

THE VORTEX by Noel Coward

A Resource Extra for students, teachers & individuals

The Vortex by Noel Coward is showing at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester from 17 January to 10 March 2007. It is directed by Jo Combes and designed by Lez Brotherston.

NOEL COWARD

Noel Coward was born in Teddington, Middlesex on 16 December 1899. He was born just in time to see the last Christmas of the old century, and it's due to his festive arrival that he was christened 'Noel'. Despite his flamboyance in later life and his apparent ease amongst the top tier of society, Noel Coward actually had humble beginnings. He was brought up in suburban south London, the son of a failed piano salesman, Arthur Coward. His younger brother was a very ill child and died very young, and as a consequence Violet, his mother, was utterly devoted to the young Noel.

Depending on which source is consulted, Coward began his professional acting career between the ages of 9 and 12. It is clear however that he enjoyed performing from a very young age. Community concerts, school prize giving events and even for house guests (he would apparently fly into wild tantrums if he wasn't asked to perform in front of guests!). By the time he appeared in *Peter Pan* (1913) at the age of 12, Noel had established a modest reputation as a child actor. One reviewer described him as "bursting with remarkable talent". However, in later life Noel described himself as "one of the worst boy actors ever inflicted on the paying public".

Noel spent his late teens performing in touring theatre and in occasional West End roles. He had been writing and co-writing scripts since the age of 19, but it wasn't until 1920 that he found some success. His play *I Leave it to You* opened in the West End and even though it was a brief run the play, and Noel's lead role performance in it, were given encouraging reviews. Unfortunately, his age meant that producers were unwilling to take a risk with him. He also made a visit to America where he hoped to sell some of his early scripts to Broadway producers. This was an unsuccessful trip. Tired, and low on money Noel returned to England, thankfully to see his luck change. A producer of a small theatre in Hampstead was very interested in producing one of Noel's two new plays, *Hay Fever* and *The Vortex*, but he couldn't decide which one. According to Noel, Norman Macdermott, the producer, favoured *Hay Fever*. However, in Noel's own words "...as

there was no good part for me in that, I managed to steer him over to *The Vortex*".

The Vortex opened on 16 December 1924 and it took London by storm. The subject matter was shocking to a 1920's audience but people loved his brilliant theatrical sense and skilful writing. Coward had written, directed and was now starring in the play that would run for a year in the capital and would ensure he would never be poor again. On transferring to the West End, the play was joined by three other of his plays – *Fallen Angels*, *On with the Dance* and *Hay Fever*. This gave Noel a 'four hits in one season' triumph, and signalled the start of a prolific writing career in which he produced over 40 plays and musicals, around 10 films and TV scripts, 15 musical revues and cabarets, not to mention his books of short stories and memoirs. All this is staggering considering Noel also directed, acted and sang in the majority of the work he produced.



Coward described the publicity he received following the success of *The Vortex* saying, "I was photographed and interviewed, and photographed again. In the street. In the park. In my dressing room. At the piano..." Look at a range of photos of Coward – what impression of him do they give? How would you describe him from the photos? How does this image compare with the impression you get from Coward's own writings?

It wasn't until after World War Two that Noel Coward's work began to be unfashionable. He became seen as a playwright disconnected from the new post-war, serious world, a theatrical world that demanded more 'realism'. His plays were viewed as silly and light-hearted affairs. Coward took the opportunity to buy a house in Jamaica and indulge in his love for painting, as well as reinventing himself as a popular Las Vegas Cabaret star, but he certainly didn't retire. He still continued to pen plays, books,

poems, songs and musicals, as well as appearing in the occasional film.

The 1960's saw a renewed interest in Coward and his work. No one enjoyed this peak more than Noel himself. He was suddenly in demand once more, on both sides of the Atlantic. This is a trend that remains today. Constant revivals of Noel Coward's work allow us to re-examine the beauty and wit of one of

the century's greatest writers. The writer John Osborne memorably once said "the 20th Century would be incomplete without Noel Coward: he was simply a genius, and anyone who cannot see that should kindly leave the stage."

Noel Coward died on 26 March 1973 at his home in Jamaica.

ANALYSING AN EXTRACT

Take a look at the following extract from the beginning of ACT II of *The Vortex*:

The scene is the hall of MRS LANCASTER'S HOUSE, about forty miles from London. When the curtain rises it is just after dinner on the Sunday of the weekend party – the gramophone is going, and there is a continual buzz of conversation. CLARA HIBBERT, an emaciated soprano is dancing with TOM VERYAN, HELEN with PAWNIE and NICKY with BUNTY. FLORENCE is seated on the club fender talking intellectually with BRUCE FAIRLIGHT, an earnest dramatist, the squalor of whose plays is much appreciated by those who live in comparative luxury. There must be a feeling of hectic amusement and noise, and the air black with cigarette smoke and superlatives. During the first part of the scene everyone must appear to be talking at once, but the actual lines spoken must be timed to reach the audience as the speakers pass the footlights. This scene will probably be exceedingly difficult to produce, but it is absolutely indispensable.

HELEN: It's much too fast, Nicky.
TOM: Do slow down a bit.
NICKY: It's the place that's marked on the record.
PAWNIE: I've never danced well since the War, I don't know why.
FLORENCE: But your last act was so strong, when she came in half mad with fright and described everything minutely.
BRUCE: I try to write as honestly as possible.
CLARA: I gave her three for manners, but seven for charm, because I had to be a *little* nice!
TOM: I thought she was rather a decent sort.
BUNTY: No, but really, Nicky, his technique completely annihilated his inspiration.

Why do you think Coward felt that this scene was indispensable? And why might it be 'exceedingly difficult to produce'?

Look closely at the extract, and if possible, at the rest of Act II. What does the scene tell us about the characters and the way that they relate to each other?

What effect does it have that everyone appears to be talking at once, and that we as an audience hear only snatches of their conversations?

Think about Coward's description of the mood: 'a feeling of hectic amusement and noise, and the air is black with cigarette smoke and superlatives'. What does this description conjure up for you? Make a list of all the things that come to mind when you read the description – it might be colours, emotions, or situations, not necessarily directly linked to *The Vortex*. Often theatre designers will begin to think about their design by collecting together images and ideas that remind them in some way of the play. From your list, can you see any different ways you might begin to capture Coward's description in a stage design? Think about the effect that lighting might have on the scene, do you imagine the scene as dark, or brightly lit? Should there be any coloured effects in the lighting?

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: Find an artist whose work you feel connects :
: with *The Vortex*. Think about how you might :
: use this artist's work if you were designing set :
: and costumes for the play. :
:.....

Bear in mind that Coward wrote the play for a Proscenium arch theatre. How do you think staging this scene with the audience end on might be different from staging it in the round? You could try staging the scene yourself with your audience in different positions. Which way do you feel best captures the style and atmosphere of the scene?

Finally, what is the effect of the music in this scene? In this extract, the music is played from a gramophone, and the dancers complain it is too fast. How might this add to or reflect the mood? Later on in the act, Nicky plays the piano while the couples dance. Do you think there is any significance in the difference between live and recorded music? In general, what effect do you feel it has on the play that Nicky is a pianist?

TIME AND PLACE

The change that ran through society at the end of the First World War acted as a release from the previous years of Victorian and more immediately, Edwardian propriety. The 'new woman' was born. She was called the 'flapper'. She was a rebel. Sexually promiscuous. She had an Art Deco dress with a flattened chest and a short skirt. It wasn't what we would call a short skirt now. It would have only exposed the knees, but in the 1920's that was shocking! The name 'flapper' is thought to have come from the sound of a young bird leaving the nest.

To listen to BBC news broadcasts from the 1920s go to: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/io_newsroom/1789014.stm

This post war backlash affected all levels of society. The wealthy people were known as the 'Bright Young Things'. This group flaunted laws and polite social customs. They would visit expensive and exclusive nightclubs, dance provocatively to the new jazz sounds and drink all night. They were seen by the older generation as low moral mischief-makers. You may think that this is how teenagers are seen now. However, remember this was the first time young people had ever really broken from the conventions of their parents. Thanks to the post-war economic boom, it was also the first time they had money of their own. Quite a bit of it, and now they had quite a bit to spend it on.

The label 'Bright Young Things' was attached to young, rich members of society. What does the label suggest about them or their behaviour? Discuss whether there is an equivalent group in current society. If so, who are they? What defines them?

Young women in particular were feeling the benefits of this new form of self-expression and not just socially. Back in 1918 women over the age of 30 were given the right to vote. They were beginning to find a voice. By 1928 everyone over the age of 21 would get the vote.

These young rich revellers were accused of being nothing more than hedonists (pleasure seekers) and decadents (excessive and self-indulgent), but it was short lived. The 1930's brought economic decline, the great depression and a movement to restore morality after the liberalism of the twenties. However this brief

ten-year period, known as the 'roaring twenties' is where we find our play *The Vortex*. This is the society that Noel Coward so accurately comments on.

Noel Coward was a 25 year-old man who loved the party scene. He revelled in high society. *The Vortex* was the play that gave him the money and reputation to do just that. The subject matter reflected a section of society that fascinated the young Coward. The new-found freedom and promiscuity, especially amongst young women, is highlighted by Florence Lancaster's 'affair' with Tom Veryan, and then later by Tom's passionate switch to Bunty Mainwaring. In fact the whole play unravels a network of hidden, past and forbidden relationships that the paying public would have found shocking to watch. On top of all this Nicky Lancaster is a drug user, a habit that became very fashionable amongst the 'Bright Young Things'. When one adds the veiled references to homosexuality, it becomes obvious why some of the more traditional journalists of the time described *The Vortex* as 'a dustbin of a play' (The Express) and 'the most decadent play of our time' (The People).

Write a feature article for a modern-style celebrity gossip magazine looking at the lives of the characters in *The Vortex*.

Noel Coward was a homosexual, but never admitted the fact in public. This is not to say people didn't know, but he was living in very different times. He acquired a belief from his parents, that one should keep ones private affairs, private. Coward also lived between two ages. His sexuality was most likely known amongst the 1920's liberal high society, and not seen as negative or restrictive. However times and attitudes hardened in the depression hit 30's, the war and post war 40's and 50's. By the time of the next great social revolution in the 60's Noel wasn't as high profile and there was no reason to break his silence. Despite pressure in his later life to admit his sexuality, he would most commonly reply with "There is still a woman in Paddington Square that wants to marry me. I don't want to disappoint her."

Create a timeline showing world events between Noel Coward's birth in 1899 and his death in 1973. Read examples of Coward's writing from different times in his life, and using your timeline think about how changes in the world may have influenced his work.

REHEARSAL INTERVIEW with David Fielder (playing Pouncefort Quentin)

With just under a week until the first preview performance, how is it all going?

Delightful – I always like working here because we get looked after so well as actors. The Director and Designer have decided on quite a revolutionary staging of this play. The play has three locations – there’s a London house, there’s a country house and there’s a bedroom in the country house, and we are having one set for all three locations, which is quite complex.

I always feel strange at this point in time as we start to run the length of the play. There’s usually a cycle that begins with getting the part and thinking you can do it, then reading the part and knowing you can do it, and then rehearsing the part and discovering that you can’t possibly do it at all! That tends to be the process, and so we’re at an exciting stage now because we’re getting ready to move from the rehearsal room into the Theatre.

Could you give us a quick brief run down on what the play is about and how your character fits into it?

The Vortex is a play about a dysfunctional family in 1924, except the family are from the upper-middle / lower aristocratic class and have loads of money. They have a huge mansion in the country and a huge mansion in London, and they spend their time between England and Paris. The husband clearly works and the wife doesn’t, and they are part of what was known as ‘the gay crowd’. I think when Noel Coward wrote the play it was a bit of a lambaste against society’s indulgence, and the sadness that it creates. They show off everything that should make

them happy, but they’re not, they’re in deep pain. My character is an old friend. I would say that he is on the conservative side of things – he is a flamboyant homosexual who would prefer it if people wouldn’t shout about it. He loves the high life, he loves all the partying, and he’s witty, sharp and rather shallow.

Do you think that it’s important that the Director has set the play in the original period in 1920’s?

I don’t think you should play around with the period of this play. When it first opened, *The Vortex* was very shocking to society as it showed people of certain class behaving in a shocking manner. The wife has a toy boy who is clearly known about by the father, and there is the issue of drugs – in fact they only just got permission from the Lord Chamberlain to put on the play at all. The play highlights the crack in the facade – everything appears glorious, whereas actually it’s rife with selfishness and the desire to put on a front when you pretend that your life is glorious. So I don’t think you can set it in another period.

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David Fielder describes the play as being about ‘the cracks under the façade’. Choose a section of dialogue from the one of the party scenes, and in between the lines that are spoken write what you think the characters are really thinking and feeling. Are there tensions under the surface? You could also try performing a section the play and then freezing the action while the characters speak their inner thoughts.

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SUGGESTED FURTHER RESEARCH

- MORLEY, S., 2002. Introduction. In: COWARD, N., *The Vortex*. London: Methuen
- COWARD, N., 1986. *Noel Coward Autobiography*. Methuen
- BELL, M., 1980. *The Context of English Literature 1900-1930*. Holmes & Meier

- Film: ‘Blithe Spirit’ (1945) Directed by David Lean
- Film: ‘Bright Young Things’ (2003). Directed by Stephen Fry
- Music: ‘The Compact Coward’ (1989)
- Musical: ‘The Wild Party’. Written by Andrew Lippa

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