

PRESENT LAUGHTER



UPSTAGE

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UPSTAGE WINTER 2010 *Present Laughter*

Present Laughter was written by Noël Coward in 1939 and first staged in 1942 on tour, alternating with his domestic drama *This Happy Breed*. Coward's play *Blithe Spirit* was added to the repertory for the tour later on. The play's title comes from a song in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* ("present mirth hath present laughter"). The plot follows a few days in the life of the successful and self-obsessed actor Garry Essendine as he prepares to travel for a touring commitment in Africa. Amid a series of events bordering on farce, Garry has to overcome his fear of his impending mid-life crisis. The story was described by Coward as "a series of semi-autobiographical pyrotechnics".

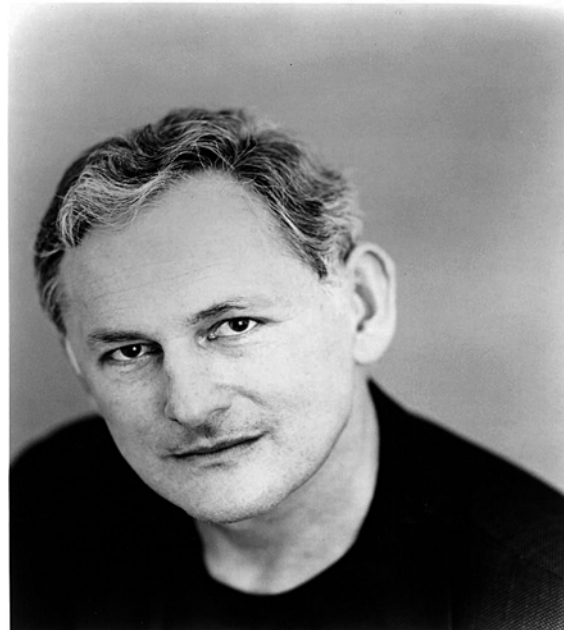
Below is an interview with actor Victor Garber (Garry Essendine) and Director Nicholas Martin which was conducted early in rehearsals as well as links to other Noel Coward resources.

Interview with the Director and Actor: Nicholas Martin and Victor Garber



This is the second time you are both working on this play together. You also collaborated on *Present Laughter* in 2007. Whose idea was it?

Nicky Martin: It has always been, for me, a great part for Victor and his schedule was always so crowded that we never had the chance to do it. Then he suddenly became free and I seized the chance to direct him in it. It's been collaboration from the



beginning. We cut the play together, talked casting together, so I always think of it as a mutual decision; but perhaps it was mine. It was almost the last play I did as Artistic Director at the Huntington in Boston.

Victor Garber: It was your idea. I rely on other people to tell me, "Oh you should do this." Nicky and I did the Scottish Play together, and that was also his idea. We did *The Royal Family* and then he wanted me to do the Scottish Play at the Old Globe in San

Diego and I said, “You’re insane. I couldn’t possibly play that role.” Then I sat down and started reading it and I thought, “Why not?” So we did that and it was a fantastic experience and very daunting. Then he said, “You should read *Present Laughter*” and I remember I had a copy out in LA and I started reading the play and I thought, “This is the greatest part for me.” I said, “We have to do this.” So when we did it in Boston and it was very successful, everyone would come from New York and say, “You’ve got to do this in New York.” Sure, but how, when and where? I always had a feeling we would get to do it and I’m so happy it finally happened here at the Roundabout.

It’s a bravura part; Coward wrote it for himself. What are the challenges for you, Victor? You’re on stage practically all the time, correct?

NM: May I answer that for a second? I would say, first and foremost, the role of Garry Essendine requires having talent, breadth, versatility and charisma, about as much charisma as you can summon. All of which Victor has. I would also say endurance, but I’m not playing it, so he can answer...

VG: It certainly requires endurance. When I started working on it the other day, I got to the end of the first act, just going over the lines in my apartment and I hadn’t even gotten to the second act and I was exhausted. What I really get about this part now is that it is stamina, it is endurance; but it is also the tone. You always have to be careful because he goes off on these tirades almost every scene and it can become monotonous and kind of annoying. You have to be able to find the lightness and the nuance of every moment. Really what is great about going back to the play is that I am finding what is really important to hit, what the play is really about and what really

touches this character deeply. It’s a beautifully written play and it’s very deceptive because it is very funny and yet there is something incredibly poignant and revelatory about the theatre and the lives of the people who are in theater. I was saying to someone the other day how happy I am to be back in Noel Coward’s world. I feel so comfortable in it.

Tell me something about your relationship to Coward. Is this the first time you have directed a play of his?

NM: Yes. I think *Present Laughter* is his best play. I also think to live in a time when there’s an actor like Victor who can truly realize this part is remarkable. A part that even Coward, if you examine the letters he wrote, said was exhausting. Coward spoke very deeply and urgently about the need for speed in the play. What they call in speech classes “rapidity of utterance”. Victor is right—the world of this play is such a comfortable world. And we are very lucky with the cast.

Tell me what you were looking for when you were casting the play.

NM: Highly trained actors who are both funny and have a depth because if you do Coward in a kind of classroom way where everyone is just talking very fast and holding cigarette holders and carrying on -- it is deadly. You have to bring a sense of urgency and reality to these people, and either you have that or you don’t. It is what’s called a sense of style. All the actors inhabiting this play have a sense of style. But they also have a sense of life.

Do you see it as high comedy or farce?

NM: High comedy, definitely. There are also some odd serious moments and some

moments that will feel familiar to a modern audience.

Well, certainly the midlife crisis that Garry is going through is relevant. But I'm never quite sure if he is 40 or not because he keeps playing with that...

VG: We've taken some liberties there because I'm older than the character really is, obviously. For me, one of the sweetest parts of this character is that he obviously runs the roost; but there are several times when he just stops and says to the character opposite him, "What are we to do?" He asks that question of almost everyone in the play at some point and I think that's so telling about this character. I feel it all the time –I get up and I look in the mirror and I say, "How did I get to be this old? It's not possible. What am I to do?" I think that Garry has reached a point in his life where it is starting to fade and how do we all deal with that? I think that's poignant for people sitting in the audience, thinking, "Wow, I can relate to that." Lying about your age or pretending you are not quite as old as you are. It's part of the human condition.

NM: What we call the midlife crisis now is when your body is beginning to go and your hair is falling out and changing color and you still feel like a child inside. Garry has that. And there is something about that happening to him that is both endearing and poignant. The child in actors has always got to be in play. I think that's a very important thing. I think that some of Garry's reactions, which can be described as temperamental or over the top, are really human reactions to these midlife changes. He is really just a child expressing himself.

One of the things I appreciate about this play is the bad behavior Garry indulges in. Is it fun to go there, Victor, to that

stereotypical place of misbehaving as an outsized, self-involved stage personality?

VG: Oh, it's most fun.

Tell me something about working with Nicky. What is it like?

VG: It is a mess and a disaster... (smiles)

That's why you keep working with him.

VG: We've been friends longer than most people have been alive and we started together working as actors before he wisely gave up his career as an actor and became a director.

NM: He pushed me out of acting. He said I was melancholy, depressing...

So, you were on stage together? In which show?

VG: *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the John Drew Theatre in East Hampton. I'm sure people will remember it.

Nicky, did you play Chasuble?

NM: No, I played Lane and another servant.

VG: And I played Jack. It was a production starring [Ellis Rabb](#) as Lady Bracknell. It was a wonderful time in our lives.

Did Ellis start that tradition of playing Bracknell in drag?

VG: No, [William Hutt](#) did, but Ellis, of course, said, "I did it before anyone else!" There was nobody like Ellis before or since. This was a very important time in both our lives and we became inseparable from that day on.

NM: We had both been told that we would be great friends and I think that makes you nervous.

VG: We both didn't really need a new best friend; we were both over-stretched as it was. But we became friends and one thing led to another. This is only our third play, I think.

NM: Yes. I feel like it's our 50th.

So, when Nicky gives you direction, Victor, does it have more resonance because he knows you so well?

VG: It is really about trust. If you don't trust your director and you think, "Does he really know what he is doing?" then you are in for a rocky time. Listen, I've worked with directors I didn't trust and did very well and, conversely, I've worked the other way too. But you know when you step into a rehearsal room with Nicky that you are going to have a good time. We all like to have a good time and really there's nothing better than coming to a rehearsal of Nicky's for me. Nicholas sets that tone. And he knows this world and he knows what he's doing. You know that the blocking is going to be great and it's going to look beautiful. What I love about the production and Nicky's sensibility is that it's something Noel Coward would actually like. I say that boldly, but I really believe that. I think this production is very true to the play. Our intention was to depict this world with the taste I think Noel would have approved of.

I think the one cardinal sin for Coward was to bore people.

NM: Garry Essendine's observations on theatre are dear to us because they're just as pertinent today as they ever were. Some critics thought of the play as prurient in its time because of the infidelities that are

spelled out. Coward wanted very much to do this play on television and none of the networks would do it.

Let's talk about working with the designers. How did you come to hire these specific people, Nicky?

NM: Well, [Alexander Dodge](#) is a young designer that I knew when I taught at Bennington and he always had the same sensibility as I about sets. I knew he would design something that was absolutely right for the world of the play, but that was also dazzling to behold because you have to do that for Garry and you've got to do it for this play. We've worked a lot together and we are very comfortable with each other. And Alexander himself comes from a world that is not unlike a modern version of the play. He really gets the sensibility of it. [Jane Greenwood](#) is someone I've wanted to work with all my life and this is our chance.

VG: I've worked with Jane before in one of my first jobs at Stratford, Connecticut in *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*. I can remember it as if it were yesterday because she looks exactly the same. She's ageless and she's one of the great designers. I feel so fortunate that she's doing this production. She also designed *Liberace* which I did for CBS. We often laugh about that. Jane is incomparable.

And Rui Rita is doing the lights. Have you worked with him?

NM: Yes, another good friend who I was happy to hire. I chose the music from a bunch of Coward stuff.

That was my next question. Will Victor be playing the piano?

NM: Yes, and singing.

VG: Every morning I walk to work and I listen to Noel Coward music. “World Weary” is a song that we do in this play. And it is uncanny how well it fits in; it is literally like it was written for this play.

NM: The song is not specified in the script, but Victor and I found it.

What was it written for?

VG A revue called *This Year of Grace*. I know that only because he says so in the live performance from Vegas that I listen to every day. He’s so underrated. I mean sometimes I think, “Who was writing lyrics like this? Or the tunes?” His talent is just dazzling to me. When I did *Blithe Spirit*, which is the only other Coward I’ve done, I remember thinking: “This is a world that I feel so comfortable in.” I think there is so much more there than he is given credit for. People assume that his plays are light and frothy...

I think the tide has turned there somewhat.

NM: The word “genius” is finally applied, as it should be. If you look at a list of his accomplishments, I don’t know who else in our time...Updike, maybe...

Or Alan Ayckbourn.

NM: But he doesn’t write songs.

Or direct himself. Coward directed himself. I read a wonderful biography that said when he was a child if his parents wouldn’t let him perform for company he would throw a terrible tantrum.

VG: He was driven and deeply ambitious. He created “Noel Coward” and that is impressive to me.

We were talking, before you came in, Nicky, about a comment that Peter Hall made about this particular play. He said that if it hadn’t been done in the 1940s, those women would be men, because of Coward’s sexuality. Then we talked about him coming up during Edwardian times when one’s private life was not public fodder. We lamented a little bit about how today’s celebrities have no privacy.

NM: There’s another reason we are affectionate about this play. The people in it are so well observed. I think everyone in the play is based on someone in his life.

Well, they say the character of Morris could be Jack Wilson, his lover and manager. And there was the secretary who was with him for forty years, Lorn McNaughtan, on whom Monica is based. And then either Joanna or Liz is based on a real actress, I believe. He wrote for specific people.

NM: Well, in this play he certainly did. And he wrote for [Gertrude Lawrence](#) and for himself, of course.

Victor and I were talking about how progressive he was in terms of writing about bisexuals in *Design for Living*. It titillated people enough that it gave him fame. He knew about publicity, wouldn’t you say?

NM: Oh God, yes. I think there is nothing about the theatre that he didn’t know or create, certainly the theatre of his time. They are very enduring plays. I don’t think any play of his, including the great *Private Lives*, which kind of peters away for me, or *Blithe Spirit*, has the depth that this play does. That’s why I don’t like to reduce it – either in presenting it, acting it, or speaking

of it – as just another play about crazy old actors because it is much more than that.

I get that. Of course, I'm being entertained by the wit of it when I read it. I laugh just at the image of Garry being in Africa...

NM: We have to look at it another way.

VG: Everyone comes away from it with a different feeling; but it is our job to unearth as much of it as we possibly can. And that's what we hope to do.

I want to ask you both a question for our younger readers. What advice, if any, would give a young person who wants to direct?

NM: I would tell them that after they have learned everything you can learn about the stagecraft (design, lighting and all that stuff), and after they've learned how to stage a play, and I feel you can only learn by doing it; the most important thing in directing is to create an atmosphere in the room that is so relaxed and so comfortable that the actors can do their best work. That's not to say that there isn't a certain amount of discipline in the room as well. But you hire actors who are disciplined. You are not a disciplinarian as a director. Cast actors with the chops and the skill and the depth to do that in a comfortable way.

I think that is terrific advice because certainly people will come back to you as a director if you give them a good experience.

NM: That's the point. I cast this show entirely on the phone, except for the young woman and that was a lucky break because her audition was remarkable.

Do you have any advice for young people who want to be actors?

VG: I didn't do the conventional way. I left school when I was sixteen. I never had an education. I was a musician and I got a job as an apprentice in a theatre company in Toronto because I knew that was what I wanted to do. I went about it in a way that nobody would advise anyone to do. Now I would say get into a theatre school at least to get some idea of what it is about. Nowadays it seems most kids just want to go to Hollywood and be movie stars. That is a crapshoot. I think if you look a certain way, you've got a shot. If you don't, you don't have a shot. For me, you have to have a passion for it. You have to believe that it is the only thing you can do. Because if you don't it is not going to happen. And also I think you can only learn to act by acting. You can go to classes and you can study and I totally support that. When I was working at the Yale Repertory Theatre, I would look at these young actors who were students at Yale and I was so envious and jealous because they were learning all these things that I never learned. I was just doing it. I learned to act by copying other people, which I am not ashamed to say. When I would see a play I would say, "What is it about that performance that makes it work?" And then I would try and adopt everything I could into what I did, and that's how I learned to act.

That's not unlike Coward. Coward was a self-made actor too.

NM: My whole generation learned to act by copying everything else. I can't say that's the most valuable way to learn because I also went to drama school. I will say there's a myth about actors that it doesn't matter how smart they are. It does matter.

VG: It is very different now than when I started acting. I think there is no one way to become an actor anymore. You have to follow your instinct. The biggest mistake I think most actors make is that they don't really trust who they are. When I was teaching acting, the most common problem was that people were "acting", they weren't being. They were always covering up who they were instead of revealing who they are. You have to reveal the character through you. I have a real hard time with actors I work with when someone starts "acting". I just literally recoil. I'm a big ham though. I'm a laugh whore. I believe there is a commitment to being true and that's where the comedy comes from and that's where the drama comes from. It is really just about telling the story honestly.

I think that is a great observation because even when the characters are over the top there has to be truth, otherwise we sort of lose interest in them. Would you agree?

NM: God, yes, I always agree with that.

I wanted to ask you both, if by some miracle Noel Coward walked into this room right now, what would you ask him?

VG: "Where can we have dinner?" I would just like to hear him talk and tell me stories about his life because I find him intriguing.

Is there something you would ask Sir Noel if he walked in, Nicky?

NM: I would actually talk to him about the precious quality of friendship. That's the subject with which I think *Present Laughter* concerns itself, and that is especially resonant for me because I belong to a circle of friends that has become true family for me.



Victor Garber is one of the most respected and talented actors of his generation. With six Emmy and four Tony nominations to his credit, he has been seen in some of the most memorable works of film, television and stage. Most recently, Garber portrayed San Francisco mayor George Moscone in Gus Van Sant's Academy Award®-nominated film *Milk*. Additional film credits include *The First Wives Club*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Legally Blonde* and the highest-grossing film of all-time: *Titanic*. For his work on television, Garber has been nominated for six Emmy Awards, including three for the ABC drama, "Alias," two for comedic guest-star roles on "Frasier" and "Will & Grace;" and a nomination for his portrayal of Sid Luft in the television movie "Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows." He most recently appeared in ABC's "Eli Stone," FOX's "Justice," "Laughter on the 23rd Floor," "Meredith Willson's The Music Man," ABC's musical version of "Annie," and in "The Wonderful World of Disney" film "Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella." Garber also appeared in the miniseries "Dieppe" and the TV movie "First Circle." Garber's earned four Tony nominations for his work in *Damn Yankees*, *Lend Me A Tenor*, *Deathtrap* and *Little Me*. He performed in the workshop of Sondheim's *Wiseguys*, and in the Tony Award-winning play *Art*. His stage credits also include the original Broadway casts of *Arcadia*, *The Devil's Disciple*, *Noises Off* and *Sweeney Todd*. Additionally, Victor garnered rave reviews in Sondheim's *Follies* for *City Center Encores!* And *Present Laughter*, directed by Nicholas Martin at the Huntington Theatre.

NICHOLAS MARTIN (Director). Broadway: *Butley*, *Match*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Rehearsal*. Off Broadway: *Why Torture is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them* (Public); *Saturn Returns*, *The New Century*, *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* (Drama Desk nom.), *The Time of the Cuckoo*, and *Chaucer in Rome* (Lincoln Center Theater); *Fully Committed* (Vineyard and Cherry Lane); *Full Gallop* (MTC and West Side Arts); *You Never Can Tell* (Roundabout); *Betty's Summer Vacation* (Obie Award, Drama Desk nom.) and *Sophistry* (Playwrights Horizons); *Bosoms and Neglect* (Signature Theatre). Regional: *The House of Blue Leaves* (Mark Taper Forum); *Dead End* (Ahmanson); *Macbeth* (Old Globe), and the West Coast and London productions of *Full Gallop*. Mr. Martin is the Artistic Director of Williamstown Theatre Festival where his directing credits include *Knickerbocker*, *She Loves Me*, *The Corn is Green*, *Where's Charley?*, *Camino Real*, *Dead End*, and *The Royal Family* among others. He is Artistic Director Emeritus of Boston's Huntington Theatre Company.

For More Information on Noel Coward, Please Visit the Following Resources

Times Online: Noel Coward's Enduring Talent to Amuse

The Noel Coward Society

BBC: Noel Coward

The Official Noel Coward Website



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