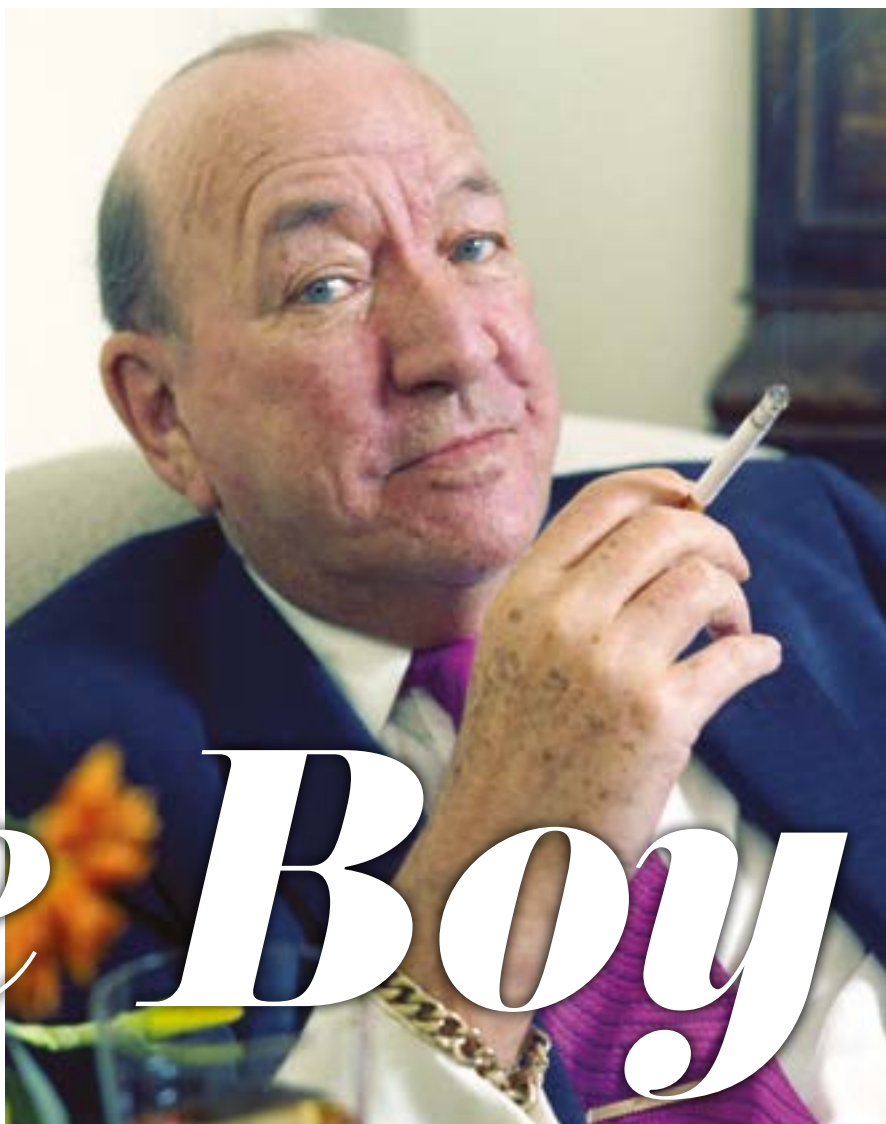


MAD ABOUT

the Boy



FIFTY YEARS AFTER NOËL COWARD'S DEATH **XAV JUDD**
TAKES A LOOK AT THE LIFE AND TIMES OF "THE MASTER"

In 1971, at the National Film Theatre (now BFI Southbank), during a discussion with Noël Coward about his career, cinema great Richard Attenborough recollects the advice his subject offered to a starlet who'd screwed up a dress rehearsal. Basically, she wanted an insight into Coward's consistently high standard of (acting) work, and he replied: "Get on. Say your lines. And get off without crashing into the furniture".

Such a quip was indicative of a man whose tremendous natural ability appeared to make any artistic endeavour he pursued seem easy. On stage from the age of seven, having written his first successful play as a teen, and the best-paid author on the planet by 1931, this polymath also sang, composed, painted, and directed.

Noël Peirce Coward was born on 16 December 1899, in Teddington, south-west London. The second of three sons, his father, Arthur, worked as a piano salesperson while his mother, Violet, was the daughter of a Royal Navy captain. Although the family lived in "genteel poverty", the playwright's mother encouraged him in a respect for the arts. Therefore, Noël appeared in amateur concerts in

his early childhood, went to the Chapel Royal Choir School, and attended a dance academy.

Despite receiving minimal formal education, young Coward's willingness to learn was highlighted by his voracious reading. And when performing, this precocious talent simply came alive. So, it was no surprise that, when an important opportunity presented itself, Noël grasped it with both hands. In 1911, after spotting an advert in the Daily Mirror for the role of Prince Mussel in the children's play *The Goldfish*, the budding thesp secured the part in an audition. Not long after what had been his first professional engagement, the esteemed actor-manager Sir Charles Hawtrey (not the Carry On actor) cast Coward as a pageboy in the stage production of *The Great Name*. More than anyone, he became the adolescent's mentor: "He was absolutely wonderful to me. He taught me, really, everything I know about comedy," recounted Noël, in a 1969 BBC interview with Patrick Garland.

In the next half-decade, Coward continued acting in minor roles in a succession of plays including *Charley's Aunt*, *Peter Pan*, and *Where the Rainbow Ends*. But in the last year of World

"He was now the country's leading writer and had a salary to match: in 1929, his earnings were the equivalent to over £3 million in 2020 prices"



War One the Londoner was conscripted into the Artists Rifles. However, he was deemed unfit for active service due to a tubercular tendency and was discharged on health reasons after nine months.

As well as treading the boards, Noël had always written, turning out his initial play at the astonishing age of ten. In 1920, the all-round entertainer starred (invariably, Coward always wrote “fat parts” for himself) in the self-penned *I’ll Leave It to You*. The three-act light comedy,

which revolved around an uncle’s scheme to provoke his lazy nephews and nieces into worthwhile vocations, got mixed reviews. The Times commented: “It is a remarkable piece of work from so young a head – spontaneous, light, and always ‘brainy’.” Yet, three days later, the Observer stated that if Coward “can overcome a tendency to smartness, he will probably produce a good play one of these days.” Regardless of any mild criticism, adroit, industrious and especially inspired, Noël came to master the art form



leading to a string of hit productions in the mid-1920s including *On with the Dance*, *The Vortex*, and *Hay Fever* - written in a ridiculously short 72 hours. In fact, in June 1925, the accomplished dramatist had four shows on simultaneously in the West End. He was now the country’s leading writer and had a salary to match: in 1929, his earnings were £50,000 (equivalent to over £3 million in 2020 prices). A portion of this income was spent on the 17th-century-built, exquisite Kent retreat, Goldenhurst Farm.

Coward’s life was not without irony. Always dapperly attired - he was often seen in silk dressing gowns or smoking jackets – and well-spoken, the charismatic, fiercely patriotic artist was viewed as the quintessential Englishman. Nonetheless, technically, he was actually breaking the law, being a practising homosexual at a time when it was illegal to be gay. Although Noël never commented on his preference publicly, the flamboyant chain-smoker was openly gay to his nearest and dearest, with two of his most momentous loves being the Yank stockbroker Jack Wilson, who became his business manager, and lifelong companion Graham Pryn.



PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DESIGN FOR LIVING, ALLEN WARREN, PRIVATE LIVES



“The flamboyant chain-smoker was openly gay to his nearest and dearest”

“East, West - just points of the compass, each as stupid as the other.” Maybe it’s a bit of a shame Coward never got to utter this cool line from the film *Dr. No* (1962). He would have, if he hadn’t declined the titular role; famously, he wrote a telegram to Ian Fleming, the author of the James Bond novel on which the movie was based, and articulated: “Dr. No? No! No! No!”

Although chiefly known as a playwright and for appearing on stage, Coward made several forays into movies, not only as an actor in war classics like *In Which We Serve* (1942), which he also co-directed, produced and scripted, but as a producer in film adaptations of his plays such as *This Happy Breed*, *Brief Encounter*, and *Blithe Spirit*.

Coward reinvented himself as a cabaret singer in the mid-1950s, with a series of sold-out shows in the *Desert Inn* in Las Vegas. The silver-tongued maestro performed his own songs, for instance, the ground-breaking *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* and the satirical *Don’t Let’s Be Bestly to the Germans*. Throughout the rest of the decade and up until the end of the next one, Noël continued to write plays and musicals. The

new material was not as well-received as former productions. Arguably, he was slightly out of touch with the UK Zeitgeist, having relocated abroad for tax reasons (he eventually settled at the *Firefly Estate* in Jamaica). Additionally, perhaps he was viewed as something of an anachronism, in comparison with the likes of John Osborne, Harold Pinter, and Alan Sillitoe, the angry young men who shook up the notion of traditional British society with kitchen sink dramas. Lastly, ill-health unquestionably affected his perceptiveness and the quality of his output: he suffered from arteriosclerosis and memory loss. The latter condition meant that after his star turn in the film *The Italian Job* in 1969, where he delighted as criminal mastermind Mr Bridger, he retired from the silver screen. By now, the prolific author – he devised over 65 plays and 300 songs including revue classics such as *Mad about the Boy* and *Don’t put your Daughter on the Stage Mrs Worthington* – was



COWARD ON CELLULOID

FOUR OF HIS MOST UNFORGETTABLE GEMS

IN WHICH WE SERVE (1942)

Co-directors Noël Coward & David Lean

This maritime epic was inspired by the actual World War Two exploits of Lord Mountbatten, while in command of HMS Kelly. It’s 1941, and the fictional destroyer HMS *Torrin* receives a critical hit from Nazi bombers in the *Battle of Crete*. As a few of the vessel’s crew cling to life rafts, they narrate “the story of the ship” via flashbacks.

BRIEF ENCOUNTER (1945)

Director David Lean

Undeniably one of the most renowned British motion pictures, this moving romantic drama was based on Noël’s one-act play, *Still Life*. A couple of strangers – Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) and Dr. Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard) – meet at a railway station and contemplate having an affair.

BLITHE SPIRIT (1945)

Director David Lean

In this comedy-fantasy, novelist Charles Condomine (Rex Harrison) and his second wife Ruth (Constance Cummings) take part in a séance. Afterwards, they are visited by the ghost of his first spouse.

THE ITALIAN JOB (1969)

Director Peter Collinson

In what is a rip-roaring comic caper, a group of criminals led by Charlie Croker (Michael Caine) attempt to steal a cache of gold bullion being transported through the streets of Turin in a reinforced security truck.

so venerated that cinema legends John Gielgud, Alec Guinness and Laurence Olivier were among those to grace his 70th birthday bash at London’s *Savoy Hotel*. Within three months, further recognition arrived in the form of a knighthood (Winston Churchill had vetoed said honour in 1942).

Noël Coward died from heart failure on 26 March 1973 at his beloved *Firefly*. He was 73. Today his plays are still regularly staged all over the globe, and made into television and movie adaptations. Daring, witty, with an assured deft touch, Coward’s extraordinary 50-year oeuvre redefined what it was to be a dramatist. And undoubtedly, the LGBT+ icon is one of this country’s greatest (routinely coming in the top ten in related polls). In a 1969 interview in *Time*, the literary trailblazer said, “I wanted to write good plays, to grip as well as amuse.

And by Jove, he jolly well cracked it!

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