



PRESENT LAUGHTER

Education Pack



Created by the Noël Coward Archive Trust

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Introduction

By Kate Bassett, Literary Associate at Chichester Festival Theatre

Garry Essendine's day is not going to plan in *Present Laughter*. Noël Coward's comic protagonist has long cultivated an urbane manner, establishing himself as a swish West End matinee idol and world-famous 'romantic comedian' – one with droves of adoring fans and a close-knit circle of friends who form a kind of alternative family and who double, professionally, as his devoted management team. He is also, in private, a habitual playboy, a casual libertine. However, Garry's feathers are about to be sorely ruffled as his bohemian Chelsea flat turns into a near-farce – a flurry of slamming doors, misdialled phone numbers and alarmingly dogged admirers.

When *Present Laughter* premiered in 1942, Coward himself played the fortysomething Garry and, indeed, a teasing question raised by this depiction of theatrical folk offstage is to what extent Garry is a self-portrait of the 'real-life' playwright – Essendine being a magnetically charming but egocentric, discontented and sometimes drama-queeny creature (not to mention an anagram of 'neediness').

Coward readily acknowledged Garry to be a partially autobiographical caricature. Thanks to the many iconic publicity shots that Coward posed for in similar regalia, the fictional celeb's appetite for silk dressing-gowns flags up how Garry mirrors Coward's own debonair (not openly gay in 1942), artfully fashioned image. One might say the audience is invited to flirt with the notion that they are being treated to an intimate glimpse of Coward (or as good as) at home, like some theatrical equivalent of *Hello!* magazine.

As such, the play may be regarded as a merrily brazen piece of self-promotion. For sure, Garry loses his cool and has foibles but, by implicitly sending himself up, Coward actually makes himself seem all the more loveable – all the more humorous and not blindly conceited. As regards Garry's inveterate 'playing around',



comedy traditionally embraces a bit of permissive frolicking in a festive spirit: it offers a window for its protagonists – and for its audience members, psychologically – to merrily shrug off strict moral codes, for a little while at least. Behaving badly goes hand in hand with hilarious comic timing as Garry can't resist temptation and performs seemingly shameless volte-face, and, at the close of play, the tone of *Present Laughter* is more mellowly amused than censorious.

That said, far from being just blithely condoned by Coward, his protagonists have moments in this play when they condemn each other's libertinage with a ferocity that feels startlingly close to a self-rebuking, confessional exposé by the dramatist. Although it is often said that Coward was rock-solid in his self-belief, he leaves some conscience-nagging moral question marks hanging over the behaviour of the theatrical bohós he portrays here.

Garry also sounds painfully close to the iconically posturing Coward as he describes the trap of perpetually being in self-conscious performance mode - something like forever checking one's half-estranged image in the mirror, or always appraising oneself as if from some far corner of the room. Hesitantly confiding in his one-night-stand Daphne, he observes: "I'm always acting – watching myself go by – that's what's so horrible – I see myself all the time eating, drinking, loving, suffering – sometimes I think I'm going mad."

As Sean Foley, the Olivier Award-winning director of Chichester Festival's new production, observes, *Present Laughter* is a light comedy with some notable substance to it. It takes its title from Feste's song in *Twelfth Night* where the pleasure principle – a *carpe diem* proposition – mingles with the melancholic line, "Youth's a stuff will not endure." And Coward's play is, as Foley notes, "about a mid-life crisis: about somebody having to come to terms with ageing; needing to sober up in terms of their fame, their promiscuity, the way they lead their life; somebody realising that the personality they've constructed has become an albatross round their neck. We get to see Garry at a low and dark ebb while the piece remains a brilliant light comedy."

All too often, comedies are dismissed as shallow frivolity and, particularly during World War II, some critics wrote Coward off as an irresponsible flibbertigibbet, though he in fact contributed to the war effort, working in the fields of propaganda and intelligence, as well as offering entertainments that relieved the grimness of those years.

Foley particularly relishes how Coward executes "a kind of jiu-jitsu move on his critics" in *Present Laughter*. Included in Garry's string of irksome visitors is a maniacal rookie playwright with highbrow pretensions. Named Roland Maule, he obsessively attends yet scorns Garry's commercial hits as lacking any 'depth' whatsoever, as vacuous trash reducing the star's talent to modelling dressing gowns and making witty remarks. In retaliation, with choice quips en route, the incensed Garry trounces Roland's avant-garde script as hopelessly unstructured, plotless poppycock. And all this is within Coward's own skilfully structured, escalating sequence of maddening encounters. It's schematically taut whilst appearing to teeter on the verge of meltdown.

The Times review of the original production (which came into London in 1943), declared: "Mr Coward in this piece makes his points with the... precise snap of a well-sprung snuffbox." Although the play was written amazingly speedily, in only six days, Coward underlined – in his actual autobiography, *Future Indefinite* – that structuring is of "paramount importance" and that he had been planning *Present Laughter* in his mind "for nearly three years before I finally wrote it".

Foley adds that: "What you get in *Present Laughter* is both Coward's amazing line-by-line comic language *and* the craft of farce. In farce, the comedy comes from the situation - so a character can get a big laugh from opening a door. In Coward's world, the character opens the door *and* says a fantastically amusing line." He points up that performing comedies isn't merely fooling around either. "It demands a ferocious



attention to detail. Everybody has to know, at every moment, exactly where the focus is – don't move on the gag – and, far from just twittering on and wafting around with cigarettes, we're finding that really playing the stressful situations which the characters find themselves in is very emotional, and engagingly recognisable."

Remarkable, too, is this play's capacity for switching from droll to serious confrontations and back again, thereby challenging simplistic genre categories. Like *Twelfth Night* albeit in a different vein, *Present Laughter* risks pushing its characters towards the verge where fooling around is felt to have gone too far, to the point where it isn't funny anymore and at which the mischief-maker's 'licence' expires. It certainly never veers as close to grievously troubled relationships as Coward's early drama *The Vortex* (which features a cocaine-addicted protagonist and twisted mother-son relationship), but the aforementioned *Times* review even suggested that, "when things go wrong and they are always going wrong, life [for Garry and his satellites] comes perilously near to the confines of tragedy." Coward noticeably laced *Present Laughter's* dialogue, as well, with words not typically associated with merriment, with intimations of suppressed depression, mournfulness and loneliness, thereby hinting at potential depths and complex, ambivalent feelings in several characters, besides Garry.



Simultaneously, the set-up is playing almost Pirandellian games with the audience, in having actors playing *dramatis personae* who hail from the world of theatre-making and theatre fandom, many of whom, if not all, seem habitually prone to slip into play-acting or histrionics in their everyday lives, such that sometimes their interlocutors and the audience – and quite possibly the characters speaking – cannot tell if they are sincere or faking it. While constituting another amusing teaser, this is also intriguing and – more than is the case with the diva Judith Bliss in Coward's 1920s *Hay Fever* – it's unsettling.

Given that Garry is sometimes driven to explosive frankness – daring to voice hard truths very directly and repulse delusions – he may be regarded as having heartfelt feelings, a moral core and courage. However, the repeated blurring of veracity and acting disconcertingly leads back to the possibility that Maule's accusation of hollow superficiality stands, and maybe no-one whom we are watching fully means what they say.

Present Laughter has a sensitive side. How close some of the characters are to seriously 'going mad' is probably open to interpretation given that Coward was, privately, prone to nervous breakdowns himself. This play, nonetheless, casts a sharply satirical eye over sentimental phoneyes and superannuated brats with First World problems, or types whom some might now call "snowflakes". They recurrently inflate their relatively inconsequential experiences with the vocabulary of romantic melodrama or tragedy: "It's agony", "unbearable", "utterly miserable".

Comedy is often about timing, but issues of scale and emotional distance are also integral. Provided the consequences of the characters' actions aren't ultimately cataclysmic, audiences are prone to be amused both by wild exaggerators and, in turn, by those who pop their balloons of histrionic hot air.

Wry voices cut in forming a recurrent pattern of deflation through *Present Laughter*, getting irrationally magnified things in perspective so that what is seriously important can finally be understood. Garry's no-nonsense secretary, Monica, curtails his epic tirade about having to work with an "epoch-making, monumental, world-shattering, God-awful bore" with the terse précis, "What he's trying to say is that he doesn't care for Beryl Willard." And Garry's down-to-earth valet, Fred, having heard all the showy "weeping and wailing" exits whistling.

In terms of emotional distance and audiences watching comedies, the so-called "superiority theory of comedy" applies in that we are laughing *at* other's ludicrous follies and wild outbursts, having a more rational viewpoint as we spectate from the stalls. But we aren't simply 'superior'. We are identifying, not unsympathetically, with them too. It is as if we are watching through a one-way mirror, yet intimately seeing our own reflection at the same time.



Kate Bassett is Literary Associate at Chichester Festival Theatre, a script consultant and dramaturg. Her book In Two Minds: A Biography of Jonathan Miller is published by Oberon. As an arts journalist specialising in theatre, she has written for the Times, Telegraph and Independent on Sunday as well as hosting platform talks at the Barbican, National Theatre and British Library.

Production Photos: Katharine Kingsley and Rufus Hound; Tracy-Ann Oberman; Delroy Atkinson; Lizzy Connolly © Johan Persson

Structuring Present Laughter

By Noël Coward

Noel Coward created this synopsis prior to writing the script for PRESENT LAUGHTER, as a structural guideline for the piece. It is a fantastic insight into the way he approached writing, slotting pieces of the plot's puzzle together

The action of the whole play takes place in Garry Essendine's studio in London. When the curtain rises it is about 10.30 A.M. Daphne Stillington a young society girl comes out of the spare bedroom left in a man's pyjamas and dressing gown and wonders about rather helplessly. She finds a telephone and rings up a girl friend and persuades her to swear she spent the night with her.

Miss Erikson, a vague Swedish housekeeper appears to put the studio in order, she betrays no surprise on seeing Daphne. Presently, Fred, a rather familiar cockney valet also appears. Daphne implores them to call Mr Essendine, which they firmly refuse to do. Monica Reed, Garry's secretary, comes on with the morning's maid. Daphne makes elaborate excuses about having lost her key the night before. Monica is pleasant but unimpressed. Garry appears down the stairs rather flowery obviously having just woken up. The telephone rings and chaos begins – he wants his coffee – somebody wants him on the telephone. Daphne wants attention. He lavishes the servants with orders for breakfast – tells Monica to take all calls in the office and has touching 'good-bye-if-only-you-were-older-and-I-were-younger' scene with Daphne, finally persuading her to go back to her room and dress. When she has gone Monica returns – he has short business like scene with her and retires upstairs – more telephone for Monica – Fred comes in with two trays one of which he takes to Daphne and the other upstairs to Garry. Doing this there is a brief laconic dialogue between him and Monica.

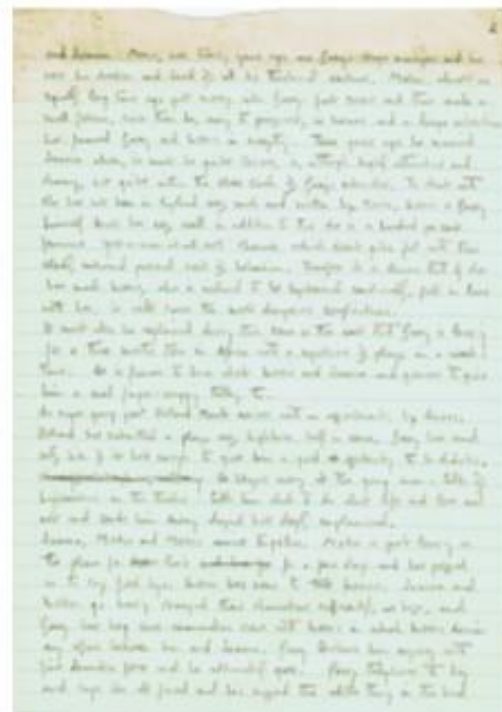
The bell rings and Liz arrives – Monica and she have short pleasant scene which is interrupted by Daphne re-entering in her evening dress and cloak of the night before. Liz betrays no surprise or embarrassment at seeing her although becomes voluble about her lost key etc. when she realises that Liz is Garry's wife. Liz charmingly and efficiently packs her off to her friend's house in her car.

Garry reappears, more or less directed, Monica goes into the office. Liz and Garry, drinking coffee, have a scene exploring their relationship. i.e. That Liz A. is not in love with him any more but calm and devoted. B. That she left him at least five years ago because she couldn't stand his general behaviour and C. warns him that Morris is having an affair, or at least is about to have an affair with Joanna, Morton's [referred to in Coward's synopsis as Morton and not Henry as it is in the play] wife. It should be made clear in this scene the exact relationships between Garry, Morris, Morton and Joanna. Morris, over twenty years ago was Garry's stage manager and his now director and head of all his theatrical ventures. Morton, almost an equally long time ago put money into Garry's first

success and thus made a small fortune, since then he, owing to perspicacity, in business and a large inheritance has advanced Garry and Morris in everything. Three years ago he married Joanna whom, it must be quite obvious, is, although highly attractive and charming, not quite within the close circle of Garry's intimates. To start with, she had not been in England very much and neither Liz, Monica, Morris or Garry himself know her very well in addition to this she is a hundred percent feminine 'get-a-man-at-all-costs' charmer doesn't quite sit with their closely outward personal view of behaviours. Therefore it is obvious that if she has made Morris, who is inclined to be hysterical emotionally, fall in love with her, it will cause the most dangerous complications.

It must also be explained during this scene or the next that Garry is leaving for a three months tour in Africa with a repertoire of plays in a week's time. He is furious to hear about Morris and Joanna and promises to give him a real finger-wagging talking to.

An eager young poet Roland Maude arrives with an appointment. Liz leaves. Roland has submitted a play, very high brow, half in verse, Garry has read only bits of it but enough to give him a good opportunity to be didactic. He blazes away at the young man – talks of highbrowing in The Theatre – tells him what to do about life, and love and art and sends him away dazed but deeply enamoured. Joanna, Morton and Morris arrive together. Morton is just leaving on the plane for Paris for a few days and has popped in to say good bye. Morris has come to talk business. Joanna and Morton go having stamped their characters sufficiently, we hope, and Garry has his own examination scene with Morris in which Morris denies any affairs between him and Joanna. Garry lectures him anyway with fine dramatic force and he ultimately goes. Garry telephones to Liz and says it's all fixed and he's nipped the whole thing in the bud.



Coward's handwritten structural guideline to Present Laughter

Staging the Play



Production photos: Rufus Hound; Rufus Hound and Katharine Kingsley; Rufus Hound and Lucy Briggs-Owen © Johan Persson

Director Sean Foley on PRESENT LAUGHTER



Present Laughter. 'It's quintessential – and autobiographical – Coward which', says director Sean Foley, 'is very, very funny. *Present Laughter* is, in my view, up there with *Private Lives* as one of Coward's two or three masterpieces.'

That's a view we can trust, since Sean is one of our leading comedy directors, actors and writers, with a long list of award-winning West End productions to his name including *The Play What I Wrote*.

'There's a quote from *Present Laughter*, 'All you do with your talent is to wear dressing-gowns and make witty remarks' which sums up the kind of perception Coward sometimes suffers from', Sean believes.

'But *Present Laughter* is actually about a character who is having a mid-life crisis – and who hasn't had one of those?! Garry Essendine is a theatrical matinee idol who has constructed for himself a very particular type of personality and through the course of the play comes to realise it doesn't fit him anymore and he's got to move on.'

Sean also points out that while Coward wrote the leading role of Garry for himself, the play offers brilliant comic parts for women. 'I'd say the winner of the evening's proceedings is Garry's estranged

wife Liz, who is this rather mysterious, very strong-willed, very witty woman who is more than a match for him.

‘And then there’s Monica, Garry’s secretary, who’s smarter than him, knows all his slightly schoolboyish ways and can deal with him brilliantly.’

Rufus Hound, whose stage work includes *Neville’s Island* in Chichester, and *One Man, Two Guvnors* and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* in the West End, takes on the iconic central role.

‘Garry is arrogant, in love with himself and incredibly vain – all for our comic benefit of course!’ says Sean. ‘It’s a play about the theatre, and the actor playing Garry needs to be someone who absolutely relishes being the centre of attention but has utter charm and charisma with it. Rufus has got those qualities. And while there have been successful older versions of Garry, Rufus brings it back to how it was originally written, which is someone who is just turning 40, wondering what is becoming of himself and the world as he does so.’

Having acted here in *The Critic* and *I Am Shakespeare*, and directed *The Dresser*, Sean is no stranger to the appeal of plays that make the theatre itself their subject.

‘In some sense, every play about the theatre is a sort of send-up, even if they’re quite serious ones; you can’t help but hold the mirror up to the vanity and self-regard that are a stock-in-trade of actors. But on the other hand – and I think this particularly applies to anyone who stands on stage and tries to make people laugh – there’s a sort of compelling, almost noble attempt to entertain us that most people would run a mile from attempting.’

‘Audiences love seeing backstage, whether in films, books or plays. People like reading about showbiz personalities. I don’t quite know why but they just totally love it. And the theatre has always been a metaphor for life.’

‘*Present Laughter* is a play that’s stood the test of time and delighted people for 80 years. Hopefully it will be a tremendously entertaining evening in the theatre.’



Photo: Sean Foley in rehearsals for Present Laughter; production image of Rufus Hound © Johan Persson

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!

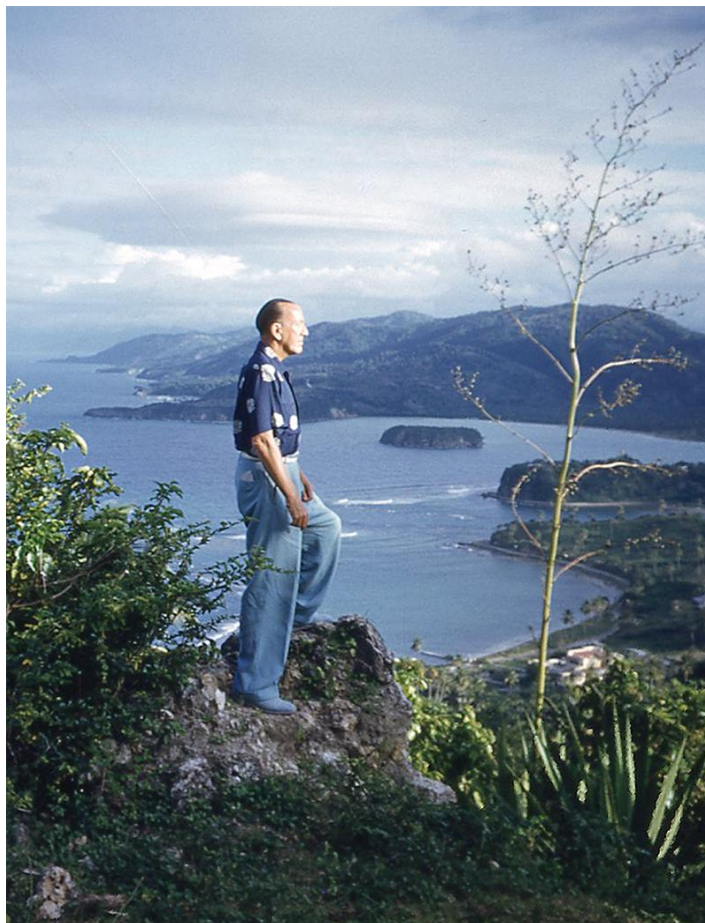
The post-war years saw his star in temporary eclipse. Austerity Britain – the London critics determined – was out of tune with the brittle Coward wit. His plays enjoyed only modest success but Noël responded by ‘re-inventing’ himself as a cabaret and TV star, particularly in America. In 1955 he played 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 in his Jamaican home Firefly

Noël Coward

Highlights of a life and career

1899 - 1938

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, Little Theatre. 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

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 (Ireland 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 in Ireland 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.

Discussion Starters

Questions about the Play

1. Why do you think the play is called Present Laughter? Is the play ultimately a comedy?
2. Do you think the play is autobiographical? Explain why or why not.
3. The play takes place in the middle of the 20th century. How does this come across? Think about the language, the behaviours of the characters, the set design and the costume.
4. How many characters are in the play and why do you think Coward chose these characters? What character types do they represent?
5. Think about the treatment of gender in the play. How are men and women portrayed? Is there a clear contrast between the two?
6. If you had to choose a scene from the play to act out, which scene/act would you choose and why?
7. What do you understand by the phrase 'star vehicle'? Is Present Laughter an example of a star vehicle?

Questions about the Production

1. Did you find the production funny? How was the humour created and maintained? What were your favourite moments?
2. How does Garry's physical presence onstage change according to who he is interacting with? For example, Garry and Liz, Garry and Monica, Garry and Daphne, Garry and Mole, etc. What do you think are the reasons and motivations for these changes?
3. What ideas do the set design and props give you about the life Garry leads?
4. How do the costumes represent each character?
5. What elements of the staging of this play make it similar to a farce?
6. How was music used in the production and what impact did it have?
7. Does this production 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 Present Laughter?

Useful Links



Noël Coward

www.noelcoward.com

The Noël Coward Archive Trust

www.noelcowardarchive.com

Chichester Festival Theatre

<https://www.cft.org.uk/whats-on/event/present-laughter>

Sean Foley and Rufus Hound on Present Laughter

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__aB6d38limw

Image credits

Production and rehearsal images: Johan Persson