

WHAT'S ON? ACROSS THE GLOBE

(Professional companies in red amateur in black)

America & Canada

Blithe Spirit: 3 to 5 Mar 2004 Crofton House School, Vancouver, BC
20 to 30 Dec University Players, University of Windsor, Windsor, ON
Mar to Apr 2004 Denver Center, Denver, CO
26 to 30 Apr 2004 Mississauga, Ontario
Hay Fever 20 Nov to 13 Dec Grand Prairie Live Theatre, Grand Prairie, Alberta
24 Feb to 6 Mar Powerhouse Theatre, Vernon, BC

Come Into the Garden Maud

Oct 9, Nov 3, & Dec 8. Food for Thought Productions, National Arts Club, NYC Tel: (212) 362-2560
Design For Living 5 to 13 Feb 2004 Amicus Productions Toronto, Ontario
Fallen Angels 18 to 31 Jan 2004 Bramalea Live Theatre, Brampton, Ontario
Present Laughter 2 to 26 Jun 2004 Raymond Burr Performing Arts Theatre, New Westminister, BC

Private Lives

Feb 2004 Tribal Productions Inc. Thornhill, Ontario
20 to 30 Dec University of Windsor, School of Drama and Arts, Windsor, ON
May of 2004 Enid, Oklahoma's Gaslight Theatre - our website gives exact dates.
Jan to Feb, 2004 Lyric Stage, Boston, Mass.
~~Apr to May, 2004 Irish Classical Theatre. Buffalo, NY~~

Australasia

Blithe Spirit 15 Nov to 20 Dec Melbourne Theatre Co Victoria then national tour 2003 (Press Night 19 Nov)
30 Oct to 1 Nov Tropic Line Theatre Queensland, Australia + small tour
15 Nov (PN 19 Nov) to 20 Dec & 21 Jan to 20 Mar 2004 Melbourne Theatre Co, Victoria then Sydney Theatre Co

United Kingdom

Present Laughter 16 to 19 June 2004 The Hampton Hill Playhouse, Hamp[ton Hill, Mddx.
Fumed Oak 13 & 14 Dec Phoenix Players, Village Hall, Abertin, Glamorgan
Hay Fever 12 to 17 Jan 2004 Nottingham Arts Theatre, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire
27 to 28 May 2004 St. Mark's Church Hall, Reigate, Surrey
7 to 14 Dec Horsell ADS Rhoda McGraw Theatre, Woking, Surrey
2004 (TBC) West Yorkshire Playhouse, The Quarry
30 Apr to 15 May 2004 Haymarket Theatre, Basingstoke
2004 West Yorkshire Playhouse, The Quarry

Blithe Spirit

21 to 24th Apr 2004 Oswaldtwistle Players at Civic Theatre, Union Rd, Oswaldtwistle, Lancashire 7.30pm £4.50 - Wednesday and £6.00 (£5.00 concessions) - Thursday, Friday, Saturday 01254 387851
4 to 6 Dec Middle Barton DG, The Alice Marshall Hall, Middle Barton, Oxfordshire
29 to 31 Jan 2004 Betchworth O & DS Village Hall, Bewtchworth Surrey
22 to 24 Apr 2004 Rhiwbina ATS Memorial Hall Rhiwbina Cardiff
8 Jun to 4 Aug 2004 Ian Dickens Productions - Balckpool /Darlington /Swansea (TBC)
11 to 21 Mar 2004 REC Theatre Company, Buxton
8 Jun to 21 Aug 2004 (TBC) Ian Dickens Productions Blackpool/Darlington/Swansea

Private Lives

24 Jan to 7 Feb 2004 Eye Theatre, Suffolk
5 to 28 Apr 2004 Northcott Theatre, Exeter
6 Mar to 3 Apr 2004 Derby Playhouse
July 2004 (TBC) Dublin Gate - Irish tour
3 to 5th Dec 7:30pm Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham £7.50 / £6 (concs) 0121 440 383
18 to 22 May 2004 Quince Players, The Cordes Hall, Sunninghill, Ascot, Berkshire
24 Jan to 7 Feb 2004 Eye Theatre, Suffolk
6 Mar to 3 Apr 2004 Derby Playhouse

Relative Values

The Marquise 2 to 11 Jul 2004 Hever Lakeside Theatre, Kent
Star Quality 14 Jan to mid May 2004 Bill Kenwright Ltd - UK Tour, opens Windsor
9 to 14 Feb 2004 The Talisman Theatre, Kenilworth, Warwickshire

(* denotes Premiere, TBC = To be confirmed)

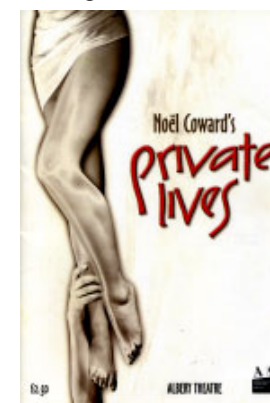
The contact details for items to be included here or in Home Chat please contact:
The Noël Coward Society, 29, Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon, Norwich, NR6 6TB
Email: whatson@noelcoward.net Tel: +44 (0)1603 486188 Fax: +44 (0)1603 400683



December
2003
£3 (\$5)
FREE TO
MEMBERS

PRIVATE LIVES - PUBLIC INTEREST

It's shaping up to be a busy 2004 in the UK for Coward with the relaxing of rights on PRIVATE LIVES and BLITHE SPIRIT at the moment there is a professional Coward production on every month from January - August (and probably beyond). It cannot be too strong an



assumption that this is largely due to the internationally successful Howard Davies directed revival that dominated the stages of the West End and Broadway so successfully last year. Great to see that a modern interpretation of Coward's classic piece can succeed in raising both audiences and interest amongst professional and amateur companies. Blithe Spirit has always been the Coward comedy of choice for most amateur companies - at some time in their seasonal repertoires - a joy to see growing interest for both amongst professional companies during this 30th anniversary year of his death. Long may we see and hear the best of the Master's comedies and dramas proving time and again to be as relevant today as when they were first written.

Current and future professional productions can be seen at:

PRIVATE LIVES
Theatre Royal, York
Current- 8/11
PRIVATE LIVES
Citizens Theatre, Glasgow
Current- 15/11
PRIVATE LIVES
Eye Theatre, Suffolk
24/1/04- 7/2/04
PRIVATE LIVES
Northcott Theatre, Exeter
5/2/04- 28/2/04
PRIVATE LIVES
Derby Playhouse
6/3/04- 3/4/04
BLITHE SPIRIT
REC Theatre Company, Buxton
11/3/04- 21/3/04
BLITHE SPIRIT
Ian Dickens Productions Blackpool/
Darlington/Swansea
8/6/04- 21/8/04 (tbc)
PRIVATE LIVES
Dublin Gate Irish tour
July 2004 (tbc)
BLITHE SPIRIT
Tropic Line Theatre Queensland,
Australia + small tour
30/10- 1/11
BLITHE SPIRIT
Melbourne Theatre Co Victoria Then
Sydney Theatre Co
15/11 (pn 19/11)- 20/12/21/1-20/3/04

IN THIS ISSUE

Page 1 - Annual Lunch - Steve Ross
Page 2
Page 3
Page 4
Page 5
Page 6
Page 7
Page 8
Page 9
Page 10
Page 11 Committee 2003
Page 12 - WHAT'S ON?

STEPHEN FRY & SIR JOHN MILLS

Judy Campbell & Moira Lister
Are amongst the celebrity guests at the Noel Coward Society - Steve Ross
Cabaret Evening at Pizza On The Park on

31st January. The Cabaret supremo has invited Judy Campbell and Dominic Vlasto to add their talents to his own programme of Noel Coward songs in an evening packed with nearly a 100 members and guests. An evening of Coward music, an odd recollection and guest appearances should make this a night to remember. If anyone would like that last ticket or two then please get in touch with Barbara Longford whose organisational flair has provided a great way to start 2004.



FLOWERS FOR THE MASTER

The 7th and 13th December see two celebrations of Coward's birth at The Gershwin in New York and the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. By the time this edition reaches members we will have passed the former date and be just in time for the latter. Nearly 40 members will be attending the AGM in London and joining our guests Eleanor Bron and Malcolm Sinclair at Drury Lane and at The Savoy for our Annual Lunch. The Auction of Coward books that follows should provide an opportunity to grab an interesting Christmas present or two.

AUCTION REGISTRATION

For those who are coming along to the Auction of Coward books at The Savoy on 13th December at 2.30 pm you can register at the sale and take part in the bidding. There will be an opportunity to look at the books from about 2.00 pm onwards.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE NOËL COWARD SOCIETY 2003

The Annual General Meeting of the Noel Coward Society takes place this year at the Theatre Museum at 10.30 am. The Directors of Noel Coward Ltd. (Michel Imison, Robert Gardiner and John Knowles) have invited Barbara Longford to take of the Chair of the Society for the next year. John Knowles will take on the role of Membership Secretary for the year. The minutes of last year's meeting are shown below

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE NOEL COWARD SOCIETY The Theatre Museum, Covent Garden 14th December 2002

Present: Michael Imison-MI (Chair), John Knowles-JK (Secretary), Geoffrey Skinner-GS, Robert Gardiner-RG, Ali Howarth, Gareth Pike, Stephen Marshall, Marcy Kahan, Janette Jenkins, Judy Shakespear, Reggie Musgrove, Jenny Summerfield, Garth Smith, Everly Summerfield, Elizabeth ??, Beryl Knowles, Ken Starrett, Dominic Vlasto, Barbara Longford, Celia Cologne
MI opened the meeting at 10.30am

CHAIRMANS REPORT

Full report attached. MI began by announcing that there would be a slight change to the days' events, the reception at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane would commence at 12 noon and Ms Elaine Stritch would arrive at 12.30pm. Judy Campbell would also be laying flowers on behalf of Graham Payn. MI acknowledged the contribution and support given to the NCS by Graham Payn and suggested that we should send him a vote of thanks; this was proposed by Stephen Marshall and seconded by GS. In addition, MI mentioned that Sheridan Morely had been in an accident recently and that the NCS should formally send its best wishes for his recovery. MI felt that it had been a good year for the NCS but that we should aim for a greater contribution from the wider membership for the future. He concluded his report by announcing that 3 new members were to join (names).

SECRETARY'S REPORT

JK has had a year of catching up with the society administration, he is still trying to secure membership renewal. He invited all members present to help themselves to the free CD that is available. Home Chat has developed and consolidated its style and is now attracting more than enough contributions to fill each issue. JK has been juggling responsibilities all year with: web maintenance, Home Chat, society finances and membership and is pleased to confirm that Graham Martin of Blinkhorns will be taking over the functions of treasurer as well as the auditing and that GS will be responsible for membership. This week it has been confirmed that the NC Foundation will provide £5900 towards costs of incorporating the musical index and discography of Dominic Vlasto and Alan Farley into the NCS website, it is anticipated that this will prompt a total re-building of the NCS website and result in a fully-searchable database. No financial report is available as the auditors were unable to supply this because of other work commitments, MI pointed out that Noël Coward Limited is actually responsible for the accounts and assured the members that they were carefully administered; there was currently £2000 in the NCS account but members should be as proactive as possible in encouraging new members.

MINUTES OF 2001 AGM

These were read and MI drew attention to matters arising that had not been followed up from them: Membership, MI expressed concern that the society was still very London oriented and accepted partial responsibility for this situation for not encouraging more regional activities. The idea of having events that stem from a Coward on Film season had also not been followed up and it was suggested that we might try to approach the NFT or the Theatre Museum for their input. It was noted that Barry Day's new book, Coward on Film will soon be published and that it will initially be available exclusively to NCS members. The minutes were accepted as an accurate account of the 2001 meeting and MI handed over to John Knowles as the new chair.

FUTURE AIMS FOR THE NCS

JK felt that the role of the new committee should increasingly be to reflect what the members want the committee to do. GS and Michael Imison reported back on an event they had attended, High Societies (an annual expo event for theatrical-based societies) where they had gained comfort from the realisation that the NCS was a pretty good organisation by comparison with those represented at this event. It was acknowledged that the USA represents a very large market and there is a great demand for Coward information, unfortunately the sheer size of the US would make US-based society events a lot more difficult to organise. Ken Starrett who lives in New York is keen to contribute to raising the profile of the NCS and New York was going to be the best place for focus on expansion in the US for 2003. JK posed the questions, "what is the way forward, and what do we want to do with the society" Celia Cologne asked if we could restrict public access to the website, possibly charge for it. JK replied that this was already underway and it had been discussed in committee with a view to using current membership rates as a starting point for payment to access the site. This led onto the question of the membership fees.

Reggie Musgrove felt that £25 per year was very expensive - the most expensive in his experience, MI added that a lower rate for senior citizens had been discussed in committee and was a possibility. Marcy Kahan suggested that a copy of Home Chat is sent gratis when any application is made as an incentive to take up membership. The issue of making payment available by credit cards on the website was raised - particularly in view of the overseas membership, JK explained the technical difficulties and also that it had been felt to be prohibitively expensive up to now but that GS was going to be able to use the Samuel French Ltd credit card payment facilities and we should see if this helps. Ken Starrett inserted a cautionary note that US citizens are becoming very wary of on-line credit card fraud and it might be easier to increase their membership fee to cover the

A CELEBRATION

Members of The Noël Coward Society are invited to visit the Theatre Hall of Fame at the Gershwin Theatre, where a special guest will lay flowers on the statue of Noël Coward. This is to celebrate his life and commemorate the date of his birth on December 16, 1899. The man who thought he would not be remembered, has been, and will continue to be. Similar occasions will occur in London at the Coward statue in the Drury Lane Theatre and the statue at Firefly, his home in Jamaica.

This event will take place:

**Sunday, December 7,
2003 – 1:30 PM**

Gershwin Theatre - 1633
Broadway
(51st Street between
Broadway & 8th Ave.)
New York City

At **2:00 PM**, following the
celebration at the Gershwin,
a luncheon will take place at:

**The Broadway Room
- Rosie O'Grady's
800 Seventh Avenue (52nd
Street) - New York City
(See Menu on Reverse Side)
A documentary film on Noël
Coward, not seen since**

TONIGHT AT 7.30, 2.30 and 8.30 in 1935/36

It was Coward who created what was in 1935 a unique approach to presenting a series of one-act plays. Shown below with the 7.30 nomenclature at Birmingham's Theatre Royal. In Mander and Mitchenson's *Theatrical Companion to Coward* the writers state: The group consists of ten one-act plays combined in various orders to make three programmes, each of three plays. THE FIRST PROGRAMME PRESENTED by John C. Wilson as *Tonight at 7.30* at the Opera House, Manchester, 15 October 1935 (*We Were Dancing The Astonished Heart, Red Peppers*). THE SECOND PROGRAMME PRESENTED 18 October (*Hands Across the Sea, Fumed Oak, Shadow Play*). (9 weeks' tour: the company remained in Manchester for a second week, followed by Leeds, Glasgow, 2 weeks; Edinburgh, Liverpool,

THEATRE ROYAL BIRMINGHAM

**"TO-NIGHT AT
7-30"**

Commencing Monday, 9th December, at 7-30 p.m.

FOR ONE WEEK. Matinees Thurs. & Sat. at 2-30 p.m.

FOR POSTAL APPLICATION

BOX OFFICE NOW OPEN.

NOV 25 FOR PERSONAL

The outstanding event of the Autumn Theatrical Season is the renewed partnership of Gertrude Lawrence and Noel Coward in Mr. Coward's latest production, "To-night at 7-30."

This will be their first appearance together since their sensational success in "Private Lives."

Noel Coward can always be relied upon to provide something "different," and his latest venture will constitute an entirely new idea in the theatre. He has written six short plays, and three of these will make up the programme of each performance—one Comedy, one Serious Play and one Play with Music. The titles of the six plays are as follows:—*First Group*: "We Were Dancing," a comedy; "The Astonished Heart," serious; "Red Peppers," an interlude with music. *Second Group*: "Hands Across the Sea," comedy; "Fumed Oak," unpleasant comedy; "Shadow Play," a musical fantasy.

In the musical shows Noel Coward and Gertrude Lawrence have several dances which have been specially arranged for them by Ralph Reader, the young English dance producer, and they will also play the leading parts in all of the plays.

Noel Coward has for so long been the outstanding man of the English Theatre that a catalogue of his career would be tedious as well as futile. There is no aspect of the theatre of which he is not completely



NOEL COWARD

the master. Songs, sketches, operetta, revue, comedy, farce, drama—flow readily from his pen.

"To-night at 7-30" is his latest venture, a serious play, a comedy and a musical show at every performance.

Think of all that is exclusive, witty, tasteful, smart and stylish—and you have Gertrude Lawrence. She has a greater flair for subtle comedy than any other actress on the English stage and has deservedly been the West End's leading star for some time.

A strong supporting cast includes Moya Nugent, Alison Leggatt, Everley Gregg, and among the supporting men are Alan Webb and Anthony Pelissier.

John C. Wilson, Noel Coward, Alfred Lunt, and his wife, Miss Lynn Fontanne, form the company responsible for this production.

Messrs. Wilson and Coward are anxious to stress the fact that although the plays will all be of short duration they are not one-act plays in the accepted sense. They will vary in length from 40 to 60 minutes each; in the number of scenes employed and in period. Each will be a complete little play.

At matinees the title will be changed from "To-night at 7-30" to "To-day at 2-30." A full orchestra will be travelled with the company.



GERTRUDE LAWRENCE

PAGE TEN

Newcastle and Birmingham.) At some of the towns the matinees of the plays were called *Today at 2.30*. At the Theatre Royal, Birmingham, on 9 December, *Family Album* was given its first production, replacing *We Were Dancing* in the first programme.

THE FIRST PROGRAMME PRESENTED IN LONDON at the Phoenix Theatre, 9 January 1936, as *Tonight at 8.30* (*Family Album, The Astonished Heart and Red Peppers*).

THE SECOND PROGRAMME PRESENTED, 13 January (*Hands Across the Sea, Fumed Oak and Shadow Play*).

The plays are listed in order of production:

(a) *We Were Dancing* (b) *The Astonished Heart* (c) *Red Peppers* (d) *Hands Across the Sea* (e) *Fumed Oak* (f) *Shadow Play* (g) *Family Album* (h) *Star Chamber* (i) *Ways and Means* (j) *Still Life*

THEATRE ROYAL **BIRMINGHAM**
"TO-NIGHT AT SEVEN-THIRTY"



"WE WERE DANCING,"
GERTRUDE LAWRENCE and
NOEL COWARD

"HANDS ACROSS THE SEA"
ALAN WEBB, NOEL COWARD
and ALISON LEGGATT

"FUMED OAK," MOYA NUGENT,
GERTRUDE LAWRENCE and
NOEL COWARD.

"RED PEPPERS,"
NOEL COWARD and
GERTRUDE LAWRENCE

SCENES FROM FOUR OF THE SIX PLAYS WHICH WILL BE PRESENTED IN TWO GROUPS UNDER THE TITLE "TO-NIGHT AT 7-30." THREE PLAYS WILL BE STAGED AT EACH PERFORMANCE.

PAGE ELEVEN

That Night at 8:30

by Joel Kaplan

On 20 January 1936, after a lengthy illness, King George V died peacefully in his sleep. His passing, Shaw tells us with uncharacteristic affection, left "the Monarchy in England at a higher standard of respectability and popularity than it had ever attained before." London's theatres paid their respects by shutting their doors on the day following the announcement as well as for the funeral itself. The King had been held in high esteem by the acting profession whose members now recalled his frequent theatre visits, his support of actors' charities and, above all, his appearance with the Royal Family five years earlier on the set of Coward's *Cavalcade*. The effect of his death would be felt in West End playhouses for months to come, as glittering first nights were intruded upon by the black gowns and sober accessories that signified Court mourning. The new King, Edward VIII, however, vowing to return the country to normality as quickly as possible, expressly asked the theatres to resume regular operations.

Critics and audiences, accordingly, looked forward to the continuation of what had begun the previous autumn as a "boom" season. Indeed, one reviewer, predicting that 1936 would be "a year of triumph for London's Theatre-land," glanced back nostalgically to 1910, the year of the previous King's death, offering to match that "notable" season play for play. If 1936 were not a record year, he concluded, it would not be the fault of the plays or the players.

The point is well taken, particularly if we cast our eyes over what was on offer in early 1936 at some of London's principal playhouses. At the New Theatre on St Martin's Lane, John Gielgud's production of *Romeo and Juliet* was in the third month of what promised to be a record run. It featured a "dream cast" headed by Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft, Laurence Olivier and Edith Evans. Across Leicester Square at the Lyric, Cedric Hardwicke provided robust competition in *Tovarich*, while Emlyn Williams's psychological thriller *Night Must Fall* had settled into a long run at the Duchess. The latter featured not only Williams himself

as the play's compelling psychopath but a "suitably terrified" Dame May Whitty, whose character's sweet tooth was rumoured to have resulted in the on-stage consumption of 58 pounds of chocolates since the piece opened the previous spring.

Playgoers with more literary leanings could witness the first London performances of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* at the Mercury, or W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's revue-style recycling of modern civilization, complete with masked Greek chorus, in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* at the Westminster. At the other end of the spectrum were the season's inevitable musicals and (acceptably) naughty revues. In 1936 these included *Please, Teacher!* at the Hippodrome, *Tulip Time* at the Alhambra and C.B. Cochran's *Follow the Sun* at the Adelphi, a piece that became notorious for its dance interpretation of Hogarth's painting "Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn." At the lag end of the Christmas season those intent upon entertainment of a more family bent could still catch the pantos: Jack

and the *Beanstalk* at Drury Lane, *Sleeping Beauty* at the Vaudeville, or *The Forty Thieves* at the Lyceum. By the end of January box-office business for all was remarkably brisk, with a healthy complement of advance sales. The show, however, that bore the curious distinction of having been "least hit by the King's death" was Noel Coward's *Tonight at 8:30*. Having opened on 9 January at the tiny Phoenix Theatre on Charing Cross Road, Coward's offering of nine one-act plays performed in tandem over three nights averaged a consistently solid £3000 a week. The project, the most ambitious Coward ever attempted, had been conceived and written the previous year, arriving in London after a Manchester opening and a nine-week provincial tour. Coward's aim, set forth in a loftily worded programme essay, was to revive the fortunes of the one-act play. Grandly tracing the practice of "presenting three short plays in an evening" back to the tragedies of ancient Greece, Coward lamented the degeneration of the form into the provincial "curtain-raiser"

produced only because the evening's main attraction was not of sufficient length. Coward's remedy was to exploit the form's unique ability to create and sustain moods, while underscoring the seriousness of his commitment by using it as a vehicle for himself and Gertrude Lawrence - in the mid-1930s the most bankable of London's celebrity couples. What appealed particularly to Coward was the possibility of using the one act play to extend his range as playwright, director and performer, as well as surprising audiences with a contrapuntal package of unexpected effects. In some pieces, such as *Hands Across the Sea*, he appeared in familiar form, offering variations on his well-made comedies of outsiders and insiders. Others such as *Fumed Oak* and *Still Life* showed him in a more sober mood. In the former he appeared as a hen-pecked husband who, after fifteen years of submitting to verbal abuse, strikes his wife and deserts his family. In the latter (revived at the Shaw Festival in 2000, and the basis for David Lean's film *Brief Encounter*) Coward's games of English restraint and reticence are played out in the public spaces of a Midlands railway station. By many accounts the most popular piece in the project was *Red Peppers*, an affectionate guying of the world of vaudeville. Appearing as a fractious third-rate song-and-dance team, George and Lily Pepper, Coward and Lawrence forsook their dressing gowns and cocktails to indulge in crude unwitty abuse, drink Guinness, and perform raucous parodies of two of vaudeville's hoariest set pieces, the "sailor-on-leave" and the "man-about-town". The genius of *Tonight at 8:30* lay not in its component parts but in their overall effect, as each play -

or "mood" - contributed to a mosaic that demonstrated both Coward's aesthetic virtuosity and his ability to repackage his public persona. As a result, the notorious bad boy of the 1920s and the slick, elegant stylist of the early '30s were joined by a multiplicity of characters and techniques that hitherto had seemed to lie outside Coward's sympathies. Critics stressed the modernity of the achievement by dwelling upon what they called the project's "filmic" or "cinematic" qualities, its ability to effect rapid cross-cuts between radically different episodes.

Indeed, *Play Pictorial* ran a cartoon that would be much reproduced, depicting scenes from six of the plays as separate frames on the same spool of celluloid. The effect, however, could also be felt within the more formally adventurous of the works. And here the piece that most excited critics and audiences was *Shadow Play*.

The story of *Shadow Play* is easily enough told: five years into a troubled marriage, the well-heeled Simon and Victoria Gay forth are on the brink of divorce. One evening, after a particularly unpleasant altercation, Vicky takes too many sleeping pills and experiences a hallucinatory dream in which she and Simon relive some early episodes of their courtship. When she awakes, with Simon beside her, reconciliation seems a distinct possibility. From such unprepossessing stuff Coward creates a surreal and highly original musical fantasy, employing song, dance and sophisticated theatrical "time slips" to offer a stage commentary on the workings of memory and sentiment. At the outset of the piece we are on familiar territory: a "well-furnished, rather luxurious Mayfair bedroom" in which Vicky, distressed by

Simon's infidelity, slips into her dressing gown and "dopes herself to the eyes."

This is the world of *The Vortex*, or *Private Lives* five years after the final curtain. Once the pills begin to take effect, however, Coward uses Vicky's disorientation as an excuse to experiment with time, space and dramatic structure. The comedy she had attended earlier that day, for example, resurfaces as a device for revisiting her past, as Coward uses the stage conventions of sentimental theatre to mock the brittle and cynical world of contemporary Mayfair. An orchestra sounds, an overture swells, and Vicky and Simon are whirled in and out of a world modelled on Fred Astaire musicals, in which, when the emotional temperature heats up, dialogue slides naturally into song, and song just as naturally into dance. Because they are taken back to experiences they have already had, each knows what will happen next - and they say so to one another. Missed cues and faulty entrances are "corrected," and recalled dialogue replaced with recollected thought. In the process, Coward, who virtually invented modern subtext, allows Vicky to offer the best definition the term has yet received: "Small talk - a lot of small talk with quite different thoughts going on behind it." In the end, it hardly matters whether Vicky and Simon can reach an accommodation. Form has, in effect, overtaken content. Language, movement and stage convention have themselves become the work's meaning, as Coward - like Wilde before him, in Shaw's nicely turned phrase - begins to "play with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre."

Joel Kaplan