



# HOME CHAT

OCTOBER  
2001

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NOËL COWARD SOCIETY

## THE SOCIETY'S 3rd YEAR BECKONS

On November this year the Society will enter its third year of existence. During this formative period it has been very successfully led by Michael Imison as Chair and Gareth Pike as Secretary and General Manager. Michael is to retire from his role in November but will remain on the Society's committee and stay as a director of Noel Coward Ltd., the charitable company that has responsibility for the Society. Gareth Pike who retired from his post last month will also stay with us on the committee. The Society owes a great deal to their efforts in establishing and directing its work over this period - we thank them both! The new Chair for the next year is to be Tracy Cutting who has been a member of the committee during this last year and is the representative of Warner Chappell the music publishers. Tracy's incisive, imaginative style and dedication will bring opportunities to develop further the work of the Society. John Knowles has taken on the role of Secretary and General Manager and has a brief to develop and share the work of the Society amongst its members. He and other committee members are keen to see the establishment of new Society groups and events across the globe, regional groups in the UK and activities that involve members in the work of the Society. We wish them both well! John Knowles and Robert Gardiner have also become directors of Noel Coward Ltd.

## Society Events for the Autumn/Fall

### Private Lives, Star Quality, AGM and December 16th

Our visit to see the West End production of *Private Lives* may well have happened by the time you receive this newsletter. There are still some seats left for this visit at 8pm on Wednesday Oct 3. The cost is £30-00 which guarantees you a £35-00 seat in the stalls for the last preview before the press opening of this limited run, which is predicted to be a total sell out. You will also get a free drink in the interval and we are hoping to have programmes autographed by the cast available for you to buy. The Society has also booked a room at Café Flo in St Martin's Lane (diagonally opposite the theatre) for dinner at 6 pm before the performance. This will be a special pre-theatre menu offering two courses and coffee for £11-50. At this price you get a main course with either starter or desert. ***During the dinner Philip Hoare will talk about the play and we will raffle a signed copy of the original hardback of Philip Hoare's definitive biography of Noel Coward.*** If you would like to add your name to the list of those coming to the performance please phone Michael Imison on 020 7689 0493 or email him on [imisonplay@hotmail.com](mailto:imisonplay@hotmail.com). If you would like to come to the dinner please ring or email with your choice from the menu (as shown in a recent letter to you). This includes those who have already indicated that they intend to come to dinner. This will speed up service.

Our Annual General Meeting on November 17th will be combined with a theatre visit to see *Star Quality* starring Penelope Keith. The meeting is likely to be held at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden and be followed by a meal before attending the theatre.

We are also arranging our annual flower-laying ceremony on Sunday, December 16th, the Master's birthday, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. This will be followed by a meal at 'The Ivy' restaurant, the haunt of the 'Bright Young Things' the group of hedonists - that became a vital part of Coward's young life in the 20's - led by Lordships Napier Alington and Ned Lathom with Tallulah Bankhead and many other rising stars!

We will keep you posted on all our events - trying wherever possible to bring together as many interesting

### A member writes ...

... from Sallyann Wilson: I have been researching for a night of dramatised ghost stories I am performing on Halloween. I came across this tantalising quote, in reference to a haunted house and wonder if anyone can put me any the wiser?  
"Sir Noel Coward was a frequent visitor at one time - a man who was no stranger to ghosts." The diaries are of little help. (Ed: Does anyone know the name of the house - the reference must be to *Blithe Spirit*?)  
Any ideas? Email: [Sallyann10W@netscape.net](mailto:Sallyann10W@netscape.net)

### HOME CHAT CHANGES

From next month Home Chat will include an insert on coloured paper featuring original material from members, Coward devotees, historians, actors, invited authors and others. These will provide a collectable resource of unique papers for members.

If any member would like to contribute to this new series of articles please write to:  
John Knowles, 29, Waldemar Avenue, Hellesdon, Norwich, NR6 6TB, UK email [johnknowles@noelcoward.net](mailto:johnknowles@noelcoward.net)



## I've Been To A Marvellous Party ...

By Kenneth Tynan

*This review of Cole Lesley's book 'Remembered Laughter' was first seen in the New Yorker. It provides one of the best summaries of Noel Coward's talents that we have ever seen.*

In 1936, COLE LESLEY, a stage-struck youth who could not cook and had never been a valet, went to work for Noël Coward as a sort of cook-valet. Several weeks passed before the ice of the master-servant relationship was broken. One morning, discussing plans for luncheon, Mr. Lesley inquired, "What would you say to a little fish?" "I should say, 'Good morning, little fish,'" Coward briskly replied, and Mr. Lesley rejoiced, sensing that he had been admitted to his employer's confidence. This was the first, though far from the best, of the innumerable Coward jokes that were to keep him happily enslaved for the 37 remaining years of his master's life, during which time he rose from the ranks to become Coward's major domo, confidant, companion, and Boswell. In writing *Remembered Laughter*, he had access not only to the boss's previously unpublished letters and journals but also, of course, to his own flypaper memory. He quotes extensively from all these sources, and the result is to establish Coward, in his private manifestations, as the funniest eminent Englishman of the 20th century. Not the wittiest: He never regarded himself as a wit, and said he would have hated to hear Oscar Wilde (whom he thought witty but humorless) spouting prefabricated aphorisms by the hour. What he relished were tributes like that of Nancy Mitford, tearful after broncho-spasms of lunchtime laughter: "Oh Noël, you do make such jolly good jokes." Mostly at breakneck speed and without significant revision, Coward wrote five classic comedies - *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives*, *Design for Living*, *Present Laughter*, and *Blithe Spirit* - that have entered the English-language repertoire and show no signs of moving out; he composed a large number of durable songs, both comic and romantic, most of them best remembered when sung in what he called "my thin, feathery voice." Time has decisively confirmed two verdicts on Coward's dramatic prose. This, by T. E. Lawrence, apropos of *Private Lives*: "The play reads astonishingly well. It gets thicker in print, and has bones and muscles...For fun I took some pages and tried to strike redundant words out of your phrases. Only there were none." And this, by Coward himself, aged 56: "I think on the whole I am a better writer than I am give credit for being. It is fairly natural that my writing should be appreciated casually, because my personality, performances, music, and legend get in the way. Someday I suspect, when Jesus has definitely got me for a sunbeam, my works may be adequately assessed." Born in 1899 in the shabby-genteel West London suburb of Teddington, Coward made his theatrical debut at the age of 11. A year later, there occurred the memorably bizarre episode at the London Coliseum when his adoring, imperious mother asked the star of the show, a renowned *clairvoyante* who worked entirely smothered by a white sheet, whether she should keep her son on the stage, and got the following reply, bellowed through the sheet at a full house: "Mrs. Coward, Mrs. Coward! ... Keep him where he is! He has great talent and will have a wonderful career!" His formal schooling, never more than intermittent, ended

for good early on. This boded well, since major English playwrights do not, on the whole, make a habit of acquiring a university education. Poets and novelists often thrive on it, but aspiring dramatists, practitioners of a vulgar art that demands nightly contact with popular audiences, seldom flourish in the bookish enclaves of Oxford and Cambridge. Throughout his teens, Coward immersed himself in bad popular theater, annexing the more outrageous lines, usually spoken by flamboyant leading ladies, for subsequent use in his conversational repertoire. Once, in the 1950s, after I had given his latest play a tepid review, he greeted me at a party with the daunting remark, "May God forgive you, Blanche Westermere, for I never shall!" I had no idea, until I read Mr. Lesley's book, that this resounding threat was first uttered by Madge Titheradge at Drury Lane in 1916. By the time Coward was 17, a certain presumption was already apparent. Playing a bit part in D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World*, he convinced the great director that it would be wiser to photograph him walking toward, rather than away from, the camera. Aged 18, he was summoned to dinner at an august literary club that numbered Galsworthy, Maugham, Wells, and Arnold Bennett among its members; turning up in full evening dress, he found everyone else in ordinary suits but generously let them off the hook by declaring, "Now, I don't want *anybody* to feel embarrassed." At 19, he was lunching almost daily at London's smartest theatrical restaurant, and he was only 20 when his first play, *I'll Leave It to You*, opened in the West End. It failed to click, and some dark times followed, among them a near-penniless sojourn in New York, but in 1923 he was back on the London playbills as star and author of *The Young Idea*, which contains the first line that distinguishes Coward from all his predecessors in English comedy: "I lent that woman the top of my thermos flask and she never returned it. She's shallow, that's what she is, shallow." Despite warm praise from the critics, the play folded after eight weeks. By now, however, Coward had begun to build a cult audience based on his own personality, and a year later he gave them the scandalous success they expected of him: *The Vortex*, about a dope-sniffing boy and his lascivious mother. He was 24 years old, and famous beyond recall. Thereafter his private life, when not spent at the typewriter or in the company of talented colleagues, would be rather too obsessively thronged with princes and rajahs and dukes, with ambassadors, governors-general, and high commissioners, with the Baroness von This and the ex-Queen of That - evidence of a reverent *faiblesse* for titled nobles that clung to Coward (as to many other English writers of his era) throughout his life. It must be counted among his few abiding weaknesses that he tended to equate snobbism with patriotism, and patriotism with virtue. On the question of Coward's sexual habits, his biographer Mr. Lesley writes with exemplary candor and maddening brevity. He tells us that actress Gertrude Lawrence took Coward to her bedroom when he was 13 and gave him a practical demonstration of the facts of life. This experiment, however, cannot have been an unqualified success, since we read, shortly afterward: "He was homo sexual. There is nothing sensational to report." Coward's self-approval, so crucial to artists, was never dependent on the approval of others. He wrote, "I am as unmoved by failure as I am by success, which is a *great* comfort .... I like *writing* the plays anyhow and *if* people don't like them that's their loss." He



conserved his energy for his art: None of it was sacrificed on the altar of domesticity. Work was primary, and not to be dislodged by human allegiances from its central place in his life. As he revealingly said: "People, I decided, were the danger. People were greedy and predatory, and if you gave them the chance they would steal unscrupulously the heart and soul out of you without really wanting to or even meaning to. From now on there was going to be very little energy wasted and very little vitality spilled unnecessarily." He kept his word. Coward retained, well into his sixties, the ageless vitality of the talented and prosperous pederast, putting one inevitably in mind of Dorian Gray, whose face remained unwrinkled while his portrait withered in the attic. (Coward's only concession to vanity was to have his jowls surgically removed in 1965.) It has always seemed to me little short of miraculous that Coward and others like him managed to survive with such gallant and creative resilience through a period when homosexuality in England was punishable, if officially detected, by imprisonment and permanent ostracism. Indeed, I sometimes suspect that Coward's professional persona (theatrical camp overlaid with Empire-building stiff-upperlip) was in part a disguise, adopted to put the cops and the public off the true scent. He was gay in both the correct and the modish meanings of the word, but that does not account for the quality or the quantity of those superbly idiosyncratic jokes. Where did they spring from? Coward extravagantly admired Saki as one of his few literary antecedents. "There was apple-blossom everywhere." "Only on the apple trees, surely." In this exchange, Saki employs the mock gravity of Ionesco, the deadpan puncturing of romantic pretension, that Coward was soon to transplant to the theater. The use of dowdy English place-names in contexts that deflate the speaker is another Coward trademark: You really cannot, with any dignity, retire in high dudgeon to Budleigh Salterton or pass a misspent youth in Herne Bay. When Roland Maule, the intense young avant-garde author in *Present Laughter*, introduces himself to his idol, Garry Essendine (Coward's nearest approach to a self-portrait), and announces that he comes from Uckfield, the audience laughs at the simple incongruity. Far less readily explicable, and far more typical of Coward, is the much bigger laugh that always follows, when Maule adds, "It's very near Lewes," and Essendine cheerfully replies, "Then there's nothing to worry about, is there?" Something quite subtle is going on here: Essendine is responding not to what the young man actually says but to the nervous defensiveness that underlies it. We laugh at an apparent non sequitur that is in fact perfectly logical. A comic master is at work. To convey the flavor of private Coward, extensive quotation is indispensable. There are, to begin with, the one-line impromptus. After tasting, while on tour in wartime Britain, a long-promised and eagerly awaited dish of roast goose that turns out to be inedible: "I think a grave has walked over my goose." On reading Monica Baldwin's *I Leap Over the Wall*: "It has strengthened me in my decision not to become a nun." At the end of a long letter of practical advice to Arnold Wesker, whose talent he deeply respected: "Never wear your wife's sweater again, it is not becoming." After suffering from the egocentricity of Claudette Colbert in a TV production of *Blithe Spirit*: "I would wring her neck if only I could find it." On seeing a tropical moon rising over a glittering dinner party on a coral beach: "This is piling Pelléas on Mélisande." A terse

cable to Mr. Lesley after a trip to Turkey: "AM BACK FROM ISTANBUL WHERE I WAS KNOWN AS ENGLISH DELIGHT." And his account of Ian Fleming's wedding breakfast in Jamaica, at which he described Mr. Fleming's specialty, black crab served in its shell, as exactly like eating cigarette ash out of the ashtray. As he marched through middle age, Coward plunged ever more boldly into areas of humor that American readers may find either baffling or downright embarrassing. There were the complicated word games; e.g., if you hummed a Chopin mazurka, it meant Chaplin, because Chopin died in 1849, the date of the gold rush from which Chaplin borrowed the title of a deathless film. There was the impassioned delight in puns, as when, staying in a hotel at Lausanne, Coward wrote that he was profoundly happy "on the bonny, bonny banks of Lac Léman," where there was "no lack *des cygnes*." When Aneurin Bevan did him a political favor, he moved heaven and earth to persuade Dame Laura Knight to sketch Bevan's portrait, so that he could tell his friends that Knight was drawing Nye. And he could not resist describing a Greek sailboat as "one of those caiques that you can have but *not* eat." In the postwar period, fractured French started to invade his correspondence. "*Quelle Béarnaise!*" (*viz.* "What sauce!") was his reaction when a friend dared to overact; and Buckingham Palace, because it overlooks the Mall, acquired the code name of Mal Vu. If you think these are jokes no responsible adult could possibly father, switch off, for worse was to come - an addiction to baby talk, which, though mainly confined to Coward's inner circle, sometimes broke out into the public domain. Mr. Lesley ("Toley" in infant argot) recalls an occasion when he and Coward were seated in the restaurant car of a train alongside a foursquare English squire and his wife, who had obviously recognized their illustrious fellow-traveler. When tea was served, Coward's cup lacked a spoon, whereupon he complained, with the precise articulation for which he was renowned, "Toley, Noley hasn't dot a poony." Mr. Lesley says he can still hear the snort of disgust that erupted from the adjoining table. Infantile, of course; but consciously so, and in a manner not inconsistent with a thoroughly adult talent. I submit, in fact, that infantilism may be the essential cocoon within which certain kinds of talent need to flourish. It is a virtue, not a fault, in Coward that he never discarded - and was never embarrassed by - his childhood. He was a superbly preserved middle-aged child, ebullient and suntanned, who carried his nursery memories into adult life with no vestige of shame. Beneath the stoical mask of the disciplined performer we can always discern the ecstatic tot, winking conspiratorially at other Peter Pans, to the perpetual discomfiture of "adults." Coward was not an intellectual (he writes, with insouciant self-deprecation, to his pal Nancy Mitford that "as you may or may not know, I am just mad about books and you being so brainy and all ... might give me a few ideas which, I may say, would be bitterly resented") but a creature of impulse, who was tough-minded enough to resist the temptation to become what passes in our society for a "grown-up." I cherish Mr. Lesley's portrait of Coward in his fifties, retiring early to bed at his country house in Kent (usually after a visit to the vil-

(Continued on page 4)



lage cinema) with a mug of Ovaltine, "a little eggy something on a tray," and large helpings of chocolates from Charbonnel & Walker in Bond Street ("Mr. Coward's special mixture") the most pampered, debonair, hardheaded, professional boy on earth. Writing, years later, of death, which by then had become an imminent possibility, he still saw himself as a child, serenely awaiting a nanny's summons: "I would prefer Fate to allow me to go to sleep when it's my proper bedtime. I never have been one for

staying up too late." With every step he takes toward the adult world, as Wordsworth noted, "shades of the prison-house begin to close/upon the growing Boy." Not, however, upon the Boy from Teddington, who saw confinement looming and took prompt evasive action-or, as he would have said, "rose above it." Whether by genetic luck or environmental good judgment, Noël Coward never suffered the imprisonment of maturity.

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## The Unknown Coward

further extracts from privately printed material found in the London Office of Noel Coward.

*From Poems by Hernia Whittlebot with an Appreciation by Noel Coward*

### ROMANCE

#### *in C sharp minor*

*So, this is all that Love has left,  
Good Lord, the hours are slow,  
My mouth is like a Lion's den,  
My breath is crackling like a stove,  
Or the whip of the Ring-Master.  
The night light gutters,  
And so does he - My lover once.  
Good Gracious!  
Fool that I am, and always was,  
Take my dreams in your strong brown hands,  
Roll them under the bed;  
Take my hair (it is over there),*

*And cram it in the wardrobe;  
Take my soul between your knees  
And bite it and tear it please!  
What have I left to give your feet,  
To leap upon and crush ?  
My heart's too heavy, your heart's too light,  
To balance the twain together;  
Take my body, each tingling pore,  
And paint it red and blue,  
And take, oh take my eyelids, do,  
And fling them about the yard;  
Maul and tear, and nuzzle and beat,  
And shake me like a rat;  
Spit and choke, and cough and laugh,  
Clap both your hands and writhe;  
Quaff a drink of Burgundy  
And throw at me the dregs,  
And when you have jumped and rolled your will  
And left me shattered utterly,  
Go out into the rollicking Sunlight,  
And leave me to eat my egg.*

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

<b>US &amp; Canada</b>	<i>Blithe Spirit</i>	12 Apr to 19 May, 2002.	Center Stage's Pearlstone Theater, Baltimore, Theatre Amisk, Dauphin, Canada
	<i>A Suite in Two Keys</i>	5 to 17 March, 2002	Walnut Street Theatre,
	<i>Fallen Angels</i>	14 to 17 Nov	Markham Little Theatre, Markham, Ontario,
	<i>Hay Fever</i>	5 to 29 October March 2002	Yellow Point Drama Group, Nanaimo BC Domino theatre, Kingston, Ontario.
<b>Europe</b>		20 Sep to 1 Oct	Stage Centre Productions, North York, Ontario
		25 Oct to 3 Nov	The Krudttonden Theatre, Copenhagen, Denmark
<b>Australasia</b>	<i>Design For Living</i>	Nov/Dec 2001	State Theatre Co of South Australia, Adelaide
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<i>Blithe Spirit</i>	29 Sept to 6 Oct	Tower theatre, Islington, London
		6 to 13 Oct	Tynemouth Priory theatre, North Shields
		12 & 13 Oct	Village Hall, Whittington, Staffs.
		17 to 20 Oct	The Concordia Theatre, Hinckley, Leicestershire
		24 to 27 Oct	The Brookdale Theatre, Stockport, Cheshire
		1 to 3 Nov	The Festival Hall, Petersfield, Hampshire
		15 to 17 Nov	Albrighton Players, Albrighton Junior School
		22 to 23 Nov	St Paul's Girl's School, London, W6
		22 to 24 Nov	North East Surrey College, Ewell, Surrey
		3 to 8 Dec	Chesil Theatre, Winchester
		8 to 9 Dec	Village Hall, Laleham
		20 to 23 Mar 2002	The Village Hall, Barton, Cambridge,
	<i>Hay Fever</i>	6 Oct to 20 Oct	The Nomad Theatre, Leatherhead, Surrey
11 to 13 Oct		The Rhodes Hall, Bishops Stortford	
16 to 20 Oct		Kenton Theatre, Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire.	
1 to 3 Nov		The Lopping Hall, Loughton, Essex.	
1 Sep to 6 Oct		Latchmere Pub, London	
<i>Star Quality</i>	Preview 23 Oct, opens 29 Oct in West End - starring Penelope Keith	Crucible Theatre, Sheffield	
<i>The Vortex</i>	Sep 2001	Palace Theatre, Paignton	
<i>Nude With Violin</i>	17 Oct to 20 Oct	Garden Suburb Theatre	
<i>Still Life</i>	5 to 8 Dec		
	22 Feb 2002	The Concert hall, Ascot, Berkshire	
	<i>Private Lives: Previews now on, opens 4 Oct 01, booking to 6 Jan 02 -</i>	Albery Theatre, London	

