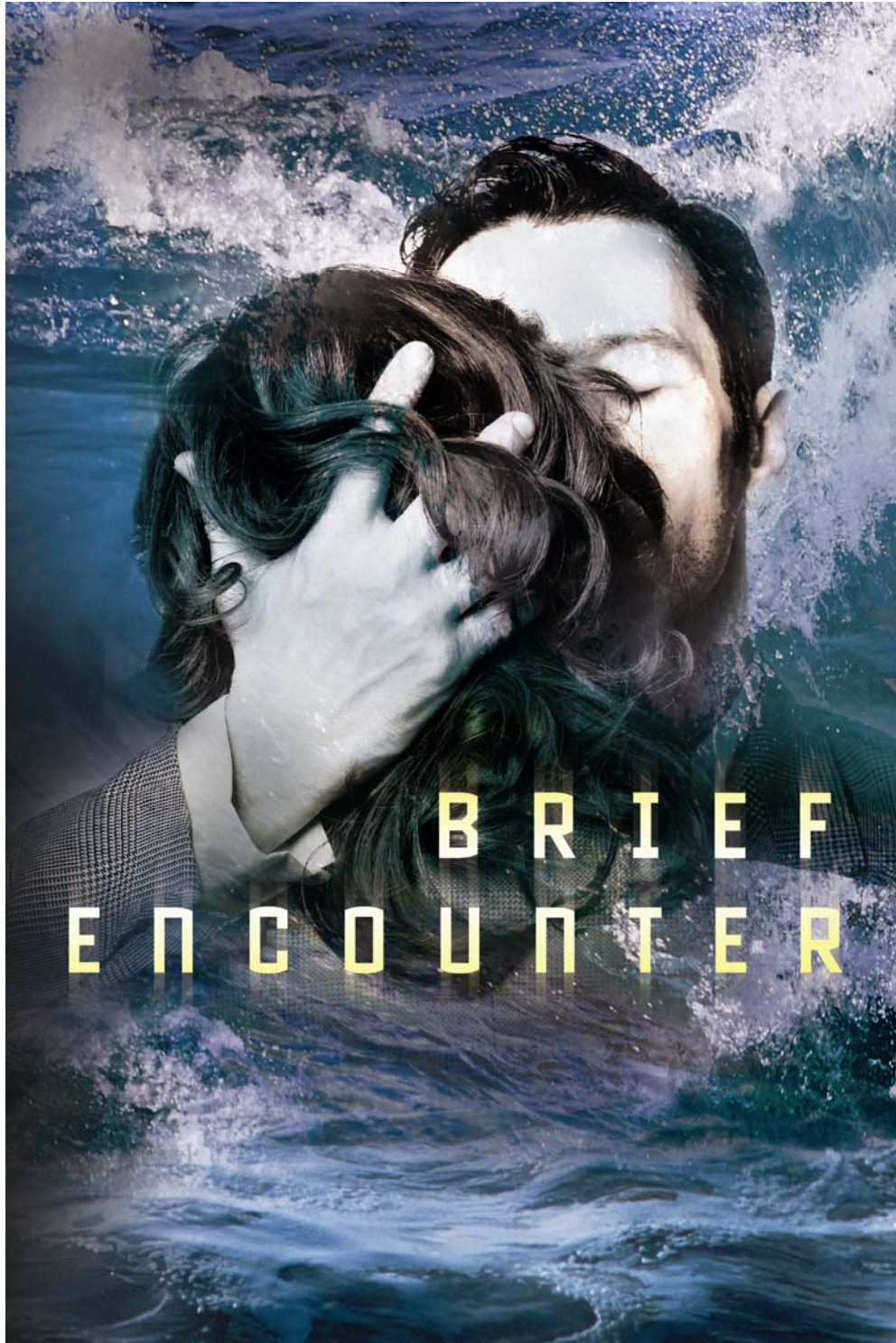


# UPSTAGE



BRIEF  
ENCOUNTER

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## **The Transmutability of Coal**

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## **Brief Encounter Playgoer's Guide**

### **From the Guthrie Theatre**

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### **From the Kneehigh Theatre**

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## THE SIMPLE NOTION OF GREAT STORYTELLING

An Interview with Emma Rice

BY DAN RUBIN

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Emma Rice is the artistic director of Kneehigh Theatre and the director of *Brief Encounter*, which she also adapted for the stage. She joined Kneehigh as an actor in 1994 and is responsible for pushing the company towards its internationally recognized style of idiosyncratic, intelligent storytelling. She has also directed for Kneehigh *The Itch*, *Pandora's Box*, *Wild Bride*, *The Red Shoes*, *The Wooden Frock*, *The Bacchae*, *Tristan & Yseult*, *Nights at the Circus*, *Cymbeline*, *Rapunzel*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, and *Don John*.

### YOU BEGAN IN THEATER AS AN ACTOR?

Yes, I trained as an actress and certainly worked the first 15 years of my career primarily acting. But I started to become involved with devising work, so I think I started developing my directorial skills as an actor and it became a very natural progression to gently slip out of acting and become a director.

### SO IT WAS A GRADUAL PROCESS RATHER THAN A DEFINITIVE MOMENT?

No, there was a definite shift: I was working with Kneehigh as an actor and they said to me, because I was so bossy by that point and shaping rehearsals during tours and having lots of ideas, "When are you going to direct a show?" And I said, "No, no, no, I don't need to direct." And they said, "Go on, Emma, go on. What would you direct?" And I knew exactly what I'd do, so they gave me a show. That very first show I directed I acted in, as well, and that continued for a few years: I put myself in shows and kept acting. Now I try not to. I love directing so much that I don't miss acting anymore.

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### WHAT WAS THAT FIRST SHOW?

*The Itch*, which was a version of a Jacobean tragedy called *The Changeling*.

### WAS KNEEHIGH YOUR FIRST ARTISTIC HOME AFTER YOU TRAINED AT GUILD-HALL SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND DRAMA?

I did lots of bips and bobs and I was with another theater company called Theatre Alibi for many years before I joined Kneehigh. And with Theatre Alibi I traveled to Poland, where I worked with the Gardzienice Theatre Association as a performer. I've had three theater homes really.



One of the barns in Cornwall where Kneehigh Theatre creates its free-spirited work (photo courtesy Kneehigh Theatre)

**BUT YOU'VE BEEN WITH KNEEHIGH SINCE 1994?**

Kneehigh is extraordinary and it was love at first sight. The Kneehigh barns, where we rehearse, are on the south coast of England in the county of Cornwall, so it is very wild and very beautiful. Kneehigh was this band of gypsies to my eyes, not like actors you'd meet in London. They were browned from the sun with wild hair and playing music. It was very exciting and very sexy. They were more like brigand rock stars than finely coiffured actors. I came with quite a serious and rigorous theater ethos, and they very much came from a comedy and clowning background, and I think there was a fantastic chemistry between us instantaneously, and that continues to this day really. I think that is why the Kneehigh brand works so well, because the comedy and the tragedy sit so beautifully next to each other. They gave me a sense of humor and brought a huge amount of joy into my work. And we sit outside the capital, which really makes a difference to us all: we are not part of the business. We are our own world that we create and inhabit.

**DOES THAT GIVE YOU MORE FREEDOM?**

It's freedom from the fear of being accepted. We do what we do. We're not constantly judging ourselves based on what other people think or, indeed, where our next job will be.



We are supported by our community, and we're also a community in ourselves, so we support each other. I think it's very freeing for the work that we come together here [in the barns] and make theater. We challenge ourselves on our own terms; we're not really guided or influenced by other people.

**WHEN DID YOU TRANSITION FROM A DIRECTOR WITH KNEEHIGH TO THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE COMPANY?**

It was such a gradual progression I can't even remember. I think it was five years ago now. It was natural. Kneehigh's been going for 30 years, and I've certainly learned from my predecessors that the only way to survive is to embrace change. And change was coming: my directing style was taking the work to different places and to different audiences.

**HOW SO?**

Kneehigh was famous because there were no theaters in Cornwall until about ten years ago, so Kneehigh traditionally has always performed outdoors: in woodlands and on beaches, on cliff tops and in car parks. And that meant the work was very bold, with broad brushstrokes, and often very funny. Because it started in the daylight, the work had to have a sort of almost brazen quality.

I think my work has kept a lot of the boldness, but it has fine-tuned a lot of the art and a lot of the performance. Also, the work has come indoors and, although I think we're still improved by the elements, I've really distilled a lot of the work we'd done in the open air. Another company was spawned out of Kneehigh called WildWorks, which has really taken all the open-air work. They keep working on a very big scale with lots of people. They have 200 people in a show and it's fantastic, but it's not what I want to do. I want to tell stories and find the emotion and the finely drawn human relationships that I think theater is about.

**DO YOU HAVE A PERFORMANCE SPACE IN CORNWALL NOW?**

Yes, there's a theater called Hall for Cornwall. It used to be the old town hall. We share it. It's not ours. And I say that we don't perform outdoors, but we still try to find unusual places [to perform], and our plan is to have a huge tent [The Asylum] that we can hitch up in exciting places in Cornwall. We would control the food and the music and the whole experience, and you'd still get to smell the sea air. We hope to tour nationally and internationally with The Asylum and really be able to deliver an experience from the minute people arrive at the space to the minute they leave.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS TOURING FOR KNEEHIGH?**

We've always toured because we've never had a theater of our own. And we've been touring internationally more and more with the work, which we love. I can't think of anything better than traveling with the group of people you make work with and meeting other communities across the world. We've been to Colombia and Brazil and China and Lebanon—we've been to some amazing places in the last few years. And, of course, the States!

**YET KNEEHIGH PRIDES ITSELF ON BEING TRUE TO ITS CORNISH ROOTS. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING YOUR WORK FOR OTHER CULTURES, BOTH IN ENGLAND AND INTERNATIONALLY?**

It's not really quantifiable; it's something that *is* rather than something we nurture. We had the oddest thing happen when we went to Australia with our show *Tristan & Yseult*. We started the show and suddenly all these Cornish flags were waving: the black and white flag of Cornwall. And you realize that so many people emigrated from Cornwall and there's a great sense of ownership of that.

I think that the main thing is that people realize we're not just a company of actors but a community, and that we're *from* somewhere. I think people are very excited when they see pictures of where we make the work and where we live. It's not just a city. It's somewhere very special. I think people really do respond to that, and we do as well: we not only know what we do, we know who we are, and where we come from, and I think that's a very strong and privileged thing in life.

**TELL ME ABOUT THE BARNs WHERE YOU MAKE THE WORK.**

It's a mini world. We've got a huge kitchen because food is very important. We love to eat and talk together: that's where a lot of the relationships and ideas are made. And we've got a rehearsal space, a music room, costume [storage], workshops. Also we can go and stay there when we make work. So for those weeks we drop everything and say, "We're going to make a show." We certainly don't live together all of the time. We all go and descend on the barns, and what's amazing is that, because there is nothing to do there apart from be there and be with each other, we keep working. People play music into the night. People have ideas. We laugh. Two weeks at the barns is like two months in the rehearsal room, and the work is so deep and such fun that you don't notice it's happening.

**WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS THE DIRECTOR WHEN THE WORK IS CREATED BY AN ENSEMBLE?**

I'm definitely the author of the work and the world that I wish to create, but the collective imagination is far greater than the individual's, so as a director I try to lay as many foundations as possible for the piece and then let the actors be as free within that world as they can possibly be, because they will always surprise me. They will always come up with something I would never have thought of. Many ideas come from many places. The trick is to have a strong enough vision that people have those good ideas because they understand the world that we're making. Nothing gets by me. I'm tougher than I pretend. I'm a collector and an editor, as well as an author.

**ONE OF THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN A.C.T. AND KNEEHIGH IS THE DESIRE TO REINVIGORATE CLASSIC LITERATURE. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT WHY YOU'RE ATTRACTED TO THESE STORIES?**

Theater is storytelling. Sometimes it becomes about lots of other things, but ultimately human beings like to come together and be told a story and to be transported. There's something very simple about that notion. I think there are probably very few great stories, and the great stories have survived because they hit a fundamental human nerve. So *Cinderella* is a classic story because there aren't many of us who, when we were young, didn't feel unloved, didn't feel ugly, and didn't feel that the world was turned against us. So those stories are told for good reason. They speak to us on a very profound level.

As a director I'm interested in those tales that talk to us about freedom and how to negotiate the responsibility of life with the needs and possibilities of being a human being. One of my first pieces of work was *The Red Shoes*, which is very much about how you deal with desire and obsession when society is telling you not to, what can go wrong, what the dangers are. With *Brief Encounter*, I've used a lot of scenes from the selkie tales, which tell of the seal woman who comes onto dry land and marries and has children, but ultimately kisses her children goodbye and swims back into the sea because that is who she is.

Different stories come to you at different times in your life and they're very, very powerful, and they do help you. A lot of them are about endurance, about when you think you can't go on. These stories say, "You can. You will. There are ways."

**WHEN DID YOU REALIZE YOU WANTED TO REVISIT *BRIEF ENCOUNTER*?**

It happened almost by accident, which is, of course, the best way. Stories visit you when you least expect them, and if you concentrate too hard—get too academic—you cut off your instincts. *Brief Encounter* literally caught my eye. Somebody was talking to me about

doing *Peter Pan* (which I didn't want to do), and I flicked my eye [towards the bookshelf] and said, "I don't want to do *Peter Pan*, but if you'd asked me to do *Brief Encounter* this would be a very different conversation." So that is how it started: my eyes catching sight of a book.

And, of course, I love it because I love love, and I love romance. It's the best feeling in the world, and a lot of my work is about that heady feeling of love and what happens to us. I love *Brief Encounter* because it is so British and so elemental. It's about falling in love with somebody that you can't have. I don't think there are many adult human beings who haven't been in that situation at some point in their lives. Then I started working on it. I had had that very instinctual draw towards the piece, but then I was knocked out with how sensational Noël Coward's words are: how beautifully observed they are. Then thinking about Laura's freedom on a feminist level . . . The first version of this play, called *Still Life*, is about choosing: you can choose to live or you can choose to have this still life in which your true desires and needs as a human being aren't being met, which I think happens to so many people.

**DOES LAURA CHOOSE THE STILL LIFE IN THE END?**

I hope not. In my version, she might not get her man, but I hope she gets herself.

**WHY DO YOU THINK IT'S A BRITISH PIECE?**

Maybe I'm wrong, but I think culturally in Britain we are very aware of how repressed we are and how restrained we can be. I think *Brief Encounter* is a lesson in restraint. Nobody really talks about their emotions. Laura never says, "I love you." There are things that are never said in this story, which I think is very British, but I hope that's also universal. I have no doubt an American audience will understand and respond to the piece and understand the human situation. I'm not worried about that at all and I'm very excited. But I would be interested to wonder if you could ever do an American production. Would Americans have had this relationship?

**I WONDER IF IT IS SLIGHTLY FOREIGN LESS BECAUSE IT IS IN BRITAIN AND MORE BECAUSE IT TAKES PLACE 70 YEARS AGO?**

In Britain people discussed how this affair wouldn't happen now: they would just sleep together. I really dispute that. I think all sorts of things are acceptable in society, but that doesn't mean they are less painful or that the issues are less fundamental. So, from my own experience, it doesn't feel dated. The accents might feel a little dated, but the situation . . . we all struggle to do our best and at times that is incredibly painful.



**WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF CREATING *BRIEF ENCOUNTER* LIKE?**

I was working with a script, which I don't normally do. I normally devise work, so this was a new process. Before I started working with any actors, I worked through Coward's songs and poetry and layered in lots of his lesser-known works, elements that delighted me and I had no doubt they would delight audiences as well. And then we worked. We did some what we call "R & D"—research and development. We did a week in advance, when, with the actors, I explored if this idea was going to work and worked on the design. Then we got together and started to put it together.

Our process always involves improvisation with character work. There's a great freedom in that process. Things come together very late. If you direct very strongly from word go you never know what you're going to miss. You just have your own vision. So it was a very playful process. And it's still changing now. There will be changes coming to the States. I still look at it and think, "Oh, I could do that a little bit different. Or a little bit better." Nothing fundamental, but I feel that a piece of theater is never done because the world around us changes. You always find new things to discover.

**WHEN WAS THE DECISION MADE TO HAVE LIVE THEATER AND FILM EXIST ON THE STAGE AT THE SAME TIME?**

I never wanted to replicate the film because, Why would you do that? It's a brilliant film that people can watch, so that was never the aim. But because it is such an iconic British film my first idea about the piece was that it had to be really referential to that film. But it also had to be very referential to theater. I wanted to boldly play with both those forms so that the audience would delight in the live event. This is why at times the curtain will come down and people entertain in front of it—that's a very British theatrical tradition. But we've also got the big cinema screen with people bursting in and out of it. I thought this had to be totally about film and totally about theater all in one evening.

**WHERE DOES THE MUSIC FIT INTO THIS?**

We've woven in not only some of Noël Coward's beautiful music but also there's an under-score of music that, with the film on the back wall, acts as a kind of metaphor for what's going on underneath the very restrained simple conversations. The sea on the back wall and this rolling live music (as well as some carefully chosen bits of Rachmaninov) takes us into that emotion, casting a spell over the whole production that is really irresistible.



Annette McLaughlin (left) and Beverly Rudd in *Brief Encounter* (photo by Steve Tanner)

**HOW DID YOU CHOOSE THE NOËL COWARD SONGS FOR THE SHOW?**

I feel the show is about love in all its forms. The three couples represent three different stages and parts of love. There's that beautiful song called "Any Little Fish"—"Any little fish can swim . . . But I can't do anything at all, but just love you"—which fits very nicely at the beginning when everyone is hopeful, before anything goes wrong. Then there's that fantastic poem we used called "I'm No Good at Love"; I feel the bitterness of the end the moment it begins. It's the most heartbreaking poem that Coward wrote, and he wrote it about himself. What a terrible thing love is: it's the most glorious sensation, but we also feel excluded from it at times. That fits in one of the characters' mouths so beautifully.

I went through Coward's whole canon looking for his insights into love. He was gay in the 1930s. He would have experienced more sadness and anger and shame than most, and you feel that coming through in his writing, as well as the beauty of it. When I hear the lyrics of the song "A Room with a View"—"A room with a view and you / No one to worry us"—it breaks my heart because, in his time, if he met somebody, that would have been all they wanted. Just some privacy to be themselves. So the songs chose themselves, really, and it was just the most wonderful task to look through his words. Because he's brilliant, as well: so naughty! He wrote some really naughty lyrics! I would have loved to have met him because he was bloody funny and bloody honest. It would have been remarkable.

## THE TRANSMUTABILITY OF COAL

An Interview with Scenic and Costume Designer Neil Murray

BY DAN RUBIN

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Neil Murray is an associate director and designer at Newcastle's Northern Stage, the largest producing theater company in northeast England. His design for *Brief Encounter* won the *Evening Standard* and Critics Circle awards and was nominated for the Olivier Award for Best Design.

### HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED WITH *BRIEF ENCOUNTER*?

I've known Emma [Rice] for a long time, and I worked with her and Kneehigh a few years ago [as codirector on *Pandora's Box*]. I came on board early on and we talked a lot about the world of *Brief Encounter* and what we needed to do given that there was going to be film. There are three different kinds of film [in this production]. There is the film that acts as a backdrop that establishes where we are. Then there is a screen that makes the audience actually feel as if they are in the cinema. We were always keen to merge live acting with film, so we devised a screen made of elastic with slits in it allowing characters to emerge from and disappear into film. They would, live, move into and through the film, and then we would be left with a film image of them, and vice versa.

Then there is the moment Laura is contemplating suicide, this incredible, fabulous moment when she climbs up on the bridge. We use a screen that runs on a wire, and someone tears across the space [with the screen] and immediately this train rushes across the stage [projected onto that screen]. It's a good moment.

We also talked a lot about the nature of the story and the kinds of locations. It was going to be a composite world, a strange world of amalgamate elements that somehow gel together. *Brief Encounter* is not a naturalistic world, but it is made up of naturalistic elements juxtaposed in a poetic way. For instance, when we first opened [at Birmingham Repertory Theatre], we had an enormous stage. So spilling into this world we had two enormous heaps of coal. Then we went to London and moved into a three-screen Cineworld cinema[, previously the Carlton Theatre on London's Haymarket, not far from where *Brief Encounter* the film opened in 1945], which was extraordinarily small given where we'd been. It was a bit of a nightmare. The coal heaps got very, very reduced.

### WHAT ADJUSTMENTS HAD TO BE MADE FOR A U.S. TOUR?

After London we did the British tour, which was months of touring to lots of theaters. We'd go to different-sized places, as with any tour. Also, because of the nature of touring,



Hannah Yelland (live onstage) and Milo Twomey (projection on screen) in *Brief Encounter* (photo by Steve Tanner)

company doing it, so we knew it was possible, and I'd seen a Dutch dance company use a similar thing, so I knew the process, but the making of it was a bit of a challenge.

**IS YOUR DESIGN OF THE TEAROOM AND RAILWAY STATION BASED ON A REAL LOCATION?**

No, because it came out of the workshops in Cornwall. The buffet bar—where the women serve tea and buns from—is the piano that, most importantly perhaps, the Rachmaninoff is played from. And that is a very Kneehigh way of working: they are rather anarchic, I suppose. They take the elements of a buffet and add a multifunctional piano.

you have to do a get-in on Monday morning and do your first performance on Tuesday night. That's tight. That's a bit scary. Adjustments were made. For instance, the coal heaps became sacks of coal because they are easy to get in and out. So what you have in San Francisco is what has just toured Britain because it fits into your theater as it is.

**IS KNEEHIGH BRINGING OVER THE COAL WITH THEM?**

Yes, as far as I know. But it's just the sacks. The coal is less significant now. It used to be a wonderful feature. But, hey.

**WERE THERE ANY DEBACLES WITH THE SPLITS IN THE SCREEN?**


It was a complete nightmare. We'd seen a film of a Spanish






# PLAY GUIDE

Guthrie's WorldStage Series presents  
Kneehigh Theatre's production of




NOËL COWARD'S



**BRIEF**

ENCOUNTER



originally produced by  
DAVID **PUGH**  
&  
DAFYDD **ROGERS**  
and  
**CINeworld**

adapted and directed by  
EMMA **RICE**

February 11 - April 3, 2010 • McGuire Proscenium Stage



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**GUTHRIE  
THEATER**

818 South 2nd Street  
Minneapolis, MN 55415

DIRECTOR  
Joe Dowling

612.225.6000 STAGE DOOR  
612.377.2224 BOX OFFICE  
1.877.44.STAGE TOLL-FREE  
612.377.6626 TTY  
[www.guthrietheater.org](http://www.guthrietheater.org)

A Play Guide published by the Guthrie Theater

RESEARCH: Kristi Banker, Jo Holcomb, Rachel Teagle,  
Belinda Westmaas Jones

GRAPHIC DESIGN: Luis R. Martinez

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This play guide will be periodically updated with additional information.  
Play Guide last updated February 18, 2010.

## SYNOPSIS

**W**hen Laura, a married woman travelling into town to shop, gets a speck coal dust in her eye, handsome Dr. Alec Harvey is quick to help her. But this chance encounter sparks an irresistible but utterly irreconcilable passion. They cherish their weekly meetings at the station, but their romance is destined to end prematurely: both are married, have children and are bound by devotion to their families. The train station comes alive with love, as two other couples (Beryl and Stanley, Myrtle and Albert) engage in more playful affairs of their own. Less stifled by societal mores, these couples create a comedic lightness that balances the bittersweet romance of the main characters. As Laura and Alec are carried along through this impossible affair, scarcely daring to share illicit kisses, they realize that they must part for good, and their heart-wrenching farewell is enough to bring tears to the hardest of hearts.

### CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

#### Laura Jesson

Rice describes the female lead as “a pleasant, ordinary married woman.” Married to Fred, she has a son named Bobbie and a daughter, Margaret. Before meeting Alec Harvey, Laura normally spent her Thursdays “doing the week’s shopping, exchanging [her] library book... and [going] to the pictures.”

#### Alec Harvey

Leading male. Alec is a General Practitioner in Churley who comes to London once a week to work for his friend and fellow practitioner, Stephen Lynn. Alec has a great passion for preventative medicine and tells Laura, “I’m respectable too, you know. I have a home and a wife and children and responsibilities – I also have a lot of work to do and a lot of ideals all mixed up with it.”

#### Myrtle Bagot

Manageress of tea room at Milford Junction. She is a sharp, independent woman who does not take kindly to men except, “I’ll say one thing for Albert Godby – he may be on the common side, but ‘e’s a gentleman.”

#### Beryl Waters

Myrtle’s young shop assistant. Fancies Stanley, the cake-seller.

#### Albert Godby

Station master and ticket inspector of Milford Junction who has taken a strong liking for Myrtle.

#### Stanley

Cake-seller who frequents the tea room at Milford Junction. Flirts with Beryl.



Photo: Hannah Yelland (Courtesy of Kneehigh Theatre)

#### Fred Jesson

Laura’s supportive and unobtrusive husband. Laura describes him to Alec as a man of “medium height, brown hair, kindly, unemotional and not delicate at all.”

#### Mildred

Works at the bookstall in Milford Junction.

#### Dolly Messiter

Interrupts Laura and Alec during their final moments together.

#### Mary Norton

Friend of Laura who does not know, but may guess at Laura’s affair.

#### Mrs. Rowlandson

Accompanies Mary Norton at The Royal.

# KNEEHIGH THEATRE

## HISTORY OF KNEEHIGH THEATRE

**B**ased outside of London in the southern county of Cornwall, Kneehigh Theatre originated in 1980 when Mike Shepherd formed an informal theater workshop. Known for its distinctly physical, musical, and visually-arresting style, Kneehigh seeks to tell stories that are relevant and emotionally charged in innovative ways. Past productions include *Cymbeline*, *Rapunzel*, and *The Bacchae*, which won a TMA-award for best touring show in 2004. Their latest show is their take on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the darkly seductive *Don John*, produced in association with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

## METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

**“S**tories have an ability to present themselves, to emerge as if from nowhere.” For the artistic director of Kneehigh Theatre, Emma Rice, *Brief Encounter* presents itself as a reaction to the liberating and trapping nature of love.

Rice explains the making of theatre as “an excavation of feelings long since buried, a journey of understanding... In my experience, our basic needs and desires are the same - to be communicated with, to be delighted, to be surprised, to be scared. We want to be part of something and we want to feel. We want to find meaning in our lives.” *Brief Encounter* addresses this need by presenting three pairs of lovers who experience the joys and complications of love.

Through the shared imagination of Kneehigh Theatre, *Brief Encounter* comes together through live music and visual performance. Rice believes in connecting the audience to the story through emotions, not through naturalism, by expressing emotional uplifts and falls through aerial work and cinematic effects.

“People should have a great night out; [they] should feel alive and changed. I’m passionate about the live experience... that a people come into a room and another group of people do something.”

## MORE FROM EMMA RICE

**“N**oel Coward wrote this fantastic love letter to love. With the three couples... you’ve got the central tragic, impossible couple; the young couple that don’t know anything apart from hope of it, the joy of it; second time love, [with a] lovely older couple finding it a second time. The play was a chamber piece; the film was a star vehicle [for the story]. Let the language of love bubble through.”

– Emma Rice, *Interview with St. Ann’s Warehouse*, Brooklyn, NY. December 2009.

**“It isn’t a happily ever after story and it never should be, really not what it’s about; I hope they find something more about themselves... that there is something bursting out of them in that still life, still marriage was not working for them.”**

– Emma Rice, *Interview with St. Ann’s Warehouse*, Brooklyn, NY. December 2009.



Photo: Annete McLaughlin and Joseph Alessi (Courtesy of Kneehigh Theatre)

**“K**neehigh is a team. The shared imagination is greater than any individuals so we begin the rehearsal process by returning to the story. We tell it to each other, scribble thoughts on huge pieces of paper, relate it to our own experience. We create characters, always looking to serve and subvert the story... Layer upon layer the world is created, the story released”

– Emma Rice, Artistic Director, Kneehigh Theatre

**“We lay the foundations, then we forget them. If you stay true to the fundamental relationship between yourself, your team and the subject matter, the piece will take on a life of its own. Armed with instinct, play and our building blocks of music, text and design, Kneehigh [does] fearless battle. One of our most used phrases in the process is ‘hold your nerve’. There is no room for neurosis or doubt, these will only undermine the process, hold your nerve, stay open and delight in the privilege of making theatre”**

– Emma Rice, Artistic Director, Kneehigh Theatre

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF *BRIEF ENCOUNTER* FROM COWARD'S ORIGINAL *STILL LIFE*

**I**t was then that Noël Coward, producer thought it was time for Noël Coward, actor to team up with Gertrude Lawrence and so he summoned Noël Coward, author to come up with a play in which the two would not bore themselves too terribly if they had to play it eight times a week. One of the Noëls came up with the smashing idea of writing not one, but ten plays (although only nine were used) that the two stars could perform in various combinations over a three night span. The one act plays (a neglected form which Coward was determined to revive) ran the gamut from light comedy, to psychological drama, to music hall, to farce, to musical fantasy and operetta, to melodrama.

Stephen Cole, *Noël Coward: A Bio-Bibliography*. Greenwood Press, London, pp. 17. 1993.

After an acclaimed London run, *Brief Encounter* made its U.S. debut in an extended engagement at both San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre earlier last fall followed by a run at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York, this January.

The play originates from Coward's one-act *Still Life*, taken from a cycle of 10 one-act plays comprising *Tonight at 8.30*. After the cycle's initial tour in 1935-6, Coward was prompted to produce three of his one-acts as feature films, one of which was *Still Life*. Coward went on to adapt *Still Life* into an 86-minute film, titled *Brief Encounter*, directed by David Lean, which premiered in Britain during 1946. The film has remained synonymous with excellence for British filmmakers ever since.

Emma Rice's adaptation of *Brief Encounter* seeks to incorporate Coward's initial stage piece with that of its feature film hybrid to create an amalgamation of creative genius. Not only does Kneehigh Theatre aim to present Noël Coward's work as it was written and as it has been

received by audiences throughout the last century, Kneehigh continues to challenge the expectations of theater-goers by producing a piece that is yet unlike any other in format. The process requires investigating cinematic as well as theatrical techniques to evoke a sense of wonder and nostalgia for love, adventure and loss.

Kneehigh Theatre's artistic director, Emma Rice, utilizes the theatrical experience as an opportunity to connect with the audience on a personal level:

The event of live theatre is a rare chance to [meet human] needs. We can have a collective experience, unique to the group of people assembled in the theatre. I don't want the fourth wall constantly and fearfully placed between the actors and their audience, I want the actors to speak to their accomplices, look at them, to respond to them. I want a celebration, a collective grasp of amazement. I want the world to transform in front of the audience's eyes and demand that they join in with the game. Theatre is nothing without the engagement of the audience's creativity. Theatre takes us right back to Bruno Bettelheim and his belief in the therapeutic and cathartic nature of stories. We tell them because we need them. —Emma Rice, excerpt from Kneehigh Theatre's website.

By demanding the participation, the full awareness of the audience through sensory and emotional combatants, Kneehigh Theatre establishes itself as a premiere source of theatrical exploration almost a century after Coward's initial tour of *Tonight at 8.30*.

## TIMELINE OF DEVELOPMENT

### 1935

Coward wrote the one-act *Still Life* as a part of *Tonight at 8.30* (a composite of nine one-act plays) for him to perform with Gertrude Lawrence. Tried out at Opera House, Manchester. October 15, 1935.

### 1936

Performed *Tonight at 8.30* at Phoenix Theatre, London. January 9, 1936 (157 performances). A nine week tour followed including Leeds, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Newcastle and Birmingham.

Trans-Atlantic performances include: Colonial Theatre, Boston October 26, 1936; National Theatre, NY. November 24, 1936 (118 performances).

### 1944

Coward adapted *Still Life* for David Lean's *Brief Encounter*.

### 1945

Cineguild releases *Brief Encounter* in Britain.

### 1946

*Brief Encounter* released August in the US.

### Radio broadcasts:

*Brief Encounter*, Academy Award Theatre CBS-Radio. November 20, 1946.

*Still Life*, Theatre Guild On the Air ABC-Radio. April 6, 1947; November 13, 1949.

*Brief Encounter*, Lady Ester Screen Guild Players CBS-Radio. May 12, 1947.

*Brief Encounter*, Lux Radio Theatre CBS-Radio. November 29, 1948; May 14, 1951.

*Brief Encounter*, Electric Theatre CBS-Radio. May 1, 1949.

*Brief Encounter (Still Life)*, BBC-Radio. May 4, 1955.

### Produced for television:

*Still Life*, Schlitz Playhouse of Stars CBS-TV, NY. October 26, 1951

*Tonight at 8.30*, Producer's Showcase NBS-TV, NY. October 18, 1954

*Brief Encounter*, NBC-TV Dinah Shore Show Chevy Show. March 26, 1961

*Brief Encounter*, NBC-TV Hallmark Hall of Fame. December 11, 1974

*Tonight at 8.30*, BBC. April 14, 1991

*Collins Meets Coward*, A&E. March 31, 1992

**All above information from:** Cole, Stephen. *Noël Coward: A Bio-Biography*. Greenwood Press, 1993.

### 2008

Emma Rice produces her own stage adaptation, *Brief Encounter*.



## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

**I LOVE ROMANCE.  
I ALSO LOVE FOLK TALES.**

*Brief Encounter* has surprisingly embraced both these passions.

**I**n *Still Life*, later to become *Brief Encounter*, Noël 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 as Alec and Laura are. 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.

–Emma Rice, October 27, 2008.

(from the forward of *Brief Encounter*)



Photo: Emma Rice  
(Courtesy of Kneehigh Theatre)



## WHAT THE CRITICS ARE SAYING

**Calling to mind a marionette show with visible puppeteers, Kneehigh's style is all about showing the workings while holding the audience in twhrall. The fourth wall is torn down and an unshakeable connection is made between spectator and performers. When that works - as it does here, in spades - audiences have an almost giddy-making sense of becoming complicit in the imaginative process.**

David Benedict, *Variety*, February 20, 2008

The magic does not cease once the actors have shown us to our seats and the musicians have strolled around the auditorium singing songs. As the lights go down our protagonists GP Alec and housewife Laura get up from their seats in the centre of the front row of the stalls and start arguing in the aisle, illuminated only by the torches of the rest of the cast, dressed as 1930s cinema ushers, who shush them to keep quiet. Seconds later, they are up on stage, walking straight through the screen, immediately to be transformed into a grainy black and white, one-dimensional film image. It's a moment where theatre and cinema merge, and it sums up what is great about this production, the technical wonderment, the humour and the sense of atmosphere – this is an experience rather than a play.

Chloe Preece, *London Theater Guide*, February 17, 2008

**Emma Rice's staging of Noël Coward's screenplay is a delight: moving, funny, gripping and, even at its most inventive, true to the original and its all-English heart.**

Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, February 19, 2008

“[Kneehigh Theater] is known for productions driven by visual and musical invention – theatrical rather than narrative imagination. And “Brief Encounter,” which was a hit in London (where it was presented, cleverly, in a converted movie house) and arrived in New York after a successful engagement at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, is a case in point.

Bruce Weber. “This Play Really Wants To Be a Movie.” *New York Times* .December 6, 2009.

“Just like Coward, Kneehigh is making its own bravura statements on the giddy and unpredictable nature of love – as well on what constitutes out-and-out genuine entertainment.”

David Finkle, *Theater Mania*, March 13, 2008.

“That big-screen weepy has made moviegoers swoon and sniffle for decades. The story remains intensely romantic. But its illicit, if chaste, love affair has never been so much fun and joyful.”

Joe Dziemianowicz, *New York Daily News*, December 9, 2009.

**Noel Coward's Brief Encounter” is a celebration of stagecraft, too. To reveal any of Rice's delightful, eye-pleasing surprises would spoil much of the fun. Better to just go and let the considerable enchantment of her ingenuity wash over you - much like the passion that engulfs the play's two unhappy lovers.**

Michael Kuchwara, *Associated Press*, December 9, 2009.

“To Rice, ‘It’s about impossible love, it’s about first love and it’s about second-round time love – all its joys and all its miseries.’”

Sarah Miller, *WNYC Radio*, December 7, 2009.



Photo: Milo Twomey and Hannah Yelland (Courtesy of Kneehigh Theatre)

# ON THE PLAYWRIGHT

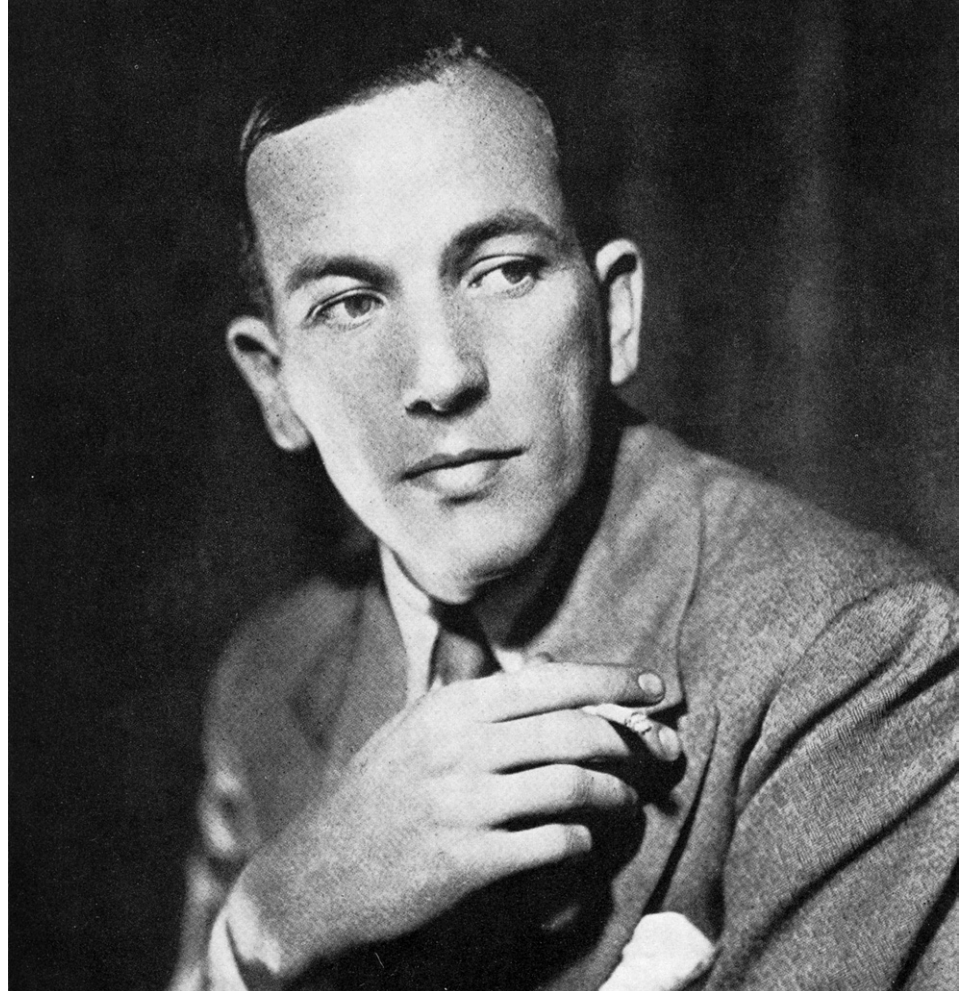
**P**erhaps best known today as a playwright, Coward was a man of multiple talents, considered by many to be the greatest all-around entertainer of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in 1899 to a middle-class family in Teddington, Middlesex, England, he rose to become an international celebrity, on friendly terms with the British royal family. Coward began his stage career as a child actor at the age of ten.

His first great success as actor/playwright came in 1924 with *The Vortex*, a succès de scandale that dealt with drugs and boy toys and established Coward the playwright as the angry young man of the 1920s. His next hits were the comedy *Hay Fever* and the operetta *Bitter Sweet* (1929). In 1930 he wrote *Private Lives* for Gertrude Lawrence and himself; they played to sell-out runs in London and New York. In 1935, he penned *Tonight at 8:30* (a collection of nine one-acts, played in repertory), which he and Lawrence performed in 1936.

Though Coward wrote more than 50 plays, revues, and musicals, he also created numerous short stories, a best-selling novel, a book of verse, several films, and more than 500 songs (including the famous “Mad Dogs and Englishmen”). He had a wide range as a composer and lyricist.

Coward was also an actor, producer, and director for stage, radio, television, and film. His film projects included *Brief Encounter*, which he wrote and produced, based on his one-act play *Still Life* from *Tonight at 8:30*. The film’s 1945 release was number two on the list of the top 100 British films of all time compiled by the British Film Institute in 1999. In 1943, Coward was awarded a special Academy Award for the “outstanding production achievement” of the film *In Which We Serve*, a patriotic wartime drama he wrote, produced, and co-directed and in which he starred.

In the 1950s, when postwar critics rejected the wit and charm of Coward’s boulevard comedies in favor of the gritty “low-life” (Coward’s words) drama of Britain’s new generation of “Angry Young Men,” he reinvented himself as a cabaret entertainer, based on his experience playing for troops during World War II. After several successful seasons in London, he brought his act across



Noël Coward, cover of “The Play,” 1932

the Atlantic in 1955, becoming the highest-paid performer to play Las Vegas. With successful British revivals of *Private Lives* and *Hay Fever* in 1963–64, the tide turned again in his favor. In 1970 he was awarded a special Tony Award for his “multiple and immortal contributions to the theater.” Coward was knighted in 1970 and died peacefully at his home in Jamaica in 1973.

## A COWARD CHRONOLOGY

### 1899

Born Noël Peirce Coward, December 16 at Teddington, Middlesex to Arthur Sabin Coward and Violet Agnes (Veitch) Coward.

### 1911

Made first stage appearance as *Prince Mussel* in *The Goldfish*.

### 1912

*The Great Name* with Charles Hawtrey and *Where The Rainbow Ends*. On February 2nd he made his directorial debut with *The Daisy Chain*.

### 1913

Played *Slightly* in *Peter Pan*. Noël met Gertrude Lawrence.

### 1915

*Where The Rainbow Ends* again in a different part. He played his first adult role in *Charley’s Aunt*. He also wrote both music and lyrics for his first song “Forbidden Fruit.”

### 1917

*Ida Collaborates* (written with Esme Wynne) produced on a British tour. Made first film

appearance in W.D.Griffiths' *Hearts of the World*. This year he served in the army.

### 1918

Coward has his second play produced, *Woman and Whiskey* (written with Esme Wynne). Wrote *The Rat Trap*.

### 1919

He had his first song published: "The Baseball Rag" with music by Doris Joel.

### 1922

*The Young Idea* (1921) produced in England (1932 in America). *A Withered Nosegay* was published.

### 1923

Played Sholto Brent in *The Young Idea* in the West End. Wrote songs and sketches and appears with Gertrude Lawrence in *London Calling!*

### 1924

*The Vortex* (1923) produced with Coward playing Nicky Lancaster. He became a sensation. Also *Fallen Angels* enjoyed a West End production. This year he also wrote his first radio sketch.

### 1925

Coward meets John C. Wilson. *Hay Fever* (1924) produced in Britain. *The Vortex* was produced on Broadway with Coward in the lead role. He also made his radio debut and first recording.

### 1926

*The Rat Trap* (1918) and *The Queen Was In Her Parlour* (1922) produced in Britain. Wrote *This Was A Man produced in America*, *The Marquise* produced in Britain (America 1927).

### 1927

The first film versions his plays produced; *Easy Virtue*, *The Vortex* and *The Queen Was In The Parlour*. *Home Chat* produced in Britain (1932 America). Coward composed "A Room With A View."

### 1928

*This Year of Grace* (1928) was produced in the West End, and on Broadway (with Coward appearing).

### 1929

Wrote book, lyrics, music and directed *Bitter Sweet* which was produced in the West End and on Broadway. He also wrote *Private Lives* this year.

### 1930

*Private Lives* was produced in London with Noël and Gertrude Lawrence as Elyot and Amanda. Wrote *Post-Mortem* and "Mad Dogs and Englishmen."

### 1931

*Private Lives* was produced on Broadway starring Noël and Gertrude Lawrence. Coward wrote the book, music and lyrics (including "Twentieth Century Blues"), and directed *Cavalcade* which was also produced this year at Drury Lane in the West End. Coward met Graham Payn at audition for *Words and Music*.

### 1932

The Noël Coward Company formed to perform his plays in repertory. *Cavalcade* won the Academy Award for Best Picture. For the revue *Words and Music* Coward wrote book, music and lyrics, including "Mad About the Boy." *The Queen Was In Her Parlour* filmed again as *Tonight Is Ours*.

### 1933

*Design for Living* (1932) was produced on Broadway with Coward and The Lunts (Alfred Lunt & Lynn Fontanne). *Design for Living* and *Bitter-Sweet* both filmed. Wrote "Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage Mrs. Worthington."

### 1934

*Conversation Piece* (1933) produced in Britain (starring Coward) and in America. Coward played his first major film role in *The Scoundrel*. He cut ties with C.B.Cochran and formed Transatlantic Productions with John C. Wilson and the Lunts to produce his plays and the plays of others. Wrote *Point Valaine*, produced in America (Britain in 1944).

### 1935

Wrote and starred in *Tonight At 8:30* in London.

### 1936

*Tonight At 8:30* produced in America with Coward.

### 1937

*Present Indicative*, the first volume of his autobiography published. Wrote "The Stately Homes of England."

### 1938

*Operette* (1937) produced. Adapted *Words and Music* (1932) for American production as *Set to Music*.

### 1939

*Design for Living* produced in Britain. Wrote *This Happy Breed* and *Present Laughter* but rehearsals interrupted by outbreak of war. From September 1939 to April 1940 Coward held post in Enemy Propaganda Office in Paris. The first television version of his plays produced *Hay Fever*. His first set of short stories was published: *To Step Aside*.

### 1940

Singing tour to Australia for the Armed Forces. Wrote *Time Remembered*.

### 1941

*Blithe Spirit* (1941) starts a long run at the Piccadilly Theatre in the West End (directed by and starring Coward), and on Broadway. He also began writing *In Which We Serve*. Wrote "London Pride" and toured New Zealand.

### 1942

Coward took *This Happy Breed* (1939), *Present Laughter* (1939) and *Blithe Spirit* on tour in Britain. London production of *Blithe Spirit* transferred from St. James' and then Duchess' Theatres where its run totaled 1997 performances. Coward played the lead in both and appeared as Captain Kinross (based on Louis Mountbatten) in the film *In Which We Serve* which he co-directed with David Lean. Coward won the special Academy Award for Best Production.

### 1943

*Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed* were produced in the West End with Coward in the leading roles. *This Happy Breed* filmed with Coward as co-producer.

### 1944

Coward continued to entertain the troops. *Middle East Diary* published. Coward toured extensively in South Africa. *Blithe Spirit* filmed with Rex Harrison. Wrote screenplay for *Brief Encounter*, based on "Still Life" in *Tonight At 8:30*.

### 1945

*Brief Encounter* was premiered. Wrote *Sigh No More* which is produced in Britain.

### 1946

The musical *Pacific 1860* (1945) produced at Drury Lane starring Mary Martin and Graham Payn. *Present Laughter* produced in America.



**1947**

*Peace in Our Time* (1946) produced. Appeared in *Present Laughter* in Britain.

**1948**

Coward made his last appearance with Gertrude Lawrence as a replacement for the ailing Graham Payn in *Tonight at 8:30* on tour in the US. He played *Present Laughter* in French (*Joyeux Chagrins*) in Paris. Wrote screenplay for “Astonished Heart” from *Tonight at 8:30*.

**1949**

*This Happy Breed* produced in America. Appears in *The Astonished Heart*. Wrote “Home and Colonial.” *Fallen Angels* revived with Hermiones Gingold and Baddeley.

**1950**

The musical *Ace of Clubs* (1949) produced at Cambridge Theatre.

**1951**

Coward launched a new career in cabaret at Café de Paris. *Relative Values* (1950) produced at the Savoy Theatre (America 1954).

**1952**

*Quadrille* produced at the Phoenix Theatre. Wrote “There are Bad Times Just Around the Corner.” Three plays from *Tonight at 8:30* filmed as *Meet Me Tonight*. The Vortex revived with Dirk Bogarde. Bought land in Blue Harbour, Jamaica and built his home, Firefly.

**1953**

Coward played in Shaw’s *The Apple Cart*. The Noël Coward Songbook published.

**1954**

*After the Ball* (1954) produced in Britain (America 1955). *Future Indefinite*, second autobiography, published. Coward’s mother dies on June 30.

**1955**

Coward made his television debut in *Together With Music* with Mary Martin. He also made his Las Vegas debut.

**1956**

Coward became a tax exile, giving up residence in England and moving to Bermuda. He made his Carnegie Hall debut narrating *Carnival of the Animals*. *Nude With Violin* (1954) produced at the Globe Theatre. Appeared on American television in *Blithe Spirit*.

**1958**

Coward made his first post-war Broadway appearance in *Present Laughter*. Adapted a Feydeau farce as *Look After Lulu* produced in America (and Britain 1959).

**1959**

Moved to Les Avants in Switzerland. Composed his first score for the ballet *London Morning*. Starred in the films: *Our Man in Havana* with Alec Guinness and *Surprise Package* with Yul Brynner.

**1960**

*Waiting in The Wings* (1959) produced. Published his novel *Pomp and Circumstance*. *London Morning* produced in Britain.

**1961**

Wrote and directed *Sail Away* on Broadway. Wrote a series of articles for *The Times* berating the new wave of English drama (Osborne and others).

**1962**

Wrote music and lyrics for *The Girl Who Came To Supper*. *Sail Away* (1961) produced in Britain.

**1964**

Coward directed *High Spirits* (based on *Blithe Spirit*) and received Tony nominations for directing and book writing. He directed a revival of *Hay Fever*, with Edith Evans, at the National Theatre, London to great acclaim. A collection of stories published under the title *Pretty Polly Barlow*.

**1966**

Coward appeared in the West End for the last time in his last three one act plays *Suite in Three Keys* (1965).

**1967**

*Bon Voyage* and *Not Yet The Dodo* were both published. Coward appeared as Caesar in Richard Rogers’ TV musical *Androcles and the Lion*. He also worked on the third volume of his autobiography (unfinished) *Past Conditional*. *Fallen Angels* revived with Joan Greenwood and Constance Cummings.

**1968**

*Post-Mortem* (1930) gets its first professional production on British TV. Coward was portrayed by Daniel Massey in a film biography of Gertrude Lawrence *Star!*.

Coward played Mr. Bridger in *The Italian Job*. *Hay Fever* revived with Celia Johnson and Roland Culver.

**1970**

Noël Coward was Knighted by Her Majesty the Queen (New Year’s Honours list).

**1971**

Received a Tony Award for distinguished achievement in the theatre.

**1972**

*Cowardly Custard* an anthology of Cowards songs and writings, was produced in London with great success at the Mermaid Theatre. *Oh Coward!* another anthology, produced for a Toronto nightclub, began a tour of North America. Coward received the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Sussex. Noël by Charles Castle published.

**1973**

*Oh Coward!* opened on Broadway. Coward made his last public appearance at a gala performance of *Oh Coward!* Noël Coward died on March 26 in Jamaica and was buried in the garden at Firefly.



Illustration of Noël Coward in *Private Lives* by British cartoonist Tom Titt, 1931

# COMMENTS FROM COWARD

**T**here is nothing more gratifying to the irresponsible human ego than getting an easy laugh. One silly man with one laborious little joke can cause an incredible amount of damage. It is a frightening thought that careless talk, enough careless talk, can cost more than lives. It might cost the future of Western civilisation.

*Middle East Diary*, August 5, 1943

**H**ow helpful it would be, moving so continually across the public vision, to know what that vision really observed, to note objectively what it was in my personality that moved some people to like and applaud me and aroused in others such irritation and resentment. How salutary it would be to watch the whole performance through from the front of the house, to see to what extent the mannerisms were effective and note when and where they should be cut down. I know, as all public performers know, that it is impossible to please everyone, but it would be a comfort to know for certain, just once, that I was at least pleasing myself.

*Future Indefinite*, 1954

**I've sometimes thought of marrying - and then I've thought again.**

From an interview in *Theatre Arts*, 1956

**N**owadays a well-constructed play is despised and a light comedy whose only purpose is to amuse is dismissed as "trivial" and "without significance." Since when has laughter been so insignificant? An actor-become-star who steps out and charms a large audience with his personality and talent is critically tolerated as though he was a performing bear. No merriment apparently must scratch the set, grim patina of these dire times.

*Play Parade: volume V*, 1958

**It is perfectly possible that I am out of touch with the times. I don't care for the present trends either in literature or the theater. Pornography bores me. Squalor disgusts me. Garishness, vulgarity, and commonness of mind offend me, and problems of social significance on the stage, unless superbly well presented, to me are a negation of entertainment. Subtlety, discretion, restraint, finesse, charm, intelligence, good manners, talent and glamour still enchant me.... Have I really or at least nearly reached the crucial moment when I should retire from the fray?**

*The Noël Coward Diaries*, October 29, 1961

**I** believe that the great public by which I've lived all these years should not be despised or patronized or forced to accept esoteric ideas in the theater in the name of culture or social problems or what not. I'm sick of the assumption that plays are "important" only if they deal with some extremely urgent current problem.

Problems? We live with them all day, every day, all our lives. Do we have to have them in the theater every night, too? I was brought up in the belief that the theater is primarily a place of entertainment.

The audience wants to laugh or cry or be amused. Swift entertainment not strange allegories.

"Noël Coward on Noël Coward," John G. Rogers, *New York Herald Tribune*, December 8, 1963

**Sum it up? Well, now comes the terrible decision as to whether to be corny or not. The answer is one word.**

**Love.**

**To know that you are among people whom you love, and who love you. That has made all the successes wonderful - more wonderful than they'd have been anyway, and I don't think there's anything more to be said after that. That's it.**

Noël Coward's film biography, *This is Noel Coward*, quoted in *Noel* by Charles Castle, 1972



# COMMENTS ON THE WORKS OF NOËL COWARD

**T**here are probably greater painters than Noël, greater novelists than Noël, greater librettists, greater composers of music, greater singers, greater dancers, greater comedians, greater tragedians, greater stage producers, greater film directors, greater cabaret artists, greater TV stars. If there are, there are fourteen different people. Only one man combined all fourteen different labels – The Master.

Lord Louis Mountbatten, 1969

**F**or us English dramatists, the younger generation has assumed the brisk but determined form of Mr. Noel Coward. He knocked at the door with impatient knuckles, and then he rattled the handle, and then he burst in. After a moment's stupor, the older playwrights welcomed him affably enough and retired with what dignity they could muster to the shelf which with a sprightly gesture he indicated to them as their proper place. ... Since there is no one now writing who has more obviously a gift for the theater than Mr. Noël Coward, nor more influence with the young writers, it is probably his inclination and practice that will be responsible for the manner in which plays will be written during the next twenty years. ...

It is in his dialogue that Mr. Coward has shown something of an innovator, for in his construction he has been content to use the current method of his day; he has deliberately avoided the epigram that was the fashion thirty years ago ... and has written dialogue that is strictly faithful to fact. It does not only represent everyday language, but reproduces it. No one has carried naturalistic dialogue further than he.

Somerset Maugham, Introduction to *Bittersweet and Other Plays*, 1929

**Noël Coward started out as a youngster supremely equipped to represent the disillusion of adolescence after the holocaust of war. For some reason these youngsters who had escaped death because they were too young to fight were very contemptuous of their elders who had escaped the war on the other margin of life. But they had learned to dance all night, to drink more than was good for them, always with abandon rather than with taste, to take drugs, to play with their health and the moral laws, to be condescendingly patient with the sins and frailties of their elders, and to be picturesque and self-consciously naughty. It was out of this material that the drama of Noël Coward was made.**

Thomas H. Dickenson, *The Contemporary Drama of England*, 1931

**[C**oward's] plays, in general, do not "date." Admittedly the idiom is personal and he often writes much as, in real life, he speaks; but that is merely to say that he writes with wit; and wit is a quality that does not date. The things that do date, in the theater, are attitudes of mind inspired by purely contemporary factors – political opinions, for instance, or moral judgements, or messages on How To Save the World. All such paraphernalia are happily mainly absent from Coward's work. He is interested only in humanity, its quirks and foibles, its vanities and idiocies, its prejudices and pomposities, and these things, as Congreve

and Sheridan have taught us, are changeless. What is more, he expresses that interest with a verbal dexterity unmatched in our time. It is not a difficult idiom to imitate – and many have done so – but it is impossible to reproduce. In fact, it is the imitators who now sound dated, not Coward.

Terence Rattigan, in *Theatrical Companion to Coward* by Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, 1957

**Coward's, I think, is an overpublicized but underestimated talent. ... In most authors the over and above, the work of the unconscious self, is usually concerned with sensibility; the conscious part is common-sensible. In Coward, as in Wilde and Congreve and Swift – and, I suspect, all important satirists – the conscious aim is to be sharp and glittering, amusing; the over and above is tender, it speaks of a practical and rather feminine good sense.**

Tyrone Guthrie, *A Life in the Theatre*, 1959

**W**ho would have thought the landmarks of the Sixties would include the emergence of Noël Coward as the grand old man of British drama? There he was one morning flipping verbal tiddlywinks with reporters ...; the next, he was ... hanging beside Forster, Eliot and the OMs, demonstrably the greatest living English playwright.

Ronald Bryden, *New Statesman*, August, 1964

**I**t is a proof of Mr. Coward's adroitness that he has managed to disguise the grimness of his comedy and to conceal from the audience that his conception of love is desolating and false.

Desmond MacCarthy, *Humanities*, 1954

**M**r. Coward writes dialogue as well as any man going; it is seemingly effortless, surprising in the most wonderfully surprising places, and “true” – very, very true. He is, as well, a dramatic mountain goat; his plays are better made than most – but not in the sense of the superimposed paste job of form, but from within: order more than form. And Mr. Coward’s subjects – the ways we kid ourselves that we do and do not exist with each other and with ourselves – have not, unless my mind has been turned inward too long, gone out of date.

Edward Albee, Introduction to *Private Lives, Blithe Spirit and Hay Fever*, 1965

**Coward combined a Victorian work ethic with the highjinks of the young. He was industry in cap and bells. He laid siege to the public as songwriter, actor, and playwright. He wanted to be everywhere. And because of his talent and the changing times, he largely succeeded. He was the young idea of the Twenties – gaiety, courage, pain concealed, amusing malice. In him Youth found a symbol and a boulevard spokesman: someone equal to their elders in sophistication, yet who made their impudent disenchantment a star turn.**

John Lahr, *Harper’s Magazine*, October, 1982

**T**o celebrate Coward is not necessarily to admire a particular piece of work but to enjoy the impact of a highly personal style, the projection of a markedly individual personality upon its chosen material. ...

Compared to the plays current in Coward’s childhood, his own dialogue was spare and allusive, needing more support from gesture and subtext. It was a process of stripping that was to continue in dramatic speech until Coward’s own dialogue was to seem positively formal in comparison with newer writers like Pinter, who freely acknowledges his debt to him. He established, too, a new response on the part of characters to the language that they speak. ... Coward’s characters visibly enjoy their own cleverness; they make language into a game, irresistible even at moments of emotional crisis. ...

This consciousness of language and its potential for play is one of Coward’s lasting legacies to writers such as Pinter, Orton and Ann Jellicoe.

Francis Grey, *Noël Coward*, Modern Dramatists Series, 1987

He was a witty man, and the soul of Noël’s wit was brevity. Words fascinated him and he used them precisely and sparingly. Most tellers of Coward stories get them wrong because they embellish, ignoring the golden rule that he applied to all writing and speaking: *Simplify!* “Wit,” he once said, “is like caviar. It should be served in small, elegant portions and not splodged around like marmalade.” ... Noël’s curiously clipped delivery implied there was something comical about the everyday world. There is nothing inherently funny about Budleigh Salterton, but the way it was used in *Blithe Spirit* meant many people could never take it seriously again. ... With a twinkle of the eye and a slight baring of the teeth, Noël could make you look at life anew.

Graham Payn, *My Life With Noel Coward*, 1994

**T**he sense of period lies, principally, in Noël Coward’s speech-rhythms. Being both actor and song-writer, Coward treats language with explicit musicality; pitch and cadence are minutely marked. ... A wholly different metronome beats in our present phrasing. Moreover, such is the specificity of Coward’s métier that one makes out a particular accent behind the words. Even in cold print they compel the inflections, the acuity of certain vowels, the falling strain of fashionable speech at the end of the jazz age. ... Our current feelings move in another key.

George Steiner, *After Babel*, 1975

# GLOSSARY

## Banbury's

First made in the Banbury, Oxfordshire, these cakes are oval-shaped and filled with currants.



## Bath buns

Yeast-raised, round-shaped buns topped with raw sugar or dried fruit. Each bun also contains a whole sugar cube in its center.



## Boots

A pharmaceutical company based in London. During the 1940s Boots had a range of products that “expanded beyond traditional chemists lines - from stationery, to silverware and picture framing, as well as the introduction of new services like Booklovers Libraries and Cafes in the larger stores.”



## Cadbury's

A chocolate manufacturer referenced in *Brief Encounter*. During WWII different manufacturers worked together to meet production needs. If an order came in that couldn't be filled “Nestlé would make a Cadbury's bar or vice versa. Cadbury Dairy Milk disappeared during the war years, because there was no fresh milk available – instead there was Ration Chocolate made with powdered milk.”

During *Brief Encounter*, Stanley the cake-seller tells Myrtle Bagot that there has been another run on chocolate:

**STANLEY:** There's been a run on the Cadbury's nut milk this afternoon! I shall need some more

**MYRTLE:** How many have you got left?

**STANLEY:** Only three

**MYRTLE:** Take six more then, and don't forget to mark 'em down

## Churley

The station near where Alec has his practice. Trains leave from Platform 4 of Milford Junction.

## “dotty”

Acting eccentrically in manner, in this case “crazy in love”. In *Brief Encounter*, knowing that their behavior is obvious to outsiders, Laura remarks, “the boatman thinks we are quite dotty, but just look how kind he's been.”

## Johannesburg

Johannesburg was founded in 1886 after the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand area of South Africa. By 1910 the British had overtaken the area from the original colonists the Dutch Boers, forming the Union of South Africa and instigating apartheid; segregating the white from the black population.

It was the boom of industrialization during WWII that caused an influx of Johannesburg's black population to double to more than 400,000. The sudden rise in population led to insufficient housing, fueling poor living conditions and the spread of disease.

## Kardomah

Restaurant at which Laura and Alec dine. In the film, *Brief Encounter*, this scene was shot at Five Ways Café in Beaconsfield.

## John Keats (1795-1821)

Famous English romantic poet. When Fred is trying to solve a crossword clue in The Times newspaper, the answer relating to Keats is the word “romance”.

## Ketchworth

The station near where Laura lives. Trains leave from Platform 3 of Milford Junction.

## Kate O'Brien (1897-1974)

Popular Irish novelist known for writing novels dealing with female sexuality. Laura borrows O'Brien novels when she goes to Boots each Thursday.

## Milford Junction

In the film, *Brief Encounter*, none of the scenes were actually filmed at Milford Junction. Most railway scenes were filmed at Carnforth Station in Lancashire, with others at Denham Studios. As the film was produced during WWII, Carnforth was chosen by the Ministry of War Transport because its remote location was safe from attack. Filming had to take place at night between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. so as not to interfere with daytime train operations.

## “out of hours”

Before alcohol can be served in licensed commercial areas.

## Pantomime

Otherwise known as *pantos* this genre of theater developed out of commedia dell'arte. Usually based on fairy tales or nursery stories, pantos involve music, topical jokes and slapstick comedy. In London pantos are produced primarily around Christmastime for family enjoyment.

## Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Russian-American composer whose oeuvre was centralized on Russian late Romanticism in classical music. Sections of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto are played at various times during the film (conducted by Muir

Matheson and played by Eileen Joyce and the National Symphony Orchestra.) Coward insisted its inclusion because of the emotions which it expressed.

### 'special pigeon'

A colloquial saying referring to a person's special concern or business (otherwise known as "one's pidgin"). Alec uses this phrase when revealing his passion for preventative medicine.

### The Royal

The restaurant at which Laura and Alec indulge in champagne and are spotted by Mary Norton and Mrs. Rowlandson.

### Three Star

A make of brandy.

### "upstart"

In other words, a *parvenu* or person acting in a presumptuous, aggressive manner.

In this case, two soldiers degrade Myrtle Bagot when she refuses to sell them alcohol, as it is "out of hours" she in turn calls them "upstarts" for challenging her business practices.

**MYRTLE:** I've already told you I can't serve alcoholic refreshment out of hours

**JOHNNIE:** Come off it, mother, be a pal!

**MYRTLE:** (*losing her temper*) I'll give you mother, you saucy **upstart** –

**BILL:** Who are you calling an upstart!

**MYRTLE:** You – and I'll trouble you to get out of here double quick – disturbing the customers and making a nuisance of yourselves

**"When the end of the play is reached, marriage and romantic love are little damaged, and both sophisticated broadmindedness and conventional morality are found to be compatible."**

–Milton Levin. *Noël Coward: Updated Edition*, 1968.

## PASSION AND DUTY

**W**hile Laura's fidelity to her husband and Alec's loyalty to his wife may strike contemporary audiences as unlikely, the play nonetheless presents a realistic affair. In a recent interview with WNYC Radio on December 4, 2009, the director Emma Rice explains:

People often say that it's unbelievable that they didn't sleep together; and I think what world do you live in? People are wrestling with their conscience, wrestling with their morality all the time. I think it's completely contemporary – the issue of what's the right thing to do and how to achieve it – is completely relevant.

To better understand the choice of Alec and Laura – to remain faithful to their spouses despite their attraction to one another – it is helpful to examine the cultural expectations for marriage and the family as they held true in Britain during the 1930s and '40s.

Sonya O. Rose, scholar and professor emerita for the departments of History, Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, presents the following observation in her article "Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain," published in *The American Historical Review*, October 1998:

During wartime, propagandists manipulate patriotic sentiment to stimulate loyalty and sacrifice; they focus public attention on

questions such as who 'we' are and what it is that 'we' stand for. It is a time when physical bodies and the social body – the national body – are threatened on a variety of fronts.

Rose suggests that sexual propriety and restraint were central to nation building and that Britain required individuals to sacrifice their private and personal interests and desires for the collective good. Furthermore:

If the nation was being imagined as a unified community of people capable of putting the national interest above their own needs and desires, then fun-loving, sexually expressive women and girls threatened that sense of unity that was imagined to be the essence of Britishness in wartime. This was a maternal and masculine nation, one exemplifying not only heroic self-sacrifice but also 'impartial reason,' which defined itself against the feminine. The discourses of moral purity thus figured duty and sexuality, bravery and pleasure, and sacrifice and desire as oppositional human characteristics.

Even fictional women, like Noël Coward's Laura, were subject to the standards of public civility. If a woman were to step outside of boundaries set by marriage, the foundation of the British nation would collapse.

So why would Coward create a story about an impossible affair between two already married individuals? In *Family Matters: A history of ideas about family since 1945*, the author Michael Peplar investigates melodrama present in British New Wave cinema. His close reading of the film *Brief Encounter* reveals the emotional turmoil underlying the steady family life of Laura Jesson:



Throughout the film we see the character of Laura ... maintaining an extremely shaky control over feelings and situations which clearly frighten and panic her and yet to which she seems inextricably drawn. Her brief relationship with Alex [sic] is shown to develop almost against her will. As the narrative progresses, the dichotomy between her life with her husband and her life without him (either real or in her imagination) increases and she has to remind herself 'We're a happily married couple and must never forget that. ... I'm a happily married woman, this is my whole world and its enough; or rather it was until a few weeks ago'. The phrases, 'happily married couple' and 'happily married woman' seem to be uttered defensively, almost as if they could be understood as a mantra by which Laura is able to know and accept her life as it is.

While Peplar makes observations about the film and not the play, his remarks are valuable. Similarly Richard Dyer, an affluent critic and cinema specialist, wrote in his companion to the 1946 film *Brief Encounter* for the British Film Institute's classics collection that Laura, like other women of the period, is "torn between two kinds of desire: passion and duty (which is the desire to do what is right and kind, for 'decency and self-respect'). She is also torn between acceptance of a male value system and a nuanced perception of its inadequacies."

Not entitled to love Alec, Laura restrains her emotions and continually orients herself toward home and responsibilities, which is unsettling to the contemporary audience. Dyer identifies that Laura's morality is a value that is lost in contemporary society:

I also used the film teaching abroad, in the USA, Italy and Sweden. In Naples they hated it. 'All that suffering, and for what?', they cried. Even those who thought it well done also thought it appalling. They couldn't understand why Laura and Alex didn't just get on and have sex and why indeed she didn't leave Fred for him. ... I do see why: the pressures on Laura now seem unnecessary or unacceptable, in an age where heterosexual sex is less momentous than it was when ineluctably tied to procreation, where divorce is commonplace, where women feeling passionate, and libidinous, is taken for granted. It is salutary to be reminded how embedded in its time the film [and original story] is. And yet I also feel that many of the emotions it mobilizes are not in fact things of the past: betrayal and deception, divided loyalties, the pull between safety and excitement, coziness and abandon.

By illuminating the morality of Laura in *Brief Encounter*, Dyer suggests not only that the story is itself a timepiece, a testament to the morality of the 1930s and '40s Britain, but that *Brief Encounter* presents Englishness through the recognition of restrained emotions:

not wanting to hurt, wanting to be nice, desiring comfort, stymie emotional abandon. The very familiarity of this for some people is a pleasure because it confirms part of how we experience our affective lives.

While contemporary audiences may dissociate from the values in *Brief Encounter*, Dyer stipulates that it is necessary to consider Coward's

own sexuality and how, as a gay man in the 1940s, Coward limits his presentation of impossible love to that of a socially acceptable couple through heterosexual discourse. Imagine then, the strain that Coward felt as being presented in *Brief Encounter*; lovers incapable of consummating a sexual relationship due to social expectations.

Whether or not people believe in the existence of marital fidelity as presented in the play, it is important to remember the pressure put on individuals to maintain the family unit in Britain during the 1940s. As Rice said in her forward to *Brief Encounter*, "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 as Alec and Laura are." Regardless of the era or social position, Rice argues that "none of us are victims, but we can review the bargains we make and escape in a profound way."

Claire Rosenkvist

The author is currently an intern of the Guthrie's literary department.



Photo: Hannah Yelland and Milo Twomey (Courtesy of Kneehigh Theatre)



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After seeing Kneehigh Theatre's production of *Brief Encounter*, discuss the significance of motifs such as trains, time, cinema as entertainment and music from Rachmaninoff. Can you identify other recurring words or themes throughout the production? Explain how these phrases or actions are important metaphors in the story.
2. *Still Life*, the play on which *Brief Encounter* is based, was written in 1936. What was happening in Europe during and leading up to 1936? How does the political strife of the time affect the action and the characters in this play?
3. Michael Peplar, author of *Family Matters: A History of ideas about family since 1945*, suggests that Noël Coward was "following in the tradition of Forster and others ... using the idea of a potential extra-marital relationship to explore the wider idea of constraint and the control of desire in a respectable middle-class context." Why do you suppose values such as self-control and fidelity were esteemed in 1940s Europe?
4. In conjunction with the previous question, consider and discuss the implications of the following perspective provided by David Mace, who was one of the founders of England's first marriage guidance centers in 1948. In "What Britain is doing" an article he published in *Marriage and Family Living* for the National Council on Family Relations, Mace states that "Britain has always been proud of her family life. It has been the backbone of her national greatness. Today it is threatened as never before. We know we're up against it – just as we did when the Germans got to Calais. But we know too, as we knew then, that we've got to win. The only lasting foundation for a sound national life is sound family life."
5. Are you surprised to find fidelity presented in *Brief Encounter*? In 1945 the divorce rate was over three times higher than that of the pre-war figure of 5,000 per year. Do you think the attitude surrounding extramarital affairs and divorce has shifted dramatically since the 1940s? Why or why not?
6. How do you define "love"? Is your definition different than your family's and friends' definition or expectation of love? What is your perspective on marriage and how does it compare to your family's or friends' understanding of marriage?
7. How do you think societal differences between today in the United States and 1940s Europe affect our understanding of Laura and Alec's affair? Who can and should have a relationship; why or why not? Do you have any reservations about the other couples presented in the story?
8. There are implicit references to class status throughout the play. Many characters make judgments and assumptions, sometimes casually, in passing, about other characters, based on where they come from or how they speak. How does this affect how we view the characters?
9. If you have seen David Lean's film *Brief Encounter*, how does Rice's stage adaptation compare? What has Kneehigh Theatre's production succeeded in doing? How does the medium of theater affect the presentation of this story?
10. What has appealed to you in the actors' performances? How do you relate their stage presence to the scenery and costumes? How did the cinematic effects affect or hinder the performance?
11. How does the Kneehigh Theatre production utilize music? How does it affect and shift your perspective of or feelings toward the story and the characters? Was the live music conducive or distracting to the production; how?
12. If you read Coward's *Brief Encounter* or one-act *Still Life* before watching the performance, what did you find different onstage from what you imagined? How did the acting company help your perception of the characters? How does hearing the words spoken impact you differently than reading the words?
13. How has the play's presentation – without an intermission – changed or challenged your theatrical experience? What effect would putting an intermission in have had on your feeling of the performance?
14. Compare *Brief Encounter* with other current or recent productions you have seen at the Guthrie (*Macbeth*, *Yellow Face* or *M. Butterfly*). Discuss how these plays address common themes such as fidelity and intrigue; playing with identity and relationships in the public view. Consider the central characters' specific struggle with upholding sense of self and defining one's identity. How has this season's productions challenged your perception of normality or morality?
15. How can or does Coward's homosexuality influence his writing? How do you think his presentation of heterosexual love affairs comment on lingering tension surrounding gay relationships and/or marriage within his own time and ours?

16. Recall the discussion between Alec and Laura after their meeting at Stephen's flat. What do you think this discourse reveals about Alec? About Laura?

LAURA Please go away – please don't say anything

ALEC I can't leave you like this

LAURA You must. It'll be better – really it will

ALEC You're being dreadfully cruel

LAURA I feel so utterly degraded

ALEC It was just a beastly accident that he came back early – he doesn't know who you are – he never even saw you

LAURA I listened to your voices in the sitting room – I crept out – feeling like a prostitute

ALEC Don't talk like that, please –

LAURA I suppose he laughed, didn't he – after he got over being annoyed? I suppose you spoke of me together as men of the world

ALEC We didn't speak of you – we spoke of a nameless creature who had no reality at all

LAURA Why didn't you tell him the truth? Why didn't you say who I was and that we were lovers – shameful secret lovers – using his flat like a bad house because we had nowhere else to go, and were afraid of being found out! Why didn't you tell him we were cheap and low and without courage – why didn't you?

ALEC Stop it, Laura, pull yourself together.

LAURA It's true – don't you see, it's true!

ALEC It's nothing of the sort. I know you feel horrible, and I'm deeply, desperately sorry. I feel horrible, too, but it doesn't matter really – this – this unfortunate, damnable incident – it was just bad luck. It couldn't affect us really, you and me – we know the truth – we know we really love each other – that's all that matters

LAURA It isn't all that matters – other things matter too, self-respect matters, and decency – I can't go on any longer

17. How does *Brief Encounter* address masculinist discourse? How do Coward's women fit into this masculine world? Discuss how *Brief Encounter* presents characters' gender, gender roles in the domestic and public realm, as well as power play and relationships. How are women like Laura, Myrtle and Beryl similar? How are they different? What about the men? Compare Alec and Fred, Stanley and Albert. Describe the interaction between the sexes; how do you think their interactions indicate their response to or acceptance of a patriarchal society?

18. How could Alec's relocation to Johannesburg suggest not only "banishment" from the Western world, but also a continued male supremacy? By leaving England for Africa, does Alec get away with the extramarital affair? Is Laura similarly capable of a new beginning with Alec's departure or is she fated to social condemnation?

19. In 1957 Terence Rattigan, one of England's most popular 20th century dramatists, argued that Noël Coward's work does not date and that it would remain relevant audiences of future generations (see quote on page 13). What do you think after seeing Kneehigh Theatre's *Brief Encounter*? Is Coward's work dated or does it remain relevant for audiences of the 21st century?

20. Before seeing *Brief Encounter*, what exposure have you had to other works by Noël Coward? How is *Brief Encounter* similar to or different from other Coward plays you have seen or read?

21. Richard Dyer suggests that *Brief Encounter* portrays a British sentimentality. What is Britishness? How would you describe what it means to have a "stiff upper lip"? How do you perceive the emotional restraint of the characters; is their composure believable? Why or why not?

22. Is this production a comedy? Romance? What is funny? What is dramatic? How does the ending of the play affect whether one thinks it is a comedy or a romance?

## FOR FURTHER READING

## BY COWARD

- Coward, Noël. *Australia Visited*. Heinemann, 1941.
- Coward, Noël. *A Withered Nosegay, Chelsea Buns, Spangled Unicorn*. Methuen, 1984.
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## ABOUT NOËL COWARD

- Braybrooke, Patrick. *The Amazing Mr. Coward*. London: Archer, 1933.
- Coward: A Pictorial Record of the First Performances and Revivals of the *Theatrical Works of Noël Coward*. Rockliff Publishing Co., 1957.
- Day, Barry. *Noël Coward: A Life in Quotes*. Metro Books, 1999.
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## FILMS BY COWARD AS WRITER

- Easy Virtue* (1928; remade, 2008)
- Private Lives*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1931)
- Bitter Sweet*, British & Dominion (1933)
- Design for Living*, Paramount (1933)
- Cavalcade*, 20th Century-Fox (1933)

- Tonight Is Ours*, based on the play *The Queen Was in the Parlour*, Paramount (1933)
- Bitter Sweet*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1940)
- We Were Dancing*, based on *Tonight at 8:30*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1942)
- This Happy Breed*, Universal (1944)
- Blithe Spirit* (1945)
- Brief Encounter*, based on *Still Life*, Cineguild (1945)
- The Astonished Heart*, Universal (1950)
- Tonight at Eight-Thirty*, based on *Ways and Means*, *Red Peppers* and *Fumed Oak*, British Film Makers (1953)
- A Matter of Innocence*, based on his short story "Pretty Polly Barlow," Universal (1968)
- Relative Values* (2000)

## FILMS WITH COWARD AS ACTOR, SCREENWRITER, DIRECTOR OR PRODUCER

- Hearts of the World* (1918, uncredited)
- Across the Continent* (1922, uncredited)
- The Scoundrel* (1935)
- In Which We Serve* (1942, also director/screenwriter)
- This Happy Breed* (1944, as producer)
- The Astonished Heart* (1949)
- Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956)
- Our Man in Havana* (1959)
- Surprise Package* (1960)
- Paris, When It Sizzles* (1964)
- Present Laughter* (1964, TV)
- The Vortex* (1964, TV)
- Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965)
- Androcles and the Lion* (1967, TV)
- Boom!* (1968)
- The Italian Job* (1969)

## ONLINE RESOURCES

The Noël Coward Society  
[http://www.Noël\\_coward.net/](http://www.Noël_coward.net/)

Noël Coward Estate  
[http://www.Noël\\_coward.com/](http://www.Noël_coward.com/)

Noël Coward Foundation  
[http://www.Noël\\_coward.org/](http://www.Noël_coward.org/)

The Music of Noël Coward  
[http://www.Noël\\_cowardmusic.com/](http://www.Noël_cowardmusic.com/)

## **'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?
  
- **The Book of Love and Marriage** – Imagine you've been commissioned to write a book about attitudes towards love and marriage in 2008. Interview as many people as you can from as many 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?

## **‘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?
- 2) Monogamy** – Can we really be happy if we commit to a relationship with just one partner for the rest of our lives?
- 3) Adultery** – What do you think about extra-marital affairs?
- 4) Love** – Does love conquer all? What would you do for the one you love?
- 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?

### **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’ or ‘Trisha’. 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?

## **'Reading Between the Lines'**

Gather together images of 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? 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 discussion, an essay or a review.

- 1) What does the story of Brief Encounter tell us about marriage in the 1940's?
- 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?
- 4) What does the tide represent?
- 5) How effective is the use of screen projection throughout the play?
- 6) What do the spoof adverts in the interval tell us about how women were viewed at that time?
- 7) What do you notice about the speech patterns 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?

10) In what way does the writing influence your opinion of the characters?



# education

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For more information about  
Roundabout Theatre Company's Education Department, please visit our website,  
<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org/education.htm> ,  
or email us at [education@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:education@roundabouttheatre.org).

**Education Department:** **Greg McCaslin** *Education Director*; **Jennifer DiBella** *Associate Education Director*; **Sarah Malone** *Education Program Associate* ;  
**Aliza Greenberg** *Education Program Associate*; **Ted Sod** *Education Dramaturg*;  
**Amy Fishman** *Education Assistant*; **Erin Monahan** *Education Intern*;

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