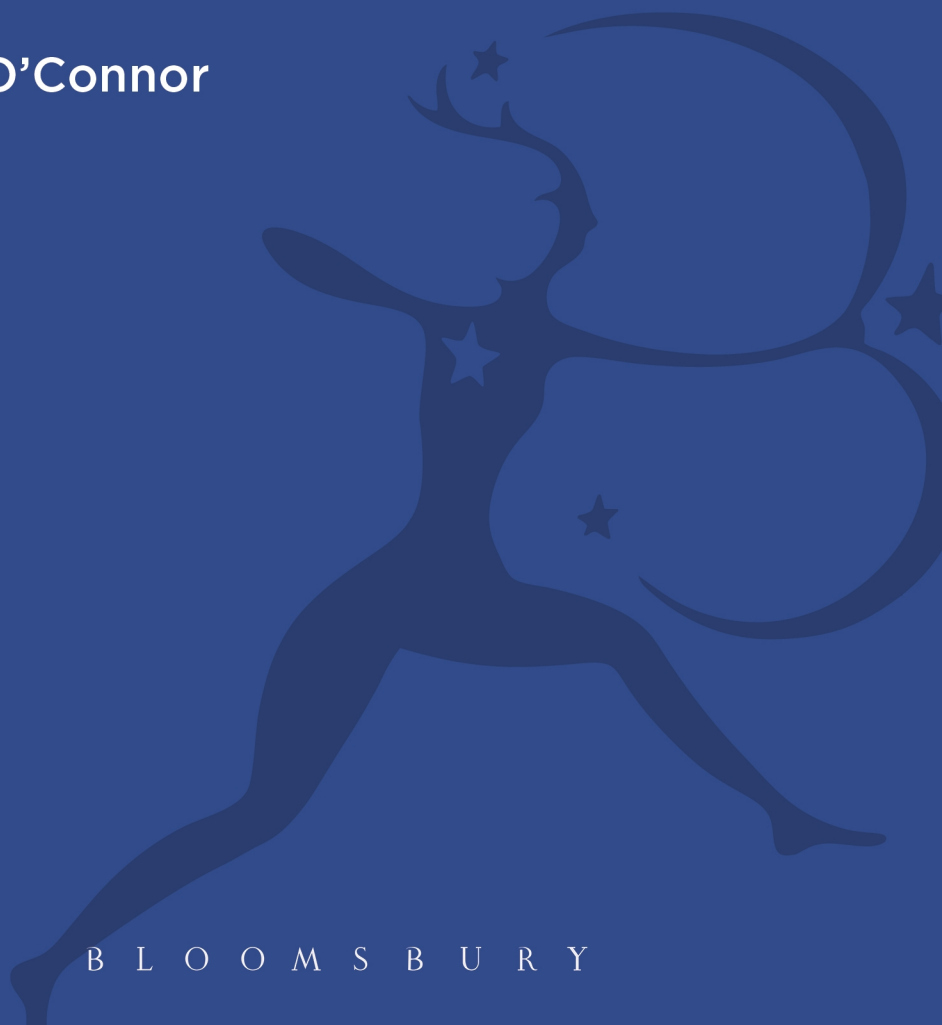


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Popular Gay Drama
from Wilde to Rattigan

Sean O'Connor



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Foreword

Simon Watney

In *Straight Acting* Sean O'Connor writes brilliantly of the distinct, if overlapping, theatrical worlds created in the first half of the twentieth century by the British playwrights Somerset Maugham, Noël Coward and Terence Rattigan, and of their complex, shared debts to Oscar Wilde. His chosen form – a chronology of essays – suits his purpose well. For this is happily not a book with a Big Idea. Rather, O'Connor invites us to reflect on the many shades and tones of sexual shame and secret love that flourished in a pre-1960s culture of suffocating respectability. Since he recognizes the continuities of popular culture as much as the discontinuities, he is admirably mindful and respectful of the subtleties of the writers whose work he analyses. Moreover, his discussions are framed with the confident commonsense of a thoughtful and experienced director, who never drifts off into waffle or jargon.

His response to the material has a thoroughly refreshing directness. Thus, for example, he notes at one point that

as we move further away from *Brief Encounter* as a document of contemporary life, and the film joins the mythology of 'Englishness', its conventions seem to me as foreign but its emotions as fresh and direct as a Restoration comedy or a Victorian sensational novel.

It is not the least of this book's achievements that it leaves the reader with a marked sense of early-twentieth-century British popular theatre as a period quite as distinct as that of the Jacobean tragedians or the Georgian stage. Nor have we moved on so far that we can no longer recognize the world of Coward's light comedies, or the various genres deployed by Rattigan, which O'Connor depicts with an acknowledged mixture of horror and respect as

FOREWORD

a particularly English territory where individuals struggle with the middle-class mores of the mid-twentieth century, [...] a world of sea-side boarding houses, public schools and hotel lounges where individual freedom is checked by the pressures of gentility. It is a rich territory inhabited by those crippled with paranoia about sex, frustrated by the cruelties of age and isolated in their own painful, solitary English world.

Indeed, it is the sense of the emotional *richness* of the plays and films under discussion that so distinguishes O'Connor's readings. And how very welcome it is to find a critic who so convincingly and movingly depicts his own personal relation to the theatre of his grandparents' generation – 'grandparents', however, who were gay men earlier in the century, facing dilemmas which have hardly disappeared in the interim.

It is thus a particular pleasure to introduce a book which is delightfully well written and devoid of either pomposity or aggression. Sean O'Connor has done for modern theatre studies what Richard Dyer achieved in film studies. He demonstrates with great success that we may take popular West End theatre seriously, without resorting to the kinds of critical obfuscation that mars so much contemporary cultural study. O'Connor offers us an accessible, thoughtful introduction to early-twentieth-century English theatre, and in so doing he helps illuminate much about that era, both the pain and cruelty, and the creative courage and inspiration.

Simon Watney
London, February 1997

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Sean O'Connor
August 1997

For Angelo Rossi

Introduction

Apologia

*A dreaded sunny day
So let's go where we're wanted
And I meet you at the cemetery gates
Keats and Yeats are on your side
But you lose
Because Wilde is on mine.*

Morrissey¹

From birth we are relentlessly socialized into a heterosexual identity that we may later choose to reject but which remains an always familiar landscape – those on the margins of a culture know more about its centre than the centre can ever know about the margins.

Andy Medhurst²

For much of the 1970s, every Saturday afternoon my parents and I would travel from our home in Bromborough to Birkenhead, the nearest large town, to visit my grandmother. They would dump me at Paterson Street and go off to shop at Birkenhead Market, a warren-like Victorian structure selling everything from paperback books at five pence each to sawdust-encrusted racks of lamb. The market reeked of a heady mix of butcher's off-cuts, day-old cakes and cheap cafés – 'Betty's best butties with best butter'. Rather than be dragged around the market, to be trampled and shoved by Birkonians keen to pick up their bargains and get home in time for the football results, I would stay with my grandmother, eat her scouse and watch the Saturday matinée on BBC2. My grandmother was widowed in the mid-1970s and, with hindsight, I feel she must have enjoyed the company that this Saturday shopping ritual gave her.

Though it's only recent history, we forget how enslaved we were to the tastes and timetables of television programmers before the general availability of video recorders. Then, the appearance of a favourite movie on TV was a special event. There was major excitement when *The Sound of Music* was shown on television for the first time, and a regular Bank Holiday thrill about the screening of the latest Bond movie. Saturday night film premières might even be in black and white, as this was that strange twilight period of afternoon close-downs and test-cards, the fag end of the transition from monochrome to colour on TV. Anything screened today in black and white on Channel 4 or BBC2 is automatically billed as a 'classic', regardless of whether it's *Citizen Kane* or *Murder at the Gallop*. In the 1970s, we in the audience had few choices. Our tastes were formulated differently then, because we had fewer dishes to choose from. The Saturday matinée, usually a double bill, was a wonderful lucky dip. Sometimes it was a florid Hollywood melodrama like *All That Heaven Allows*, sometimes a tepid British comedy like *Twice around the Daffodils*. I hungrily consumed these films and the more I saw, the more I began to develop likes and dislikes, a taste if you like. I collected celluloid images in my mind in the same way that my school-mates collected those stupid football cards that came with a thin piece of chewing-gum. Particular scenes would stick in my mind and continued to resonate in my imagination: Kathleen Byron as the deranged nun seductively applying her lipstick in *Black Narcissus*, Bette Davis fumbling to plant bulbs near the end of *Dark Victory*. Particular lines would echo in my head and I'd even learn some of them by heart: 'That's not the Northern lights – that's Manderley!'; 'Oh Fred, I've been so foolish. I've fallen in love! I'm an ordinary woman – I didn't think such violent things could happen to ordinary people.'

I was particularly fond of films that starred Bette Davis, Celia Johnson, Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, Margaret Lockwood and Joan Fontaine. Some actors could move me in certain roles but not in others. I loved Jennifer Jones in *The Song of Bernadette* but was left cold by her in *A Farewell to Arms* ('I hate the rain; I sometimes see myself dead in it'). War films generally bored me. Except, of course, those with Greer Garson. I even began to distinguish the trademarks of particular directors and would watch anything by Alfred Hitchcock or George Cukor. At the time, I certainly wasn't aware what the attraction was. Nostalgia, possibly, for a recent past that seemed so much more attractive, stylish and

romantic than my bland childish present. I think the plots intrigued me most immediately. Here were the stories of shy, bookish outsiders, usually women, that spoke directly to me. One Saturday evening when I was about seven, my father, who is a bit of a film buff himself, announced that he wanted to watch a particular film. It sounded to me like a chaps-in-the-jungle adventure thing, very Wilbur Smith, on which he's very keen. I asked him, 'Are there any women in it?' He looked surprised, 'I'm not sure, I should imagine so. Why?' I wasn't quite sure why I'd asked him either, but I knew that there was a difference between Saturday matinée-type films, which I liked, and Saturday evening-type films, which he liked. 'I don't know,' I said. 'I think films with women in are just more interesting.' But this wasn't a transvestite hankering of mine. I didn't think I was or even *wanted* to be Bette Davis in *Now Voyager* or Joan Fontaine in *Suspicion*. But their *dilemmas*, the triumph of the romantic loner and the metamorphosis of the ugly duckling, were plots with which I did identify, trapped as I felt in a never-ending childhood in a harsh, unlovely northwestern town without any prospect of escape, or even the relief that a small change might bring.

In the late 1970s, after months of research in *Which?* magazine, my Dad became the proud owner of the first video recorder in our street. It was, he told us, 'top of the range' and would 'last for years', being the 'most sophisticated model'. It was a Betamax, a whirring monster in teak, now, alas, consigned to that cemetery of twentieth-century good-ideas-at-the-time which includes the Sinclair C5 and the Sodastream. At that time most pre-recorded films were contemporary ones, as the studios had yet to transfer their huge backlogs of films to tape. But even these I couldn't swap with my friends at school, as their dads had been bitten by an altogether different and stronger strain of the video bug, courtesy of JVC. These were the halcyon days of the 'video nasty', when it was easier to buy copies of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* than to get hold of the June Allyson version of *Little Women*.

Disappointed by the choices offered by the early video age, I began to consume books from the library voraciously. At first, I was fairly promiscuous in my choice of material and would read anything that sounded intriguing or that had a good cover. Once I 'discovered' a writer I would plough through his or her work, regardless of its quality. I wasn't worried by the idea of a 'canon' or what I ought to read; my criterion for books was that they should make me want to read on. If they began to indulge in

stylistic masturbation, I would lose patience and go on to something with a good story. Needless to say, Virginia Woolf didn't feature very strongly. (A little paddle in *The Waves* at the age of thirteen put me off watersports with Mrs Woolf for years.) Consequently, my brain is a mine of fairly useless information about the more obscure and idiosyncratic corners of the work of Agatha Christie, Nancy Mitford and Dennis Wheatley. I can't quite remember when I first began to read play-texts, but it was undoubtedly related to the films I had watched and enjoyed, such as *Witness for the Prosecution*, *Rebecca* or *The Monkey's Paw*. Once I discovered plays, I couldn't get enough of them. I wish I could say that I began to read them because of some theatrical instinct, the mighty call of The-spis. Sadly, it isn't true. I began to read plays because they were quicker to get through: no boring descriptions and plenty of conversation.

Initially I rarely saw plays actually performed on the stage and had to create productions of the plays I'd read in my imagination, usually cast with actors I'd admired in films. The Wirral doesn't really have a theatre, unless you count the Floral Pavilion in New Brighton. Optimistically named, New Brighton is the classic 'seaside town they forgot to pull down'. It is a (very) poor man's Blackpool, but without the tower, without the illuminations and without the Golden Mile; it does have its own rock, though. The Pavilion is a squat Victorian music-hall and continues to promote a varied theatrical diet from Frank Carson to the Birkenhead Operatic Society's umpteenth production of *Brigadoon*. The only drama here was the local Townswomen's Guild's annual one-act play festival. 'Proper' theatre happened across the water in Liverpool, at the Playhouse (traditional repertory), the Everyman (slightly avant-garde) and the Empire (touring shows and musicals). My first visit to a real theatre, like most people's I should imagine, was to see a Christmas production of *Peter Pan* at the Liverpool Empire, a cavernous theatre in a city bursting with cathedrals and architectural monuments to its prosperous but distant Victorian past. I was entranced when Peter asked us to resurrect Tinker-Bell. 'Did we believe in fairies?' I can never see a glitter-ball cast its own particular spell over an audience without a pleasant shiver going down the back of my neck. The hundreds of flickering mirrors shot magic all over the grandiose auditorium. At the time I had shouted to Peter at the top of my voice that, yes, I did believe in fairies! Now I know there are.

By the time I had graduated to secondary school, a Catholic boys' establishment run by an eccentric gallery of ageing Irish brothers and

war-fractured masters creeping towards retirement, I had consumed Birkenhead Library's drama section, from Sophocles and Shaw to Ray Cooney and Enid Bagnold. At school, I was disappointed that our only forays into drama were not the Greek or Renaissance classics which Robert Donat had led me to expect from *Goodbye Mr Chips*, but Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in which small boys played the 'maidens' and the odd sixth-former would drag-up to play the ageing harridan, like Katisha in *The Mikado*. (I'm sure it will come as no surprise if I add that Lily Savage graduated from the same establishment.)

If I had realized in my teens that the hormonally charged ambience of the rugby team disguised such an undercurrent of strong but oh-so-casual homoeroticism, perhaps I would have been more enthusiastic about it at the time. As it happens, I disdained the very idea of measuring willies in the showers or the happily accidental fondlings of the communal bath. As a way of avoiding games afternoons which were cold, dirty and dull, I persuaded a small group of friends, all crap at rugby, to put on plays. Rehearsals were scheduled to clash with rugby practice on Wednesday afternoons. With the naive enthusiasm of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, we discussed what to produce. *Oedipus Rex* was a possibility, but seemed pretty thin in the chuckle department. We toyed with *Macbeth*, but couldn't agree which of us should play the wife. Eventually we decided on *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The production lasted for hours, and though it was endlessly amusing to play it must have been excruciating to watch. A video with a strange orange wash still exists for posterity. On Betamax, of course. Buoyed by our success, but having obviously cracked the classics, we next produced *Hands across the Sea*, a very funny short comedy of bad manners by Noël Coward. Why these plays, of all that I had read? What attracted me to them? I liked them because they were funny. I liked them because the characters were so outrageous. I liked the fact that the plots didn't seem to matter; the way the story was told was the important thing, the use of language. Here was a world where wit and humour triumphed and where the swaggering, mindless prowess of the sportsfield was ridiculed. With hindsight, I suppose that I had identified and was enjoying the sensibility of camp.

In the mid-1980s, I left the Northwest to study in London. I didn't think at the time that my decision to go to London was a particularly conscious one. Anywhere outside the Wirral would have suited me. On

reflection I think that London was a magnet for me, as it is for so many other young gay men. It seemed fascinating and romantic because just about every book I'd read or film I'd seen seemed to involve it. *Nobody* of renown seemed to have hailed from the Wirral. The fact that Glenda Jackson had once worked in Boots in West Kirby and that Kenneth Halliwell had graduated from Wirral Grammar, only to achieve a rather dubious celebrity for hammering in Joe Orton's head, seemed pretty poor claims to fame. Years of watching *Blue Peter* had drummed into my head that they broadcast from LONDON W12 8QT and that we received their bounty huddled around our makeshift crystal sets in 'the regions', 'the provinces' or a whole list of euphemisms which stressed 'THIS IS WHERE IT'S AT AND YOU'RE NOWHERE NEAR IT!' And, yes, Morrissey had urged the pale and interesting youths of the 1980s to ditch our humdrum towns, like Lynn Redgrave and Rita Tushingham in *Smashing Time*, and head for the metropolis where Life would begin.

A decade ago, when I timorously stepped off the train at Euston with *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (unread) weighing down my small brown suitcase, the gay scene was a very different creature from the one that exists today. Before the advent of the gay Euro-bar-cum-club-café, the scene was dominated in the West End by 'traditional' pubs. These were generally dark, usually tatty and often dirty, serving a strange collection of rent boys, media queens and raincoats. Somewhat fazed by the city, a college friend and I joined a youth group in King's Cross and ended up as regulars at a pub called The Bell. Near several colleges and next door to the independent Scala Cinema, the clientele of The Bell were quite particular: indie-types with pristine retro-haircuts and sharp politics. Here at least you stood a fair chance of meeting men of a similar age who also watched films, saw plays and read books; but I was shocked to discover that lots of these young gay men had shared my solitary experiences with books and films. I was gutted to find that Bette Davis was a 'gay icon', up there with Judy Garland and Barbara Stanwyck. I was even angry. I was hardly aware of Barbara Stanwyck! I hated Judy Garland! I thought *I* was the only one who identified with Bette *that* way. Now that so many other people shared her, I felt it was all cheap and silly and obvious. My friend Gareth had developed an obsession with Bette Davis whilst growing up in a mining community in South Wales. When asked by his mother on his eighteenth birthday which of all his

presents he would treasure throughout his life, she was slightly worried that he chose an LP from a friend, *Miss Bette Davis Sings*, which included Bette's up-beat re-mix of the classic 'I've Written A Letter To Daddy'. Gareth, too, experienced the same surprise at finding that Bette Davis was an icon for gay men in London and that in the innocence of his youth he had been displaying, shall we say, telltale signs?

Unknowingly, I had been familiarizing myself with the vocabulary of a shared culture. Others had been attracted to the same books and films for the same reasons that I had, united by some subtle sense of difference. In the bookshops, theatres and cinemas of my adolescence, I had discovered a comforting sense of identity on the page, stage and screen, which could never have been voiced in a depressed, working-class town like Birkenhead in the 1970s and 1980s. I felt that in London at least I had access to a culture where I could share and develop this identity.

In the English department at university I met a mature student called Sally. She was a sharp-witted, no-nonsense woman in her sixties who had taken her first degree at Cambridge in the 1940s. Though studying Restoration literature, Sally had a lifetime's reading behind her and consequently seemed to have provocative opinions about everything. Once I rather naively took Sally on in one of those awful literary debates where you try to justify your own taste (SEAN (*tight-lipped*) I just like it, OK?). In passing, she happened to mention Noël Coward's *Private Lives*: 'Well, we all know what *that's* about, don't we?' Having decided at the time that only Shakespeare, or at a push Milton, was worthy of my fabulous critical skills, I hadn't given Coward any thought at all. 'What do you mean?' I asked. 'Boys buggering each other all over the carpet. Don't have to be a genius to see that.' When I thought about it, I saw that Sally might be right. But what surprised me was not the fact that Coward exhibited such a strong gay subtext, but that Sally (tweedy, pukka, straight) was aware of it too and had obviously been aware of its existence in Coward's work throughout her reading and theatregoing life. In her diaries, Frances Partridge recalls a visit to the first production of Britten's homo-opera, *Billy Budd*, in 1951 and recognizes it as 'a queer's heaven' where 'only homosexual emotions figure'.³ She had also sussed Britten's none-too subtle hymn to boy-love, *Peter Grimes*, in 1945, believing that 'what Britten was consciously or unconsciously expressing in *Peter Grimes* was a plea for the freedom from persecution of homosexuals'.⁴

So is the subtext of Coward, or Britten, or Wilde or Maugham's work so very obvious? And has it always been? A recent production of Coward's *Design for Living* was hailed by critics as a radical exposure of the play's bisexual agenda. But the thesis of the play has always been pretty obvious; it's inherent throughout the dialogue. Leo tells Gilda that 'I love you. You love me. You love Otto. I love Otto. Otto loves me.'⁵ Straightforward enough. But in this production Otto and Leo did actually kiss. Here the subtext was explicated for us, the implicit had been made explicit; there was no way the dumbest homophobe in the audience could miss the director's point.

Theatre is a collaborative process, a collusion between the playwright, the director, the designer, the performers and the audience. Each of these has an interpretive role. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of the individual audience members define their different perceptions of and attitudes to the work. Theatre is a process of interpretations, where Wilde believed that 'all interpretations are true' and 'no interpretation final'. Even 'realistic' drama is metaphorical and stage characters are ciphers or representations, for the arena of the stage is that of allegory. We are invited to read our lives in the action that takes place on stage. Prior to the blatancy of productions like Sean Mathias's *Design for Living*, there has been a tacit collusion between gay writer and gay audience. For gay people as audience members are practised at interpreting art, never taking anything at face value and locating themselves within texts that seem, superficially, to exclude them. We have had no choice but to read ourselves in works about heterosexual relationships and as, on the whole, we are born to and cultivated by straight parents, we understand the language of heterosexuality: we are 'culturally bi-lingual'. But perhaps the hints, suggestions and symbols that we feel are so obvious and exclusive to us in gay writing have not been as incomprehensible to heterosexuals as we like to think. In defending his early work, which had been condemned as 'decadent', Noël Coward had come to the conclusion that an 'unpleasant subject' such as drug addiction, adultery and, by extension, homosexuality was 'something that everyone knows about, but shrinks from the belief that other people know about it too'.⁶ In the 1950s, Terence Rattigan tried to persuade the producer of the American production of *Separate Tables* to accept a rewrite which explicitly identified a central character as homosexual. Rattigan was very aware that English audiences had become accustomed to collaborating in his subterfuge:

an English audience knew my problem and accepted the fact that I had to skirt around it. They got the full impact of the play. . . . An American audience, on the other hand, not conditioned to censorship and to the evasiveness to which British dramatists are now forced, may well take [the character's] stated offence not as a symbol at all, but as a literal fact.⁷

After my conversation with Sally at college, I began to wonder whether, if the emotions that inspired these works were specifically gay and were apparent, even obvious, to her, then perhaps my attraction to them as a young gay man back in Birkenhead had been something more substantial than 'just a feeling'. I began to realize that what had particularly appealed to me was that which was not said or stated but was suggested, implied or hinted at. The writers who excited me in my adolescence had offered me the freedom to site myself in their plays, films and stories, the freedom to explore the rich and dangerous territory of the subtext. Gay writers earlier this century, anticipating contemporary playwrights like Harold Pinter, had evolved a particular style which heightened the importance of subtext, for the subtext is the queens' realm.

In this book, I have concentrated on writers and plays which have interested or influenced me. It is very much an exploration of my own taste. I had originally intended to include the rather modish Joe Orton, but I have to confess that though the biography is fruity, the plays bore me rigid. John Lahr has almost single-handedly ensured Orton's literary canonization, but where would his reputation stand if his life had not come to such an untimely, romantic and marketable end? Would Orton too share the ill-frequented literary suburbs with those other iconoclasts of the 1960s, Arnold Wesker, Edward Bond, Ann Jellicoe and Shelagh Delaney? I have not attempted to write a history of twentieth-century 'gay' plays.⁸ Both Michael Wilcox and Nicholas de Jongh have explored that ground more directly, focusing on plays that are more explicitly 'about' homosexuality, such as Mourdaint Shairp's *The Green Bay Tree* (1933), Philip King's *Serious Charge* (1955) and Keith Winter's *The Rats of Norway* (1933).⁹ Nor have I attempted to write a chronology of twentieth-century dramatic writing by gay men, for such a study would run to many volumes. Ivor Novello, a major craftsman of British musical camp, surely deserves a study of his own, as does Rodney Ackland,

whose work has only recently been recognized by the National Theatre.¹⁰ The essays that follow do not presume to cover the whole broad and varied careers of the writers I have focused on, but the period that they inhabited, from the 1890s to the mid-1970s, does encompass the development, maturity and decline of a particular style of theatre, the 'well-made play'. New plays by Wilde, Maugham, Coward and Rattigan dominated the West End stage for almost a century and revivals of their work continue to be a mainstay of the repertoires of the West End as well as the touring circuit and repertory theatres. Without these writers there would be no West End theatre as we know it. Just how well would the 'well-made play' have been made without them? A major part of our theatrical culture has been dominated by gay writers like these and their sympathies have helped to shape our society by nurturing the imaginations and opinions of Joe Bloggs in the Dress Circle. Neil Bartlett observes the strange ironies of the theatre where actors dramatize heterosexuality and where gender itself is a kind of drag, as any four-year-old with the slightest acquaintance with *Widow Twanky* or *Prince Charming* could tell you:

Thousands of people go to see shows every night and have no idea that they are watching their fantasies acted out by gay people, while gay people still know what they have always known, that shows which 'say' nothing about us can still be some of the most powerful and exciting vehicles of our pleasures and our griefs.¹¹

Though each of the writers I examine projects a distinctive voice in their work, Wilde, Maugham, Coward and Rattigan share a particular way of looking at the world, a strategy of discussing relationships and a similar agenda. Stylistically they have a great deal in common. They are certainly all traditionalists. As a rule, they do not experiment with form and language. But British drama was generally unshaken by the Modernist movement, avoiding the innovations of the poets and novelists of the 1920s.¹² In our present age when the division between the commercial theatre and the subsidized theatre appears more pronounced than ever, it seems appropriate to consider these avowedly commercial playwrights and how far their personal dilemmas as gay men affected their agendas as revealed in their work intended for a popular audience.

The period encompassed by this book also covers some of the most

fascinating developments in British legislation that have directly affected gay men. Both the 1890s and the 1960s were periods of comparative liberalness. The Wilde scandal brought the concept of the 'naughty nineties' to an end and the years between the demise of Wilde and the rise of Orton were decades of legal control and social hostility towards homosexuality, which resulted in a culture of repression and concealment. It is the evolution and practice of a stage language of discretion, an ability to discuss and explore that which is unspeakable, that I attempt to explore in the work of these writers. The theme of transgressive behaviour, and particularly transgressive love, features heavily in the plays I examine, but it's always bound within the conventional, popular form of the 'well-made play'. This genre might even serve as an overriding image for the work of these writers: the exploration of transgression and alienation, but restrained within a tight, traditional three-act structure. Insecurity about age, the fading of beauty and the burden of secrecy are major themes in these plays, as are guilt, shame and embarrassment. Consequently, these works have spoken to me directly and eloquently of a sense of isolation and 'otherness' which I believe is an inherent part of their creators' art. To me, the anxieties of wartime are very apparent in *Blithe Spirit*, even though the war is never mentioned. Like the ghostly Elvira, Coward's sexuality haunts the play just as apparently, but just as discreetly, as the war does. Whether it's deliberately intended or subconsciously evolved, the subtext cannot help but be an expression of the author, whether he's aware of it or not: In Colin Dale's unlicensed and unproduced play of 1940, *Queer People*, the hero, a gay architect, is advised that unbeknown to him, his sexuality is apparent throughout his work, right down to the gradient of the floors or the arrangement of the rooms. His sometime lover quotes Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*,

Every man's work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of himself, and the more he tries to conceal himself the more clearly will his character appear in spite of him.¹³

The art of Wilde, Maugham, Coward and Rattigan is an art born of self-censorship, subterfuge and concealment, but it is also rich with oblique signals and references for those open to reading them. But this

art inspired by repression has also produced some of the most successful, important and life-enhancing plays of the twentieth-century; many of them, such as *Private Lives*, *The Deep Blue Sea* and *Blithe Spirit* are now regarded as classics which continue to inform our culture. Beginning with Oscar Wilde, I attempt to explore the resonances of his agenda for tolerance and his creed of individualism in the works of the popular gay writers who followed him. As a background, I have briefly charted the legal innovations which regulated the personal lives of gay writers throughout this period. The law policed the lives of gay men in private and the presentation of stage plays in public for much of this century. Such regulations necessitated the evolution of sophisticated strategies by gay dramatists to express their personal preoccupations on stage, albeit obliquely. At one particularly frenetic point in *Present Laughter*, between the slam of the bedroom/closet door, the doorbell rings and Essendine, Coward's alter ego sighs, 'With any luck it's the Lord Chamberlain'. As Alan Sinfield observes, for most of the twentieth century, the theatre, just like gay men, has been haunted by the 'ominous ring of the doorbell' that was the herald of the law.¹⁴

They shoot themselves, don't they?

Interviewer: What influence, if any, did Wilde have on you or others of your set, while you were growing up?

Cecil Beaton: A very negative influence, indeed, in terms of being honest about one's difference. The *name* was not spoken, and from time to time there were tidbits of news meant to intimidate anyone who might follow in his footsteps.¹⁵

Throughout history, writing by gay men as artists has been conditioned by the statutes which regulated their behaviour as individuals. Such regulations in Britain during the past century inspired a culture of self-censorship and subterfuge by gay writers. Oscar Wilde, surely the most famous homosexual of the nineteenth century, casts a long shadow across this short, turbulent twentieth century, both as a dramatist and as an individual. Wilde manipulated the dramatic forms which he had inherited from the mid-nineteenth century and created a new genre, a comic drama of morals. He distinguished himself from his contemporaries by creating a stage language which eschewed naturalism in favour