



HOME CHAT

JULY
2001

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NOEL COWARD SOCIETY

Sunday Luncheon and Exhibition of original Noël Coward Paintings

with Sheridan Morley and Moira Lister

The Society is now able to confirm its Sunday luncheon and talk by Sheridan Morley on Noël's paintings at the Alexander House Hotel and Restaurant at Turner's Hill at 1.00 PM on Sunday 22nd July. This event will provide an opportunity to view some of The Master's original watercolour and oil paintings. In addition there will be a chance to see the coloured slides taken of Noël's paintings in 1988 - some not previously seen in published works. The price of the event with full roast lunch (with a vegetarian option) is £42 a head. Following lunch Moira Lister will provide a short programme of Coward's writings - with no doubt stories of her past work with Noel - and readings of some of The Master's verse. For anyone who is interested the Hotel is offering a special rate of £65 per person, for two sharing a room, for bed and breakfast on Sunday night.

The address of the Hotel is: Alexander House Hotel, East Street, Turners Hill, Crawley, West Sussex, RH10 4QD, Tel: +44 (0) 1342 - 714914, Fax: +44 (0) 1342 - 717328 E-mail: info@alexanderhouse.co.uk , website: <http://www.alexanderhouse.co.uk> .

Please let us know if you are interested by contacting Gareth Pike by July 14th at the latest. email: ncsociety@aol.com Tel/Fax: +44(0)1963 351 421 or email Michael Imison on imisonplay@aol.com .

SEMI MONDE Posters - Thelma Holt, the producer of SEMI MONDE has donated to the Society the front of house pictures from the show. Two are very big, about 5 ft 8 ins by 3 ft 6 ins, one only slightly smaller and a number of poster size. They show scenes from the production and one of the larger ones shows a group of the men, one of whom has become Noel Coward. This is a unique item. These posters are available for sale in order to benefit the Society and offers should be sent to Michael Imison - if you have any suggestions for using them to benefit the Society in any other way then please let us know. (Contact Michael Imison imisonplay@aol.com). Our thanks to Thelma Holt for this and producing the stylish SEMI MONDE!

HAY FEVER

Presented by the Oxford Stage Company on 3rd May 2001 at Theatre Clwyd and subsequently on tour. Currently at Theatre Royal Windsor to 7th July (Box Office 01753 853888 Web site: www.theatreroyalwindsor.co.uk). Final week at Everyman Theatre Cheltenham 10th - 14th July (Box Office 01242 572 573 Web site www.everymantheatre.org.uk)

Cast

Sorel Bliss	Leah Muller
Simon Bliss	William Rycroft
Clara	Susan Porrett
Judith Bliss	Estelle Kohler
David Bliss	Jonathan Newth
Sandy Tyrrell	William Buckhurst
Myra Arundel	Claire Vousden
Richard Greatham	Christopher Luscombe
Jackie Coryton	Emma Darwall-Smith
<i>Director</i>	<i>Dominic Dromgoole</i>
<i>Set and Costume Designer</i>	<i>Jonathan Fensom</i>
<i>Lighting Designer</i>	<i>Matthew Eagland</i>

I caught up with this production in Bury St Edmunds where it played to packed houses despite the summer heat. Dominic Dromgoole, who has expressed his enthusiasm for Coward's work in the Sunday Times was, perhaps for this reason, sparing in the directorial innovations he introduced. He even allowed the audience to see the play as it was written with three acts and two intervals. Of all Coward's plays it lends itself least well to the current, almost invariable, pattern of

two parts divided by a single interval. Only the semi-realist set, with a huge staircase that bridged the stage and which offered views of the garden struck a resolutely contemporary note. The play is notorious for its lack of action so makes huge demands on the actors who have to sustain the audience's interest with the dialogue alone. Fortunately here was a cast who relished Coward's verbal dexterity. A brisk pace was established at the outset and maintained throughout. Simon and Sorel avoided being conventional spoiled children and for once Sorel's condemnation of her family's cavalier attitude to those bold enough to visit them rang true. On the other hand the characteristics of the visitors which make them unacceptable to the family were strongly and subtly brought out. Sandy Tyrell is clearly seeking a sexual adventure with Judith, but lacks the experience to take advantage of the situation when it is offered. Similarly Myra wants to seduce David, simultaneously overestimating her sexual attractiveness and her personal charm. Richard Greatham, here played not so much as a suave diplomat but more as a hidebound middle manager, is too old and too dull for Sorel, while Jackie, who is perforce paired with Simon, has so little personality as to be almost invisible. Their complaints the following morning about the evening they have suffered are humourless and self-pitying. As they finally flee without saying goodbye Judith's comment "how very rude" is entirely apt. However, the Bliss family, actress, novelist and painter, quickly immerse themselves again in the creativity which makes them truly happy, justifying, to themselves at least, their own self-absorption. I highly recommend this production which continues to 14th July.

Michael Imison



From the Web Site ... Blithe Spirit

Reprint of an article donated by Philip Hoare.

Christmas 1955 found Coward back in Hollywood, to rehearse *Blithe Spirit* for CBS. New York was rapidly losing its position as a centre for television; not only was land cheaper in Hollywood, but most of the stars lived there.



© Philip Hoare Archive

Lauren Bacall had been chosen to play Elvira, and Claudette Colbert, Ruth. Neither woman was easy to work with; Colbert was 'extremely tiresome', and Bacall was 'no comedienne'. Colbert recalled that Coward was 'unremittingly difficult'. When she apologised for fluffing her lines - 'I knew them backwards last night' ~ Noël retorted, 'Yes, and that's the way you're saying them this morning.' Colbert had always regretted the fact that the distance between her nape and shoulders was short: 'The thing Noël said that hurt me most - but funny it was - he said, "If she had a neck, I'd wring it."'



© Philip Hoare Archive

Russell and Hamilton were dismayed that Coward wanted Graham Payn in *Blithe Spirit*. 'We thought Graham was safely in London but Coward said, "Oh, Graham's here, he can play Dr Bradman. Russell reminded him that 'three years before he'd had Graham on Broadway, and brought him to the front instead of Gertie Lawrence. Hedda Hopper had attacked him in the press for it ... With Hopper and Louella Parsons watching a live TV show, it would be disastrous ... We just said no.'



©Philip Hoare Archive

Preparations followed the usual precise requirements: Coward demanded a month of rehearsals on a fully furnished set (in the poltergeist scenes of the play, even the furniture had to be rehearsed), and all but essential personnel were barred ('That's so the men spending their money won't bother their ulcers', Noël told a journalist). He also requested a studio audience for an early rehearsal, to judge reactions.



©Philip Hoare Archive

These were unprecedented demands for a medium used to casual drama production methods. But just as camera rehearsals began, an abscess was discovered on Coward's sciatic nerve in his right leg. A doctor sent for, 'and injected the damn thing eight times with the thickest needle I have ever seen'. Numbed with novocaine, he continued, although he seemed bad-tempered for much of the rehearsals. But the ninety-minute show was 'played without nerves and on nerves ... the result was that the performance went like a bomb'. The invited audience were described as 'very hep' by the New York Herald-Tribune, who likened it to 'a smart Broadway opening with a terribly fashionable cast, in front of an upper-drawer audience.' Critics judged the show 'light as a glitzy drawing room'. One paper remarked on the dialogue, just about the most emancipated we've heard in a television comedy .. uproarious boudoir innuendo; several well-placed hells and damns; and one of the funniest rebukes of all time ... Noël Coward tells his purring, ectoplasmic wife, "Don't call me 'lover boy'. It's vulgar and inaccurate."



The Unknown Coward

As reported last month a limited edition of Barry Day's book is about to be published. Initially this publication will be made available to Coward Society members only. The extracts below give a flavour of what can be expected in the book. They relate to Coward's wartime verse.

Then there was the war film - In Which We Serve - Noël's tribute to his beloved Navy. Based closely on the character and wartime exploits of his friend, Lord Louis Mountbatten - specifically the sinking of Mountbatten's destroyer, the H.M.S. Kelly - the film is still considered the classic among wartime propaganda films. It was, in effect, a poem on film, a complement to the many other verses he used to express his feelings and frustrations during those darkest of days. For the people who had got us into the mess with such myopic lack of preparation he had nothing but contempt. At Christmas 1939 he would write ...

Back to the Nursery

Back to the Nursery,
Back to the Nursery,
Let us enjoy this sublime anniversary.
Full nineteen hundred and thirty-nine years
Let us forget the despair and the tears
Let us ignore all the slaughter and danger
(Think of the Manger! Remember the Manger!)Let us envisage the Star in the East
(Man is a murderer. Man is a beast.)

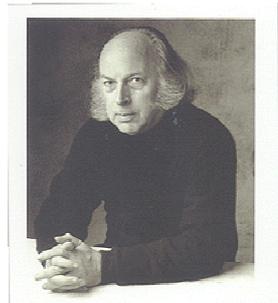
Let us forget that the moment is sinister,
Let us uphold our devout Foreign Minister.
Let us not prattle of Simon or Hoare
Or Mr. Chamberlain's diffident war.
Let us not speak of Belisha or Burgin
(Think of the Virgin! Remember the Virgin!)Let us from ridicule turn to Divinity
(Think of the Trinity! Think of the Trinity!)Now as our day of rejoicing begins
(Never mind Poland. Abandon the Finns.)
Lift up your voices! "Long live Christianity!"
(Cruelty, Sadism, Blood and Insanity.)
So that the world across carnage is hurled,
God's in his Heaven - all's right with the world!

... but for the men and women who would, once again, get us out of it he had nothing but admiration .

These Are Brave Men

These are brave men
Who sail the sea in war
But we civilians must never mention it.
There's an unwritten law
That rules one multitude of ordinary heroes
To be prepared
Each minute of each hour
To stay at action stations
Closed in - sweating in the heat
To face much time
Far too much time
To wonder and to contemplate
In that long waiting,
So many possibilities to fear
To have, in convoying a Merchant fleet,
To move so slowly and to regulate
The engines of the ship, the nerves.
Each man's aware
In each man's secret heart
There lurks, not fright
But some dark premonition of what might
At any second happen.
Suddenly the ship swerves
Sharply to starboard - then again to port.
Submarine alarm
Enemy aircraft - bearing red 3.0
This may be it,
This may be the swift prelude to the slow
And sodden processes of dying.

Barry Day
(*and The Master of course!*)



The Benefits of Membership!

As Michael Imison pointed out in a recent email to the marvellousparty email group:
The discounts on Coward books are substantial. The Complete Lyrics and Look Back in Pleasure the centenary volume are two thirds of the published price a combined saving of seventeen pounds . The Theatrical Companion is seven pounds odd off the published price. Buy all three and subscribe by bankers order and you will already be in profit! CD prices are typically £9 and £10. We have a bargain double CD of Noel and Gertie original recordings digitally remastered at £12. Our members number most of the world experts on Coward's work and they'll be happy to advise you on what is worth getting.



This newsletter is the last to be sent using last year's membership information. To continue to receive HOME CHAT and retain access to the Members' pages on the Society's web site - you should renew your membership of the Society.

All applications for membership should be sent to Gareth Pike at: The Noel Coward Society, PO Box 2700, Castle Cary, BA7 7YT United Kingdom email: ncsociety@aol.com, Tel/Fax: +44(0)1963 351 421 - It helps both the Society and yourself to arrange to pay by standing order from your bank account.

Coming Soon ...

An article on the Coward collection at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden outlining both the physical collection and recordings on video of productions, revivals etc.

Items from the collection of books and publications discovered at the London Office of Noel Coward will soon be available to members. These include a number of copies of the most of the *Play Parade* series of collected plays produced from 1933 onwards. These are the earliest complete compilations published by Heinemann.

Apologies ...

Sincere apologies to all those who have taken the trouble to develop and send in crossword puzzles and word squares and have yet to see them published ... we will be publishing them over the next few editions. Requests for articles and information have unfortunately squeezed them out this time.

Reviews ...

Members attend productions of Coward plays all over the World. It would be wonderful to have some of your thoughts on those shows you have seen. They do not have to be full-blown reviews - just observations and thoughts about what has been seen. We will publish what we receive (some editing may of course be necessary!)

Executive Committee ...

There have been some changes to the Society's Executive Committee. **There is a particular need for a computer literate member to take charge of the society's membership records.**

Philip Hoare has kindly agreed to act as a consultant to the Society in future. Our thanks for his generosity in moving into this new role. We are always looking for members who wish to play a larger part in the work of the Society. If you would like to help - at any level - then please contact either Michael Imison or Gareth Pike on emails: imisonplay@aol.

Current & Planned Productions - Professional and Amateur (All 2001 dates unless stated)

US and Canada:	<i>Blithe Spirit</i>	3rd to 14th July 12 Apr - 19 May, 2002.	Theatre Collingwood, Collingwood, Ontario Center Stage's Pearlstone Theater. www.centerstage.org Baltimore Playhouse, Halifax
	<i>Present Laughter</i> <i>Relative Values</i>	4th to 11th August 27th March to 14th July 18 May to 14 Jun	The Alabama Shakespeare Festival English Theatre Frankfurt State Theatre Co of South Australia, Adelaide
Australasia:	<i>Design For Living</i>	Nov/Dec	The Gate Theatre, Dublin
United Kingdom & Ireland:	<i>Blithe Spirit</i>	5th July to 22nd Sept 13th & 14th July 9th to 18th August 15th to 25th August Aug 2001 8th to 9th December 22nd to 24th November 12th & 13th October	Totterhoe Lower School, Nr. Dunstable The New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth Parish Church Hall, Murrayfield, Edinburgh Hever Lakeside Theatre Keswick Village Hall, Laleham NE Surrey College, Ewell, Surrey Village Hall, Whittington, Staffs.
	<i>Hay Fever</i> Oxford Stage Co. UK tour	11 Sept to 15 Sept 25th June to 7th July 10th to 14th July	Opera House Jersey (Ian Dickens productions) Windsor Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham
	<i>Hay Fever</i> <i>Present Laughter</i> Middle Ground Tour	16th to 20th October 7 to 9th June 4th to 7th July 9th to 13th July 17th to 21st July	Kenton Theatre, Henley-on-Thames Courtyard Theatre, Hereford Playhouse, Weston-Super-Mare Epsom Playhouse, Epsom Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury Directed by Michael Lunney, Designed by Ali Gorton Box Office: 01253 290 190 Unicorn Theatre, Abingdon, Oxfordshire
	<i>This Happy Breed</i> <i>Come Into The Garden Maud and Fumed Oak.</i> Rugeley Arts Tour	11th to 14th July 23rd June to 28th July (see local press for exact dates of perf.)	Village Hall, Hixon, Stafford, Staffs Highfields Hall, Highfields Village Hall, Hiddley
	<i>Star Quality</i>	Opens 7 Aug	Theatre Royal, Windsor - due West End late October
	<i>The Vortex</i> <i>Private Lives</i>	Sept 2001 8th to 13th April 2002	Crucible Theatre, Sheffield Playgoers Theatre, Louth, Lincolnshire

