



Novello, Ivor (1893-1951)

by Matthew Kennedy

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Show business renaissance man extraordinaire, Ivor Novello not only composed the scores of musical comedies, but also acted in films while dominating the London stage as a playwright and handsome romantic leading man for three decades.

He was born David Ivor Novello Davies in Cardiff, Wales on January 15, 1893. His mother was a choir director and celebrated vocal coach. Through her, young Novello developed his deep interest in music and by age fifteen had published his first song.

He attended Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was a boy soprano. He served in World War I, first as an entertainer in France, then as a pilot in the Royal Naval Air Service. During the war he composed scores for several musical comedies, but his biggest hit came with the patriotic song "Keep the Home Fires Burning" (1914).

Novello's persona was that of a handsome bachelor made for romantic melodrama and adventure. As such, he dominated the English stage from the 1920s until his death in 1951, rivaled only by another notably versatile actor-writer-composer, Noël Coward.

Lesbian writer and socialite Mercedes de Acosta, in her memoirs *Here Lies the Heart* (1960), described Novello's beauty and élan: "A uniquely handsome man, his sensitive face had perfectly balanced features, the dark eyes beautifully cut into it and set off by black and shining hair. He wore his uniform with style and dash and altogether looked enchanting."

Novello made his film acting debut in *The Call of the Blood* (*L'Appel du Sang* [1919]), followed by *Miarka: the Daughter of the Bear* (*Miarka, Fille de L'Ourse* [1920]), both produced in France.

Novello debuted on stage in London in *Deburau* (1921). He then starred on screen in *Carnival* (1921), *The Bohemian Girl* (1922), *The Man Without Desire* (1923), and D. W. Griffith's *The White Rose* (1923).

A homosexual with no desire to become a family man, Novello thrived professionally in multiple careers. His stint as playwright, and frequent actor of his own words, took off in 1924 when he wrote and performed in *The Rat*. Back on screen, he acted against type, playing a psychopath in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926).

Other screen credits include *The Vortex* (1927), from a Noël Coward play; *Downhill* (1927), again for Hitchcock; and *The Constant Nymph* (1928). These were followed by stage runs of *Symphony in Two Flats* (1930), *The Truth Game* (1930), and *I Lived with You* (1932).

The press linked him romantically to *Bohemian Girl* co-star Gladys Cooper, but the real love of his life was actor Robert Andrews, with whom he lived from 1917 until his death in 1951.

Novello never hid his homosexuality through marriage or denial, but his women fans adored him anyway, primarily for his striking good looks and remarkable stage presence. His sophisticated and urbane social circle was peopled with leading homosexuals in the arts, including Noël Coward, Clifton Webb, and Somerset Maugham.

It is likely that the open secret of Novello's homosexuality played a part when a notoriously homophobic judge sentenced him to a month's imprisonment during World War II for evading wartime restrictions on the use of gasoline.

In 1931, Novello went to Hollywood and co-wrote several film scripts, including *Mata Hari* (1931) and *Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1932), but he preferred the theater to movies.

In addition to tackling Shakespeare with *Henry V* in 1938, he wrote, composed, and starred in four successful musicals at Drury Lane: *Glamorous Night* (1935), *Careless Rapture* (1936), *Crest of the Wave* (1937), and *The Dancing Years* (1939).

In the late 1930s, British theater critic W. A. Darlington remarked that "without Mr. Novello, Drury Lane is a white elephant; with him it is a gold mine. He writes plays, composes music and acts the principal male parts. Anybody who can do this successfully is a craftsman of the highest order."

Novello's work is rarely revived, as his unashamedly romantic style is far out of fashion. Perhaps it is time for rediscovery. He was amazingly prolific, publishing 250 songs, fourteen plays and eight musicals, in addition to maintaining an active career as an actor.

Ivor Novello died on March 6, 1951 from coronary thrombosis in London just four hours after appearing in a performance of *The King's Rhapsody*, a play he wrote. He was 58.

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About the Author

Matthew Kennedy teaches anthropology at City College of San Francisco and film history at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. A film critic for *Bay Area Reporter*, he has also written for such publications as *Performing Arts*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Bright Lights Film Journal*. He is author of *Marie Dressler* and a biography of film director Edmund Goulding.