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## Sir John Remembered

*Stephen Fry - his first meeting with Sir John Mills & Noël Coward*



*Michael Imison presents the Vice President scroll to Stephen Fry at Coward On Film*

There could have been no more poignant a reminder of what we owe Sir John Mills than those words spoken by Stephen Fry our newest Vice President on Sunday May 22 2005 as he accepted his scroll of honour at the Coward On Film event in London. Stephen is a close friend of the Mills family and his reflections on the night when, as Stephen put it, "Johnny left the party..." added a new dimension to the numerous obituaries published since the loss of one of our finest screen actors and our President.

Recalling Sir John's career provides a history of British film making. His first theatrical role was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Belton School, Suffolk followed by a role in *As You Like It* at Norwich High School and later in 1928 as the gardener in *A Paper Chase* for the Vicar's Amateur Dramatic Society in Ipswich after being turned down by the Felixstowe Players. His first professional role was in the chorus of *The Five O'Clock Girl* at the London Hippodrome in 1929.

Noël first saw him touring the Far East in the theatre company, 'The Quaints' in the Vivian Ellis and Richard Myers musical *M.C. Coaders*. Noël was persuaded to join them and play Stanhope in *Journey's End* for three performances. In Stephen's acceptance speech he talked about meeting Sir John for the first time and how the friendship they enjoyed gave him

an insight to the friendship Sir John had with The Master. In presenting Stephen with his scroll of office Michael Imison said...

"I am honoured and delighted to have been asked to present the scroll confirming his Vice Presidency to Stephen Fry. But first I am going to depart from my brief because I don't think anyone else is going to get the opportunity to say thank you to the people whose hard work made this magnificent event possible, particularly Barbara Longford and John Knowles, so I hope you'll show your appreciation in the usual way. (Applause)

I also hope everyone will forgive me if I delay the pleasure of hearing Stephen's acceptance speech for a moment with a personal anecdote, whose relevance will not be immediately obvious.

BBC Radio 4 has a programme *Reunion* in which a group of people involved in some notable period of the not-too-distant past are reunited to recall their experiences. The BBC decided that the programme would revisit the formation of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society and a researcher rang me because I was in fact, as the organiser of a student theatre company on the Fringe, the prime mover in forming the Society, nearly fifty years ago now. Unfortunately, they had

## keynotes

*Cameron Mackintosh is to refurbish and rename the Albery Theatre in the West End as The Noël Coward Theatre. Novello is also honored with the renaming of The Strand as The Ivor Novello Theatre - it was here that he lived in his upstairs flat with the decidedly small, shaky, lift. Both renovations are due to be completed by late 2006.*

The dress Moira Lister wore as Joanna in the 1947 revival of *Present Laughter* has been presented to the Hampton Theatre, Teddington.

*Stephen Fry has joined Moira Lister and Sheridan Morley as one of our Honorary Vice Presidents.*

Barry Day's *Coward On Film* is still available at the reduced price of £24.80 by ringing +44(0) 1752 202 301 and quoting *sapcoward05*

*Ruth Leon, Sheridan Morley and Michael Law wowed 20 NCS members at The Pizzeria on the Park on May 24 with their evening of Gerstwin and Coward - an event also enjoyed by the Duke of Kent and Princess Alexandra in the audience.*

Two exhibitions featuring Noël are to take place in the Teddington area in July; one at Orleans House Gallery, Richmond and the other at the Landmark Centre the former St. Alban's Church where Violet Veitch and Arthur Coward first met whilst singing in the choir!

the Society, nearly fifty years ago now. Unfortunately, they had the idea that the Society was set up in the teeth of opposition with the deliberate intention of defying the establishment and revolutionising British Theatre. In fact since 'The Fringe' as it had been dubbed, already existed and the twenty-odd unwired groups that formed it were by no means all radical, all we did in setting up the Society was to provide a centralised booking and information service, already much needed by the groups and the public alike. No opposition, no controversy and I think no radio programme.

The relevance of this story is that when at the other end of my life I set out to create a Noël Coward Society, it was again a blindingly obvious thing to do. Other writers such as Oscar Wilde had a society, as Stephen knows because I believe he is involved. There were lots of Coward fans out there. All that was

needed was a central organisation to co-ordinate the activity. Gareth Pike offered himself as our first administrator, and John Knowles, who had already developed a comprehensive Coward web-site, generously put it at the disposal of the Society. Graham Pym provided funds to get it going. It really couldn't have been easier. So, just as if I hadn't formed the Festival Fringe Society, it is certain that somebody else would have, equally this Society was waiting to be formed and I just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

Nevertheless, I can't help finding it gratifying that someone like Stephen at the top of the entertainment world, but who was only fifteen years old when Coward died is willing to lend his name to our activities. It is specially gratifying because of his connection with our beloved late President, the much-missed John Mills. It is a happy coincidence that Stephen was brought up in Norfolk, power-base of John Knowles and the county immortalised by Coward as being very flat. Stephen's adolescence was far from flat, as his autobiography recounts. The emotional turbulence it induced led to a suicide attempt and jail for using stolen credit cards – although he is quoted as saying that, after public-school life, prison conditions seemed quite comfortable. Prison was enough of a shock, however, to get him to work as an independent learner, untroubled by provocative authority figures, to pass his A levels and to win a scholarship to Cambridge. At Cambridge he met Emma Thompson, who introduced him to Hugh Laurie and there he joined the Footlights. Thus began the public career of the adolescent who claimed at seventeen "My whole life stretched out gloriously behind me."

This career eventually led him to a starring role in *Relative Values*, the only full length feature film to be made of a Coward play in recent times. This alone could qualify him as our Vice President. In fact he is a genuine Noël Coward fan and has attended one of our previous events at Pizza on the Park.

It has been pointed out to me that Stephen's life now has many parallels with Noël's. I think that is true, though I don't recall Noël ever being famous for being celibate, as Stephen once was, or for being interested in spectacled bears, whose rescue from extinction is one of the many good causes that Stephen has espoused. When it comes

to ticking the boxes however, they both tick playwright, screenwriter, actor, director, entertainer, versifier, wit, film-producer, novelist, lyricist and librettist. I must admit I had forgotten until I came to prepare this speech that Stephen's fortunes were founded on writing the book for the revival of *Me and My Girl*.

But apart from success in a multiplicity of fields, there are three personal characteristics that Stephen does, it seems to me, share with Noël. He has a great talent for friendship and his true friends become friends for life. He enjoys work. Noël said "Work is more fun than fun" and from his tremendous output I sense Stephen feels the same. Lastly they share a respect for and love of language. I am going to close by giving you a sample of how Stephen uses language by quoting a brief passage from *Maoab is my Neighbour*.

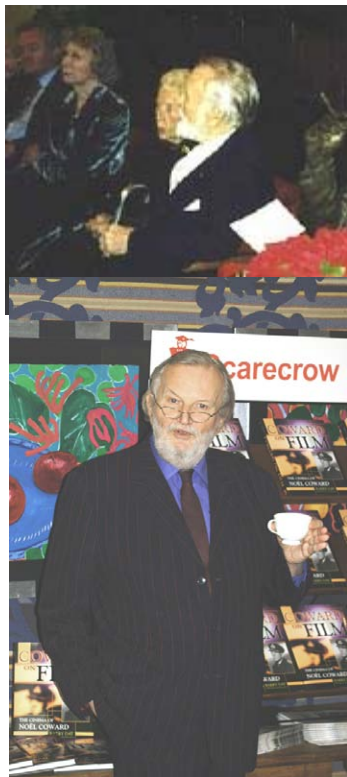
Those of you that already know it will be happy to be reminded of it and for those that don't I hope it will encourage you to read the book. The subject is a photo that Stephen always carried with him.

*"It was the house where I grew up. It contains my brother's bedroom, with its peeling William Morris wallpaper; it contains the bedroom I spent most of my life in lying awake for hours and hours and hours with the self-induced insomnia of adolescence, peeing out of the window into the night air and killing the honey-suckle below because I was too lazy, sloppy and sluttish to go downstairs to the lavatory; it contains the bedroom of my sister, with posters of the cricketer Derek Randall, still hanging on the wall. It contains the study on whose carpet I stood so many times, facing my father over some new school report, some new disaster, some new outrage that might send my mother from the room clutching a handkerchief to her mouth in grief and upset. It contains the same objects and the same memories and it contains the same two parents who made me from their flesh and whom I adore so much. It is home."*

Stephen, please will you come up here. I have much pleasure in presenting you with this scroll confirming your Vice Presidency of the Noël Coward Society.

Stephen started by thanking Michael Imison and then replied...

"Michael what a remarkable person I am, I would love to meet me. I don't know where to begin. I'll begin oddly



TOP: Sir John and Mary Mills at the 2000 Coward birthday celebrations at Drury Lane. BOTTOM: Sheridan Morley talks about Coward on Film in the Charlotte Street Hotel, London.

"Michael what a remarkable person I am, I would love to meet me. I don't know where to begin. I'll begin oddly enough not far from here with a man called Roger Peters who some of you may remember lived for several years in The Savoy Hotel under the guise of apparently putting together a film version of *Key Fever*, the Master's favourite play. The play that he famously wrote in a very short time and the one play which for most of his life he refused to let any film-maker get their hands on it because he regarded it as 'too fucking perfect' someone told me they were his exact words, I wouldn't swear in front of you otherwise of course.

Anyway I amongst everyone here who I think who ever held a pen, biro or pencil in the Western hemisphere had been invited to Roger Peters suite at The Savoy at some stage and asked if I would consider writing a screenplay of *Key Fever*. And I had, kindly I hope, declined, though we had become if not friends, passing acquaintances and we would "What Ho!" each other and also meet in the Croucho Club or flaneuring around town as one did in the late eighties.

On one occasion when I was between houses I bumped into him and he said, "You don't know anybody who wants to live in The Savoy for six months do you?" "Well" I said, "As a matter of fact I think that's a marvellous thing to do, I think I'd rather like to do that." I'd always fancied myself as something of an Elaine Stritch and so he said, "Well, you pay the room service and the rest is free." Because he had to go back to America for some reason, he had various things to work out and he didn't want all his things to be taken out of the suite as he'd lived there so long and he wanted someone he vaguely knew and trusted to look after his hash brownies and his collection of pornography and so on. And so I was very happy to do that. It seemed a fun thing and I'd just been asked to do a film called *Peter's Friends* with Ken Branagh. *Now this is very relevant!*

It was because I was living in The Savoy that I also bumped into a friend of mine, John Sessions who said please come and see me in *Twelfth* which he was playing in what is now called the Comedy Theatre or the Pinter Theatre and so I said, "Yes I would happily come and see you in *Twelfth*." It's one

of the nice things about being in the West End you just drift into theatres and out of them again. I'd been planning to catch up on my theatre going. And because I'd gone

appear at 5 o'clock. I don't want to see you again until you are ready to come and change." And then you come and open the flowers and they've moved it round, and it really is bliss, I can recom-



Michael Denison who were in that production, at least Dukie Gray was. And because I met them they invite me to one of their legendary Sunday lunches at Shardeles in Old Amersham. And because I went to that lunch I met John Mills.

This was one of the most marvellous events of my life. He was utterly charming and he came to me and he said, "Ooh now you're a friend of Kenneth Branagh aren't you," and I said, "Yes." He said, "Will you do something for me, would you tell him that I am one of Larry Olivier's oldest friends and I think I can speak for him from the grave when I tell you that Kenneth Branagh is not to pay any attention to the nonsense from the critics in which they're excoriating him for daring to make this film of *Henry V*," which at the time had just come out. He said, "I saw it, I thought it was wonderful, I thought it was marvellous and what's more I think Larry would have adored it and would have adored him and I'd like you to tell them from me." And I said, "No Sir John I won't do that I'd like you to do that. Can I invite you to dinner with Ken and his then wife Emma Thompson so that you can," and he said, "That would be charming, thank you." Of course it's a glorious thing to have a suite at The Savoy so you can say to Ernesto your floor waiter. You say, "Ernesto, I'm having a dinner party on Thursday with Sir John and Lady Mills, Ken Branagh and Emma Thompson. Make the suite nice."

"Certainly Mr. Fry, I want you to dis-

why everybody doesn't do it. I called down a little earlier, it was just that I was slightly nervous, just in case ... you know how it is in hotels even one as English as The Savoy that maybe there would be a Portuguese front-of-house manager who might not recognise Sir John. So I said, "By the way I just want to say that I have a guest coming it's Sir John Mills."

"Oh we love Sir John Mills always we know Sir John."

And so I was relieved because I wanted them to be properly welcomed. Ken and Emma had arrived and there was a ring at the doorbell and in came Johnny Mills with Mary beside him. And he went, "Oh my God." And a big tear appeared in his eye. "This is Noël's suite." And it was the suite that Noël always took when he had a 1st night and had a party. And it was the most fabulous evening. Johnny was on spectacularly good form and he regaled me with Noël Coward stories. A thing that I could have done to me until I died of starvation. I can hear stories about Noël for ever. Since I was a child, I'm trying to think of the first moment I became aware of him. And I think I have it. Probably in common with many of my generation. Looking around an attic and finding an old collection of records and one of them of a man in a dinner jacket standing in the desert with a tea cup. You know what I'm talking about, *Live at Las Vegas* and the Wilbur Clarke's

of a man in a dinner jacket standing in the desert with a tea cup. You know what I'm talking about, *Live at Las Vegas* and the Wilbur Clarke's Desert Inn. An extraordinary 'Phillips microgroove,' it proudly claimed itself to be, '33 and a third rpm' I wore it out, absolutely wore it out.

Michael was very kind in comparing me to Noël and of course I come nowhere close because there is one whole area in which I respect Noël Coward more and more and more every year that passes and that is as a songwriter, as a melodist, as a writer of music, real music, lasting music. An extraordinary composer of rhythms and harmonies, the very stuff of music. He was remarkably gifted and he had a very beautiful singing voice. In his early high-crooning days he was absolutely unrivalled. And I still can't hear songs like a 'Room With A View' sung by anybody else, because no one else has that absolute purity of vowel, that absolutely beautiful fluting, crooning tone.

So that's really why I first became aware of him and then I started to see him in the odd film because, of course, and certainly by the time I was 15 he had died and anyway way before then he was no longer available to be seen on stage. I became aware that there was something about him which Michael alluded to which put him in common with my other great literary heroes at the time who were P.G. Wodehouse and Oscar Wilde and it was that they did something with language that very few other writers can do.

They make it dance; they make it sing in your head; they allow you to get joy from words. Not so much off the page sometimes, it's actually the tongue hitting the front of the mouth, the texture, the rhythm, the sound of words, the speed of words, fluency of them the delight in them. We sometimes exorcise ourselves for having a cinema and a theatre which is almost perhaps too involved in language. Every now and again some Shakespearean troupe will come from Georgia or Slovakia and do a production of *Richard III* or *Henry VI* in their own language and we are all supposed to be astonished by how marvelously they use gesture. Well fine! People can throw their arms around and they can jump up and down and they can do clever things with props but no one is going to tell me Shakespeare is much use without the English language. It just obviously isn't true. And no one can tell me that a huge

part of the pleasure and the privilege of being English is that we share the same language as Milton and Shakespeare and the King James bible and Noël Coward and Oscar Wilde and all those others. It gives us something; it gives us a kind of aristocracy amongst the world that can never be taken away from us. It gives us a familiarity with and a reach, it gives us something that makes us very special.

But, and again Michael was spot on the money. The more I read about Coward the more I admired about him... was this genius for friendship, was this extraordinary ability to inspire a kind of love in people that was absolute. Oddly enough is almost suggested in the first half of the film we just saw (*The Scoundrel*). I am sure you like me much preferred the Mallare of the first half of the film than the second half of the film and it was a marvellous thing for me because the only films I've seen with Noël in are the obvious ones like *It Which We Serve* and the later ones *Swamp Lake Is Missing* and of course *The Balcon Job - Mr. Bridger on his private toilet*

It was wonderful to see Noël absolutely in mid-season form and to realise what devastating charm he had. I mean we all know of course that he used language wonderfully. Every imitation is just that, an imitation, but to see the real thing like that absolutely superb manner in which he uses language and gesture. And also I'm surprised by how good-looking he was in a way, how wonderful his eyes were. I'd always thought that maybe he was rather a stiff and stary and not a very efficient screen actor. Rather over-trying and stary but actually that was magnificent. If it hadn't been so lacklustrely in its direction and cinematography it could have been a remarkable performance. It could have been one of the great films that we could have seen. As it is still I would walk ten miles in tight shoes over broken glass to see that again because it was a beautiful insight into his charm and the seduction, I mean he could probably get away with bedding any single person in the world. He could take Mike Tyson if the mood took him. Let's face it who wouldn't be utterly seduced and charmed by that. And of course the crueler he is the more charming he is.

No there's something about Coward that is often forgotten. He is thought of as a brittle hothouse kind of figure and some of his dialogue - you know all of

that "deep in the deepest part of you." It can sometimes be a little false to our ears. But he is of the 20th Century in theatre and in literature and in his short stories and in his autobiography, he is absolutely at all times, and it's, I suppose, the only word you think of that we use today is, authentic. He is an absolutely authentic. He is not a poseur. Yes he's stylish but he's authentic. I think the day will come when we fully appreciate how much he was a poet of his own time, particularly the early 20s.

If you read books like *Children Of The Sun* and so on which are rather intellectual essays on the 'bright young things' and into that sort of world that exploded, you realise that no one came closer to defining it as well as he did. Not even Michael Arlen who I believe invested when he was a rich young novelist in one of Noël's early productions. Things like 'Poor Little Rich Girl,' 'Parisien Pierrot,' he understood exactly some of the extraordinary iconography of the time. Comedie de l'Arte - he alludes to it on several occasions. He had a real insight into 'what comes after' his famous phrase. 'Cocktails and laughter' with which he is associated are perhaps less important to him than ultimately 'what came after.' In that sense he had I think a very poetic soul. He obviously was a lord of language but I think his great interest, and it's one of the words he uses, perhaps more in his lyrics than any other lyricist in the 20th century is 'heart'. Again an easy one to blush at and simper at but I do think the mysteries of the human heart were his abiding theme.

Now the climax to my acceptance is... I will open as I began.

As you know I am sure all of you that Coward was visiting Singapore in 1929 I think and he came across 'The Quaints' and there it was in double performance in Hamlet and Mr. Cinders he first met John Mills. A lifetime friendship, love, for both of them and it is a marvellous thing that I was able to see Johnny in his last weeks and was able to do something because of my rather nerdy technical nature which was to burn some CDs of Noël that were playing as Johnny was slipping away and leaving the party and we have here two very special guests, they are Crispian Mills, who is Johnny's grandson, and his beloved Patricia Horrocks who looked after Johnny like no one else in his last two years who Johnny adored and who adored Johnny.

It was a wonderful relationship and

grandson, and his beloved Patricia Horrocks who looked after Johnny like no one else in his last two years who Johnny adored and who adored Johnny.

It was a wonderful relationship and Patricia tells me that on the night that Johnny did leave the party she played Noël Coward to him and it really was a party they stayed up till 3 or 4 in the morning and he was lying in his bed, Johnny smiling as he heard those fabulous melodies, those wonderful songs and the voice of the Master, a phrase I am sure you know that Johnny gave Noël. "I can't keep calling you sir", Noël agreed that he should not call him sir, as he wasn't a schoolmaster. "Well you're my master then," he replied.

So he is indeed the Master and it's because of Johnny. So it is wonderful to have these two here, Patricia and Crispian. It's a great love of my life that, and I am very touched ever to have come so close to the Mills family and by extension close to the wider family that Johnny had which included as its crowning head Noël Coward. So this means an enormous amount to me. I shall do my very best to turn up to as many events as I possibly can and what else can I say except, thank you very much indeed. Thank you!

Sheridan Morley was also our guest at *Coward On Film* and, with a voice that defines gravitas, he allowed us to share more on Noël's film career and to reflect on the varied film roles, directorial and writing credits of this most remarkably talented man.

For those who have never seen *The Scoundrel* here is some information about the film including some odd facts.

In 1917 a precocious Noël Coward covered in yellow makeup walked down a street with Lillian Gish in D.W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World*. Some 18 years later Coward's friends Ben Hecht and Charles Mac Arthur gave him a chance to appear in a feature originally entitled *Miracle on 49th Street* that developed into *The Scoundrel*.

It was shot by Paramount, not in Hollywood, but in the Astoria Studios in Queens, New York. The plot can be summed up in one sentence:

A ruthless, cynical, hated publisher is killed in a plane crash, and his ghost must wander restlessly unless someone sheds a tear for him.

Coward says of his own involvement: "What really induced me to try films was that I wanted the experience"

He thought it would also give him an

opportunity to act opposite his beloved Helen Hayes who was MacArthur's wife. In the event her commitment to a touring production where she played what Coward called "this rather boring historical person" Mary Queen of Scots - meant she was unable to take part. After much trial and error Julie Haydon finally and easily took on the leading female role after walking into the office and giving a sensitive reading of the part.

Noël was guaranteed that it would be made in 30 days so that he could resume his obsession for world travel.

He wrote his mother, "My picture is going to be very good I think. The story and dialogue are marvellous, but oh dear



I am afraid it will upset you, as it is very tragic and I have to die in it! I play half of it as a dead man. I will send you a complete script soon - so you can read it and be fully prepared."

Noël found the direction of Hecht and Mac Arthur less than rewarding. He thought it "erratic,"

"I who had never made a picture before, was confused and irritated from the beginning to the end."

What annoyed him most was what had always annoyed him whenever found it in the theatre - a sheer lack of professionalism!

The hero of the project was undoubtedly the cameraman and assistant director, Lee Garmes who had already established his reputation by creating Marlene Dietrich's distinctive look in *Morocco*,

*Shanghai Express* and *Dishonoured*. He provides at times a dramatic and intensive pallet of light and shade that gives this early film noir much more atmosphere than the directors ever managed.

His most famous work was the semi-autobiographical stage comedy "The Front Page," translated to film in 1931 and three times since, most notably in Howard Hawks version *His Girl Friday* in 1940 and Billy Wilder's take in 1974.

He did and Mac Arthur indulged their "artistic" sides by writing, directing, and producing a handful of these unusual, serious films that qualify mainly as oddities: *Crime Without Passion* in 1934 and *The Scoundrel* a year later.

Their screenplay for *The Scoundrel* film won the 1935 Oscar under the category "Writing - an original story". It was won against Moss Hart's *Broadway Melody of 1936*, Gregory Rogers *G-Men* and the *Gay Deception*.

But it is obvious that some of the best moments of dialogue in the film are down to Coward's writing - or at least intervention in the director's script.

Some odd facts on what you are about to see:

This is a modern "Flying Dutchman" story in which Coward uses his position as a powerful publisher to break as many hearts as is humanly possible. When Coward as Anthony Mallare does his usual hat/het job on poet Julie Haydon as Cora Moore, she plants a curse on his head, praying that he'll die and that no one will mourn him. Within the week, Coward is killed in a plane crash. Slated for Purgatory, Coward is given a second chance - if he can find someone who will weep for him, his soul will be saved.

The film is not an acting masterpiece. It contains some cameos from the New York glitterati of the time who add historical rather than dramatic value to the film. Alexander Woolcott in a role that gives more than a nod to Oliver Hardy, confirms his value as a critic rather than a performer!

In Coward's Oscar success *In Which We Serve* the scene of Coward struggling underwater after the demise of the HMS *Terrin* is an out-take from *The Scoundrel* intended, in the original, to be used as part of a sequence where he is seen floating in the sea following

he is seen floating in the sea following his plane crash.

Noël was given a very free hand in the film - the directors played backgammon all day and only tore themselves away when an actual take was called.

At one moment he exercised this freedom by helping Julie Haydon who was not a particularly skilled actor - and her obsession with her coiffure was getting on Noël's nerves. He took advantage of the directorial laxness by briefing the cameramen personally to continue shooting whatever happened. Then when the scene began he started to tussle the lady's hair so violently. She reacted emotionally and the result was considered the highlight of her performance!

Noël also insisted on seeing all the rushes which provoked Alexander Woolcott to call him the Czar of all the Rushes.

Noël received \$5,000 dollars for his appearance plus a share of the profits that he signed away as an investment in Hecht and MacArthur's next movie, which dra-

matically flopped.

Variety called it "A critic's picture with limited box-office appeal" It is now considered a cult movie - whatever that means.

Barry Day writes that the film had one immediate and enthusiastic fan - Marlene Dietrich. She phoned Noël straight away after seeing it but he refused to take the call, assuming it to be a hoax. Only after persevering did she get through with her congratulations on his performance. The line remained open for the rest of their lives.

The New York Times says:

As a suave lymanered portrait of decadence, *The Scoundrel* is a remarkably interesting motion picture. Mr. Coward is so perfectly attuned to the part that we cannot help suspecting that he contributed to the dialogue. He is a master at delivering the barbed epithet. You have to hear him reciting a line like "It reeks with morality"—stressing the 'r's so as to make it exquisitely funny—to know how good he can be. The other

players, including Julie Haydon and Stanley Ridges as the lovers whom Mallare destroys, are thoughtfully repressed to the mood of the film. If you keep your eyes open, you will discover Hecht and MacArthur popping into the picture briefly as a pair of nondescript bums in the flophouse scene.

What it does provide is the most extensive performance we have of Coward in a single film at an age when he was at his peak as a theatre actor and writer - this is him as he was in 1935 - *The Scoundrel!*

With thanks to Michael Ineson, Stephen Fry, Jo Crocker, Patricia Homrooks, Crispian Mills, Sheridan Morley - and to Barry Day for details of the film 'The Scoundrel' taken from his book 'Coward On Film' published by The Scarecrow Press.

## A HIGH-SPIRITED NIGHT

A Noël Coward First-Night was always something special. There was a great atmosphere of anticipation and it was always a star-studded occasion.

If there was space in the programme I occasionally jotted down the names of the celebrities I spotted. Of course there would have been many I didn't see but I've just come across my programme for the opening night of *High Spirits* at the Savoy Theatre on 3rd November 1964 and here are the names I wrote in the programme; Noël himself with Judy Garland and Evelyn Laye and Frank Lawton. Douglas Fairbanks, Lilli Palmer and Jack Hylton and Luchino Visconti. A.P. Herbert and Jean Anderson and Moira Lister and Hy Hazell as well as Liza Minnelli and Joyce Carey, also David Jacobs and Jack Hulbert, Gladys Calthrop, Vera Zorina and Lionel Bart. Lena Horne and husband Lennie Hayton, Anthony Havelock-Allen and Phyllis Monkman and Dorothy Ward with husband Shawn Glenville. Margaret Vyner and Maureen Swanson and Carlos Thompson and Charles Kerwin and Megs Jenkins. Designer John Cavanagh and Christopher Hewitt. A nicely varied selection of people from the Arts and these are just the ones I happened to see!

From *First-Nighter* Ken Sephton

From Stephen Marshall - an extract..

## MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA

by Ernest Reynolds, Harrop - 1949

On occasion we reprint views of *The Master's work that are of their time and give an indication of the academic, critical or popular view of his writing. This stance of this extract is very clear.*

Finally, and in a class by itself, there remains to be considered the work of Noël Coward (1899- ). That he belongs, at least as far as success goes, to the top rank of modern English comic writers cannot be denied. But perhaps never in theatrical history have such fame and wealth come to a man for such flimsy achievement.

A superbly accomplished gift for dramatizing the modern age and making it imagine that its insipid conversations are, in Gilbert's phrase, "coruscations of impromptu epigram," a mastery of every trick of the trade, so that his comedies and musical plays are more like the exhibitions of a juggler than true dramatic creations, an unerring reflection of the moods and manners of the age, without, however, even a glimmering of an idea which might lead to social progress, a technique of quick-fire, staccato delivery, whose very rapidity veils the matchboard thickness of the underlying thought, an ability to exploit the conversational rhythms of modern music

in a series of slick but banal musical plays, whose long run of commercial success has only recently broken down with the virtual failure of *Pacific 1860* (1946), these and many other indefinable qualities characterize the work of Mr Coward. The reply to criticism of his plays is that society has itself during the last twenty-five years been flimsy and unsubstantial, and therefore, in reflecting it, Mr Coward and his like are only holding the mirror up to nature. But there are deeper implications to the matter than this, for surely the function of the theatre is, as Yeats said, to liberate the mind and not elevate the frailties of social life into a standard of conduct which audiences will seek to copy because they see it presented on the stage and think it smart.

Since the early 1920s Coward has poured out a flood of these slick, streamlined comedies, such as *The Vortex* (1924), *The Young Idea* (1923), *Easy Virtue* (1926), *Fallen Angels* (1925), *The Queen was in the Parlor* (1926), *The Marquise* (1927), and *Bitter Spirit* (1941), a thin farce with an absurd ghost theme which monopolized the stage of a London theatre for over five years at a time when good plays were unable to get a hearing. There has also been a succession of musical plays, such as *Bitter Sweet* (1929), *Operette* (1938),

continued on column 3 Page 10..

...continued from column 3 page 6

# Laughter! Lister! Love!

## a Noël Coward Cabaret

In honour of Moira Lister, Vice President of the Noël Coward Society

On Saturday 7th May members and guests attended a special event in the Noël Coward Studio Theatre, at the Hampton Hill Playhouse (HHP), produced and arranged by Celia Cologne, our Membership Secretary. Moira Lister had visited the Playhouse in June, 2004, together with NCS members, for an excellent production of *Present Laughter*, performed by the Old Hamptonians' Amateur Dramatic Society (OHAD).

Moira had so much enjoyed the occasion that she had promised to send over from her home in South Africa the Molyneux gown which she had worn during the West End run of *Present Laughter* at the Haymarket Theatre in 1947, for permanent display by HHP.



TOP: Denise Ruscott, Celia Cologne and Mandy Sternhouse; MIDDLE: Stephen Bentley, John Pyle and Terence M. Cardinal; BOTTOM: Anne Rogers and Robert Gardner

The dress arrived in December, together with an original copy of a black and white photograph of Garry Essendine (Noël) and Joanna Lyppiatt (Moira) reclining in an elegant embrace on a sofa. This was accompanied by a scroll, with a photograph of the beautiful Moira, which reads:-

"This gown was designed for me by the famous couturier Edward Molyneux for the production of Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London in 1949. I wore it for almost 1000 performances. So admired was the costume that it was copied for me to wear again for the hugely successful *Move over Mrs Markham* in which I wore it for nearly 600 performances. I donate it to this theatre in admiration for its great work in keeping our beloved theatre alive. I wish you continued success. Moira Lister."

Inspired by this wonderful gesture, Celia Cologne suggested that there might be a formal handing over of the dress and the scroll and she offered to produce the cabaret. Celia invited members of the Teddington Theatre Club and also of OHAD to join her. It was a lovely occasion, which attracted some new NCS members to attend. The studio theatre was filled to capacity, with 50 people. A little star dust was added, by the presence in the audience of Anne Rogers, who many of you will have seen playing Jessie Mathews in Richard Stirling's *Over My Shoulder*, directed by NCS Committee member, Stewart Nicholls.

The afternoon began with a champagne reception in the room adjacent to the Noël Coward Theatre, which contains a wonderful display of photographs and items such as one of Noël's dinner suits and an attaché case. Jack Smerdon acted as host and narrator and opened the cabaret by talking of the Molyneux gown and giving background information about Noël Coward's life and work, including quoting from his philosophy for writing for the stage:-

"The most important ingredients of a play are life, death, food, sex and money - but not necessarily in that order."

Mandy Sternhouse and John Pyle then performed 'Men About Town' from *Tonight at 8.30* - skilfully accompanied



by Celia on the keyboard. Celia then performed 'Uncle Harry' from *Pacific 1860*, with great aplomb - accompanied by a pre-recording of herself at the keyboard. Then followed 'Alice Is At It Again' performed by Stephen Bentley. Stephen had met Moira Lister in 2004, as he had played Garry Essendine on that occasion. The NCS members who were present will recall Stephen's outstanding portrayal of Garry, which Moira Lister had also much admired.

'Has Anybody Seen our Ship?' was performed with great spirit by Mandy and John.

Jack Smerdon's witty narration was interspersed between the songs, and upon introducing 'A Marvellous Party' he included Coward's remark:

"I can take any amount of criticism, so long as it is unqualified praise."

Terence M. Cardinal's 'Marvellous Party' was one of the highlights of the afternoon. The audience were made to feel that they were with him in a bar or private room and that he was talking just to us. It seemed so fresh and timeless 'A Room with a View' was sung by Celia and John Pyle, 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen,' by Stephen Bentley, and 'Any Little Fish' by Celia and Terence

Bentley, and 'Any Little Fish' by Celia and Terence M. Cardinal. 'London Pride' had been chosen because in the evening in the Noël Coward Theatre, Graham Sawyer's production of the *Victory in Europe* play was taking place and commemorative items from the Second World War, were also on display during our champagne reception. Stephen Bentley gave justice to this wonderful song.

Jack Smerdon then introduced our own Robert Gardiner, looking most elegant in dinner jacket – at Celia's request. Robert had accompanied Moira Lister to the theatre in June, 2004. He described her enjoyment of the visit and also told her story of going to visit Noël in connection with her role as Joanna Lyppiatt. She had looked so smart that a florist had given her a complimentary corsage. When Moira learned that she had got the part, she had glided through Belgravia, as if on air. Robert read a fax message from Moira, which he had received that morning, sending the players her best wishes and adding

"I am very thrilled that you are going to immortalize my gown! It has such nostalgic memories for me".

And then, to everyone's great surprise, the doors behind the stage were opened and in walked Denise Truscott, wearing *the dress!* Denise had played Joanna Lyppiatt in the June production. The dress fitted Denise perfectly and she looked most lovely in it. Denise read from the scroll which Moira had sent over and then sang 'Why Does Love Get in the Way', from *Ace of Clubs*.

Jack Smerdon's closing words were to remark that Noël had seemed to know how posterity would deal with him and had relished it:-

"There will be lists of apocryphal jokes I never made and gleeful misquotations of words I never said. What a pity I shan't be there to enjoy them!"

The cabaret closed appropriately with the company singing 'Sail Away'.

Graham Sawyer gave a vote of thanks to the Noël Coward Society for its involvement and the gift of the dress. Barbara Longford thanked Graham and the Teddington Theatre Club for their help and assistance and Celia for producing, organising and taking part in the event and presented her with a bouquet of flowers from the Noël Coward Society.

*Barbara Longford*

*Hélène Catsiapis and Celia Cologne*

## APRIL IN PARIS



would like to invite you to join them in the centre of Paris from Thursday April 27th to Sunday April 30th. How could anyone fail to be entranced by one of the most romantic cities in Western Europe in Springtime.

To capture the true spirit of Paris we shall be located in the Opera district and have produced a selection of hotels for you to choose from, ranging from The Edward VIIth through to the more modestly priced Hotel Brighton.

We suggest early booking for next year as it is the most popular area for tourism, with many attractions in a fairly small area. The Place Vendôme will be of particular interest for us since Coward rented a beautiful flat in the Ritz where we shall celebrate with drinks on the first evening.

Then a visit to the Café de la Paix is an absolute *must!* We shall have an itinerary for your stay and a visit to the opera is a possibility. Alternatively, you may care to explore the city for yourselves at times and visit the Louvre or maybe indulge in dinner aboard a Bateau Parisiens, but remember, Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant were there first!

If you are interested please complete the enclosed booking slip. A pack of details is available to help with your choice of hotels but please make your own travel arrangements to and from the hotel destination. Bonne chance!

*Hélène Catsiapis and Celia Cologne*

### 'I like America' ..... (*Ace of Clubs*, 1949)

"And come what may, I shall return one day, to the good old U.S.A."

#### NCS Members' visit to New York

Friday 9th December – Wednesday 14th December, 2005

Many UK members have expressed an interest in participating in the visit and some have already sent deposit cheques to cover the hotel/light package. Some members have said that they would prefer to make their own travel and hotel arrangements. However, we do need to know as soon as possible exactly how many people would like to attend, because the Algonquin event, with Cabaret and Dinner and also the Luncheon after the flower-laying at the Gershwins Theatre are rapidly becoming booked by the American members.

In order to guarantee their reservations, please would all those UK members who are making their own travel and hotel arrangements be kind enough to send a deposit of £20 each, payable to 'the Noël Coward Society' to:-

Mrs Barbara Longford, 7 Argyll Mansions, London W14 8QG.

*To arrive no later than Monday 13th June!*



## KAY WALSH 1911 - 2005



Kay Walsh as Freda Lewis and John Mills as Shorty in 'In Which We Serve'

In 1936, Kay Walsh met an ambitious young film editor, David Lean, who had a burning desire to direct. Her professional and private life quickly connected with his in an intense creative partnership that lasted for more than a decade. In 1940, she became the second of his six wives.

By this time 22-year-old Kay Walsh had appeared in eight films and was dancing in the West End production, *The Melody That Got Lost*. Producer Basil Dean's wife was also in the show. He came to see his wife, and ended up signing the young dancer to a year's contract at Ealing Film Studios where she featured in some of George Formby's successful films.

In a 1991 interview with Brian McFarland, Kay Walsh described the Ealing Formby films as 'the aristocracy' in comparison with other British films of the time. They were high-flying compared with the 'fit up' quickies, but then Ealing Studios was a well-established concern. I remember particularly Jack Kitchen, a film editor who really made those Formby films move.

Her first Formby film *Keep Fit*, earned her £400 which she cautiously asked to have paid out to her at £16 a week. But her apparent good fortune at Ealing quickly turned sour. "I never suffered so much in my life as I did at that studio!" she told film historian Kevin Brownlow. "They were absolute monsters and everyone assumed I was Basil Dean's girl friend." Kay made eight more minor

films in next four years before achieving her really prestigious screen roles. One off-screen highlight of this period was writing additional dialogue for the film version of *Pygmalion* - so skilfully that autocratic author, George Bernard Shaw reportedly never noticed!

In the early 1940s, Kay appeared in two classic Noël Coward films, *In Which We Serve* (1942) and *This Happy Breed* (1944), both directed by David Lean. "Working with Noël Coward was a great honour," she says, although Coward privately derided her liberal views, calling her 'Red Emma'.

Husband David Lean was soon achieving success as a director. His trademark was strong scenes without dialogue, and it was Kay Walsh who wrote the haunting closing of his *Great Expectations* (1946) and the powerful visual opening of *Oliver Twist* (1948). Of her screen work in the post-war years, she strongly disliked her performance as the long-suffering Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. "My favourite role," she said, "was the old bannard in *The Horse's Mouth* (1956) with Alec Guinness. I wore a horrible black wig!" Kay continued in films and on TV until the 1980s.

Between films, she appeared regularly in plays and farces at the Strand and Aldwych Theatres, directed by Basil Dean. In private life, she indulged her passions for gardening, gourmet cooking "I often fixed dinner for Alec Guinness and his family", and renovating old prop-

erties.

Born to an Irish family in London, Walsh began her performing career as a chorus girl before moving into films. She was already a busy performer in low-budget pictures when she met Lean in 1936. Her marriage to Lean was never entirely happy; Lean had many affairs, and the couple divorced in 1949. But they remained on good terms.

Walsh appeared in more than 50 films, including the Alfred Hitchcock thriller *Stage Fright* with Marlene Dietrich. Her final role was in the Cold War drama *Night Crossing* in 1981.

It was in her three performances for Noël that she will be remembered best by us; as Freda Lewis in *In Which We Serve*, John Mills screen love - Queenie in *This Happy Breed* and as Lily Pepper opposite Ted Ray in the filmed version of 'Red Peppers' in *Meet Me Tonight*.

Barry Day provides the following letter from Kay to Noël written on November 18th, 1952 after she had accompanied him to the premiere of *Meet Me Tonight*...

" 66 Marlborough Place, NW8

*Dearest Father,*

*I don't know how to thank you for your overwhelming goodness to me - I have been trying to say, for nearly ten years, how much I owe to you - and always something gets in the way.*

*Please don't think that a few notices have gone to my head - but I know so well that if you hadn't fished out that old rejected test in 1941 and given me that lovely Freda character to play that I never would have become an actress.*

*Professionally I owe everything to you - and many things besides. I was so proud to go to the premiere with you and I am quite knocked down by your beautiful birthday gift. I love it dearly and will always keep it near to my heart and to my hearth.*

*This is not much of a letter for a ten year effort - but it comes from deep inside me and I feel it does no harm to say so.*

*Always with very much love,*

*Kay"*

*Kay Walsh - actor and writer.  
Died 16 April 2005 aged 90 years.*

## Cocktails & Laughter

*and what comes after...*  
Sheridan Morley, Ruth Leon & Michael Law  
*Gershwin and Coward at Pizza on the Park*



Michael Law & Ruth Leon

On Tuesday 24th May, a group of twenty Members and Guests went to Pizza on the Park for a wonderful cabaret evening performed by Ruth Leon, Sheridan Morley and Michael Law. The show began with 'I Got Music', a celebration of the life and music of George Gershwin. Michael Law, at the piano, sang a selection of Gershwin numbers with style and panache. Many of us saw Michael performing at the Maddermarket Theatre, during the Society visit to Norwich last year and again he was on top form. Ruth's biography of Gershwin has recently been published and she spoke about him, between the songs, with great warmth and vivacity.

Pizza on the Park was packed with an elegant audience and to our surprise HRH The Duke of Kent, accompanied by HRH Princess Alexandra of Kent were seated at a nearby table. There was absolutely no pomp and circumstance, but the royal presence certainly spiced the evening with a very Cowardesque touch.

Our Vice President, Sheridan Morley, took the stage at about 10.45 p.m. for 'Noël Coward - Lost and Found'. He told amusing Noël stories, made all the more immediate because of his own friendship with The Master. Sheridan's narration was interspersed by Michael performing impeccably, songs such as 'Uncle Harry', 'We Must All be Very Kind to Auntie Jessie', 'This is a Changing World', 'Something Very Strange', as well as some of the more well-known ones.

The evening had started at Barbara Longford's home, with champagne cocktails, which was great fun. Two of those attending, Richard Rose and Dominic Vlasto had just become new members of the Committee of NCS, which had been ratified at a meeting that afternoon.

Michael Law's CDs are available from [www.thepiccadillydanceorchestra.co.uk](http://www.thepiccadillydanceorchestra.co.uk) (Credit cards accepted) or Michael Law & Alan S. Bennett t/a, The Piccadilly Dance Orchestra 27, Caesar Avenue, Kingsnorth, Ashford, Kent TN23 3PZ  
Tel: 01233 612183 (24hrs Answerphone) [mail@thepiccadillydanceorchestra.co.uk](mailto:mail@thepiccadillydanceorchestra.co.uk)



Richard, Barbara  
and Dominic  
having a celebratory  
cocktail

*...continued from column 3 page 6*

Cavalcade (1931), and the incredibly stupid Pacific 1860, with which the series has for the present come to an inglorious conclusion. Coward's work, however, has amused millions of people, both in America and in England, and it would be idle to pretend that it has not been entertaining when it has proved so fantastically successful.

### *Conversation Pieces...*

*...personal thoughts from the Editor*

The number and quality of the events that members have enjoyed in recent months - and those yet to come - makes one feel that the Society has truly come of age. Well they are all reported here (or in Ken Starrett's addendones). So I'll waste no time on restating them through my own eyes. But I would like to report about one meeting in London that took place at the Hurlingham Club in Fulham when Barbara Longford and I met a man who has become known to us as The Lunt's paperboy. Martin and Shirley Dable hail from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Martin was brought up in a house next to Ten Chimneys, Geneva Depot the home of the celebrated theatre couple Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. As a young boy he delivered their papers and was often rewarded with a slice of Alfred's famed cherry pie.

Pay rates were good too as the Lunts paid all their occasional high school employees and delivery boys well above the odds. The reward for this generosity was that local people would often misdirect inquisitive strangers seeking the whereabouts of the Lunts' country retreat - thus preserving their privacy.



Martin recalls one day he arrived at The Lunts to collect his dues and was asked to come up to the lounge. The Lunts were sat on their period lounge chairs and Martin was led over to the sofa to be introduced to Noël Coward - they shook hands and Martin left with a memory that lasted longer than any cherry pie!

Barbara and I had a wonderful time with them - and I loved the club... only a 20 year waiting list, so apply now...!

## COMMITTEE 2005/6

Members will recall that over the past year the Society has been undergoing changes to make it more accountable to its members.

At present the Society is owned by Noël Coward Ltd, a company set up by the Noël Coward Foundation. The directors of NC Ltd, responded to a request from the Society for changes and agreed an interim constitution for the Society that was published earlier this year. As part of this constitution the Society

invited members to stand for the seven elected places on the committee. In the event seven people were proposed for these vacancies so an election will not be needed.

Our thanks go to all those committee members who retired or stood down from the committee and we welcome those new members who form part of the NCS committee.

The death of Sir John Mills and the appointment of Stephen Fry as a Vice

Our Patron: Graham Payn

Honorary President: To be appointed

Honorary Vice Presidents: Moira Lister, Sheridan Morley and Stephen Fry

Honorary Treasurer: Graham Martin (Birkhorns Accountants)

### Elected members (7):

Barbara Longford (Chairman)

Stephen Greenman (Secretary)

John Knowles (Publications)

Jan Penn

Richard Rose

Dominic Vlasto

Graham Sawyer

### Nominated Members (6):

Ken Starrett (North American Director)

Robert Wickham (Australian Representative)

### Consultants

Robert Gardiner (The Noël Coward Foundation)

Lisa Foster (Alan Brodie Representation)

Claire Osborne (Warner Chappell)

Geoffrey Skinner (Samuel French)

Ned Chaillet (BBC Radio Drama)

Peter Tommons (Methuen Drama)

### Advisory Members (4):

Alan Brodie (Noël Coward Estate)

Barry Day OBE (Historian/Author)

Philip Hoare (Biographer)

Alan Farley (Broadcaster/Coward Musicologist)

President of the Society has created further changes in our list of Honorary Officers.

The two other categories of committee members are 6 Nominated Members who represent other agencies and commercial companies who have an interest in the life and work of Noël Coward and 4 Advisory Members who are invited to join the committee as a result of their work, knowledge or expertise.

### Honorary Officers

Marcy Kahan (Dramatist)

Paul Webb (Dramatist/Producer)

Stewart Nicholls (Producer)

Stephen Marshall (First-Nighters)

### Representatives

## FOR THE DIE-HARDS...AND BEGINNERS MAD ABOUT THE BOY

A Review by Stephen Marshall

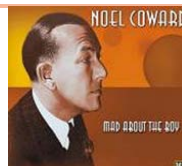
It is always good news to learn of a new release of The Master's music, even though one knows, alas, there will be nothing new and this applies to this newest offering. Discs 1 and 2 contain many of the better known items, with several of the very early recordings including songs by other composers, namely Jerome Kern and Sam Coslow - 'The Last Time I Saw Paris' and 'I'm Old Fashioned' especially suited to the Coward style. More familiar are Coward's own songs - from his early musicals *Mérolé and Music*, *Bitter Sweet* (the inevitable 'I'll See You Again' - and why not?) plus two great numbers 'Bright Was The Day' and 'This Is A Changing World' from *Pacific 1860*. Elsewhere in this varied collection are many of his revue songs and I was glad to see 'Never Again' included - first used in *Set to Music* at the Music Box Theatre in New York in 1938 and, luckily for us, encored in *Sigh No*

*Mérolé* at the Piccadilly Theatre in 1945. It is difficult to single out any one of these songs, each of us have our individual favourites and, happily, several of mine were included. True we have heard these tracks many times over the years, but this is a nice compilation, the sound is good and however familiar the songs may be they are always listenable. 'Time And Again' as Coward sings in his own inimitable style. Disc 3 is Coward music with a difference - the recordings of British dance bands in the twenties and thirties. It is likely Jack Jackson's 'I Travel Alone' will be the best remembered of the selection - due mainly to the vocal by Roberta Hunter - a track played still on some of radio's nostalgia programmes - and Miss Hunter does a good job on the lyrics. There is an unusual rendering of 'If Love Were All' by Sam Browne, one of the foremost vocalists of the era with many fine records to his credit but, I feel,

slightly uncomfortable with this song. Elsie

Carlisle, frequently partnered with Sam, ends the disc with a pleasing version of the album's title 'Mad About The Boy.' It has to be mentioned that all the songs on this disc have been issued before (British Dance Bands play Coward: Past CD9758) with two additional numbers, plus a detailed booklet giving recording dates and orchestra details. To sum up, if you have all the foregoing, is the album a worthy addition to your collection? For those of us who must have all the Coward issues - I think it is, the compilation differs from others, the 3cd set is nicely presented at a bargain price. For those just discovering Coward (and how I envy the treats they have in store!) it has to be a must.

*PULSE 3CD set PEXCD 367. £8.99  
(£6.99 plus postage from Amazon)*



## What's On?

Is your production or event shown here...?

If you want your item items to be included here please send us the details. (\*denotes Premiere, TBC = To be confirmed) Professional companies are shown in blue

### HIGHLIGHTS

*Bêche Spirit* - Stephanie Cole, Joanna Riding, Amanda Drew and Aden Gillett. Director: Thea Sharrock The Savoy Theatre Box office: 0870 1648787 - Current

*Key Fever* - York Theatre Royal from 23 May to 11 June. Tickets between £8.50 - £18.00 (Matinee £7.00). Tickets for Under 25s and Students are £3.50. Box Office 01904 623568 in the United Kingdom

### OTHER PRODUCTIONS

#### United Kingdom

##### *Key Fever*

5 to 9 Jul - Combined Actors, Cambridge, The ADC Theatre, Cambridge

21 Jun to 2 Jul - Medway Little Theatre, Rochester, Kent,

##### *Bêche Spirit*

7 to 9 Jul - Central Studio Theatre Company, Queen Mary's College, Basingstoke

1 to 4 Jun - Studio Theatre, The Godolphin School, Salisbury, Wiltshire

11 to 18 Mar 2006 - Halifax Thespians, The Playhouse, Halifax

24 & 25 June - Nunney Players, Village Hall, Nunney, Frome, Somerset

6 to 9 Jul - Uppingham Theatre Company, Uppingham Theatre, Uppingham

14 to 17 Sep Peterborough Playgoers Society, John Clark Theatre, Peterborough, Cambs

3 to 5 Jun - Mulberry Theatre Company, The Village Hall, Doveridge, Derbyshire

##### *Private Lives*

Summer 2005 (TBC) Dublin Gate then Irish Tour

13 to 18 Jun 2005 - The Pump House Theatre Company, The Pump House Theatre, Watford, Herts

Jan 2005 16 week UK tour Triumph Proscenium Productions & Bath Theatre Royal Productions

##### *Semi-Monde*

9 to 11 Oct - Oundle School, Oundle, Peterborough, Cambs.

##### *Red Peppers*

Postponed - The Matrix Theatre, Newbury, Berks

##### *Waiting In The Wings*

25 Jun to 2 Jul - New Venture Theatre, Brighton, East Sussex

##### *Relative Values*

7 to 18 Jun - Highbury Theatre Centre, Highbury Little

Theatre, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands

##### *This Happy Breed*

1 to 12 Jun - New Era Players Theatre, Newbury, Berkshire

#### In North America

##### *Fallen Angels*

April to November 2005 - (in repertory) Stratford Festival

Theatre - Stratford, Ontario - Canada

##### *Private Lives*

18 to 17 Sep Vision Theatre, Nepean, BC

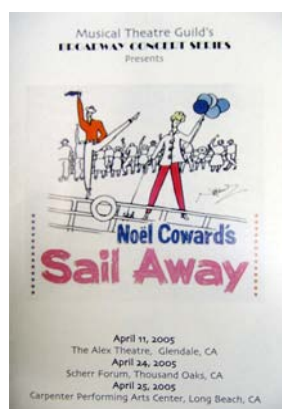
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All correspondence should be sent to The Noël Coward Society, 29 Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon, Norwich, NR6 6TB, UK  
email: homechat@noelcoward.net Tel: 01603 486 188

## SAIL AWAY

After the usual traumatic revisions and rewrites during try-out engagements in Boston and Philadelphia, Noël Coward's *Sail Away* docked at the Broadhurst Theatre on October 3, 1961. Although greeted with mixed reviews, it managed a run of 167 performances. A London production opened at the Savoy Theatre in London on June 21, 1962 and ran for six months. Elaine Stritch starred in both the New York and London productions. In July of 1963 a production was done in Sydney, Australia at Her Majesty's Theatre, and a revival in 1998 was seen in Woking, England.

Happily, cast recordings have kept the music alive, but with so few productions in the years since 1963, this entertaining musical has been somewhat neglected. The first American revival was a concert version done in 1999 as part of the centennial celebration of Coward's birth. It was presented at Carnegie Hall's Weil Recital Hall in a revised version that included songs cut from the original production. Elaine Stritch recreated her starring role.



In April of this year the Musical Theatre Guild in California celebrated its 10th anniversary. This organization, founded by several Broadway performers living in California, does staged concert versions of musicals in the manner of New York's Encore productions. As part of the 10th anniversary season, they chose to do *Sail Away*. With the help and supervision of Geoffrey Johnson and Barry Day, Musical Theatre Guild was able to use the

script of the revised version done in 1999. Mr. Johnson, a friend and American representative of Noël Coward, had been associated with the original production.

David C. Nichols reviewing Musical Theatre Guild's production for the Los Angeles Times said

*"Coward's Sail Away is a boatload of fun. The cruise-ship musical about colorful lives intertwining on board has charm and wit. The score is a mixed bag, merging top-drawer Coward character pieces, and odd stabs at 60s hip... Coward's lyrics are ever welcome."*

Perhaps this production will help revive interest in future presentations. It is hoped that this production will encourage other organizations in California to present works by Noël Coward. Recent productions of *Private Lives* at Pasadena Playhouse, *Present Laughter* at LA Theatreworks and an increase in Coward Society membership clearly indicate a growing interest. We hope it continues.

Ken Starrett