

WHAT'S ON? Is your production or event shown here...?

If you want an item to be included here or on our website then please send details to:
The Noël Coward Society, 29, Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon, Norwich, NR6 6TB or email: whatson@noelcoward.net
Tel: +44 (0)1603 486188 Fax: +44 (0)1603 400683
Professional companies are shown in blue * denotes Premiere, TBC = To be confirmed

In North America

Blithe Spirit:

26 to 30 Apr Mississauga, Ontario
22 Apr to 1 May Windmill Theatre Players, High River, Alberta
11 to 14 May Innisdale High School Barrie Ontario
6 to 16 May Quebec Art Company Appolonaire, Quebec
5 to 27 Jun A four week run on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at The Globe Playhouse, West Hollywood, CA.

Present Laughter

22 to 25 Apr Columbia Arts Center - Vancouver, WA
Vancouver On Stage 360-666-4768
2 to 26 Jun Raymond Burr Performing Arts Theatre, New Westminister, BC
May 26 Forest Heights Collegiate Institute, Kitchener, Ontario

Private Lives

Apr to May Irish Classical Theatre. Buffalo, NY
12 to 15 May Stage 43 Theatrical Society, Port Coquitlam. BC

A Song at Twilight

23 April, 13 May & 17 May Food for Thought Productions,
National Arts Club, NYC
(212) 362-2560

Fallen Angels

23 Sep to 9 Oct Stage Centre Productions, Scarborough,
Ontario

In the United Kingdom

Present Laughter

16 to 19 June The Hampton Hill Playhouse, Hampton Hill,
Teddington, Mddx.

Still Life

22 to 24 April St Edith's Hall, Kemsing, Kent
13 to 15 May RAF Lynham Stage Club, The Juliana Goss
Theatre, Lynham, Wiltshire

Nude With Violin

26 & 27 Sep Sherbourne School, Sherbourne, Dorset

Hay Fever

27 to 28 May St. Mark's Church Hall, Reigate, Surrey
30 Apr to 15 May Haymarket Theatre, Basingstoke
6 Apr to 29 May Theatre Clwyd Cymru, Mold
2004 West Yorkshire Playhouse, The Quarry
26 to 31 Jul Bridge Cultural Services, Auden Theatre, Holt,
Norfolk

Blithe Spirit

21 to 24 Apr Oswaldtwistle Players at Oswaldtwistle Civic
Theatre, Union Rd, Oswaldtwistle, Lancashire, England
7.30pm £4.50 - Wednesday and £6.00 (£5.00 concessions) -
Thursday, Friday, Saturday 01254 387851 07767 383435

15 to 24 Apr TADS Theatre Toddington, Bedfordshire
22 to 24 Apr Rhiwbina ATS Memorial Hall Rhiwbina Cardiff
4 to 8 May The Plowright Theatre, Scunthorpe, North
Lincolnshire
8 Jun to 21 Aug Ian Dickens Productions Blackpool /
Darlington / Swansea
24 to 26 Jun Clarendon Players, The Memorial Hall, Wootton
Bassett, Swindon, Wiltshire
24 Jun to 3 July Hartley Arts Group The Victoria Hall,
Hartley Witney, Hook, Hampshire

Private Lives

14 Apr to Mid May Windsor
19 Apr to 15 May Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch
July TBC Dublin Gate Irish tour
30 Apr to 3 July Gasworth Hall, Cheshire
24 to 28 Aug Connaught Productions, Frinton Summer
Theatre, Essex
26 Aug to 18 Sep Byre Theatre, St. Andrews
18 to 22 May Quince Players, The Cordes Hall, Sunninghill,
Ascot, Berkshire

Relative Values

2 Apr to 11 Jul Hever Lakeside Theatre, Kent
22 to 24 Apr The Memorial Hall, West Wittering, Chichester,
West Sussex

I'll Leave It To You

22 to 24 Apr Alderbury Players, Alderbury, Salisbury,
Wiltshire

Fallen Angels

28 Apr to 1 May Easingwold Players, The Galtres Centre,
Easingwold, York

Red Peppers

10 to 17 May McGavin Drama Club, The Village Theatre,
East Kilbride, Scotland

The Marquise

Current to mid May Bill Kenwright Ltd UK Tour, opens
Theatre Royal, Windsor

The Astonished Heart and Still Life

19 Apr to 15 May Everyman and Playhouse Theatres,
Liverpool

If any of these listings are incorrect please contact us on:
whatson@noelcoward.net or ring +44 (0) 1603 486 188 or
post to:

The Noel Coward Society, 29, Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon,
Norwich, NR6 6TB, United Kingdom



SOCIETY EVENTS FOR 2004

This Summer through Winter sees three notable UK events plus a joint US/UK celebration in New York. Accompanying this edition of Home Chat is a reply slip for two of those events. We hope to see you there!

PRESENT LAUGHTER at HAMPTON HILL PLAYHOUSE

Saturday June 19th 7.45p.m. Price of ticket (to include a champagne reception) £12.00

All members and guests are invited to attend the performance of Noël Coward's play *Present Laughter* performed by the amateur company The Old Hamptonians. There will be a champagne reception in the Noël Coward Room to meet the producer and each other before the performance, then possibly after the show to meet the cast for a short while. PLUS A MIDSUMMER WALK? You are also invited to take part in an optional Noël Coward Walk starting late that afternoon, taking in his birthplace at Waldegrave Road, Teddington and the church nearby where he attended as a choirboy, possibly stopping off at Teddington Lock for a brief while to savor the riverside scenery, then proceeding through Bushy Park to the Hampton Hill side where the theatre is located. This conducted tour lasts about an hour and will be led by Graham Sawyer who has also kindly suggested that the less intrepid might care to make a late arrival at the walk by meeting the main party inside Bushy Park at the theatre end! We shall then adjourn to The Duke of Clarence pub in the High Street, opposite the Playhouse, for refreshment before the Reception in the Noël Coward Room.

PICNIC anyone?

At this location you may also care to arrange your own lunchtime/après midi session on seats facing the cricket pitch, bask in the sunshine or shade and emulate the words of W.H. Davies: 'What is this life, if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?'

THE MASTER'S VOICE NORWICH-September 4th

A date is planned in one of England's finest cities, Norwich, where the Maddermarket Theatre which opened in 1921 and was the first permanent recreation of an Elizabethan Theatre anywhere, will provide the setting for THE MASTER'S VOICE a Celebration of the Words and Music of Noël Coward on Saturday September 4th, 2004. This production was first seen as part of the Coward Centenary celebrations and was an enormous hit! It features, amongst others Dominic Vlasto as soloist and director. Stuart Miles accompanying on piano and singers Rachel and Geoffrey Hodson. Rachels' performance of *I've Been To A Marvellous Party* is worth the ticket price alone! Details of this event can be seen in the next Home Chat. We are offering a weekend with a choice of accommodation in central Norwich overlooking the Cathedral or in a local Inn some 5 miles outside the City in the

Norfolk countryside, a choice of two guided tours with Blue Badge guides of the Medieval City or the Cathedral (you can take both if you wish - at different times)! The package will provide details of accommodation, budget train fares and ticket prices for the show. There will be opportunities to visit Norwich Castle, the Market Place and The Forum as well as to wander through the medieval streets by the River Wensum, via the famous Elm Hill. Norwich is one of the finest provincial shopping centres in the UK and includes the wonderful colourful Market, the Victorian Arcade and the new Castle Mall. Norwich City FC may well be playing on Saturday afternoon as well!

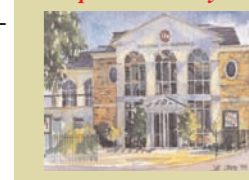
NOËL IN NEW YORK

The planned trip to New York for UK members joining in the US celebrations of Noël's birth is timed for Dec 3rd to Dec 6th 2004. The flights, accommodation and a full programme are still being arranged by Ken Starrett and Geoffrey Skinner. New York will be getting ready to greet Christmas with all the seasonal style that only the Big Apple possesses. Apart from a wonderful shopping opportunity, our programme includes: the celebrity flower-laying ceremony at Noël's statue in the Gershwin Theatre; a showing of the CBS TV *Blithe Spirit* production with Noël, Lauren Bacall and

Page 1: *Present Laughter*
The Master's Voice Noël
in New York & London
Page 2: *Books for sale*
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Laughter
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Page 6: *NC at Round Hill*
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Coward's Radio Times
Page 10: *Master Pieces*
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WHAT'S ON?

Hampton Hill Playhouse



Claudette Colbert; lunch with fellow US members; Dinner and Cabaret dedicated to Noël and his music and more. The trip will cost approximately £500 - £600 although we are still looking at cheaper options. This visit is open to members and guests. An initial deposit of £60 per person is required by 30 April 2004, payable to The Noël Coward Society and sent to Geoffrey Skinner, Samuel French Ltd, 52 Fitzroy Street London, W1T 5JR. Once the costs have been finalised details will be sent to applicants for final approval before continuing with their booking.

LORD ATTENBOROUGH IN LONDON! ANNUAL FLOWER-LAYING & RULES RESTAURANT

news from Barbara longford

Please make a note in your diaries that Saturday 11th December this year will be the date for our Annual General Meeting at the Theatre Museum, followed by the flower-laying ceremony at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Lord Attenborough has accepted our invitation to perform the ceremony this year, his filming commitments permitting, and he and his wife, Sheila hope to join us for lunch afterwards at Rules Restaurant, Maiden Lane. As many of you will know, Rules is the oldest restaurant in London

and in all of its 200 years, spanning the reigns of nine monarchs, it has been owned by only three families. Throughout its history, Rules has been crowded with writers, artists, lawyers, journalists and actors. As well as being frequented by great literary talents – including Dickens, Thackeray, Galsworthy and H.G. Wells – Rules has also appeared in novels by Rosamond Lehmann, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, John Le Carré, Dick Francis, Penelope Lively and Claire Rayner. Rules has been the unofficial “green room” for the world of entertainment from Henry Irving to Laurence Olivier and the history of the English stage adorns the walls.

Noël will undoubtedly have eaten at Rules – and there is framed caricature of him on the ground floor – but I’ve been unable to find any written reference to his having done so, despite enlisting the help of Sheridan Morley and Barry Day. If any Members or readers know of such a reference, please could they e-mail me at barbara.longford@ntlworld.com There will be a reward! The Society has reserved two exquisite private rooms at Rules, for our Luncheon – the Graham Greene Room and the John Betjeman Room, in combination. Graham Greene was a very frequent visitor and even when living in the South of France, he still chose to spend all his birthdays in these quintessentially

British surroundings. Members will be delighted to see the memorabilia from the film “Our Man in Havana”, (1959, directed by Carol Reed) on display in this room – and they will know that in the opinion of some, Noël simply “stole” the film, with his depiction of British Secret Service man Hawthorne, with Homburg and rolled umbrella. The John Betjeman Room has been so-called because at the Greater London Council Public Inquiry in 1971, when Rules was threatened by a demolition order, included in the threat to Covent Garden itself, John Betjeman spoke eloquently to help to save the historic restaurant.

Further details and a booking form will

WHAT'S ON? ... details ... and other NEWS!

Elizabeth Sharland writes that she is doing another evening at the Algonquin on Monday May 17th. The show called “Coward and his Contemporaries” will feature music and work by Coward, Novello, Bea Lillie, Dorothy Parker, with readings from Elizabeth’s anthology *Love from Shakespeare to Coward*. There will also be a book signing afterwards of her new novel *The Best Actress*. Ruth Allen will be at the piano, making her debut at the Algonquin. She was the pianist in the American Bar at the Savoy Hotel for over 8 years, before moving to New York. Why not get along to the Algonquin and see the famous round table, have a meal, find the cat! And enjoy the show!

“IT'S ALL A QUESTION OF MASKS”

Tamara Hahn has sent us a synopsis of her dissertation *Selbstinszenierung und Modernität bei Noël Coward* (Self-Dramatisation and Modernity in Noël Coward). This is a dissertation for obtaining the academic degree of Doctor of Philosophy, approved by Fakultät I Humanities at the Technical University Berlin, 2002; adviser: Prof. Dr. Kuno Schuhmann; published in: *Studien zur englischen Literatur*, Vol. 18, Ed. Prof. Dr. Dieter Mehl, LIT-Verlag: Münster, 2003; 233 pp, ISBN: 3-8258-6750-1 (online order: <http://www.litverlag.de>); in German. The dissertation considers Noël Coward's (1899 - 1973) dramatic art and analyzes it in the context of the history of literature and culture in view of his modernity. The latter manifests itself mainly in his public self-dramatisation as an artificial construct which correlates with the Coward-persona on stage. Coward's fast rise, his fall and his later renaissance are also explored against this background. The zeitgeist of the respective critic of Coward's work determines whether he is acknowledged as an artist or is dismissed as merely a representative of shallow commercial theatre. Coward toys with the audience's expectations, he exposes language as being a medium unsuitable for communication, points out and ridicules the superficiality, self-dramatisation, and the growing isolation of the individual in society. This places him in a group with much younger authors like Harold Pinter and John Osborne and accounts for his re-burgeoning popularity even on the 21st century stage. The innovative and socio-critical elements, especially in the best of his comedies (but also in several less well-known serious and musical works) have so far been largely ignored – Coward the dandy being too much in the limelight of public and critical attention. Coward's cultural significance as a chronicler of zeitgeist and as an amused critic of his contemporaries and their poses results from the diversity of his talents, his theatrical innovations, and the conscious artificiality of his public persona. By providing evidence of the correlation of these factors, the dissertation puts Noël Coward's significance into a new perspective in the history of English theatre of the 20th century.

A Letter from Noël on Wartime Tonight at 8.30

...continued from Page 10 column 2 Roland Young in *Fumed Oak*, who played it like a dim foreign office attache and was awful, *Family Album* with Joan Fontaine, Claire Trevor, Philip Merrivale, etc. and Aubrey Smith as *Burrows* - this was charmingly done and the success of the series, *Hands Across The Sea* with Judith Anderson, Isabel Jeans, Nigel Bruce, Ian Hunter, etc. was a lash-up on account of Zazu Pitts never having been on the stage before and playing ‘Mrs. Wadhurst.’ Every laugh she got went to her head and she did more and more clowning until not one word of the play was heard. The third bill was pretty horrible except for Bart Marshall, Rosalind Russell and Edmund Gwynn in *Still life*. *Ways And Means* was played by Brian Aherne and Greer Garson with all the lightness and speed of a performance of *King Lear* given by a church social. But the pearl of the whole evening was *Shadow Play* with George Metaxa and a rather aging, Jewish actress called Dorothy Stowe; this was terribly macabre. George who is now quite square, was completely incomprehensible and sang very loudly indeed. Dorothy Stone danced so much that I was afraid she would have heart failure; fortunately she did not.”

Barry Day's forthcoming book:
The Noël Coward Letters is soon to be published by Pantheon in the UK and Alfred Knopf in the US.

Noël and Gertie

Sheridan Morley's acclaimed entertainment is at the Unicorn Theatre, Medieval Abbey Buildings, Thames Street, Abingdon on 6th and 7th May, 7:30 Box office: 01235 554028 or email allynrichardson@btinternet.com Tickets: £8.00 / £6.00 conc.
Noël and Gertie is an entertainment devised by Sheridan Morley using the writings, plays and songs of Noël Coward to portray his relationship with Gertrude Lawrence. Noël and Gertie includes excerpts from Private Lives and Blithe Spirit and many of Coward's songs including Mrs Worthington, Someday I'll Find You, and I'll See You Again.

BOOKS and more for sale...

Following our successful auction of books from the London Office of Noël Coward we are busy creating a catalogue of all the books that remain. In addition we have been purchasing modern copies of some essential Coward biographies and writings to pass on to members at extremely low prices. Stephen Greenman and John Knowles will soon be sending out catalogues listing all of the books, CDs and tapes we have from the London Office. There are numerous mint copies of all but one of the six Play Parade series. They are all hard cover reprints from the 50s and 60s but have become very difficult to obtain elsewhere. The only absence is copies of Volume 4. We also have both hard and soft cover copies of the Methuen Plays black cover series. These will largely be sold as complete 5 book sets but we do have a few individual copies available. We have copies of the rare *Poems of Hernia Whittlebot* a privately printed satirical stab in the back of the Sitwell family in the style of the renowned *Chelsea Buns*. One of the nicer items that remains after the auction last year is a copy of *Home Chat*, the 1927 play that gives the name to our journal. This copy was signed and dated by Noël in 1946. It was published by Martin Secker and has a faded dustwrapper with small straight tears at the spine. The only other signed book we now hold is a copy of Coward's other notable satirical work *Spangled Unicorn* without dustwrapper signed by Lorn Lorraine and dedicated to ‘Aunt Hetty’. The catalogue should be with you soon! In the meantime ...

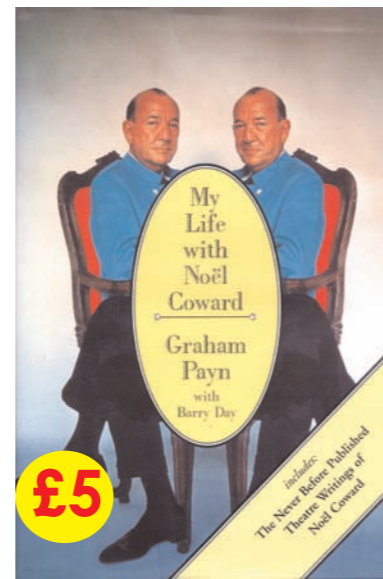


The Lyrics of Noël Coward - Methuen 2002, new paperback copies.
List price £9.99 our price £3 plus postage*

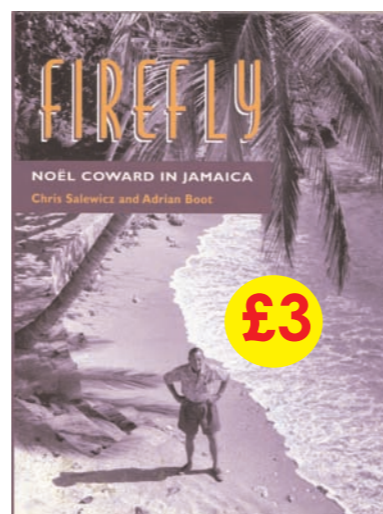
BUY THESE BOOKS NOW!

These books are available NOW from The Noël Coward Society, 29, Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon, Norwich, NR6 6TB. Please send cheque with order for the total amount
*** Postage is £2.00 per book for the UK and £5 if all three are purchased. Postage abroad will depend on whether you wish for airmail or surface mail - please email postage enquiries to: sales@noelcoward.net or write to the address on Page 12.**

Firefly - Noël Coward in Jamaica - IslandLife 2000, new paperback copies.
List price £12.49 our price £3 plus postage *



My Life With Noël Coward by Graham Payn with Barry Day Applause 1994, new paperback copies.
List price £13.00 our price £5 plus postage*



THEATRE MUSEUM COVENT GARDEN WORKSHOPS & EVENTS FOR ADULTS SPRING 2004

SUNDAY 2 MAY 14.00 - 16.30
Tickets £10.00 £8.00 concessions

THE MASTER & HIS SONGS
with Rex Bunnett & Sandy Walsh

An illustrated presentation by musical theatre historian and writer Rex Bunnett on the extraordinary career of Sir Noël Coward which covered 50 glorious years illustrated with music and spoken extracts by Sandy Walsh. Sandy Walsh appeared as Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons in the West End production of *Blood Brothers*, she has recently finished a year in *Emmerdale* playing Frances Marsden. She is a regular presenter on the BBC World Service and has won a Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival. For bookings and information on Adult Events at the Theatre Museum please call 020 7943 4750. Please note this is a recorded message line. Please do leave your message and they will return your call within 24 hours or e-mail: m.jones@vam.ac.uk

Postal address: Theatre Museum, 1c Tavistock Street, London WC2E 7PR

Master Pieces items from Noël Coward Society members...

Dominic Vlasto is our resident UK Coward musicologist who with Alan Farley in the US provides the Society with a world leading resource of Noël's music and recordings. Amongst Dominic's archive holdings are pictures and documents that make up the papers of the late Norman Hackforth - Noël's accompanist through the war and into the 1950s. Later he became Musical Director at Anglia Television as well as being the *Mystery Voice* of the BBC Radio panel game *Twenty Questions*. Dominic has kindly provided the following from his collection:



Natasha and Jack Wilson on the veranda at Blue Harbour. In the background by the pool can be seen the standing figure of Noël reading something! This photograph was taken by Norman. The Wilson's were frequent visitors to Noël's home in Jamaica. There are a series of photographs of the beautiful Natasha taken by Cecil Beaton in the archive collection at Birmingham University UK.

...continued from Page 9 column 3

Noël Coward next week

The Music of Noël Coward. Saturday 13 December Radio 4

Private Lives. Saturday Night Theatre, Saturday 13 December Radio 4, repeated Monday

The Marquise. Play of the Month, Sunday 14 December BBC1 Colour

Red Peppers. Monday 15 December BBC1 Colour (not Wales)

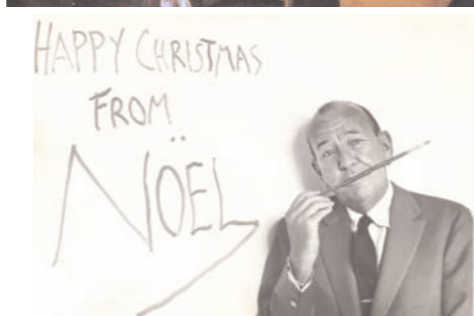
Noël Coward's Birthday Party. Tuesday 16 December BBC Colour (not Wales, West, or Northern Ireland)

Noël Coward at 70. Woman's Hour, Tuesday 16 December Radio 2 and on Friday 26 December **The Songs of Coward** BBC2 Colour

A Letter from Noël on Wartime Tonight at 8.30

In the last edition of Home Chat we featured a handout on *Tonight At 8.30* that was sent in by Terence Trimmer. Barry Day has replied with an extract from a letter Noël wrote to his secretary Lorn Loraine that throws further light on these intriguing wartime performances. He writes: "I don't know whether you know it but

Graham Payn and the Master at the unveiling of the statue at Drury lane in 1999, the Centenary year of Noël's birth.



Christmas card sent from Chalet Coward at Les Avants by Noël to Norman Hackforth



Noël Coward, Norman Hackforth and Esther Chapman have a chat beneath their gay sunshades on the Sunset Lodge Patio.

the Hollywood stars decided to give three weeks performances of the entire *Tonight At 8.30* cycle in aid of the British War Relief. These were such a triumphant success that they are to do them all over again for another three weeks. I didn't see the first bill which was young Doug and Constance Bennett in *We Were Dancing*. Basil Rathbone and Gladys Cooper in *The Astonished Heart*, and Binne Barnes and Reginald Gardiner in *Red Peppers*. All reports say that Binnie was marvelous (sic). I saw, however, the second and third bills.

continued on Page 11 column 3...

"Cocktails and Laughter... but what comes after..."

This delightful report from Florida is provided by two US members who attended our Steve Ross event and what came after! by James J Griffith, Bobi Sanderson and Barbara Longford

Barbara [Bobi] Sanderson and I [Dr. James J. Griffith] attended "Cocktails and Laughter....." on 31 January at Pizza-on-the-Park, London. It was high pleasure. We had read about it in "Home Chat" some months before. We found a direct flight on British Airways from Tampa, Florida to Gatwick, and said unhesitatingly "Let's go".

Arriving at Pizza-on-the-Park, we could feel an instant camaraderie with the one hundred or so elegantly attired people, all sharing deep appreciation of the genius of Noël Coward. The place cards were



US members Bobi Sanderson, James J. Griffith with pianist Simon Becker

personalized with our names and the brilliant Al Hirschfeld caricature of "The Master". The tables too were all given names of Coward's songs or shows and we were honoured to sit at the table of Barbara and Patrick Longford - 'Sigh No More'. We had seen Steve Ross do cabaret in America, but he outdid himself



Claire Osborne with her father Stephen

here with brilliant renditions of Noël Coward songs, for instance - "Mrs.

Worthington', 'The Bar at the Piccolo Marina', 'Twentieth Century Blues', 'What's Going to Happen to the Tots?' peppered with sparkling commentary and anecdotes about the style and wit of Noël Coward.



Pizza On The Park with Simon Becker on piano

Sheridan Morley's opening comments provided a delightful "grace note" to the evening. After dinner and free-flowing Chablis, Steve Ross returned with some Noël Coward - related music and accompanied Dominic Vlasto who performed splendidly in Coward-esque style. Simon Becker shared time at the keyboard, playing Coward songs and many old standards in great style. The overall ambience was smart, effervescent, full of delights - a "marvellous party".

...and what comes after..."

by Barbara Longford

As luck would have it, the Teddington

Theatre Club were performing 'Hay Fever' from 31st January until 7th February - so the timing was ripe for James and Bobi to visit the Hampton Hill Playhouse - home of the Noël Coward Studio Theatre. These intrepid American travellers were most keen to visit the theatre and see the play so, together with new Member of NCS, David Heal, we set off for another Coward evening three days after Pizza-on-the Park. We were given a warm reception by Eric Yardley and the Chairman of TTC, Sally Halsey, who had reserved the first row of the balcony in the main auditorium especially for the NCS Members.

'Hay Fever' was first performed professionally in 1925, and this was the third production by the TTC - the first being in 1937 - and as Noël himself might have said, "we couldn't have liked it more". Mair Graham's was a most spirited production and here was an example of ensemble playing at its very best. The cast seemed so at ease and happy in one another's company.

Writing about the play in Harper's Bazaar in 1960, Coward is quoted as follows: "The idea came to me suddenly in



US members Bobi Sanderson, James J. Griffith at the Hampton Theatre

the garden, and I finished it in about three days, a fact which later on, when I had become news value, seemed to excite gossip-writers inordinately, although why the public should care whether a play takes three days or three years to write I shall never understand. Perhaps they don't. However, when I had finished it and had it neatly typed and bound up, I read it through and was rather unimpressed with it. This was an odd sensation for me, as in those days I was almost always enchanted with everything I wrote. I knew certain scenes were good, especially the break-

fast scene in the last act, and the dialogue between the giggling flapper and the diplomat in the first act, but apart from these it seemed to me a little tedious. I think that the reason for this was that I was passing through a transition stage as a writer; my dialogue was becoming more natural and less elaborate, and I was beginning to concentrate more on the comedy values of the situation rather than the comedy values of the actual lines. I expect that when I read through *Hay Fever* for the first time, I was subconsciously bemoaning its lack of snappy epigrams.”

This is what John Lahr has to say in “Coward the Playwright” (Methuen, London 1982) – “In *Hay Fever*, the first and the finest of his major plays, he gives malice and bad manners an outing. In so doing, the play not only chronicles a new caste in English life but a shift in behaviour. In the years to come, the Blisses’ manners would prevail ‘Let (Coward) spare us more of these silly children’, pleaded the *Sunday Times*. But these silly children were the next generation of the well-to-do – a generation for whom Coward was both a spokesman and a myth. ‘There is no one now writing who has more obviously a gift for the theatre than Mr Noël Coward, nor more influence with young writers’ wrote Somerset Maugham in 1929, in an American volume of Coward’s plays that included *Hay Fever*. ‘It is probably his inclination and practice that will be responsible for the manner in which plays will be written during the next thirty years.’

During the interval we had drinks in the Noël Coward Suite and it was such a pleasure to show our American Members and our new member the Coward memorabilia on display – one of Noël’s dinner suits, his game of backgammon and attache case – and to have a chance to talk to Mair Graham.

Mair was amused to hear about Noël’s irritation with a forgetful Dame Edith Evans, playing Judith Bliss during the 1965 production at the National Theatre, London. “The line, dear Dame, is ‘On a

clear day you can see Marlowe’. On a VERY clear day, as you persist in saying, you can see Marlowe and Beaumont and Fletcher.”

The TTC cast was excellent and Rosemary Oliver as Judith Bliss, really shone. She was perfection in the part and that fact that she looked so darned glamorous too added to the overall allure of her role.

Afterwards the cast came to the Noël Coward Suite to meet the party from NCS and as you can see from the photographs sent by James Griffith, by e-mail from Florida, we had a wonderful time.

RECORDING OF STEVE ROSS AT PIZZA ON THE PARK

Simon Eadon recorded the NCS Steve Ross evening at the Pizza On The Park on January 31st 2004. The recording conditions were far from ideal but Simon managed to record the words of Sheridan Morley when introducing Steve, all of Steve’s performance and that of Steve’s guest NCS member Dominic Vlasto who sang some original Norman Hackforth songs and pastiche pieces. He also caught Robert Gardiner’s words at the end of the evening and has produced an edited highlights CD that is now available free of charge as this year’s gift for new and renewing members. The CDs will be ready very soon - so watch out for further news of them. The 25 tracks are as follows:

Part 1:

1. Introduction by Sheridan Morley
2. Where Are The Songs We Sung?/Play, Orchestra, Play
3. Mrs Worthington
4. Forbidden Fruit
5. What’s Going To Happen To The Tots?
6. This Is a Changing World
7. Waltz Songs (Ziguener/Peace Enfold You/Kiss Me/I’ve Been Invited To a Party/Here And Now)
8. Dear Little Cafe/ A Room With a View
9. Parisian Pierrot

- 10 I Travel Alone/Sail Away
 11. Why Do The Wrong People Travel?
 12. Most Of Ev’ry Day/Never Again
 13. A Bar On The Piccola Marina Part 2:
 - 14 No, My Heart (*Kander & Ebb*)
 - 15 What Am I To Do? (*Porter*)
 - 16 Home Sweet Heaven (*Gray & Martin*)
 - 17 So Many Things (*Hackforth*)
 - 18 End The Beguine (*Hackforth-Porter*)
 - 19 There Will Always Be Loch Lomond (*Hackforth*)
 - 20 You Were There
 - 21 If Love Were All
 - 22 I’ll See You Again
 - 23 Let’s Do It (*Porter-Coward*)
 - 24 Closing Remarks by Robert Gardiner
- All tracks composed/written by Noël Coward (except where otherwise specified) All tracks performed by Steve Ross except tracks 18-19-20: vocal: Dominic Vlasto. © The Noël Coward Society.

Our thanks to Steve Ross and Dominic Vlasto for allowing us to use this recording and to Simon Eadon for recording, mixing and editing the CD.

OH WHAT A NIGHT!

Thanks to our guests on Jan 31st Stephen Fry, Dick Vosburgh and his wife Beryl, Sheridan Morley and Ruth Leon & of course Steve Ross!!!



I’ve played a lot of Coward in rep and I was in the original version of *Peace In Our Time* back in 1947. Coward is a great wit the plays are always well-made and very easy to perform. And the characters are wonderful - you can always believe in them, it’s the secret of all great playwrights.
Dandy Nichols in *This Happy Breed*

round: if what Coward really fears isn’t that the impact of real life on his tuppence-coloured little world of the theatre might smash it?

Its comedy depends on its being a parody of the society beyond it. And because the small world of show business is a distorting mirror, its reflection of life is funnier. No real Home County hostess showing off her garden could be as ridiculous as Judith Bliss in *Hay Fever*, memorising the names of flowers like lines in one of her ghastly plays. No real upper-class small-talk could be as side-splitting in its banality as the barbed,

It’s the first Coward play I’ve ever done and it was marvellous playing in it with people like Margaret Leighton. Although it was a shocker in its day - because it dealt with drug addiction - I can’t see it upsetting anyone in 1969. But from the acting point of view, it was quite difficult. The boy I played - the son - is a very mixed-up character, very revolutionary really.
Richard Warwick in *The Vortex*

self-aware limitation of it (‘Very flat, Norfolk’) Elyot and Amanda use in *Private Lives*.

It would fit our ideas of greatness better if the durable Coward plays were the ones like *Cavalcade* and *This Happy Breed*, in which he hymned the virtues of the ordinary English man and woman. Probably they’re rather better than we now give him credit for - as he says, few of the critics who’ve scoffed at their pictures of lower middle-class life know that life half so intimately as he learned it in his early days as the son of a piano salesman in Teddington.

But his instinct that theatre and the national life should go their separate ways has been, for him at least, a true one. His real genius has been that of a theatrical outsider, with an outsider’s ear for what’s absurd in the way the rest of us talk, an outsider’s eye for the artificiality of our beliefs and institutions. It’s not really a contradiction that, in extra-

artistic moments, he’s a devoutly conservative cherisher of them. If they ever collapsed, he’d be without a subject. If you stop to think, he’s in eminent company. Shakespeare was an actor. So was Moliere. So, especially when he pretended to be above it all, was Shaw. Like them, Coward has been at his best when he was truest to his theatricality; to the knowledge that what lasts in the theatre isn’t uplift or edification or catching the spirit of the age, but craftsmanship. Long after his dressing-gowns and cigarette-holders have been forgotten, along with the society at which they cocked a snook, the stainless-steel precision mechanisms of his comedies will survive, time-proof and weather-proof even if they are not quite actor-proof. It’s appropriate that the discovery that we have an old master in our midst should have been led by a new generation of actor-playwrights, John Whiting, John Osborne, and Harold Pinter, all of whom have acknowledged his influence in different ways. Osborne. put it most succinctly: ‘

“Mr Coward, like Miss Dietrich, is his own invention and contribution to this century. Anyone who cannot see that should keep well away from the theatre.” There is no need for the traditional moulds of greatness to fit him. He has made his own.

There are six Coward programmes this week. They are listed here, with introductions to the plays and films by Sheridan Morley

Bitter Sweet

The Sunday Musical, Sunday 8.15 BBC1. Written in 1928 and first performed on the stage in the following year, *Bitter Sweet* was the most successful of all Coward’s musicals. It was also, he wrote later, ‘a musical that gave me more complete satisfaction than anything else I had yet written.’ Its score includes such lilting, unashamedly sentimental numbers as *I’ll see you again* and *Ziguener*. Two films were made of *Bitter Sweet*; this, the second, was released by MGM in 1941. It made drastic alterations to the original plot and lyrics; as a result Coward disowned the film, but could not prevent it becoming one of the greatest of the Nelson Eddy - Jeanette MacDonald successes.

Noël Coward: Playwright

An Omnibus programme, with Coward interviewed by Patrick Garland. Sunday 10.0 BBC1 Colour

Blithe Spirit

Tuesday 9.10 BBC2 Colour. Written during a week’s holiday at Portmeirion early in 1941, *Blithe Spirit* was to become the fourth longest-running production in the history of the English theatre. In 1939 Coward had decided to abandon play-writing for more immediately ‘useful’ war work; but, he said, “Of course I cannot guarantee that a time will not come in the war when suddenly something goes snap and cascades of bright witticisms tumble out of me like coins from a fruit machine when the three lemons come up together.” The film version, directed by David Lean, was released in 1945. Coward himself adapted his comedy. The film stars Margaret Rutherford, Kay Hammond, Rex Harrison and Constance Cummings.

The Vortex

The Wednesday Play starring Margaret Leighton, Alan Melville, Richard Warwick. Wednesday 9.10 BBC1 Colour. Written in 1923 and presented a year later at the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead, *The Vortex* was Coward’s first adult success. A drama about drug-addiction, produced at a time when even alcoholism was seldom mentioned on the stage, it made its author famous almost overnight. Though not everyone liked *The Vortex*, it established Coward in the public eye as a playwright, as an actor, and as a director. This, he noted later, “was very fortunate as until then I hadn’t proved myself to be so hot in any capacity.”

‘The Master’ at 70

An assessment by Gale Pedrick Thursday 7.30 Radio 4 (not Wales)

This Happy Breed

Starring Frank Finlay, Dandy Nichols, Gillian Martell. Thursday 9.10 BBC2 Colour.

Written in 1939 and first produced three years later, *This Happy Breed* stands apart from the mainstream of Coward’s work for two reasons: the characters are drawn from a suburban, lower middle-class background - Clapham - and their dialogue betrays a social and political awareness that Coward seldom brought to the surface in this period of his writing. Coward was himself born in suburban Teddington and spent at least four years actually living by Clapham Common.

...continued on Page 10 end of column 1

said, and passed on. He has a repertoire of anecdotes about his early years. "I was turned out of the chapel choir; I sang *There is a green hill far away* too sexily."

His first audition: "My guiding light into the theatre was the Daily Mirror. It carried an advertisement saying 'attractive, talented, and handsome boy wanted.' So Mother and I decided we'd better have a try."

His first part: Prince Mussel in a play called *The Goldfish*. "I was a happy, hearty schoolboy in Act 1 and a fish in Act 2."

Only when asked about the swinging twenties did he seem to falter for a moment. "It seems such a long way away. I can't remember very well." Reverting to the theatre, he was back on form. Did he find the theatre today lacking in a certain elegance and style? "I think there's a certain lack of style and elegance in life today, so you can't blame the theatre for it." On modern youth, he said, sure of his ground again, "Some of them are very intelligent. All this sitting

It's a lovely play to do, warm, full of love, different from Coward's usual formula. Some of it is a bit too sentimental, too patriotic, but that's been cut anyway to get it down to 90 minutes.

Frank Finlay in *This Happy Breed*

down is rather a mistake. It is a languid posture and achieves little."

What did he expect of the future? "For me gently and happily to become 80."

Did he feel like giving advice, now that he was 70? "Oh, I used to do that when I was 20." His advice to actors: "Speak clearly and don't bump into people." His advice to writers: "Work. You can't wait for what is known as inspiration."

His preferred working schedule is from 7.30 or 8.0 am till lunchtime. He used to write a lot while travelling; he wrote *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* while travelling between Hanoi and Saigon, a notion so improbable that it has to be true.

As we left, he again shook hands with us all, kindly, murmuring, "So nice to have met you. It was so nice of you to come."

Here, Ronald Bryden puts

Coward in perspective

It's hard to get used to the idea of Noël Coward being the greatest living English playwright. In these islands, the great are supposed to live in country retreats,

communicating at moments of national crisis in letters to The Times.

They aren't supposed to jet into London Airport wearing Bahama tans and swopping wisecracks with reporters. They aren't supposed to sing in Las Vegas night-clubs, to hobnob with Marlene Dietrich, and be famous for dressing-gowns and insouciance. If they insist on following the profession of Shakespeare, they are expected to reform it, rise above it, be Irish or be dead. Noël Coward has never tried to reform or rise above anything, is very English and very much alive. He's been fatally and unrepentantly theatrical since the age of 11 when he appeared as a mussel in a work called *The Goldfish* with a juvenile company which also included Ninette de Valois and Michael MacLiammoir. (You might even argue that showbiz lurked in his genes at birth, planted there by a grandfather who played the organ in the Crystal Palace.)

It's the first Coward play I've done, although I've known him for many years. We first met after the first night of my revue, *Sweetest and Lowest*. I'd written a number called *Noël*, *Noël* for Hermione Gingold and after the first night I was terrified when Coward came over to my table at the Ivy restaurant. I was quite relieved when he said simply: "Quite, quite brilliant. Can I have a copy?" We've been friends ever since.

Alan Melville in *The Vortex*

By the age of 14 he was being cast, more perceptively, as the supercilious 'Slightly', most knowing of the Lost Boys, in *Peter Pan*. Shortly after that he was cast as an allegorical beast known as - the 'Slacker' in *Where the Rainbow Ends*. When he started to write his own plays in the early twenties (*I'll Leave it to You*, *The Young Idea*, *The Vortex*) it was mainly, he freely admits, to give himself fatter parts.

Yet the fact is that all his best work - at least five comedies which should live, I'd say as long as Wilde's or Congreve's - has come out of that unregenerate show-business life of his. *Hay Fever* (1925) was the fruit of a nightmare weekend spent in word-games and tantrums with the American actress Laurette Taylor and her family in New York. *Private Lives* (1930)

was written to console his childhood

friend Gertrude Lawrence for losing the lead in *Bitter Sweet* the year before - he wouldn't trust the music to her voice.

Design for Living (1933) was run up frankly as a vehicle for himself and the Lunts to gambol in (originally he planned to set it entirely in a huge bed, an idea whose trace survives in his best one-acter, *Ways and Means*). *Blithe Spirit* was dashed off in six days in 1941 to provide himself with a war job, in the spirit of Churchill's advice not to waste his time in uniform but to "sing to them when the guns are firing." *Present Laughter* (1939), perhaps the best of all, is an unabashed group caricature of himself and his theatrical associates.

In that play, he gives his most comic expression to a theme which runs all through his work: the one summed up in his song *Don't put your daughter on the stage*, *Mrs Worthington*. This is the disastrous incompatibility of backstage life with life outside the theatre. It has provided him with the plots of several plays and almost all his musicals from

This Happy Breed isn't at all the kind of brittle, witty Noël Coward play, it's very patriotic. I'm sympathetic to that kind of thing myself, I'm a romantic about the last War, I tend to believe what he shows about ordinary people being the backbone of the country.

Gillian Martell in *This Happy Breed*

Bitter Sweet (1929) to *The Girl Who Came to Supper* (1963), an adaptation of Terence Rattigan's *The Sleeping Prince*. Usually the theme is symbolised as the inadvisability of an actress marrying into the upper classes.

In *Cavalcade* (1931), Jane Marryat does her best to prevent her son Joey marrying a music-hall singer. In *Operette* (1938), the Countess of Messiter persuades a Gaiety Girl to give up her son rather than ruin his career in the Guards. In *Relative Values* (1951), the Countess of Marshwood conspires with her butler to break up her son's engagement to a man-eating blonde film star.

It's hard to believe that a man so seldom at a loss for words should repeat himself to this extent unless the idea that stage is stage and society is society had some private significance for him.

Usually the implication is that their collision would shatter society's traditional values, antique but precious. I wonder, though, if it isn't really the other way

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

John Knowles rambles through the collector's world

On occasion and with some trepidation we print some guidance or information for those amongst you who collect Noël Coward items. The sheer volume of output from the Master coupled with the reprints, revivals, re-recordings, cabaret items, sheet music, programmes etc.

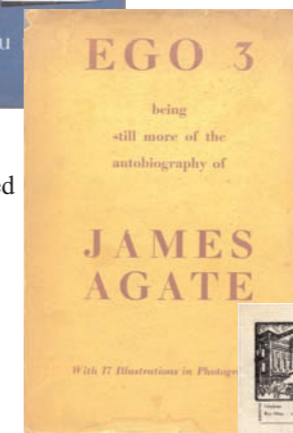
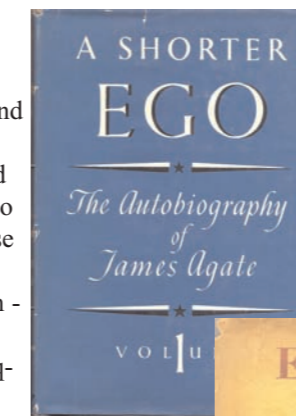
means that there is a lot out there to be collected. Noël was entirely free with his autograph - signing books, photographs and cards. Personal items sometimes appear and there is always a piano that he played, a house that he lived in and a theatre he appeared in - OK - he was and in many ways is - a ubiquitous and theatrical presence. We are not by the way suggesting collecting houses.

For the serious collector prices of signed books have appeared to rise over the years but in truth they may have only kept pace with inflation. Still they are not cheap, with a signed volume fetching between £80 and £1,500 according to rarity, written dedication and age, although I have recently seen a signed copy of *Pretty Polly and Other Stories* for sale at Alibris for just over £21.

Anyway they are not usually cheap and to some extent they are 'running out' - there will always be the results of natural turnover in the marketplace as people pass on and collections are disposed of but the days of bumping into a signed 1st edition in a small provincial bookshop at £1.50 are long gone - due to some extent to the accessibility of information on the Internet. Bargains can still be found, but they are becoming rarer. As part of the desire to learn more about Noël from one's collection many of us have started to search for biographies of friends and contemporaries and the writings of theatre critics especially if penned around the 1920s and 30s - arguably Noël's most productive years. At one time the memoirs of James Agate the notable *Times* drama critic could be culled from the shelves for a few pence. Now they command a far greater sum. The complete eight volume set of EGO, his rich and informing autobiography, is difficult to obtain but the two condensed volumes of SHORTER EGO can still be

found at reasonable prices and provide some good references to Coward. In recent years I have bought the biographies and writings of Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Gladys Cooper, Oliver Messel, Ivor Novello, Fred Astaire, Judy Garland, The Lunts, Ginette Spanier, Ian Fleming, Kenneth Tynan, George

Bernard Shaw, Tallulah Bankhead, John Gielgud, Ned Lathom ... the list is almost endless. Was there anyone Coward did not know? These often cheaper volumes provide contemporary insight into the rising, precocious actor and writer as well as the established star. Theatre programmes are a huge source of information (except for date - they are hardly ever dated!) Simply the feel they engender for the period with their sport-



ing advertisements for now obscure products and fashions evoking an age when patrons could order tea to be served in the auditorium during the interval. I have visions of clinking crockery passed on silver-plated trays from hand-to-hand as every aisle became filled with aproned ladies and steaming pots. Playbills of poster and handbill size also reflect the age of their creation and head-up another area for collection - promotional items. One featured in a past edition of Home Chat was a cardboard wheel advertising the appearance of the film *Cavalcade* at a provincial US cinema and placed on hotel doorknobs for guests to pick up and revolve to see scenes from the film. For some reason signed photographs of Noël can be far more expensive than

signed books or programmes. Coward must have signed photographs for fans by the dozen but to have a signed book, especially if it is dedicated to a 'celebrity name' provides a far more personal touch. Signed letters are very expensive but a joy to have.

Personal items are very rare and are, quite rightly, increasingly set in their proper domain of the display cabinet in theatre and museum. The range of items at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden and the recent donation by the Estate to the Hampton Theatre at Teddington are good examples ... but... it is nice to have something that is personal in one's collection and to imagine it in its context of time and place, however much of an indulgence that is!

Then there are recordings both aural and visual. One of the real blessings of technology is that 'clean' recordings of Noël and Gertie are increasingly available with recent offerings by NAXOS and DRG allowing us to hear unfuzzed and de-clicked sound. Even the crockery now has a full part to play in the DRG recording of *Noël Coward At Las Vegas*. A close friend is despairing of the trend to clean up 78s - 'the hiss is part of the experience' he tells me!

Obtaining original 78s, Plum Label etc. is getting far more difficult. I recently purchased a large picture disk with Noël's photograph and titles of the shows across it only to have it arrive in two pieces - the curse of shellac fragility and inadequate packaging! Theatre magazines are of course an essential curse, as are commemorative programmes from Coward celebrations. They are difficult to store and unless carefully archived and recorded have to be

thumbed through every time one wants a piece one read some time ago and now needs rather desperately!

So please excuse this second attempt to ramble through the world of the collector. As we know collecting is an activity of no heavenly use, whatever the worldly values, it threatens relationships, it shrinks living and working space but it provides some deep comfort to the afflicted - ourselves!



NOËL COWARD GIVES A PARTY

At Round Hill

The host at the microphone pauses a moment as his audience applauds.

BEGINNING a new season is rather like going back to school, without the tearful aspect. The big boys are gathered together in the changing rooms discussing what they got up to in the hols, the latest shows, the gayest tunes, the sporting prospects for the coming term. The new boys are huddled in the corridors, not quite certain what to expect, but prepared for a big new adventure. One cannot of course wander too far into the playing fields of Eton or the analogy may get gummed up. This inevitably brings us all, like spilled iron filings, into that highly magnetised

patio of Sunset Lodge, that is the hub, the hearth, the club, the garden path, the tuning fork for all the talk of Montego Bay. Here one finds Noël Coward with trowel and gardening gloves just back from doing a bit of weeding at Round Hill and planting a potted palm and an elephant's ear, to arouse jealousy in the bosom of Adele Astaire, whose lobelias are not yet in bloom. With him is Norman Hackforth who has come over to Blue Harbour with a spare piano to work on the music for *Lady Windermere* (the one with a fan) for these two gentlemen are preparing to lend a new

charm and solidity to the importance of being Wilde. Meantime Liz Pringle is regaling them with an anecdote about a Buff Orpington. Captain Molyneux is saying that his new curtains are the talk of the island. Reg Shaw is playing "Funny Face" and Adele Astaire exclaims that she remembers that one. Then there is a hush because Carmen is strolling through. One seldom catches a glimpse of John Pringle, because he is buried deep in Mr. Tiarks the Ballards and Guy Roop.



Some of the guests pause glass in hand. In this photo are Lord and Lady Ronald Graham, (extreme right hand), Mr. E. Thom (centre) who has recently purchased the Flint River Estate. Pat Giradet is on the left and Jane Orton

This is part of an article that appeared in *The West Indian Review* and was kept by Norman Hackforth who was working with Coward on 'After The Ball' a musical interpretation of Oscar Wilde's 'Lady Windermere's Fan'. This piece is part of the Dominic Vlasto archive collection. The picture at the bottom of page 10 is also taken from this local journal.

Coward's Radio Times

That British publishing tradition *The Radio Times* celebrated Noël Coward's 70th birthday in 1969 in its own unique way.

Noël Coward's two-week birthday party

This week, BBC sound and television begin their celebration of Noël Coward's 70th birthday between 7th December and 16th December there are 12 broadcasts plays, films and documentaries in his honour. For RADIO TIMES, Anne Chisholm gives a portrait of the master at 70. Then Ronald Bryden, who introduces the Omnibus interview on Sunday, appraises Coward the dramatist. And Sheridan Morley, author of Coward's biography, *A Talent To Amuse*, introduces the plays and films to be broadcast this week.

These days, Noël Coward's best performance is of himself. He is about to be 70, and a great wave of public interest and admiration surrounds him; he is enjoying every minute of it. Recently a small group of journalists assembled in a small, hot room at the Savoy Hotel in London to talk to him about his birthday. He lives in Switzerland and Jamaica, but comes to London every year. The wintry sun streamed through the double-glazed windows; there were drinks and nuts on small tables and several vases of carnations and roses; over the mantelpiece was a large portrait of Mr Coward himself, looking

younger than 70 in a yellow shirt. We waited. There was an atmosphere of subdued excitement. Suddenly he came trotting in through the door, moving fast, beaming, stooping noticeably, his head thrust out in front of him, looking mandarin-like as he approached us each in turn with outstretched hand. We muttered our names and he said, with emphasis as if he meant it each time: "How do you do. How nice of you to come."

Clearly, he had already prepared a repertoire of jokes about the forthcoming celebrations. "We're calling it Holy Week. There's Midnight Mass at the Phoenix" (a reference to the evening of tributes and excerpts from his work planned for the Phoenix Theatre on Monday, 15 December). He settled himself carefully into a 'small cream upright armchair, beneath his portrait, without a trace of self-consciousness. He looked splendid, but fragile. He wore a pale brown suit, a cream shirt, a brown silk tie held in place by a gold tie pin, exquisite very dark brown shoes, a heavy gold chain bracelet on his right wrist, and a gold signet ring on his left little finger - his nails were long and beautifully shaped. He appeared pleased by our flattering preliminary remarks, saying amiably, "How very nice."

He remained calm and courteous even when people began asking slightly impertinent questions. One man with a microphone thrust it under his nose and asked a tiresome question about Coward's relationship with his mother;

Coward didn't bat an eyelid. Nor did he answer the question. The possible undertones of the occasion were gracefully disregarded; we were not curious vultures come to pick out signs of decay, but perfectly delightful people come for a celebratory drink before lunch. "I wonder how much all this would set back the average citizen," muttered one cross journalist as he fiddled with his tape recorder. Later on he stood out as the one who asked the most obsequious questions.

The conversation pursued its predictable course. Coward dealt with questions like a lizard with a fly, flicking back a witticism, when at all possible, then pausing, glancing rapidly round with his

I met Noël Coward when we worked together in the film *The Astonished Heart*, which came out about 1950. I remember it very well, because I was very shy and very nervous of the whole thing - and particularly of him. I have met him from time to time over the years, we were together again in *The Apple Cart* in 1953; and we've made records together of his plays and poems. He is a very good friend. I would have been unhappy if I hadn't been asked to do something in the special programme for his 70th birthday.

Margaret Leighton in *The Vortex*

pale eyes to see if we had taken the point, and settling back to wait for the



next morsel. Was he writing anything? "I'm plodding on lamely with the third volume of my autobiography." Where would that take him to? "I think the grave." Did he feel that young people today talked as if they had just discovered sex for the first time?

"I think some of them just have." What did he think of showing the sexual act on stage? "Ken Tynan has his own dreams. I personally am not very interested." He took out a gold cigarette case and lit a tipped cigarette, his hands shaking slightly. Later he told us how, on the first night of one of his plays in which he was acting a leading part, his hands had shaken so much that he, could not pick up a cup. Coward was acting professionally at 10, started writing 'a perfectly ghastly novel' at 12, and had his first play on in London at 20. His first real success came four years later, in 1924, with *The Vortex*, a play about dissipated people that caused a sensation. With a touch of weariness Coward dealt with the inevitable question about why his later plays did not follow up this strong early theme, why his work as a whole does not demonstrate a social conscience. He suggested that in fact he had written in a serious vein occasionally - for example, during the war. Then he gave us the line evolved for the occasion: "I have a slight reforming urge, but I've kept it down rather cunningly." A girl read out an unkind review of an early play and asked him to comment. "Ah, I see you've been mugging up," he