.

The cabaret act presented him alone on stage with just a pianist, his only prop a lit cigarette extending from a long holder. In his persona of the slightly jaded, unabashedly queer, upper-class Englishman, he performed his songs, told stories, and reminisced. However, he never indulged in self-congratulatory comments on his long career. In one of his funniest songs, "Why Must the Show Go On?," he admonished against such a temptation, saying "Gallant old troupers, You've bored us all for years."

In a tribute to the American songwriter Cole Porter, he penned new--even more risqué--lyrics to Porter's classic, "Let's Do It," referring to such contemporary personalities as Tennessee Williams and Senator Joseph

McCarthy.

In a prescient review of Coward's cabaret performance, Kenneth Tynan justly remarked that the success of the act depended less on the content of the show than on the qualities embodied in Coward himself. "In Coward's case star quality is the ability to project, without effort, the shape and essence of a unique personality, which had never existed before him in print or paint. Even the youngest of us will know, in fifty years' time, precisely what we mean by 'a very Noël Coward sort of person.'"

Coward's cabaret performances spawned such albums as *Noël Coward at Las Vegas* (1955) and *Noël Coward in New York* (1957).

Coward's plays are frequently produced all over the world. His musicals are seldom mounted, but his songs can be heard on many fine recordings and in compilation albums and revues such as *Oh Coward!*, *Cowardly Custard*, and *Noël and Gertie*.

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