

## Do you live outside of the UK?

Then please let us know if you are ever planning to visit the UK on holiday or business.

Whilst the Society is growing in its membership, we still do not have enough members in any one location outside of the UK to hold meetings or events. One day we will, and no one will be more pleased than I. My guess is that our first ex-UK event will probably be in New York, but membership in Boston, Massachusetts and in Australia (Melbourne, probably) are running close.

However, in the meantime, or if you live in a part of the world where your taste for Noël Coward is fairly rare, then do let us know if you ever come to the UK. I have not notified anyone living outside of the UK about our trip to see *Semi-Monde*, but there is always a chance that one of you may be in London at about that time, so if you are, and want to join us on our visit, then do let me know as soon as possible.

Even if we have no planned event at the time of your meeting, it would be good to welcome you to these shores, and perhaps we can arrange a little impromptu meeting. It may be that we are planning something and moving the date by a week or two to coincide with your visit would be no problem to us, and an opportunity to you. Do keep in touch.

## Discounts on Membership Renewal

We have delayed seeking membership renewal, because we wanted to see if we could offer you Standing Order and/or Direct Debit facilities and be able to provide you with the appropriate forms. It turns out that Direct Debit will be prohibitively expensive, but we can offer Standing Order facilities (apparently there is no standard form for this – you just have to arrange it with your Bank), and for anyone who does want to pay that way, we will offer a £5 discount. If you succeed in getting one of your colleagues or friends to join the Society we will provide an additional £5 discount!

So, in the very near future (a matter of days) all of you who have renewals due from last November through to now (March) will be getting a letter from me, reminding you of your subscription.

Subscription time is a good time to consider your membership and let us know if there is anything else we can do to improve our offers, events or anything else you would like

## Current Productions – Professional and Amateur

<b>US and Canada:</b>	Design for Living Blithe Spirit	Now to May 13th March 2nd – 4th & 8th – 10th 19 to 25th April 1st to 9th June 3rd to 14th July	Roundabout Theatre Co., Broadway Garner Historic Auditorium, Garner, NC Georgetown Little Theatre, Acton, Ontario East End Theatre, Orleans, Ontario Theatre Collingwood, Collingwood, Ontario
	Present Laughter Relative Values Noël & Cole	4th to 11th August 27th March to 14th July 6th April	Playhouse, Halifax The Alabama Shakespeare Festival Williams College, Williamstown
<b>Australasia:</b>	Design for Living	10th to 14th April	Melbourne, Australia
<b>United Kingdom:</b>	Fallen Angels	Current extended run	Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London
	Fumed Oak Blithe Spirit	12, 13, 15, 16 & 17 March 6th to 10th March 16th to 19th May 8th to 12th March 22nd to 24th March 28th to 31st March	St. Peter's Hall, Park Lane, Norwich Devonshire Park, Eastbourne St. John's Church Hall, Leeds Little Theatre, Doncaster Village Hall, Salford, Chipping Norton Friargate Theatre, York
	Relative Values Private Lives 1 Mar to 1 May	21st to 24th March 21st to 24th March	Volcano Theatre Company tour of Wales St Andrews University, Fife
	Semi-Monde	Previews from 8th March – 1st night 21st March	Lyric Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London
	Waiting in the Wings	4th to 7th April 29th to 31st March 16th to 19th May	Memorial Hall, Little Baddow, Essex Somerset Hall, Portishead, Bristol Theatre, Harrogate
	Cowardy Custard Hay Fever	6th to 8th April 23rd to 31st March 16th to 19th May	Methodist Hall, Purbrook, Nr. Portsmouth Somerset Hall, Portishead, Bristol Harrogate Theatre, Harrogate
		29th to 31st March 28th to 30th June	Village Hall, Lympstone, Devon Village Hall, Broad Hinton, Wilts



# HOME CHAT

March  
2001

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NOËL COWARD SOCIETY

## LONDON PREMIERE OF SEMI-MONDE

*"In the world of decadent glamour, between the two world wars, there are dark clouds just around the corner: At the Ritz hotel, the well-heeled guests slip with practised sophistication from one relationship to another, seemingly oblivious to what is happening in the outside world."* From the production notes of the forthcoming production.

*Semi-Monde* was written in 1926. In the UK it received its premiere at the Citizens Theatre, Glasgow on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1977. It was directed and designed by Philip Prowse, and he is still the director and designer of this West End production at the Lyric, Shaftesbury Avenue.

The publicity for the production claims it as the English premiere. For the anoraks amongst us, I have a programme from a charity gala production at The Royalty Theatre on Sunday 13 September 1987, to aid the Combined Theatrical Charities Appeals Council. It was directed by Tim Luscombe, designed by Carl Toms, and had an all-star cast. I guess this one-off version doesn't count. It does not even get a mention in the new *Theatrical Companion to Coward*.

The new "proper" production has its Press Night on the 21<sup>st</sup> March. We have arranged a Society visit for the night before (20<sup>th</sup> March), and it promises to be a memorable evening. Tickets are at the discount price of £25 each. For those of us who want a bite to eat before the play, we are meeting at the Pizza Express in Wardour Street at 6:00 pm. (A meal, including a glass of wine, will cost about £10–£15). We will have Thelma Ruby, the producer of the play as our guest. I will have the theatre tickets with me then. Anyone not coming to the restaurant can meet me in the theatre foyer before the show to collect their tickets.

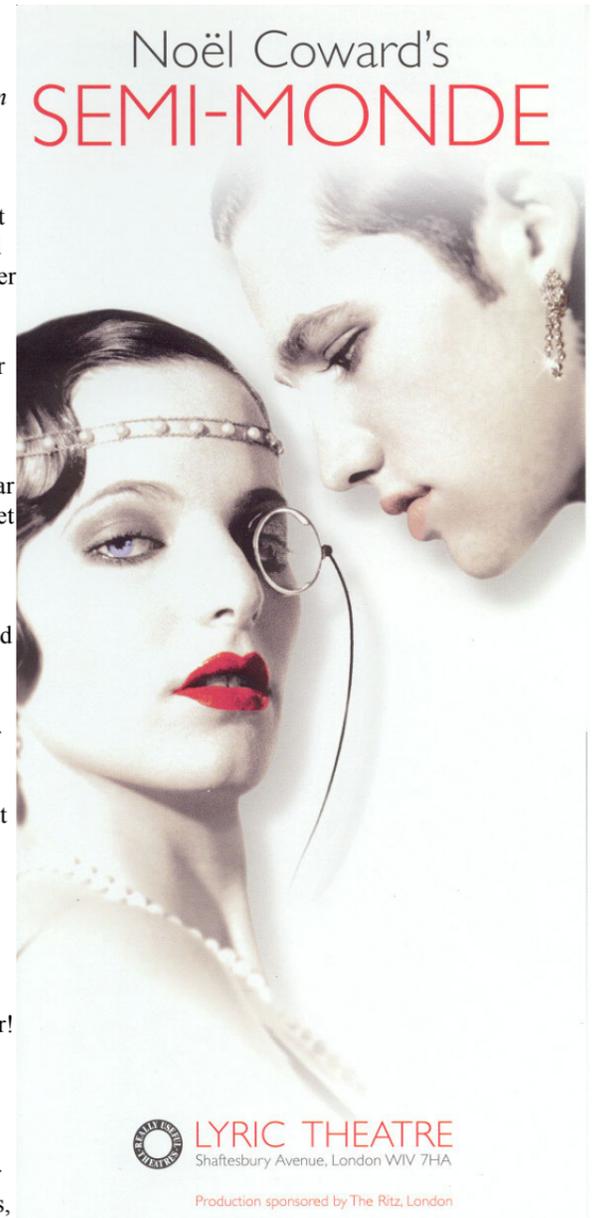
After the play, some of us may like to retire to a local bar. I will invite every member of the cast, but I cannot guarantee they will join us. Experience tells me that one of the things most actors want after they come off stage is a drink, and if someone else is paying – all the better! On the other hand, whether they will want to troop around the West End to have that drink with a bunch of Noël Coward addicts on the night before their press night performance must be in doubt.

It looks as if the Society is going to have our biggest turnout ever for this show, which is wonderful. The more of us that join these outings, the greater influence we will have with managements to help us have a memorable evening (and I have to say, Thelma Ruby and Dewynters – the PR company – have been wonderfully helpful in

## WE WELCOME YOUR NEWS

Please do send us any news you have of events and happenings near you. You might also like to forward an article, a picture, an anecdote or a view on a Coward play, poem, lyric, song or performance. Whatever you wish to let us have we will try to include it in this monthly Newsletter. Send all your contributions or queries to John Knowles, email:

johnknowles@ukgateway.net or 29, Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon, Norwich, NR6 6TB. Tel: 01603 486188, Fax: 01603 400683,



Noël Coward's  
**SEMI-MONDE**

 **LYRIC THEATRE**  
Shaftesbury Avenue, London W1V 7HA

Production sponsored by The Ritz, London



## OUR MASTER'S VOICE: A PERSONAL SELECTION OF NOËL COWARD CDs *reviewed by Paul Guinery*

Paul wrote an article entitled “Our Master’s Voice: A Personal Selection of Noël Coward CDs” in the first edition of the magazine ‘Conversation Piece.’ This describes CDs that he didn’t have, starting with the EMI issue of **The Grand Tour**. Originally the brainchild of Norman Newell in 1965, it brought a combination of June Bronhill, Dick Kenneth Williams and Joyce Grenfell’s “thing”. The result is a real curate’s egg although June Bronhill was a fine singer although she’s saddled with such saccharine orchestral arrangements that you may need to book a dentist’s appointment after hearing them. Cleo Laine is miscast for *Matelot* though more at home in a bluesy if over-wrought *Mad About the Boy*; on the other hand, it would be kinder to draw a veil over dear Joyce Grenfell’s tremulous rendering of *If Love Were All* – one simply cannot picture her, in sensible shoes and headscarf, as a world-weary *demi-mondaine*. But – and I admit I had my doubts before hearing him – it’s Kenneth Williams who’s the salvation of this ill-conceived affair. His diaries confirm his unbounded admiration for Coward (“my inspiration... I based everything on him...”) and when the original LP came out, Williams characteristically noted “I’m the best thing on it”. Arrogant? Maybe, but also true: he gives first-rate accounts of *Mad Dogs* and *Mrs. Worthington* with impeccable diction and timing while the interpretations aren’t just imitations of his mentor. However it’s all I can recommend from this curious concoction.

After some enterprising centennial issues, the record companies are now resting on their laurels so I’ve picked out a handful of CDs which, though they’ve been out for a while, are worth seeking out and should still be available. For example, if you don’t already have it, **The Grand Tour** on the Silva Classics label should be a rewarding discovery. It includes Noël’s one and only original ballet score, reminding us that he didn’t always need lyrics to stimulate his inventive music. Indeed, he already had several (wordless) film scores to his credit when London Festival Ballet commissioned a ballet from him as part of the company’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 1959. Coward was given a free hand with the scenario, though the dancer Anton Dolin, the company’s co-founder, did more than hint that a “London” theme would be welcome. That suited Coward down to the ground and he happily set his one-act ballet **London Morning** outside the gates of Buckingham Palace with a cast that included passing American tourists, bowler-hatted city gents, a sailor on leave and, naturally, a set of Guardsmen (a publicity photo shows Noël “reviewing” them). After playing through the score one evening, an elated composer noted that he was “high as a kite from sheer creativeness (also from a little scotch)”. The music is charming and memorable and

was wittily orchestrated by Gordon Jacob. The complete score was available for a while on a Decca LP but has never been reissued; this is a brand new recording by The City of Prague Philharmonic, sensitively conducted by Robin White. The companion work, **The Grand Tour**, which gives the CD its title, was a one-act ballet created in 1971 by the American choreographer Joe Layton for the Royal Ballet’s touring company, with the action set on a 1930s cruise-liner. The arranger Hershy Kay skilfully assembled a score based on a sequence of some of Coward’s most famous songs and his treatments are fresh, ingenious and appealing.

Recent trips to the main London record shops have reminded me that there are a healthy number of Coward “compilation” discs available, though inevitably they tend to overlap; the quality of the transfers also varies (on this point, the editor and I plan to pay a visit soon to the “nostalgia” label “Past Perfect” who have a Coward compilation in their catalogue. We hope to find out how they go about the tricky business of transforming shellac into plastic).

One compilation I can definitely recommend is in the “Pearl” series from Pavilion Records: **The Dance Bands Play Noël Coward**. It has some delightful material which departs from the well-worn groove. I particularly enjoyed a selection of “vocal gems” from the 1932 revue *Words And Music*; the gin-and-cigarettes voice of Alberta Hunter singing *I Travel Alone* with Jack Jackson and his orchestra; and less familiar songs such as *Try To Learn To Love* and *I’m Mad About You* (both from *This Year Of Grace*) and the delightful *Russian Blues* from *London Calling!* (1923). It’s refreshing to hear vocalists of the 20s and 30s tackling The Master’s words and music with style and panache. The compilers, Colin Brown and Tony Watts, have chosen well.

By the way, if you wanted to give anyone a “Noël Coward starter pack”, you couldn’t go far wrong with the very first anthology that appeared on CD and which is still in print: EMI’s **The Compact Coward**. It’s good value at 70 minutes playing time, and most of the “classic” Coward recordings from the 20s to the 50s are included. No great surprises but it’s a good representative survey and this CD (plus of course a year’s subscription to The Noël Coward Society) might make a hard-to-please relative very happy at Christmas. Far more entertaining than socks.

That same EMI CD includes the medley Coward recorded in 1951 when he made his triumphant appearance in cabaret at the Café de Paris, backed by an orchestra including that elegant pianist Norman Hackforth. Another glimpse of Coward the “live” entertainer is on Sony Masterworks: **The Noël Coward Album** usefully brings together two recordings that capture the Coward magic at work in the “dear old USA” (to quote his own song *I Love America*). As Noël realised, his 1955 appearance at Wilbur Clark’s Desert Inn in Las Vegas was “one of the most sensational successes of my career”. Show-biz flew in from far and wide to witness it: Sinatra, Garland, Bogart, Bacall and – most gratifying to Coward – Cole Porter (“I so wanted Cole to see me at my best and he certainly did”). A live recording was edited together from the best of four separate performances. If I had to select only one track it would have to be *Mad Dogs*: Noël’s

timing of this version (very different from the 1932 recording) is breathtakingly audacious and one of the best things he ever committed to disc: he tears off two refrains and three choruses in a little over two minutes. It sounds effortless – it’s actually artistry of the highest order. Also on this delightful CD is a reissue of an LP cut the following year, *Noël Coward in New York*, which contains a definitive *I Went to a Marvellous Party* and that haunting number *Time and Again*. Coward’s on great form – buoyed up by his American audiences’ understanding that to “perform” a song you don’t necessarily have to be a great singer in order to “put it across” (something his British critics inevitably failed to grasp). Above all, Noël was pleased that, as well as the *glitterati*, he’d also managed to give Mr. and Mrs. Middle America a good evening out: “I succeeded in doing what no one suspected I could, and that is, please the *ordinary* audiences”. Buy this disc and you’ll see why.

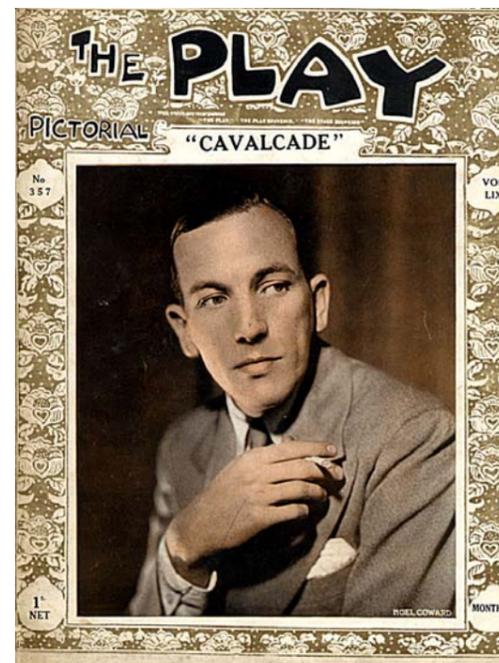
Happy listening!

**The Grand Tour (The Ballet Music of Noël Coward):**  
SILVA SCREEN (distributed by KOCH INTERNATIONAL)  
SILKD 6007  
**The Dance Bands Play Noël Coward:**  
PAVILION RECORDS / PAST CD 9758  
**The Compact Coward:**  
EMI CDP 7 922802  
**The Noël Coward Album:**  
SONY MASTERWORKS MDK 47253

## COLLECTORS’ CORNER

Victor Ross has contacted us with the following suggestion: I would welcome a regular feature which might be called “Collectors’ Corner” where those of us who collect Cowardiana might advertise their wants or surpluses.

For example, I am looking for a signed or inscribed copy of *Private Lives* one of our members might be willing sell. I have a signed copy of *The Queen was in the Parlour* which I would be prepared to sell or swap. I also have a very battered copy of *Present Indicative*, inscribed by NC in pencil in 1939 to “Charlotte, Queen of Bermuda.” Who might this have been? Does anyone know? Graham Payn says he doesn’t! You can email Victor at: VRoss90717@aol.com . Or write to John Knowles who will pass on any offers. If you have any items you would like to sell or swap then please get in touch with John.



## FROM THE WEBSITE

Last month’s report on Sir John Mill’s reminiscences of his past times with Noël Coward prompted us to look up our own back copies of theatre programmes and magazines. We finally uncovered a copy of ‘The Play’ – which is featured in full on the Society’s website. It provides a portfolio of pictures of the gigantic, and often mobile, sets used for the unique original production at Drury Lane. The website reprints dozens of these pictures of the first production, including one in colour that evokes a time between the Boer War and WW1 when the seaside, with its concert parties, crowded promenades and tray-fronted sellers, was the playground of both masters and their servants. It is used in the play as a meeting place for a short scene between the Marryot’s and members of their former staff.

There is an impressive quayside scene teeming with troops and tearful loved ones, waving as the ship moves slowly away from the dock and into the wings! The sheer size of the sets, the numbers involved and the patriotic fervour sustained by both plot, line and staging makes this production one that so many of today’s Coward followers wished they had seen (apart from the first *Private Lives* – that is!) Revived successfully in recent years by the *Glasgow Citizen’s Theatre* it is hard

## APOLOGIES

The list in the last Home Chat of the results of the Christies sale of Noël Coward had a couple of mistakes. We apologise. We also apologise to the seller and the buyers if we have caused any embarrassment by showing how much money changed hands for their items.

The last puzzle in the last *Home Chat* that I produced, (September/October/November 2000 edition) had some errors in it. It is very hard to proof check a jumble of letters, by definition they don’t make sense. Nevertheless we did have some replies. One member, Les Turnham plodded through it and kindly sent me a full set of corrections. We were going to publish the puzzle again, correctly this time, but it got lost in the hand over of *Home Chat* to John Knowles. Therefore, it was particularly appropriate that it was Les Turnham’s name that came out of the hat when we drew a winner. Congratulations to him. He wins a copy of the *Relative Values* soundtrack CD. Also ....

## LOOK OUT FOR ...

I have been contacted by a producer at the BBC Radio 3 who is planning a programme on show music. He wanted to trace the music for the overture for *This Year of Grace* for inclusion. Sounds promising! I emailed back to ask when it was to be broadcast, but I have not heard anything yet. Do keep your eyes on the schedules.

