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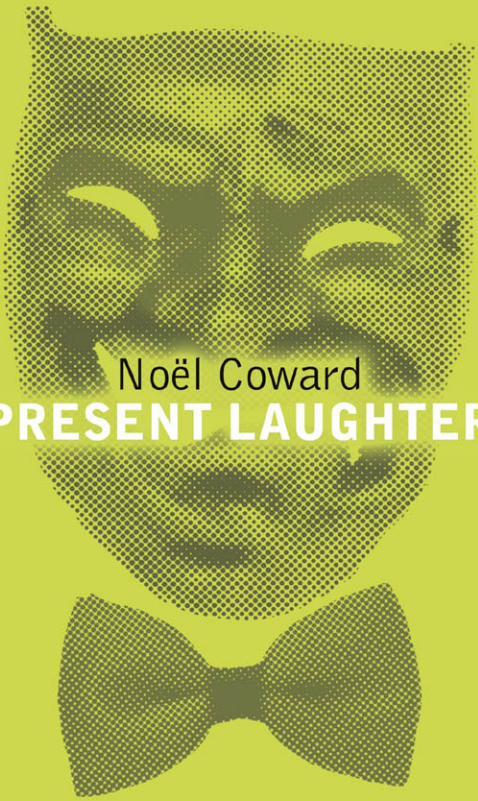

Noël Coward

PRESENT LAUGHTER

BLOOMSBURY

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Present Laughter

At the centre of his own universe sits matinée idol Garry Essendine: suave, hedonistic and too old, says his wife, to be having numerous affairs. His line in harmless, infatuated débutantes is largely tolerated but playing closer to home is not. Just before he escapes on tour to Africa the full extent of his misdemeanours is discovered. And all hell breaks loose.

Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* premiered in the early years of the Second World War just as such privileged lives were threatened with fundamental social change. Arguably the most autobiographical of his plays, it provided a sparkling platform for his talents with Coward both directing and starring as Garry Essendine.

Noël Coward was born in 1899 in Teddington, Middlesex. He made his name as a playwright with *The Vortex* (1924), in which he also appeared. His numerous other successful plays included *Fallen Angels* (1925), *Hay Fever* (1925), *Private Lives* (1933), *Design for Living* (1933), and *Blithe Spirit* (1941). During the war he wrote screenplays such as *Brief Encounter* (1944) and *This Happy Breed* (1942). In the fifties he began a new career as a cabaret entertainer. He published volumes of verse and a novel (*Pomp and Circumstance*, 1960), two volumes of autobiography and four volumes of short stories: *To Step Aside* (1939), *Star Quality* (1951), *Pretty Polly Barlow* (1964) and *Bon Voyage* (1967). He was knighted in 1970 and died three years later in Jamaica.

Also by Noël Coward

Coward
Collected Plays: One
(Hay Fever, The Vortex, Fallen Angels, Easy Virtue)

Collected Plays: Two
(Private Lives, Bitter-Sweet, The Marquise, Post-Mortem)

Collected Plays: Three
(Design for Living, Cavalcade, Conversation Piece,
and Hands Across the Sea, Still Life, Fumed Oak
from Tonight at 8.30)

Collected Plays: Four
(Blithe Spirit, Present Laughter, This Happy Breed,
and Ways and Means, The Astonished Heart, 'Red Peppers'
from Tonight at 8.30)

Collected Plays: Five
(Relative Values, Look After Lulu!,
Waiting in the Wings, Suite in Three Keys)

Collected Plays: Six
(Semi-Monde, Point Valaine, South Sea Bubble,
Nude With Violin)

Collected Plays: Seven
(Quadrille, 'Peace in Our Time',
and We Were Dancing, Shadow Play, Family Album, Star Chamber
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A Novel

Present Indicative

Future Indefinite

Present Laughter

A Light Comedy in Three Acts

Noël Coward

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LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

175 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10010
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

First published in 1943 by Heinemann and republished in 1954 in Play Parade Vol. 4
This edition first published in 2007 by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama

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Introduction © 2007 by James Grieve

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4081-0148-3
ePDF: 978-1-4725-3658-7
ePub: 978-1-4081-9144-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Introduction

Noël Coward bestrode the first seventy-three years of the twentieth century as Britain's greatest all-round entertainer. As actor, playwright, director, songwriter, comedian, film star, cabaret performer and more, he illuminated stages and screens around the world with a talent as fêted as it was prolific. He was the ultimate matinée idol, a formative fashionista and the original celebrity – the unrivalled superstar of his era. He was a confidante of royalty, and friend to politicians and movie stars. He was, wrote Terence Rattigan, 'Simply a phenomenon, and one that is unlikely to occur ever again in theatre history. Let us at least be grateful that it is our own epoch that the phenomenon has so signally adorned.'

But gratitude for Coward's singular talents has rarely been unequivocal. In his lifetime he was a perennial victim of fluctuating theatrical fashions and his plays went in and out of vogue with alacrity. His critics resented his rejection of new forms of theatre and his unwillingness to write serious drama rather than comedies. Though he enjoyed unwavering popularity with the theatregoing public, Coward's mastery of language and supreme playwriting skill were often obscured by an impression that his plays were outmoded. And today, though his plays are regularly revived and his texts widely studied, the persistent misconception that his work is frivolous, populist and outdated threatens true appreciation of his genius.

Howard Davies, director of this National Theatre production of *Present Laughter*, explains how his own misconceptions were banished by directing Coward:

> I didn't know anything at all about Noël Coward until a few years back when I directed *Private Lives*. I had resisted him in a reverse-snobbish way as being someone I thought of as too fruity, too camp and certainly not belonging to the world of social realism – incompatible with my interests in theatre which, to my mind, should always have the ability to convey, not only pleasure and spectacle, but also some value as dramatic literature and

social purpose.

But when I read *Private Lives* I suddenly realised what an incredibly good play it was: not a play about manners, but about sex, a kind of narcotic sex, a destructive sexuality that can poison human relationships.

Our fascination with a playwright is usually during the time at which he or she writes and then for a period after that when that writer still has a relevant voice. There's usually then a doldrums period where they're neglected and forgotten. Later, they're revived because we value them for what they said to their particular generation and the fact that, actually, there is a lasting message in those plays that transcends period or taste.

The transcendent qualities of *Present Laughter* have inspired the National Theatre to produce the play for the first time almost seventy years after it was written. Created at a time of enormous political and social upheaval as the world teetered on the brink of war, the characters in the play treat each other abominably as they try to find a footing amidst an atmosphere of uncertainty about the future. The precise situation may be of its time, but the themes of the play are sharply relevant to contemporary audiences and the characters instantly recognisable. *Present Laughter* may be one of Coward's funniest, wittiest and most acerbic plays, but it is also deftly plotted, supremely constructed and, in its denouement, strikingly moral. It is certainly a far more accomplished and significant work than anything that could have been produced by a writer of merely supercilious comedies.

The young Coward was something of a theatrical renegade. When he began writing plays he turned his back on the prevailing Ruritanian dramas of the times and embraced realism. 'No pert elf or faun even dared to peep round a tree at me in 1919,' he wrote. 'My mind, not unnaturally, jumped over-far in the opposite direction. I dealt, almost exclusively, with the most lurid types; tarts, pimps, sinister courtesans, and cynical adulterers whirled across my pages in great profusion.' His first great success was with *The Vortex* in 1924, a play that caused controversy

with its covert depictions of drug abuse and homosexuality. A year later the critics sharpened their knives in moral indignation at his play *Easy Virtue* which, recalls Coward, 'was described as vulgar, disgusting, shocking, nauseating, vile, obscene, degenerative etc. etc. The idea of two gently nurtured young women playing a drinking scene together was apparently too degrading a spectacle for even the most hardened and worldly critics'. In 1926, *Easy Virtue* premiered under the arid moniker *A New Play in Three Acts* after the censor perceived salaciousness in Coward's title and blocked it. The controversy that surrounded these works led Terence Rattigan to describe his contemporary as 'a young, revolutionary dramatist'.

Coward went on to write the historical epic *Cavalcade*, and the anti-war plays *Post-Mortem* and *Peace in Our Time*, while imbuing his dramas and comedies with social and cultural commentary that belies the lazy stereotypes often accorded to his work.

Davies believes *Present Laughter* is the perfect play to return Coward to the heart of the National Theatre's work:

> Nicholas Hytner [director of the National Theatre] firmly believes that as part of the National's repertoire, we should be embracing a revival of a Noël Coward play. Having directed *Private Lives* and enjoyed it, and got a lot out of the doing of it, I was challenged by Nick to read *Present Laughter* and I enjoyed it a lot. It's very funny, it's very sharp, it's incredibly economical in its structure and the way it's plotted and in the way that the characters are drawn. There's no wastage in the script at all. Like in *Private Lives*, the central point of destruction, the central moment of the play that causes everything to ricochet off in a starburst, is a point of predatory sexual betrayal by two of the central characters. From then on in, all hell breaks loose and everybody gets their comeuppance in one way or another. People are revealed to be mendacious and hypocritical. It is, I think, a moral comedy.
>
> The play is psychologically adept and accurate. It doesn't have the psychological cleverness of people who

> write about the supremacy of people's feelings, or explain at great length their inner psychology, or talk about their angst in a way that a lot of bad writing of the last fifteen years has. Some recent writers just put five or six people in a room who end up examining their own navels, worrying about the life that they are not leading and failing to express themselves in any purposive way. Coward, by comparison, makes people behave with psychological accuracy, but not by having them state their reasons, or examining their soul. I really appreciate and admire that.

Present Laughter was written in the spring of 1939 as Europe braced itself for the onset of World War Two. Coward writes, 'During April and May I wrote two plays: *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed*. I planned to appear in both of these myself in the autumn. They both turned out well in spite of the fact that while I was writing them I was aware that they would in all probability never be produced, at least not at the time I intended them to be. This dismal clairvoyance was ultimately justified. However, bathed, as we all were at that time, in a glow of governmental optimism and complacency, it would have been churlish to take too gloomy a view of the future and so I persevered.' The 1930s was a decade of economic turmoil following the stock market crash of 1929–32. Britain was gripped by unemployment, a religious revival, a shift away from the liberalism of the 1920s to a more conservative outlook and a gnawing fear of another conflict like the Great War that had so decimated communities and ravaged society. As Coward cheerfully admitted, he had 'nothing but the destruction of civilisation to worry about'. The play nevertheless went into rehearsals and reached dress rehearsal on 31 August 1939. 'On Friday September the 1st,' Coward continues, 'the Germans invaded Poland and it was obvious that it would be only a question of days, or perhaps hours, before we were at war. It was a miserable company that assembled that morning on the stage of the Phoenix Theatre. They had all known, of course, that if war came we should not be able to open, but, like

everybody else, they had been hoping all along for a miracle to happen. Now it was too late for any further hoping and we all said goodbye to each other and made cheerfully false prophecies for the future.'

Although the impending war is never explicitly mentioned in *Present Laughter*, Davies sees its spectre in the play:

> We know that Coward was writing in that period – just before the outbreak of the Second World War, at a time of great economic uncertainty, of great unemployment and of complete international economic disaster, when people are losing their savings, and the working class are suffering at the hands of economic laissez-faire attitudes throughout the world, from America through to this country. We know with hindsight that when he's writing he is aware of the fact that the world is shifting and unstable. And even though he is depicting a class that is feckless and selfish and greedy and irresponsible, he also manages to make us fear for them because they are desperate and frightened, with no emotional or financial security.

Why revive *Present Laughter* in 2007? Britain is no longer choked by the economic aftershocks of the Great Depression and staring down the barrel of a global conflict as epochal as the Second World War, but in our age of societal panic over religious fundamentalism, global warming and frenzied materialism, Coward's sentiment of 1939 still seems strikingly pertinent. We have nothing but the destruction of civilisation to worry about.

Davies sees the society inhabited by the characters of *Present Laughter* reflected in our contemporary world:

> There is something of the play which is about a generation of people who are tottering on the edge of the Second World War and feeling that their lives are probably going to shift underneath their feet and create an instability in the world that they live in. What they hang on to, and the selfish way that they hang on to it, is shown in the play to be funny,

farcical, risible, to be derided. Garry Essendine's speeches lash out at people's lack of honesty in their dealings with themselves or the world they inhabit.

I think that's interesting for us at a time when we've gone through Thatcher and ten years of Labour government. We've now discovered that we have shifted so far away from things called idealism or political ideology, and have moved towards pragmatism and material values, that we acknowledge that society is starved of something called fundamental truths and probably needs a good poke in the eye with something abrasive. That is the drama that I would like to see.

In a funny way, *Present Laughter* seems to be written for a society that is going through, or is about to go through in the case of the Second World War, a cataclysmic reawakening, a disastrous and tragic reawakening of where it really stands and what it really wants. I think the 1930s were, as W. H. Auden said, a 'low, dishonest decade'. And I suspect that recently we have been through several low, dishonest decades, and as a result the play seems particularly apposite.

Present Laughter is as potent thematically as it is politically and socially for contemporary audiences. Had *Hello!*, *Heat* and *Grazia* magazines existed in 1939, Garry Essendine would have graced the front covers with the same regularity as David Beckham, Robbie Williams and Tom Cruise do today. Matinée idols may have been eclipsed in public adulation by footballers, pop stars and reality TV contestants, but the price of fame is as pertinent a concern as ever.

Present Laughter also offers an enticing glimpse of The Master himself. In writing and playing the character of Garry Essendine, Coward inevitably invited conjecture that his creation was autobiographical. Coward himself described the play as 'a potent mixture of self-exposure and self-celebration', and his authorised biographer, Sheridan Morley, surmises, 'In one sense, no play he ever wrote was

more autobiographical, but in another sense, the conjuring trick is still intact. Garry is not really Noël, merely a reflection of him through a series of fairground distorting mirrors. Now you see him, now you don't.'

As elusive as Coward proves, there is much in *Present Laughter* that suggests Garry is, if not an alter ego, then at least a mouthpiece for his creator. Garry's lacerating dismissal of Roland Maule's play as 'a meaningless jumble of adolescent, pseudo-intellectual poppycock' is surely a thinly veiled attack on the preoccupation with new forms of theatre, and perhaps predicts Coward's contempt for what he perceived as style over substance in the kitchen-sink dramas of the 1950s that superseded his own work in the affections of the critics.

He lampoons those very critics by mimicking them in Roland Maule's response: 'Every play you appear in is exactly the same, superficial, frivolous and without the slightest intellectual significance.' It is a flash of self-deprecation that Davies admires:

> It's brilliant because Coward sends himself up by creating a character who comes in and, in his very earnest way, criticises him for being a lightweight matinée idol figure who does plays of no particular substance, just pure froth.
>
> There was a movement, both in America and here, in the 1930s to create a new kind of socialist drama. It's partly reflected with a knowledge of what was coming out of Germany in Bertolt Brecht's writings, but it's also indigenous to both America and this country where you get a theatre community which is suddenly trying to create work that has relevance to the world at large. A lot of people found, in pursuit of that kind of theatre, that Noël Coward was completely antithetical to the way that they wanted to work, and in what they were pursuing. So his creation in this play of Roland Maule, who attacks him, is a reflection of various people who were criticising him at that time from that particular theatre community.

Present Laughter has an illustrious production history. Coward played Garry Essendine when the play finally premiered and toured the provinces for twenty-five weeks before a London run at the Haymarket in the spring of 1942. He entrusted the resurrection of his reputation to a revival of the play in 1947, after the critics had savaged his musical *Pacific 1860*, and delighted audiences by reprising the central role for 528 performances. He played Garry once more, on tour in the USA in 1955.

Since then, many greats of the British theatre have renounced Daphne, been lambasted by Liz and seduced by Joanna, including Peter O'Toole, Donald Sinden, Tom Conti, Albert Finney and Ian McKellen. Now Alex Jennings dons Garry's dressing-gown to play one of Coward's greatest characters, and the closest representation of himself he ever wrote for the stage.

Lord Louis Mountbatten said of Coward on his seventieth birthday, 'There 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, they are fourteen different people. Only one man combined all fourteen different labels – The Master.'

Almost thirty-five years after his death in March 1973, the National Theatre's production of *Present Laughter* returns The Master to his rightful place – centre stage, not as a fusty writer of frivolous comedies, but as one of the most accomplished, important and enduring dramatists of the twentieth century.

James Grieve
Staff Director, *Present Laughter*, National Theatre, 2007