

The First Noël

By Al Senter

Thirty-six years after his death, the Noel Coward brand is as powerful and as evocative as ever. The sparkling quips, the clipped delivery, the silk dressing-gown, the cigarette-holder, the elegant languor of a moneyed world where it's always cocktail hour all these are integral elements of the Noel Coward image. It's an image that was manufactured for the 1920s and which we are still eagerly buying today. As Coward himself was well aware, a writer who speaks eloquently to one era is likely to be ignored by the next.

If anything, Coward was too successful in establishing himself as the voice of a generation, once the sensation of *The Vortex* in 1924 had made him the darling of the chic and the fashionable. And once that generation had passed into middle age and Coward himself moved from yesterday's radical to tomorrow's reactionary, the tide that had flowed in his favour left him stranded, posH945, in particular, as public taste ebbed in the opposite direction.

There were many critics even in Coward's heyday who predicted that such a dazzling talent, composed, as they saw it, entirely of superficiality, would soon fall to earth, like a firework that soars into the night sky, only to peter out in a few paltry shards of light. In his more introspective moments, Coward was inclined to wonder if his adversaries did not have a point. In *Present Indicative* (1937), his first volume of autobiography, he considers the case for the Prosecution:

“Was my talent real, deeply flowing, capable of steady growth and ultimate maturity? Or was it the evanescent sleight-of-hand that many believed it to be; an amusing, drawing-room flair, adroit enough to skim a certain Immediate acclaim from the surface of life but with no roots in experience and no potentialities.”

Prey to such doubts, perhaps Coward would have been surprised by the tenacity with which his best works have clung on to the repertoire.

Of the plays, *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives*, *Blithe Spirit* and *Present Laughter* always seem to be in production, closely followed by *The Vortex*, *Design For Living*, *Easy Virtue* and *Relative Values*. The revues and the musicals that gave birth to the Noël Coward Songbook may not have survived changing tastes, although his epic *Cavalcade* was handsomely served by a recent revival at Chichester Festival Theatre. Yet *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *I'll See You Again*, *If Love Were All*, *Twentieth Century Blues*, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* and *Mad About The Boy* are only a few of his popular standards. Since the National Theatre's revival of *Hay Fever* in 1964, orchestrated, no doubt, by Laurence Olivier, Coward's co-star from *Private Lives*, restored Coward to critical and public approval, his position has been secure in the pantheon of English-speaking drama. The recent film of *Easy Virtue*, the Broadway

revival of *Blithe Spirit* and Kneehigh's production of *Brief Encounter* all underline his continuing vitality.

Yet are we not in danger of making the same mistake as Coward's contemporaries in equating the man with the characters in his plays? To be fair to the mass media of 1924, it was a connection which the wily Coward, always aware of the value of publicity did everything to encourage in the public mind. In *The Vortex* Coward a moralist even in his mid-twenties, was fiercely attacking the pleasure-seeking frivolities of Florence Lancaster and her weakling son. Yet. In anatomising social decadence Coward himself was stigmatised in the same way he condemns the Lancasters. Equally his own assurance in high society gave the impression that he was a lifelong member of this exclusive club rather than an arriviste from the suburbs. There is surely some truth in Sheridan Morley's suggestion that work took the place of religion for the atheist Coward and so there was no greater sin in his mind than an indolent and a parasitic existence. Coward's apparent effortlessness, whether in acting, music or writing was actually a product of sustained and dedicated craftsmanship. And his work ethic drove him to several nervous collapses like so many high-achievers, Coward shows all the signs of a bi-polar disorder that could only be cured in his case by long, often solitary, sea voyages across the Pacific and through the Far East.

To Judge from Coward's smooth penetration into the highest reaches of society, it's easy to compose an upper-middle-class background for him, complete with nannies and butlers, public school and Oxbridge. But Coward's origins were suburban rather than smart-set, Middlesex and not Mayfair. In fact, he was born during the final weeks of the nineteenth century on December 16, 1899 in the unassuming Thames-side village of Teddington. Coward's maternal grandfather had been a sea-captain and there is the sense that his beloved mother had slightly come down in the world by marrying Arthur Coward. From working in a music publishers, Mr Coward became a travelling salesman for a piano business. Unlike Willy Loman, he's unlikely to have taken his samples on the road with him and unlike Willy he does not seem to have been very passionate about his trade. In fact, Coward's father appears to have been rather a colourless personality, not dissimilar from Mr Lancaster in *The Vortex*, content to fit in with his wife's plans and apparently relaxed about the exceptionally close bond between his wife and their elder surviving son, Holidays were taken at Brighton, Broadstairs and Bognor rather than the Riviera and until Coward hit the jackpot with *The Vortex*, family finances were often strained. From Teddington, the Cowards moved to Sutton in Surrey and thence to Battersea, Clapham Common and at length to Ebury Street on the fringes of Belgravia, where Mrs Coward ran a lodging-house.

His parents had met through their shared love of music and Coward fully inherited their interest but with added skills. Mrs Coward does not appear to have been the archetypal showbiz mother but she seemed to sense that her elder son's talents might lead to something special. Although Coward's formal education was at best haphazard, he received a thorough schooling in the theatre from his mother who

would take him to as many West End productions as the family finances could permit. And it was Mrs Coward who entered him for auditions for *The Goldfish*, a children's play, which marks Master No~1 Coward's first professional engagement on the stage. Among his fellow actors was Alfred Willmore, later to re-invent himself as the very Irish Michael MacLiammoir who remembers a boy much older than his years, possessed with boundless self-confidence. Certainly, with an insouciance that might appal today's generation of mothers, Mrs Coward allowed her son to roam on his own through the West End. In the wake of *The Goldfish*, young Noel became a reasonably successful boy-actor, both in London and on tour through the provinces, and his earnings were an invaluable addition to the family exchequer.

Even at this tender age, Coward had acquired the knack of making useful connections. As he admits in *Present Indicative*, he could behave with brattish grandeur backstage but he was wit and charm personified to the outside world. There was never any shortage of invitations to addresses that were much smarter and more comfortable than the lodging-house in Ebury Street and with his networking skills he was soon amassing a formidable array of famous friends and acquaintances. In *Present Indicative* he reels off an impressive list of his New Best Friends In 1919, including Maugham, H G Wells, Rebecca West, Fay Compton and future Hollywood star Ronald Colman. But his earnings, either from acting or the writing which he was fast developing, were sporadic and he was forced to work for a music publisher and even as a professional dancer-cum-gigolo. In order to present a facade of substance to his grand connections, Coward was often forced to borrow money from friends. If he was a snob, it was a snobbish desire for celebrity rather than blue blood. If it was success that he craved and strove so hard to achieve, it was not only for the kind of financial security that had eluded him and his family. It was as if he felt he had a destiny which he was bound to fulfil.

Yet for all the self-assurance he could muster when frequenting the stately homes of England or the smart Park Avenue mansions when both London and New York lay prostrate at his feet, the private Coward still felt something of an interloper in these charmed circles. With the loosening of social conventions that came post 1918, the upper classes and the performing classes rubbed shoulders more easily; it was as if Debretts had merged with *The Spotlight*. Coward found himself both an observer and a participant. In *Present Indicative*, he refers to himself several times as a performing beast, never wholly accepted, doing tricks to justify his admission. In Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2002), the Oscar-winning screenplay by Julian Fellowes imagines Ivor Novello, Coward's friend and rival, a valued guest at a country house weekend but one who is expected to sing for his supper. Coward must have fulfilled a similar role at many such gatherings.

It is fascinating to note how insecure Coward feels in such an environment- not simply because he's a parvenu from the wrong side of the social tracks but because he's a performer, playing a part by invitation rather than by right of birth. He compares his imposing surroundings to a film or stage set and he imagines that the great men and women he meets are all being played by the cream of Equity's

character actors. There is the clear implication that soon the director will call 'Cut!' and the curtain will fall and Coward will hand back his costume and be shown out through the Tradesman's Entrance. In *Present Indicative*, he recalls an indifferent reception for his latest play:

“I remembered the chic, crowded first night of *This Was A Man* in New York. Three Quarters of the people present I knew personally. They had swamped me, in the past, with their superlatives and facile appreciations. I had played and sung to them at their parties, allowing them to use me with pride as a new lion who roared amenably. I remembered how hurriedly they'd left the theatre the moment they realised that the play wasn't Quite coming up to their expectations; unable, even in the cause of good manners, to face only for an hour or so the possibility of being bored.”

Beneath the epigrams, both Coward's life and work were infinitely more complicated than the image he projected and still projects today. Among his thirty-six plays, there are at least two curiosities. *Post-Mortem* (1931) is a blast against those forces in society who failed to deliver a land fit for heroes to the surviving soldiers of the 1914-1'918 conflict. In *Peace In Our Time* (1947), Coward imagines what would have happened, had Britain fallen to the projected Nazi invasion in 194m. The play was unsurprisingly only tepidly received at its West End premiere. Two years after the end of the war, the euphoria of victory had no doubt vanished with the grim reality in the era of austerity. But it was still a bold move on Coward's part to question the self-congratulatory pieties of the time. These two plays suggest a Coward who is a bleak and angry social critic and might surprise audiences accustomed to the polished wit, the glittering dialogue and the heady romanticism.

The scale and depth of Coward's achievements still astonish. His writing career spanned forty-six years from *I'll Leave It To You* in 1920 to *Suite in Three Keys* in 1966: his film career lasted fifty-one years from *D W Griffiths' Hearts of the World* in 1918 via *In Which We Serve* in 1941 to *The Italian Job* in 1969 in which Coward's memorable Mr Big plans Michael Caine's heist from behind prison bars. Forget the clichés. His range was wider, his work more questioning, his talents more diverse than the cravat and the silk dressing-gown would suggest. Coward's capacity to surprise as well as delight is surely undimmed.

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Acknowledgements: *Present Indicative* by Noël Coward and *A Talent To Amuse* by Sheridan Morley.