



# BRIEF ENCOUNTER

## Education Pack



Supported by the Noël Coward Foundation

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# Introduction

## **'Brief Encounter'** A very grown-up fairy tale

**by Emma Rice, director and adaptor**

In *Still Life*, later to become *Brief Encounter*, Noel Coward wrote a play about an affair. Not a sordid affair but a love affair between two married people. An impossible affair, a painful affair, an unacceptable affair. It is written with such empathy, such observation, and such tender agony. This man knew what he was writing about. Imagine being gay in the 1930s and you begin to understand *Brief Encounter*.

Imagine the impossibility of expressing the most fundamental of human needs and emotions. Imagine the enforced shame, lies and deceit. Imagine the frustration, imagine the loss, and imagine the anger. Each of these emotions is delicately and Britishly traced through the meetings of our lovers. They experience a micro marriage, a relationship from beginning to end in a few short hours – and how many of us cannot relate to this careful and painful liaison? Not many, I'm sure. Can many of us go through a lifetime without meeting someone and feeling a spark of recognition that we shouldn't, an attraction that goes beyond the physical? And what a terrible world it would be if our emotions and spirits and psyches were amputated at the altar. And here is where real life ends and folk tales begin.

In the language of stories, we are able to examine the bargains that human beings make. We see how we bargain our own needs, the needs of the self, for various reasons. These reasons will be familiar to us all: the fear of being alone or of being excluded from 'normal' life. In the language of folk stories the

price of this bargain is often physical. A part of the body is chopped off - a hand (The Handless Maiden) or feet (The Red Shoes). We literally cut a part of ourselves off in order to conform or to be accepted. In Brief Encounter, both our lovers have chopped off part of themselves. It is delicately referred to, but Laura talks of swimming wild and free and of playing the piano. Both of these are forms of personal expression - not pleasing anyone but exploring the deep waters of the soul. Alec turns into a child when he talks of his passions, and fears that Laura will be bored. These are people trapped by the bargains that they have freely made - they have bargained their inner lives for stability, family and love. Oh yes, love. I don't for a moment believe that their marriages are all bad or that they are in any way victims. Presumably, their respective partners are as trapped by their own bargains and by the rules of society itself. None of us are victims, but we can review the bargains we make and escape in a profound way.

I have been reading many Selkie stories whilst making this piece. In these stories, a fisherman falls in love with a Selkie - or Seal Woman - whom he sees dancing on the rocks having slipped out of her sealskin. She too, falls for him. He takes her home and hides her skin. He cares for her and she for him; they have children and live a life of contentment.

One day, she finds her old skin in a cupboard. She washes and dresses the children, kisses them goodbye, puts on her sealskin and dives back into the sea. She never returns but sometimes the children will see a beautiful seal swimming far out at sea. This teaches us about our true self. No matter how much we try to repress our feelings or how much we wish to conform, our true self will always emerge. There can be no happily ever after until this true self, or nature has been accepted and embraced.

In the language of folk tales, in order to find one's true self, it is often vital that there is a near-death experience before our heroes and heroines can begin to heal and to re-form. In

Sleeping Beauty and Snow White our heroines are unconscious, almost dead, for long periods of time. In Brief Encounter our lovers also die spiritually when they part. 'I never want to feel anything again,' says Laura. This deep depression is an essential part of the process of change. It is something to be endured, understood and then moved away from. The end of the affair is not the end of hope or of love. It is part of the process of change. Alec will travel and see the world in a wider context. Laura will have to re-imagine herself, not just as a 'respectable wife and mother' but as a person in her own right.

My hope is that, like the Seal Woman, Alec and Laura escape. Not with each other in some idealistic romantic way but an escape provoked by the profound and personal awakening they felt when they met. We humans are fearful by nature - it is often somebody else who provides the catalyst for change but they are not the cause. Change can only happen from within. After our story ends, I like to think that our lovers will change. I imagine that Alec will make a real difference in Africa and find an expanse of spirit that seems untouchable in our story. I hope and dream that Laura will take up the piano again and perform on the world's greatest and most awe-inspiring stages.

As I write this, I wonder if these are, in fact, my dreams? That is the power of a great and enduring story; we can all own it and feel it and find something of ourselves in it.

# Background Information

The film 'Brief Encounter', was written by Noel Coward and premiered in 1944. It was based on a one act play that he had written in 1936 entitled 'Still Life' in which a love affair takes place between two married people.

It is no secret that the story parallels the emotions felt by Coward as a gay man living in Britain in the 1930's. Constrained by the judgemental and prudish society of that era, Coward experienced first-hand the anguish of not being to love freely.

Most of the filming of 'Brief Encounter' took place at Carnforth railway station in Lancashire. It has been suggested that this location was chosen because of its distance from the South East of England. Britain was still at war and blackouts were necessary and Carnforth was thought to be sufficiently far enough away to receive advanced warning of impending attack, thus giving time to turn out the filming lights.

Coward chose the soundtrack for the film, Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto and David Lean was the director. The two co-stars were Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson. Howard was an unknown actor at the time and was not the first choice for the role. Lean originally wanted Roger Livesey but after seeing Howard in a rough cut of 'The Way to the Stars' he changed his mind.

Celia Johnson on the other hand was always the director's choice. It was Celia who needed convincing that the film was for her. She didn't enjoy making films and it wasn't until Coward read the part to her that she wanted to do it.

When the film was first released, it was banned by the censorship board in Ireland who felt it portrayed the adulterers

in a sympathetic light. Elsewhere though the film was well received and director David Lean received his first Oscar nomination for his work on 'Brief Encounter'.

# Synopsis of the Play

Brief Encounter is a romantic drama set in 1945, during World War II. The action takes place around Milford Junction railway station, a fictional station where the main characters Laura Jesson and Doctor Alec Harvey meet by chance in the refreshment room. Both characters are married to another, but there is a strong attraction between them and after a couple of chance meetings they soon become more than just friends.

Laura is married to Fred whom she describes as 'not at all emotional' a description we later understand to mean lacking in passion. They have two children and appear to lead a financially comfortable life. Every week Laura travels to town to do some shopping and to go the cinema, and it is on one of these trips that she meets Alec. Laura has some grit in her eye and goes to the refreshment room for help; it is Alec who offers assistance. Through their feelings for each other the couple soon realise what is missing from their lives and the story then follows their anguish at discovering that neither of them is truly happily married.

Alec is keen to meet regularly with Laura and soon they are spending every weekly meeting engaging in a form of courtship – going to the cinema together, boating on the lake and dining in restaurants. Before long, it is clear that Laura and Alec have a strong desire to take their affair further. Laura is hesitant, constantly ridden by the guilt, but eventually she agrees to Alec's suggestion that they meet at his friends flat, presumably to consummate their relationship. Their plan is spoiled however as Alec's friend returns home early and Laura, riddled with shame, scurries away hurriedly.

Alec later catches up with Laura and they face the harsh reality that their affair cannot continue. Alec breaks the news to Laura that he has accepted a post in South Africa where he can



pursue his passions as a doctor. They arrange to meet for a final goodbye the following week. As they agonize over their parting and the end of their affair they are interrupted by a friend of Laura's. Their final goodbye is then spoiled as they fight to conceal their feelings in front of this intruder. Alec's train arrives and Laura is left with her friend, wondering what might have been. In a moment of despair she runs to the bridge over the railway line and looks as though she is going to end her life by jumping in front of the express train. Something stops her though and she returns home to Fred, the children and her marriage.

Throughout the play, juxtaposed with Laura and Alec's love affair are the affairs of Myrtle, the tea room manageress with Albert, the station master and Beryl, the tea room waitress with Stanley, the cake seller. In stark contrast to Laura and Alec, both of these couples are free to love and pursue their affairs. Myrtle and Albert are somewhat jaded by love, but are not romantically linked to any other and Beryl and Stanley are finding love for the first time.



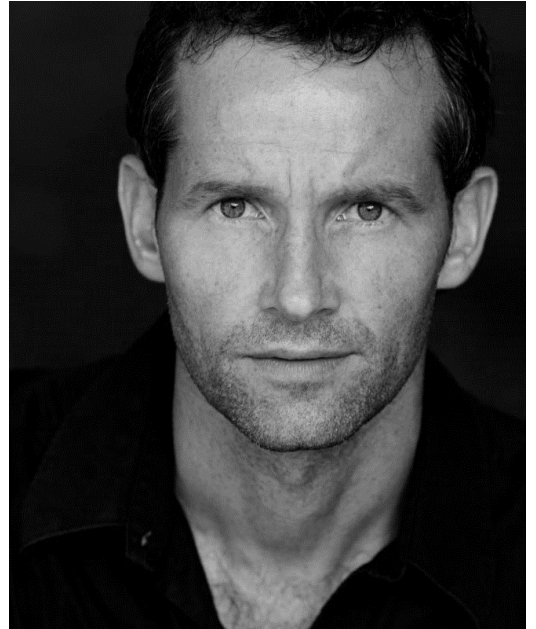
*Photo: Steve Tanner*

# Cast and Characters

## **Dr. Alec Harvey (Jim Sturgeon)**

Good looking, kind and flirtatious Dr. Harvey feels an instant attraction to Laura after getting some grit out of her eye at Milford Railway Station. He is married with two children and a successful career.

*'If you'd die, you'd forget me. I want to be remembered.'*



## **Laura Jesson (Isabel Pollen)**

Gentle, attractive and mild mannered, Laura Jesson thinks she is happily married until she meets Dr. Harvey. She has two children and a husband, Fred, whom she feels guilty betraying.

*'This can't last. This misery can't last....Nothing lasts really. Neither happiness or despair.'*



## **Fred Jesson / Albert Godby (Dean Nolan)**

Fred Jesson, husband of Laura, is a dependable, unemotional and reliable man. He is a creature of habit and routine.

*'You've been a long way away.....Thank you for coming back to me'*

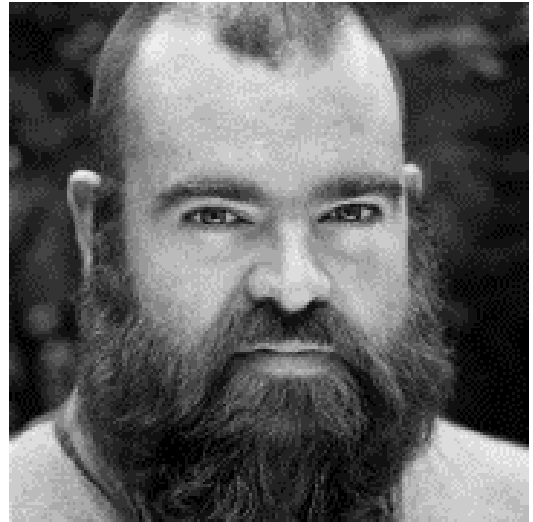
Albert Godby is a jovial, fun loving man who enjoys flirting with Mrs. Baggot in the refreshment room.

*'...you look wonderful when you're angry....., just like an avenging angel'*

## **Myrtle Bagot (Lucy Thackeray)**

Mrs. Bagot likes to appear to others as a strict, upstanding lady who commands respect from others. She is in fact just as fun loving as Albert with whom she enjoys regular liaisons!

*'If you don't learn to behave yourself - there won't be a tonight'*



## **Beryl, Waitress (Beverly Rudd)**

Beryl is a wonderfully naive young woman who works for Mrs. Bagot in the tearoom. She fancies Stanley the cake seller and enjoys flirting with him.

*'Mother will be waiting up'.*



## **Stanley, Cake Seller (Jos Slovic)**

Happy go lucky Stanley fancies Beryl and spends most of his time winking at her and playing the fool to make her laugh.

*'Are you walking home?'*



# Staging of the Play



*Photo: Steve Tanner*



*Photo: Steve Tanner*

# In Discussion

**Matt Wolf spoke to Isabel Pollen, who plays Laura Jesson, for Broadway.com**

**How familiar were you in advance with this production, which has been the signature show to date of its director-adaptor Emma Rice and her Cornwall-based Kneehigh company?**

I hadn't seen this particular play before, which may not have been such a bad thing since it meant I could come at it as a bit of a blank. Having said that, Emma is quite an inclusive director, so it does feel as if everyone has left a bit of their DNA on the piece.

**Didn't you know Emma, even if you hadn't seen this production?**

Yes, I had met her through an audition when I was at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and she remembered me! She really does clock actors in way that directors generally don't. I first got to know her helping to develop a stage production of *Rebecca*, but I was busy having a baby at the time, who is now almost two, so I was thrilled when this came along and I could work with her again.



*Photo: Steve Tanner*

**What is it about this title that endures, whether as Noel Coward's original play *Still Life* or as his celebrated screenplay for the 1945 David Lean movie?**

I think it's that you get to see three different love stories. The central one between my character, Laura, and Jim [co-star Jim Sturgeon] as Alec is the love story that cannot happen, so we get to experience what it could have been and then that gets taken away.

**But the film and the play don't stop there, do they?**

What's fantastic is that you also get the glorious stories of Myrtle and Albert at the station, which is a mature love and a wonderful love to be celebrated, and then you've got a third story, which is of young love and wonderfully clumsy and new and embarrassing and exciting.

**How does the production deal with all this?**

Very knowingly! You get these three insights into love and then Emma adds to them the Kneehigh style of theatre, where all senses are exploded: you've got music, you've got dance, and you've got the playfulness of theatre. There's this

rollercoaster of tears and laughter and fun and tragedy and everything you want, really—and it all happens in 90 minutes, which is not a bad thing.

**What’s your take on Laura herself?**

I think of her as a very good woman with a strong moral compass which is then held up at her: she meets somebody with immense magnetic charm and decides she’s going to go off track a little bit and then she decides, “No, actually.” But she does enjoy the slight risk of it for a little bit.

**How has it been working with Jim [Sturgeon], on a play where chemistry is crucial?**

I knew of Jim and he knew of me, but we’d never met. As soon as I auditioned with him, I thought, “Oh yes, I can see why this chap has been chosen.” It’s just one of those partnerships that really works. He’s fun, he’s direct, he’s professional: he’s all the things you want in Alec, and we have a lot of fun together, which is hugely important to me.

**Was it important to you to watch the time-honoured film of *Brief Encounter*, with the venerable Celia Johnson as Laura?**

I wanted to see the film as soon I knew about the part! That was to do with honouring the piece, but I think it’s also part of the homework: you do as much preparation as you can, but not so much so that you are blindly following suit. Funnily enough, where I live in London [Richmond, towards the west of the capital] is where Celia Johnson lived as well, so I definitely have been walking with her spirit.

**Have you taken a renewed interest in railway stations since joining this production—given how crucial they are to the unfolding relationship between Laura and Alec?**

There’s a little bit of that going on for me, yes. What’s amazing about train stations is that they are great people-watching places, just like airports or any place of transition. I’ve really enjoyed watching couples, particularly, getting on or off trains: that fundamental action is the same in 2018 as it was in 1945.

**What do you think of the abundance of music in the show, which ranges from Noel Coward standards to Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2?**

I listened to Noel Coward all during my [drama school] training, and it’s such a joy to have the richness of his wit. And it’s almost like Rachmaninoff saw the David Lean film and wrote the music for it—even though he didn’t.

*This interview originally appeared on Broadway.com. <https://www.theatre.com/buzz/191333/brief-encounter-london-star-isabel-pollen-on-romance-railway-stations-rachmaninoff/>*

# Sir Noël Coward

## 1899 – 1973



Noël Peirce Coward was born on 16th December 1899 in Teddington, Middlesex, England to Arthur Coward (sometime piano salesman) and Violet (soon to become the archetypal ‘stage mother’).

He made his professional stage debut as Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish* at the age of 12, which led to many child actor appearances in the next few years, amongst them Slightly in *Peter Pan* – which later caused critic Kenneth Tynan to remark – “Forty years ago he was Slightly in *Peter Pan* and you might say that he has been wholly in *Peter Pan* ever since.”

Several of his own early plays reached the London stage briefly but it was the controversial *THE VORTEX* (1924) that proved to be the breakthrough. With its overt references to drugs and adultery, it made his name as both actor and playwright in the West End and on Broadway.

Noël seemed to epitomize the spirit of the frenzied 1920s and a string of successful plays ensued – *HAY FEVER* (1925), *FALLEN ANGELS* (1925) and *EASY VIRTUE* (1926), as well as several intimate revues for which he wrote words and music such as *LONDON CALLING* (1923) and *THIS YEAR OF GRACE!* (1928). He also wrote his first ‘book’ musical *BITTER SWEET* (1929) which was a huge hit in the West End and on Broadway



The momentum continued into the 1930s. PRIVATE LIVES (1930) saw him appearing with a childhood friend, Gertrude ('Gertie') Lawrence and that partnership continued professionally with TONIGHT AT 8.30 (1936). CAVALCADE, produced at Drury Lane in 1931 was adapted for film and won a Best Picture Oscar in 1932. His revue WORDS AND MUSIC was produced in London in 1932 and introduced a young John Mills to the London stage.

Writer, actor, director, film producer, painter, songwriter, cabaret artist as well as an author of verse, essays and autobiographies, he was called by close friends 'The Master', a title of which he was secretly proud.

As World War II broke out he had two plays waiting to be produced – THIS HAPPY BREED and PRESENT LAUGHTER – but they would have to wait until 1943. Meanwhile, there was BLITHE SPIRIT (1941), a subversive comedy that ran longer than the war.

'Noël's War' was an active one... troop concerts at home and overseas... touring in plays... producing classic films such as IN WHICH WE SERVE (which he co-directed with a young David Lean as well as writing the score and playing the lead) and BRIEF ENCOUNTER... and acting as an unofficial spy for the Foreign Office!

The post-war years saw his star in temporary eclipse. Austerity Britain – the London critics determined – was out of tune with the brittle Coward wit. His plays enjoyed only modest success but Noël responded by 're-inventing' himself as a cabaret and TV star, particularly in America. In 1955 he played a sell-out cabaret season at the Desert Inn, Las Vegas which led a live TV spectacular on CBS with Mary Martin – TOGETHER WITH MUSIC. He performed many of his hit songs written from the

1920s onwards including MAD ABOUT THE BOY, IF LOVE WERE ALL, MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN and I'LL SEE YOU AGAIN. All in all he wrote over 600 songs.

He left the UK in the mid-1950s and settled in Jamaica and Switzerland.

In the early 1960s critical opinion in Britain turned yet again. He became the first living playwright to be performed by the National Theatre when he directed HAY FEVER there. 'Dad's Renaissance' – as Noël gleefully dubbed it – was underway and has never faltered since. He and his work are today more popular – and on a worldwide scale – than ever before.

Late in his career he was lauded for his roles in a number of films including *Our Man In Havana* (1959) and *The Italian Job* (1968)

In 1970 came the long overdue knighthood. In 1973 he died peacefully and was buried in his beloved Jamaica.

# Noël Coward

## Highlights of a life and career

### 1899 - 1938

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1899

16 December, Noel Peirce Coward born in Teddington, Middlesex, eldest surviving son of Arthur Coward, piano salesman and Violet. A “brazen, odious little prodigy”, his early circumstances were of refined suburban poverty.

1907

First public appearances in school and community concerts.

1908

Family moved to Battersea and took in lodgers.

1911

First professional appearance as Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish*, produced by Lila Field at the Little Theatre and revived in same year at Crystal Palace and Royal Court Theatre. Cannard, the page-boy, in *The Great Name* at the Prince of Wales Theatre and William in *Where the Rainbow Ends* with Charles Hawtrey’s Company at the Savoy Theatre.

1912

Directed *The Daisy Chain* and stage-managed *The Prince’s Bride* at Savoy in series of matinees featuring the work of the children of the *Rainbow* cast. Mushroom in *An Autumn Idyll* ballet, Savoy.

1913

An angel (Gertrude Lawrence was another) in Basil Dean’s production of *Hannele*. Slightly in *Peter Pan*, Duke of York’s.

1914

Toured in *Peter Pan*. Collaborated with fellow performer Esmé Wynne on songs, sketches, and short stories – “beastly little whimsies”.

1915

Admitted to sanatorium for tuberculosis.

1916

Five-month tour as Charley in *Charley’s Aunt*. Walk-on in *The Best of Luck*, Drury Lane. Wrote first full-length song, ‘Forbidden Fruit’. Basil Pycroft in *The Light Blues*, produced by Robert Courtneidge, with daughter Cicely also in cast, Shaftesbury. Short spell as dancer at Elysee Restaurant (subsequently the Café de Paris). Jack Morrison in *The Happy Family*, Prince of Wales.

1917

“Boy pushing barrow” in D.W. Griffith’s film *Hearts of the World*. Co-author with Esmé Wynne of one-

acter *Ida Collaborates*, Theatre Royal, Aldershot. Ripley Guildford in *The Saving Grace*, with Charles Hawtrey, “who ... taught me many points of comedy acting”, Garrick. Family moved to Pimlico and re-opened boarding house.

1918

Called up for army. Medical discharge after nine months. Wrote unpublished novels *Cats and Dogs* and the unfinished *Cherry Pan* (“dealing in a whimsical vein with the adventures of a daughter of Pan”) and lyrics for Darewski and Joel, including ‘When You Come Home on Leave’ and ‘Peter Pan’. Also composed ‘Tamarisk Town’. Sold short stories to magazines. Wrote plays *The Rat Trap*, *The Last Trick* (unproduced) and *The Impossible Wife* (unproduced). Courtenay Borner in *Scandal*, Strand. *Woman and Whiskey* (co-author Esmé Wynne) produced at Wimbledon Theatre.

1919

Ralph in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Birmingham Repertory, played with “a stubborn Mayfair distinction” demonstrating a “total lack of understanding of the play”. Collaborated on *Crissa*, an opera, with Esmé Wynne and Max Darewski (unproduced).

1920

Wrote and played Bobbie Dermon in “*I’ll Leave It to You*”, New Theatre, London 1921. On holiday in Alassio, met Gladys Calthrop for the first time. Clay Collins in American farce *Polly with a Past*. during the run “songs, sketches, and plays were bursting out of me”, First visit to New York, and sold parts of *A Withered Nosegay* to *Vanity Fair* and short-story adaptation of “*I’ll Leave It to You*” to Metropolitan. House-guest of Laurette Taylor and Hartley Manners, whose family rows inspired the Bliss household in *Hay Fever*.

1922

*Bottles and Bones* (sketch) produced in benefit for Newspaper Press Fund, Drury Lane. *The Better Half* produced in ‘grand guignol’ season, LittleTheatre. Started work on songs and sketches for *London Calling!*. Adapted Louis Verneuil’s *Pour avoir Adrienne* (unproduced).

1923

Sholto Brent in *The Young Idea*, Savoy. Juvenile lead in a musical review for which he wrote book, music and lyrics: *London Calling!*

1924

Wrote, directed and starred as Nicky Lancaster in *The Vortex*, produced at the Everyman by Norman MacDermott and transferred to the Royalty Theatre .

1925

*The Vortex* moved to the Comedy Theatre. Noël became established as a social and theatrical celebrity. Wrote *On With the Dance* (a musical revue), with London opening in spring followed by *Fallen Angels* and *Hay Fever* (which Marie Tempest at first refused to do, feeling it was “too light and plotless and generally lacking in action”). *Hay Fever* and *Easy Virtue* produced, New York. Wrote silent screen titles for Gainsborough Films.

1926

Toured USA in *The Vortex*. *This Was a Man* was refused a licence by Lord Chamberlain in the UK but produced in New York (1926), Berlin and Paris. *Easy Virtue*, *The Queen Was in the Parlour* and

*The Rat Trap* produced, London. Played Lewis Dodd in *The Constant Nymph*, directed by Basil Dean. Wrote *Semi-Monde* and *The Marquise*. Bought Goldenhurst Farm, Kent, as country home. Sailed for Hong Kong on holiday but trip broken in Honolulu by nervous breakdown.

1927

*The Marquise* opened in London while Coward was still in Hawaii and *The Marquise* and *Fallen Angels* produced in New York. Finished writing *Home Chat*. *Sirroco* produced, London.

1928

Clark Storey in S. N. Behrman's *The Second Man*, directed by Dean. Gainsborough Films productions of *The Queen Was in the Parlour*, *The Vortex* (starring Ivor Novello), and *Easy Virtue* (directed by Alfred Hitchcock) released – but only the latter, freely adapted, a success. *This Year of Grace!* produced, London and, with Coward directing and in cast, New York. Made first recording featuring numbers from this show.

1929

Played in *This Year of Grace!* (USA) until spring. Wrote and Directed *Bitter-Sweet*, London and New York. Set off on travelling holiday in Far East.

1930

On travels wrote *Private Lives* (1929) and song "Mad Dogs and Englishmen", the latter on the road from Hanoi to Saigon. In Singapore joined the Quaints, company of strolling English players, as Stanhope for three performances of *Journey's End*. On voyage home wrote *Post-Mortem*, which was "similar to my performance as Stanhope: confused, under-rehearsed and hysterical". Directed and played Elyot Chase in *Private Lives*, London, alongside Gertie Lawrence, Laurence Olivier and Adrienne Allen.

1931

Elyot Chase in New York production of *Private Lives* with Gertie. Wrote and directed *Cavalcade*, London. Film of *Private Lives* produced by MGM. Set off on trip to South America.

1932

On travels wrote *Design for Living* (hearing that Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne finally free to work with him) and material for new revue including songs 'Mad about the Boy', 'Children of the Ritz' and 'The Party's Over Now'. Produced in London as *Words and Music*, with book, music, and lyrics exclusively by Coward and directed by him. The short-lived Noël Coward Company, an independent company which enjoyed his support, toured UK with *Private Lives*, *Hay Fever*, *Fallen Angels* and *The Vortex*.

1933

Directed *Design for Living*, New York and played Leo. Films of *Cavalcade* (which won a 'best picture Oscar'), *To-Night Is Ours* (remake of *The Queen Was in the Parlour*) and *Bitter-Sweet* released. Directed London revival of *Hay Fever*. Wrote *Conversation Piece* as vehicle for Yvonne Printemps and hit song 'Mrs. Worthington'.

1934

Directed *Conversation Piece* in London and played Paul. Cut links with C. B. Cochran and formed own management in partnership with John C. Wilson and the Lunts. Appointed President of the

Actors' Orphanage, in which he invested great personal commitment until resignation in 1956. Directed Kaufman and Ferber's *Theatre Royal* at the Lyric and Behrman's *Biography*, at the Globe. Film of *Design for Living* released, London. *Conversation Piece* opened, New York. Started writing autobiography: *Present Indicative*.

1935

Wrote and Directed *Point Valaine*, New York. Played lead in film *The Scoundrel* (Astoria Studios, New York).

1936

Wrote and Directed and played in *To-Night at 8.30* – 9 short plays in which he and Gertrude Lawrence starred – Phoenix theatre London and National Theatre, New York. Directed *Mademoiselle* by Jacques Deval, Wyndham's.

1937

Played in *To-Night at 8.30*, New York, until second breakdown in health in March. Directed (and subsequently disowned) Gerald Savory's *George and Margaret*, New York. *Present Indicative* published, London and New York.

1938

Wrote and Directed *Operette*, London with hit song 'The Stately Homes of England'. *Words and Music* revised for American production as *Set to Music*. Appointed adviser to newly-formed Royal Naval Film Corporation.

## 1939 - 1973

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1939

Directed New York production of *Set to Music*. Visited Soviet Union and Scandinavia. Wrote *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed*; rehearsals stopped by declaration of war. Wrote for revue *All Clear*, London. Appointed to head Bureau of Propaganda in Paris to liaise with French Ministry of Information, headed by Jean Giraudoux and Andre Maurois. This posting prompted speculative attacks in the press, prevented by wartime secrecy from getting a clear statement of the exact nature of his work. Troop concert in Arras with Maurice Chevalier. *To Step Aside* (short story collection) published.

1940

Increasingly "oppressed and irritated by the Paris routine". Visits USA to report on American isolationism and attitudes to war in Europe. Return to Paris prevented by German invasion. Returned to USA to do propaganda work for Ministry of Information. Propaganda tour of Australia and New Zealand and fund-raising for war charities. Wrote play *Time Remembered* (unproduced).

1941

Mounting press attacks in England because of time spent allegedly avoiding danger and discomfort of Home Front. Wrote *Blithe Spirit*, produced in London (with Coward directing) and New York. MGM film of *Bitter-Sweet* (which Coward found "vulgar" and "lacking in taste") released, London. Wrote

songs including 'London Pride', 'Could You Please Oblige Us with a Bren Gun?' and 'Imagine the Duchess's Feelings'.

1942

Wrote, produced and co-directed (with David Lean) *In Which We Serve* and appeared as Captain Kinross (Coward considered the film "an accurate and sincere tribute to the Royal Navy"). He also composed the film's score. Played in countrywide tour of *Blithe Spirit*, *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed* and gave hospital and factory concerts. MGM film of *We Were Dancing* released.

1943

Played Garry Essendine in London production of *Present Laughter* and Frank Gibbons in *This Happy Breed*. Produced film of *This Happy Breed* for Two Cities Films. Wrote 'Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans', first sung on BBC Radio (then banned on grounds of lines "that Goebbels might twist"). Four-month tour of Middle East to entertain troops.

1944

February-September, toured South Africa, Burma, India and Ceylon. Troop concerts in France and 'Stage Door Canteen Concert' in London. Screenplay of *Still Life*, as *Brief Encounter*. *Middle East Diary*, an account of his 1943 tour – published London and New York – where a reference to "mournful little boys from Brooklyn" inspired formation of a lobby for the "Prevention of Noël Coward Re-entering America". The film adaptation of *This Happy Breed* by David Lean, Anthony Havelock-Allan and Ronald Neame showcased in London.

1945

*Sigh No More* with hit song 'Matelot' completed and produced, London. Started work on *Pacific 1860*. Film of *Brief Encounter* released.

1946

Wrote and Directed *Pacific 1860*, London.

1947

Garry Essendine in London revival of *Present Laughter*. Supervised production of *Peace in Our Time*. *Point Valaine* produced, London. Directed American revival of *To-Night at 8.30*.

1948

Replaced Graham Payn briefly in American tour of *To-Night at 8.30*, his last stage appearance with Gertrude Lawrence. Max Aramont in *Joyeux Chagrins* (French production of *Present Laughter*). Built house at Blue Harbour, Jamaica.

1949

Wrote screenplay and starred as Christian Faber in film of *The Astonished Heart*. Wrote *Ace of Clubs* and *Home and Colonial* (produced as *Island Fling* in USA and *South Sea Bubble* in UK).

1950

Wrote and Directed *Ace of Clubs*, London. Wrote *Star Quality* (short stories).

1951

Deaths of Ivor Novello and C. B. Cochran. Paintings included in charity exhibition in London. Wrote and Directed *Quadrille*. One-night concert at Theatre Royal, Brighton, followed by season at Café de

Paris, London and beginning of new career as leading cabaret entertainer. Wrote and directed *Relative Values*, London, which restored his reputation as a playwright after run of post-war flops. *Island Fling* produced, USA.

1952

Charity cabaret with Mary Martin at Café de Paris for Actors' Orphanage. June cabaret season at Café de Paris. Directed *Quadrille*, London, starring Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt. *Red Peppers*, *Fumed Oak* and *Ways and Means* (from *To-Night at 8.30*) filmed as *Meet Me To-Night*. September, death of Gertrude Lawrence: "no one I have ever known, however brilliant ... has contributed quite what she contributed to my work".

1953

Completed second volume of autobiography: *Future Indefinite*. King Magnus in Shaw's *The Apple Cart*. Cabaret at Café de Paris, again "a triumphant success". Wrote *After the Ball*.

1954

*After the Ball* produced, UK. July, mother died. September, cabaret season at Café de Paris. November, Royal Command Performance, London Palladium. Wrote *Nude With Violin*.

1955

June, opened in cabaret for season at Desert Inn, Las Vegas, and enjoyed "one of the most sensational successes of my career". Played Hesketh-Baggott in film of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, for which he wrote own dialogue. Directed and appeared with Mary Martin in a live television spectacular: *Together with Music* for CBS, New York.

1956

Charles Condomine in television production of *Blithe Spirit* for CBS, Hollywood. For tax reasons took up Bermuda residency. Resigned from presidency of the Actors' Orphanage. *South Sea Bubble* produced, London. Directed and played part of Frank Gibbons in television production of *This Happy Breed* for CBS, New York. Co-directed *Nude With Violin* with John Gielgud (Eire and UK), opening to press attacks on Coward's decision to live abroad. Wrote *Volcano*, not produced in his lifetime.

1957

Directed and played Sebastien in *Nude With Violin*, New York.

1958

Played Garry Essendine in *Present Laughter* alternating with *Nude With Violin* on US West Coast tour. Wrote ballet, *London Morning* for London Festival Ballet.

1959

*Look After Lulu!* produced, New York and by English Stage Company at Royal Court, London. Film roles of Hawthorne in *Our Man in Havana* and ex-King of Anatolia in *Surprise Package*. *London Morning* produced by London Festival Ballet. Sold home in Bermuda and took up Swiss residency.

1960

Wrote *Waiting in the Wings* – produced Eire and UK (Duke of York's, London). *Pomp and Circumstance* (novel) published, London and New York.



1961

Wrote and directed American production of *Sail Away* starring Elaine Stritch. *Waiting in the Wings* published, New York.

1962

*Sail Away* produced, UK (Savoy Theatre, London).

1963

Wrote music and Lyrics for *The Girl Who Came to Supper* (adaptation of Rattigan's *The Sleeping Prince*, previously filmed as *The Prince and the Showgirl*) – produced, USA. Revival of *Private Lives* at Hampstead signals renewal of interest in his work in the UK.

1964

“Supervised” production of *High Spirits*, musical adaptation of *Blithe Spirit*, Savoy. Introduced Granada TV's 'A Choice of Coward' series, which included *Present Laughter*, *Blithe Spirit*, *The Vortex* and *Design for Living*. Directed *Hay Fever* for National Theatre – the first living playwright to direct his own work there. *Pretty Polly Barlow* (short story collection) published.

1965

Played the landlord in film – *Bunny Lake is Missing*. Badly weakened by attack of amoebic dysentery contracted in Seychelles.

1966

Wrote and starred in *Suite in Three Keys* at the Queen's Theatre London, which taxed his health further.

1967

Caesar in TV musical version of *Androcles and the Lion* (score by Richard Rodgers), New York. Witch of Capri in film *Boom*, adaptation of Tennessee Williams' play *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More*. Lorn Loraine, Coward's manager and friend for many years, died, London. Worked on new volume of autobiography: *Past Conditional*. *Bon Voyage* (short story collection) published.

1968

Played Mr. Bridger, the criminal mastermind, in *The Italian Job*.

1970

Awarded knighthood in New Year's Honours List.

1971

Tony Award, USA, for 'Distinguished Achievement in the Theatre'.

1973

16 March, died peacefully at his home in Blue Harbour, Jamaica. Buried on Firefly Hill.

# 1940's Britain

'Brief Encounter' provides a great insight into British society marriage and the role of women in that era. Despite there being a war on, Laura appears to have escaped the hardships of rationing or having to join the war effort, but she is nevertheless a tortured soul. It is clear that Laura's marriage to Fred is a passionless one and that her role as a wife and mother is not fulfilling her. She is however, a typical middle class housewife of the 1940's and in those days, to have an affair was truly scandalous.

In the 1940's women who were married only went out to work if they were poverty stricken or of the right age (20-30) to be conscripted to help with the war effort. Once the war was over they were expected to return to their roles as housewives. It is difficult to imagine now but at that time, women were not welcomed in the workplace and it wasn't until 1946 the post office and civil service allowed women to work for them.

And so, the average housewife's routine revolved around her husband and children and any personal goals she may have she pushed aside in order to carry out what was expected of her as wife and mother.

Laura appears to be relatively content but it is clear that her marriage is more a marriage of convenience than of true love. During her encounters with Alec, she reveals her secret desires and passions, and it is through her attraction to Alec that she reveals her hidden personality.

The British 'stiff upper lip' is brilliantly demonstrated in 'Brief Encounter'. It was a time when emotions were reserved and feelings kept secret so for Laura and Alec to have declared their love for each other was both daring and risky. They both know however that they could not pursue their affair and the

guilt that they felt, influenced by society's view of adultery, forced them to go back to their marriages.



*Photo: Steve Tanner*



*Photo: Steve Tanner*

# Activities

The following activities are suggestions for ways in which teachers can engage students with the themes and characters in the play.

In order to help you find the right activities for your class please refer to the overview below.

## **‘Love Letters’**

Suggestions for Literacy based tasks exploring the themes of love and marriage. For some tasks the students are required to write from the perspective of a character from the play.

## **‘Debating Den’**

The students are asked to arrange their classroom for a debating session. They need to elect a chair to manage the debate and a panel of experts who need to carry out research to support their argument. The rest of the students form the audience who can be asked for their input. A list of suggestions for debate is provided.

## **‘My wife is having an affair...’**

This is a fun task that can be done prior to seeing the show. It encourages students to consider the viewpoints and feelings of people like Laura and Fred.

## **‘Reading between the lines’**

The students are asked to consider what signals are sent out when two people are attracted to each other. What is acceptable behavior?

## **‘Examining Brief Encounter’**

The students are given a series of questions to answer about the production of ‘Brief Encounter’ which will help them to write an essay or review about it.

# ‘Love Letters’

The following Literacy based activities can be used with your students after seeing the play ‘Brief Encounter’.

- **After the Affair** - Imagine you are either Alec or Laura and write a love letter to the other after the affair has ended. Decide how long it is after the affair and write about how life is now. Do you still feel the same way? How has it been since you last saw each other? Do you want to keep in touch?
- **Dear Diary** – Imagine you are Fred, Laura’s husband and write a diary entry for the day that Laura returns home and seems distracted by her thoughts. Do you know why she is like this? Are you aware of the cracks in your marriage? How do you feel about the fact that she went to the cinema with a stranger?
- **Agony Aunt** – Imagine you are an agony aunt for a women’s magazine and you have received a letter from Beryl about Stanley, asking for advice about love. What would you tell her? What sort of questions might she want answered? How will she know if it is love or lust that she feels for Stanley?
- **Love and Marriage Project** – Imagine you’ve been commissioned to write a book about attitudes towards love and marriage in 2018. Interview as many people as you can from different age groups and get their views. Use these to create your book. You could include photographs if any interviewees are willing to lend them. How do the views of different age groups compare or differ?
- **No Good at Love** – Students can discuss or write their thoughts on ‘No Good at Love’, a poem of Noel Coward’s which features in the production.

# ‘Debating Den’

This activity is designed to get your students debating issues raised by the themes of ‘Brief Encounter’.

The following list of issues can be discussed prior to reading the play or seeing the show or after.

**1) Marriage** – Do you believe in it? What are your views on divorce? Are there gender roles within marriage? Should couples share housework for instance?

**2) Monogamy** – Can we really be happy if we commit to a relationship with just one partner for the rest of our lives? Are humans by nature monogamous?

**3) Adultery** – What do you think about extra-marital affairs? What do you think constitutes cheating? How and why do you think affairs might happen? Are affairs immoral?

**4) Love** – Does love conquer all? What would you do for the one you love? What is the difference between love and lust? Do you believe in love at first sight? Do you believe in soul mates? Can you be in love with two people at the same time?

**5) Sexuality** – Does it matter what your sexual preferences are? Should you keep your sexual habits to yourself? When is it ok to have sex? What do you understand by the term consent?

## Setting up the Debate

It is important to give the students the responsibility for setting up the room as they wish it to be. This will give them ownership of the debating den and encourage them to engage. Once the room is organised, introduce the topic for debate.

## **Assigning the Roles**

Ask the students to volunteer to take on the various roles needed to hold a debate – chairperson/presenter, audience, experts. It is important to stress that you will need people to take on opposing points of view in order to make the debate fair. Asking the students to do this will encourage them to consider other points of view and will help keep them engaged. Remember to make it clear to all students that they are in role so some people may be expressing views that are not their own. All students will need to carry out some research into the area for debate, especially those who are taking on the role of an expert.

## **Let the Debate Begin**

Try as best you can to allow the students to manage their own debate but be on hand if it gets personal! Again, be clear when the debate is over and make sure that everyone comes out of role. Add to your list of issues for debate after you have seen the show.

# ‘My wife is having an affair...’

This is an activity which you can do prior to watching the play.

For this activity you will need to move tables and chairs in your classroom to resemble a TV station chat show. The task is to encourage an open debate in which the audience can participate like Jeremy Kyle. You will therefore need to identify someone to be the host (a role which you may prefer to take on yourself) and two people to take on the roles of the characters listed below. These two can be assisted with a small team of helpers who can give the characters advice about what they should say. The main dialogue can be improvised but Laura must admit to having the affair so that the audience can help Fred decide what to do.

**Laura** - Housewife, mother of two children, one boy, one girl. Married to Fred, a reliable, unemotional man who does not always pay great attention to Laura. She is a passionate but restrained woman who feels slightly restless in her married life. She has met another man and had a brief affair which she is deeply ashamed of. She does not ever want her husband to know and does not want her marriage to end.

**Fred** - Husband to Laura, father of their two children. Hardworking, consistent and steadfast man. Provider. Fred believes all is well in his world until he discovers that his wife Laura is having an affair. He wants to confront her and needs the help of the audience to do this. He does not want his marriage to end but he cannot ignore the affair.

It would be interesting to note what advice is given to Fred and Laura during this interaction and to re-visit the task after viewing the play. Have people’s sympathies changed? Do they feel more strongly drawn to the plight of one or other character



having watched the play? Why? Has the historical context affected their opinion? Does it make a difference that they only kissed?



*Photo: Steve Tanner*

# ‘Reading Between the Lines’

Gather together images of different couples. It would be useful to have images of both young and old and you may wish to find images of characters from television programmes that the students watch.

Ask the students to get into pairs and to examine an image of a couple. After discussing it with their partner, ask the students to list all that they can read from the image.

Are the couple attracted to each other or are they just friends? How can you tell? Does one person seem more interested in the other? Have they had a row? How can you tell? What does their body language indicate? If the two people are talking, what might they be saying to one another? How does the way they are dressed affect the way they are perceived?

Once they have done this, ask the students to swap their picture with another pair and repeat the exercise. When all pairs have examined two images ask the students to get into groups with those who have looked at the same image and compare notes.

When all groups have had time to discuss the images, ask them to consider what we see as acceptable expressions of love in British society. How does this compare to other countries and cultures?

# ‘Discussing Brief Encounter’

The following activity is designed to help students to develop a critical mind when viewing a piece of theatre or reading a play.

The following questions can be used as a starting point for a discussion, an essay or a review.

- 1) What does the story of Brief Encounter tell us about marriage in 1938? How have things changed?
- 2) How is the sexual tension shown on stage between the two characters of Laura and Alec?
- 3) Compare the courtship of Beryl and Stanley to the affair of Laura and Alec - what are the differences, what are the similarities? What does this add to the play?
- 4) What do you think the recurring images of waves and swimming represent?
- 5) How effective is the use of screen projection throughout the play? Why do you think projection is used in this production?
- 6) Why do you think ‘Brief Encounter’ has been brought to the stage? What kind of opportunities arise on stage that would not be possible in a film?
- 7) What do you notice about the speech and mannerisms of Laura and Alec compared to the other characters in the play? What does this tell us about their social standing?
- 8) What do you think stops Laura from ending her life?

9) If Laura and Alec were to have met in today's society what might happen? How might technology impact on their relationship?

10) In what way does the writing influence your opinion of the characters? Do you feel sympathetic towards Alec and Laura? If so, why?

11) How is music used in the production, and what effect does it have? Which musical moments stood out to you, and why?

12) Does this production of 'Brief Encounter' feel relevant to today's world? If yes, how does it achieve this? If no, why not? How might you do things differently in your own version of 'Brief Encounter'?

13) How is physical movement and dance used in 'Brief Encounter'? What do characters' movements say about them? Think about Beryl on the scooter, or Laura's and Alec's movements when they are in private versus when they are public.

14) Why do you think the production is set in a cinema? What does this add to the show?

15) At the heart of 'Brief Encounter' is a story about forbidden love and heartache, yet the production is peppered with funny moments. How is humour used to bring lightness and comedy to the story?

16) How did the staging, the set design and the lighting bring the show to life?

## **Bibliography**

### **Can Any Mother Help Me? Jenna Bailey**

*When, in 1935, a young woman wrote a letter to the women's magazine "Nursery World" women from all over the country wrote back expressing similar frustrations. This work brings together this collection of personal stories following an extraordinary group of women.*

## **Useful Links**

**The Noel Coward Estate**

<http://www.noelcoward.com>

**Kneehigh**

<http://www.kneehigh.co.uk/>

**Kneehigh's 'Brief Encounter' education pack**

<http://www.kneehigh.co.uk/userfiles/files/Kneehigh%20-%20Brief%20Encounter%20-%20Notes%20for%20Students.pdf>

**Is 'Brief Encounter' the most romantic film of all time?**

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/16/brief-encounter-romance>

**Emma Rice on her 2018 production of 'Brief Encounter'**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crAjzKeZwqk>

## **Image credits**

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