



HOME CHAT

APRIL
2001

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NOEL COWARD SOCIETY

DESIGN FOR LIVING on BROADWAY



"The actual facts are so simple. I love you. You love me. You love Otto. I love Otto. Otto loves you. Otto loves me. There now! Start to unravel from there."

Design for Living – Noel Coward

Ken Starrett writes from New York after he and his wife saw the Roundabout Theatre Company production at the American Airlines Theatre on Broadway, starring the elfin-faced Alan Cumming, so beloved of British TV comedy, Jennifer Ehle of *Pride & Prejudice* fame, and Dominic West as the happy trio in Coward's witty love-fest, *Design for Living*.

Ken writes, "I have fond memories of the production we saw in London in 1983 with Maria Aitken, Ian Ogilvy and Gary Bond. We also saw the 1984 production at 'Circle in the Square.' I have many reservations about the current production. I felt some of the performances were a shade laid-back 90s and destroyed some of the inherent bubbly quality in the play, nevertheless, it was good to see it again."

David Ives previewing the play in the New York Times describes it, "As Simple, and as Brilliant, as a Good Laugh,"

"Noel Coward's witty, gossamer 'Design for Living' is high comedy that soars beyond high jinks to basic truths."

Ben Brantley of the New York



Times in his review of the Roundabout Theatre production shares Ken Starret's reservations.

Lyricist Adolph Green commenting on the original 1933 production starring Coward said, "You kept waiting for Coward. You knew he was going to come on but you just couldn't believe he could outdo the Lunts. Then the door opened and Coward walked on and he dashed straight upstage without a word and turned his back and stood looking out a window for what seemed like half an hour. The crowd went crazy. He'd stopped the show cold."

SEMI-MONDE in the WEST END



It was wonderful to see 50 members of the Society at the preview of *Semi-Monde* at the Lyric on Shaftesbury Avenue on Tuesday 20th March. Following an early supper, attended by the Producer Thelma Holt and one of our American members, Susan Peters and her husband, we sat to watch a sumptuous production of one of the least known of Coward's plays. It was good to see so many new faces amongst those who came along. As for the production ... whether the writing of the play pulls the narrative threads

into a whole, or whether it matters, will be a subject for debate for months to come. What is not in doubt is the quality of this production which has some of our finest actors working lines and direction with wit and style in a setting that reeks of 20's decadence. The impressive black and gold setting, reproduces an idealised cocktail lounge at The Ritz hotel. It may never have been as shown, although it certainly should have been, but it provides a dark hedonistic setting for the black, lacy, stocking-topped gay young things and their evening-suited partners relishing their, 'variations on a theme' of sexual partnership, and the wit of the play. Some of the cameos are Coward at his absolute best. Well done to all for bringing this marvellous production to the public with such flair, style and accomplishment. Press reaction to this production has been mixed but every Coward lover should get along and see it! Members who have had difficulty getting through to the box office will be pleased

NEW VICE PRESIDENT

At its meeting on 20th March the Society's committee voted unanimously to invite Joan Hirst to become the Society's third Vice President, an invitation that was accepted that evening when Joan attended *SEMI-MONDE*. For many years Noel Coward's secretary, Joan was until recently the Coward Estate's London Representative and guardian of the archive, now on loan to Birmingham University. Her close personal connection with Coward and fund of knowledge about him and his work will make her a great asset to the Society. An interview that she gave to Gareth Pike will be published in



Flames of Passion

Noel Coward's Easy Virtue

by Philip Hoare – written for the recent Norwich Maddermarket Theatre revival of *Easy Virtue*.

The 1920s were a lot like now. There was a lot of money about – most of it made in munitions and war–profiteering, the after–profits of Armageddon. There was social mobility, a sense of flux; commodification, fashion, questions of taste and style. There was the draw of America, which represented a brave new world of consumerism and sex; and of a newly–liberated Europe, with its old world of high culture – and sex. Resounding through this acid jumble of jazz and jingoism like a brilliantine'd spokesman declaiming, not from a soap box in Hyde Park, but from an upended crate of champagne in Belgravia, was the crisply enunciated voice of a young man with a distinctly original talent. Noël Coward (1899–1973) had, crucially, been born into a Victorian age, grew up in an Edwardian epoch, lived through the war and come out the other side to assume his (self) ordained status as role model to a generation. He would live to see out three–quarters of the last century, and in the process observe a failing Empire and a changing world; but nowhere and at no time was his voice so acute as it was in the decade in which made his name – and which he remade in turn.

If the 1920s seem to mirror our modern era, then Coward's *Easy Virtue* seems to epitomise issues that still concern us, even now, nearly eighty years after it was written. Morality for the post–war generation was not merely the stuff of women's magazine (*plus ça change...*); it was the concern of governments and institutions, parents and church. A world in which the male population had been depleted seemed to have set the liberated woman even freer – free enough for Larita, Coward's heroine, to represent the concerns of an entire society; concerns which for a certain section of that society were predicated on fidelity, status and, all too often, prejudice.

The vexed issues of class and sex were vital to Coward and his work, and he used the upper–middle class, and the sexual and social post–war revolution that they faced, to address the issues of his day. From the very first lines of *Easy Virtue*, it is clear that the Whittakers are dyed–in–the–wool representatives of that class: the house in Home Counties, the cut flowers, the servants, the idyllic, unseen village somewhere beyond the wings and hovering miasma of metropolitan hedonism and foreign decadence somewhere beyond that. For Coward – a suburban boy made good – had been watching them, intently, with his sharp dramatist's eye for a decade or more now, and in *Easy Virtue*, he seemed intent on puncturing some of its hypocrisies, whilst admitting the equally frail moral code of his own upwardly–mobile generation.

As ever, Coward's play is elegantly constructed to carry these themes. Indeed, sections of *Easy Virtue* bear comparison with *Private Lives* (only recently voted one of the best English plays of all time). Here too are the same motifs, embroidered on Larita's 'violently expensive' clothes, stitched with sophisticated, urbane world–weariness and pressed with an impeccable taste – which she carefully and calculatedly traduces in a later scene, in a manner which

displays Coward's deep understanding of the double–edged significance of outward appearance to his period (and by extension, to ours). There's more than a touch of Jane Austen (Coward's favourite writer) to this tale of everyday country folk (indeed, contemporary reviews compared Colonel Whittaker to Mr. Bennett).

But Larita is indisputably a product of the 20th century. A fantasy amalgam of all the sophisticated women he knew and loved – a sort of Gertrude Lawrence, Tallulah Bankhead and Lillian Braithwaite rolled into one – she is a *femme du monde*, an habitu  of Cannes and Biarritz; an experienced woman like *Private Lives*' Amanda, mismatched with the hapless John (as Amanda is with the naive Victor). It is a sense of them and us morality which verges almost toward clich , only to be neatly subverted by Coward's touches: the strategically–placed volume of Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah*; or the intuition of Colonel Whittaker, who understands that 'Everything's changing nowadays, anyhow'. But most of all, the play is a deliciously enjoyable, Twenties update on a Wildean predicament in which we the audience root for Larita and her offended sense of dignity; and yet, courtesy of Coward's subtle talent, never lose sight of the sympathies and shortcomings of the rest of the world of *Easy Virtue*. The play premiered in America in 1925, while Coward was there touring his *succ s de scandale*, *The Vortex* (with its tale of everyday cocaine–addicts and toy–boys), a counterpoint to that, and the other product of the prolific young genius, *Hay Fever* (a sort of comic version of *Easy Virtue*). The play was successful (not least because of the sensation that surrounded it and its author), especially with the vampish, leopard skin–clad Jane Cowl as Larita, and although many critics pointed out the plot's similarity to Arthur Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (in which Paula Tanqueray is taken to live forty miles out of London and attempts to overcome her past history of 'moral turpitude'), Coward effortlessly and characteristically parried their perceptions by declaring that 'the form and tone and plot of a Pinero play was exactly what I had tried to achieve'.

Ironically, when he brought *Easy Virtue* to England the following year, it met with the similar moral indignation as had faced its heroine. The Manchester Watch Committee demanded that the author change its title, which he did (to *A New Play in Three Acts*) – despite the fact that, as Coward observed, the cinema next to the theatre in question was playing a film called *Flames of Passion*. But Noël had a long memory and neat instinct for witty revenge, a dish indeed best served cold. Observant Coward–watchers will note that in his definitive 1949 film with David Lean, *Brief Encounter*, Trevor Howard and Celia Johnston emerge from a Northern cinema, under a billboard advertising its latest film – *Flames of Passion*. His Larita was once more avenged on a prudish world.

Philip Hoare's biography of Noel Coward is published by Arrow Books.

Philip Hoare's new book, Spike Island, is part memoir, part history, centring on the vast Victorian military hospital at Netley on Southampton Water, where Philip grew up.

The book's cast list includes Florence Nightingale, Queen



Victoria, Wilfred Owen, R.D. Laing – and Noel himself, who entertained the troops at Netley during the First World War, while touring in *Charley's Aunt* with *Esme Wynne*'.

Philip Hoare's new 5000 word entry for Noel, for the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, has just been approved.

Philip says, "It's a mark of Noel's national importance that he merits such a hefty entry. The project – twenty years in the making – is due for publication by Oxford University Press in 2004."

BOOKS FROM NOEL'S OFFICE

The Society has recently inherited a sizeable collection of books from the London office of Noel Coward, managed by Joan Hirst for so many years. Some of the volumes are extremely rare, signed and dedicated editions that will be auctioned, but amongst the rest are an extensive collection of 1st and other editions of Coward books that will be of

FALLEN ANGELS

The hit West End production of this play (which closes on April 14th) will have a spin-off in Paris this Autumn when a new French version, *SEXE DES ANGES*, will be directed by Jeanne Moreau, (*sic*) who will also play Saunders. Coward would have been especially pleased about this. He wrote in his introduction to the English edition of Damase's *LES FOLIES DU MUSIC HALL* :

"When I was twenty I went to Paris for the first time, fell in love with it as young people usually do and I have remained in love with it ever since. Mistinguett and Chevalier were appearing in a revue at the Casino de Paris and of course I went to see them. I hadn't much French but what little I had I was extremely proud of, and on that very day I had conducted the purchase of a tie with great fluency and flair. (the friend I was with was deeply impressed: until the end of the transaction that is, when to the saleswoman's final *Bonjour Monsieur* and to her great surprise and my mortification, I replied before I could stop myself, *Aujourd'hui* with a slight

WORD PUZZLE

Pomp and Circumstance was Noel's only novel published in 1960, is my perennial Christmas 'read.' Not a year goes by when I don't indulge myself in the 'goings on' on Noel's utopian island – Samola. Noel used this imaginary setting for his 1946 musical 'Pacific 1860, and again in 1951/1956 for 'Island Fling' and 'South Sea Bubble.' Many of the characters re-emerge in the novel which remains a wonderful account of life in a British colony in the South Pacific during the fading years of the British Empire and around the first years of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. This puzzle contains all the characters and places listed with 11 letters

E	G	R	O	E	G	H	T	E	B	A	Z	I	L	E	N	E	E	U	Q
E	S	N	O	T	G	N	I	R	F	F	O	C	E	I	S	I	A	M	B
H	O	B	M	I	B	E	L	L	I	V	L	O	C	Y	N	N	U	B	U
I	S	S	E	C	N	I	R	P	E	H	T	A	T	I	N	A	U	J	D
K	A	E	L	O	H	S	N	A	M	R	E	H	S	I	F	K	L	C	D
K	L	Y	D	S	E	D	A	L	G	R	E	T	E	P	N	C	Y	O	H
I	A	E	N	I	N	A	L	A	O	L	A	N	U	P	O	O	D	B	A
T	K	N	A	K	E	E	L	A	A	L	I	O	A	B	O	C	I	B	N
D	A	O	L	M	O	L	L	Y	T	I	M	M	Y	B	N	A	A	S	I
L	L	H	O	Y	I	N	A	L	A	I	L	A	H	O	A	E	F	C	B
O	A	O	P	A	D	R	B	O	W	M	A	N	E	C	E	P	R	O	O
H	K	O	Y	B	I	B	O	B	R	B	K	Y	P	S	O	A	E	V	R
G	R	K	V	A	N	A	G	C	T	S	C	S	L	U	T	M	N	E	Y
R	E	C	I	N	A	T	N	H	U	R	D	E	A	L	T	L	C	Y	E
U	W	U	I	A	L	R	I	R	O	A	C	N	H	E	E	A	H	E	K
B	O	C	L	I	A	E	L	I	R	L	N	O	T	G	L	T	D	W	O
N	D	S	A	A	M	B	R	S	T	P	A	T	N	N	M	E	A	O	C
I	N	U	H	P	U	L	I	M	R	M	H	S	E	A	E	N	P	F	T
D	E	P	A	A	F	A	T	O	E	E	T	G	M	V	R	N	H	F	E
E	L	A	T	L	E	R	S	R	F	T	N	O	U	E	T	A	N	O	N
F	G	P	R	R	K	I	Y	T	I	D	A	T	L	N	L	G	E	E	A
O	S	A	E	A	G	S	R	L	N	N	E	Y	B	I	E	A	G	K	J
E	E	P	P	D	N	D	R	O	N	O	G	T	Y	A	A	L	I	U	N
K	N	O	A	N	I	L	E	C	E	M	R	T	K	T	H	U	L	D	O
U	N	K	E	E	K	O	K	K	J	S	E	E	N	P	C	S	P	E	M
D	I	G	R	P	Y	J	S	U	D	E	S	L	I	A	I	R	I	H	I
E	S	N	E	E	L	O	I	S	E	Y	C	U	L	C	M	U	N	T	S
H	R	I	H	E	I	G	I	A	R	C	S	R	M	A	R	D	N	A	S
T	M	K	T	O	L	O	B	M	U	F	M	U	F	A	L	O	M	A	S

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE WORDLIST

Sandra	King Kefumalani
Noonaeo	Mrs. Innes Glendower
Ivy Poland	Captain Evangelus Cobb
Samola	Queen Elizabeth
Lucy	Sergeant Hancock
Pendarla	George
Simon	Jennifer Trout
Punalo Alani	Kerry Stirling
Buddha	Inky Blumenthal
Janet	The Duke of Fowey
Kella Alia	Bob
Dusty	Esmond Templar
Cokey	Maisie Coffrington
Molly	Peter Glades
Timmy	Kala Lala
Paiana Bay	Fisherman's Hole
Robin	King Kopapadus
Hali Alani	Cobbs Cove
Michael Tremlett	Mrs. Craigie
The Duke of Edinburgh	The Reaper
Bimbo	Cuckoo Honey
Fumfumbolo	Tahali
Dr. Bowman	Daphne Gilpin
Old Sir Albert	Eloise
The Princess	Juanita
Old Tikki	Lydia French
Chris Mortlock	Bunny Colville
	Ursula Gannet



MEMBERSHIP

Last month we wrote about membership renewal and urged all of our members to canvass new members. For every new member you manage to sign up there is a reduction of £5 on your own membership fee – get 5 new members and your membership is free! All applications for membership should be sent to Gareth Pike at:

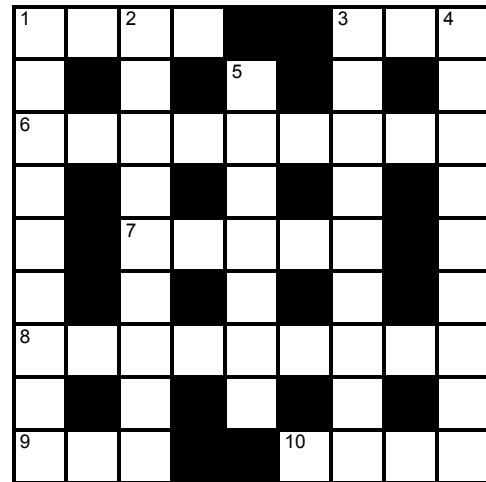
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A reminder that it helps the Society and reduces your subscription by £5 if you arrange to pay by standing order. This month we enclose a copy of our new membership form for you to give to someone you know who might be interested in joining.

All contributions to HOME CHAT should be sent to:

John Knowles, 29, Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon, Norwich, NR6 6TB. Email: johnknowles@ukgateway.net, Tel:

CROSSWORD



Across

Down

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1 Petty quarrel (4) | 1 Negotiates. (9) |
| 3 Self (3) | 2 London street with station (9) |
| 6 Newsreader (9) | 3 Hinders (9) |
| 7 Seraglio (5) | 4 Australian designer, in Hollywood from 1923. (9) |
| 8 Acrobatic Mvt. (9) | 5 Deep grooves (7) |
| 9 Note (3) | |
| 10 Miss Van Randwick (4) | |

Current Productions – Professional and Amateur (highlighted items are new this month)

US and Canada:	Design for Living	Now to May 13th	Roundabout Theatre Co., Broadway
	Blihe Spirit	19 to 25th April	Georgetown Little Theatre, Acton, Ontario
		1st to 9th June	East End Theatre, Orleans, Ontario
		3rd to 14th July	Theatre Collingwood, Collingwood, Ontario
	Present Laughter	4th to 11th August	Playhouse, Halifax
	Relative Values	27th March to 14th July	The Alabama Shakespeare Festival
	Noël & Cole	6th April	Williams College, Williamstown
Australasia:	Design for Living	10th to 14th April	Melbourne, Australia
United Kingdom	Fallen Angels	Closes 14th April	Apollo Theatre, Shaftsbury Avenue,
London			
& Ireland:	Blihe Spirit	16th to 19th May	St. John's Church Hall, Leeds
		Early July`	Dublin Gate Theatre
	Private Lives 1 Mar to 1 May		Volcano Theatre Company tour of Wales
	Semi-Monde	Booking to 28th April only	Lyric Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London
	Waiting in the Wings	4th to 7th April	Memorial Hall, Little Baddow, Essex
		16th to 19th May	Theatre, Harrogate
	Cowardy Custard	6th to 8th April	Methodist Hall, Purbrook, Nr. Portsmouth
	Hay Fever	16th to 19th May	Harrogate Theatre, Harrogate
		28th to 30th June	Village Hall, Broad Hinton, Wilts
	Nude with Violin	13th to 19th May	Players Theatre, Northenden, Manchester
	Relative Values	March 28,29,30 7.30pm	Friargate Theatre, Lower Friargate,
	31 2pm 7.30pm	York.	
	Noel Coward Tonight	9th May to 9th June	Jermyn Street Theatre with Jeremy
	(with Red Peppers & Shadows of the Evening)		Clyde, Jane How, Annabel Leventon
			& Peter Land & directed by Sheridan
			Morley – A Society outing to be arranged!

TWO FOR ONE TICKET OFFER

Our thanks go to a member who has sent in several 'two for one' vouchers for the following West End shows: Entertaining Mr. Sloane; Dannii Minogue in Notre-Dame de Paris; The Graduate; ART; and Lady Salsa. They entitle the holder to get two of one. Details are set out on the vouchers. If you are interested in having one or more of these please contact es who will distribute them on a first come – first served basis! (email: johnknowles@ukgateway.net)

