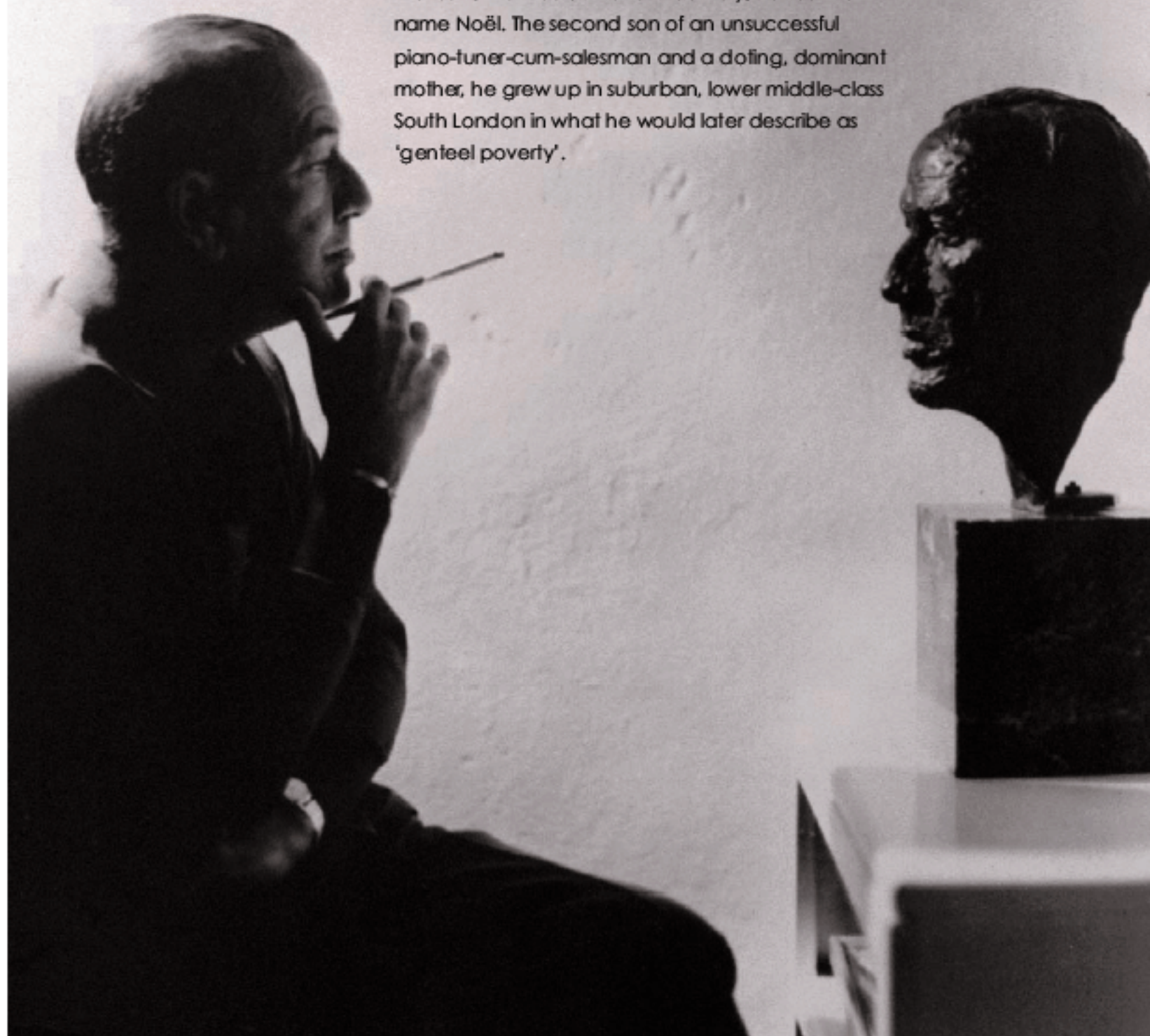


NOËL COWARD

SHERIDAN MORLEY

Sir Noël Coward, play boy of the West End world, jack of all its entertainment trades and Master of most, was born on 16 December 1899, just before the last Christmas of the 19th century, hence the name Noël. The second son of an unsuccessful piano-tuner-cum-salesman and a doting, dominant mother, he grew up in suburban, lower middle-class South London in what he would later describe as 'genteel poverty'.





When he was ten, his mother answered a Daily Mirror advertisement for 'a star cast of wonder children' to appear in a fantasy play called *The Goldfish* at the Little Theatre. He auditioned successfully, singing 'Liza Ann' to his mother's la-la accompaniment, and within a few weeks was on the stage he seldom left thereafter. Two years later he was Slightly in *Peter Pan* (Kenneth Tynan was to say that he was Wholly in it ever afterwards) and, like his beloved friend and partner Gertrude Lawrence, he then settled through World War I into the life of a fairly successful touring child actor around the British regions: Michael MacLiammoir (then Alfred Willmore and later co-founder of Dublin's Gate Theatre) was another of the 'wonder children' of the time.

In Noël's own view, he was 'when washed and smarmed down a bit, passably attractive;

but I was, I believe, one of the worst boy actors ever inflicted on the paying public'. Nevertheless he survived, and by 1917 had already made his first movie, DW Griffith's wartime epic *Hearts of the World*, for which he was paid a pound a day for making up his face bright yellow and wheeling a barrow on location down a street in Worcestershire with Lillian and Dorothy Gish.

There followed a brief, uneventful and unhappy spell in the army, for which he was summoned to the Camberwell Swimming Baths for training, another five years in the touring theatre with the occasional very minor West End role, and then an unsuccessful trip to Broadway where he hoped to sell some of the early scripts with which he had already failed to impress London managements.

This plan did not work out too well, not least because nobody had bothered to inform Noël that, in those days before air conditioning, Broadway theatre managements were virtually all closed for the summer. Until taken in



Top: Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence in *Private Lives*
 Above: Letter written to Noël Coward by Stephen Tennant with his suggestions for Mrs Erynn's costume in *After the Ball*, Globe Theatre, 1954
 Right: Yvonne Printemps as Melanie in *Conversation Piece*, 1934
 Far right: Gertrude Lawrence and Noël Coward in *We Were Dancing* from *Tonight at 8.30*



by Gabrielle Enthoven, whose theatre collection later became the basis for the Theatre Museum, he was reduced to the prospect of a park bench, but even then Coward's luck did not run out entirely. One evening he was invited to dinner at an apartment up on Riverside Drive by the eccentric actress Laurette Taylor and her husband, the playwright Hartley Manners.

After dinner it was the custom of the Taylor clan to play games of charades which grew increasingly acrimonious as the guests began to wish they had never come, let alone joined in; although countless other theatre writers had been to the parties, it was Noël who first realised there might be a play here, and 80 years later the result was still seen in 2006's *Hay Fever* with Dame Judi Dench - a resounding hit at the Haymarket.

Then, in 1924 at the tiny Everyman Theatre in Hampstead, one of the very first London fringe theatres, came the overnight success of *The Vortex*, a play about drug addiction written at a time when even alcoholism was scarcely mentioned on the stage. The roughly equal amounts of interest, indignation, admiration and money generated by the play, which Noël had written, directed and starred in and for which he had also helped paint the scenery outside the stage door on Hampstead High Street, meant that at the age of 24 he went from being a mildly unsuccessful playwright, actor and composer to being the hottest theatrical figure in London - a change that came about so fast even he took several months and one nervous breakdown to come to terms with it.

On transfer, *The Vortex* was joined in the West End by *Hay Fever*, *Fallen Angels* and the revue *On with the Dance*, thereby giving Noël a four-hits-in-one-season triumph only rivalled in the 20th-century London theatre by Alan Ayckbourn and Somerset Maugham.

But there followed a year of total critical and public reversal, when boos greeted the opening of *Sirocco* and Noël was actually spat upon in the street by disappointed theatregoers, happily not a practice which caught on along Shaftesbury Avenue. Within the next two

years however, as the 1920s ended and the 1930s began, Noël wrote and staged three of his greatest successes - the operetta *Bitter Sweet*, the definitive Cowardly comedy *Private Lives* and the epic *Cavalcade*, so that by 1931 the boy wonder of the 1920s had settled into an altogether more stable pattern of theatrical triumph, one which was best characterised by the partnership he had formed with Gertrude Lawrence. For her he had written *Private Lives*, redolent of Riviera balconies, filled with the potency of cheap music and shot through with the sadness of a couple who could live neither together nor apart, a couple who were in many incidental ways Noël and Gertie themselves. Six years later they played the West End and Broadway together again, though for the last time, in the nine short plays (among them *Red Peppers*, *Shadow Play* and the *Still Life* that became the movie *Brief Encounter*) which made up the three alternating triple bills of *Tonight at 8.30*.

Between those two towering landmarks of their relationship, Coward also found the time to write *Design for Living* for Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, the revue *Words and Music* for the producer Charles Cochran,





From top: Noël Coward and Graham Payn with Pat Kirkwood in front of the cloth for *Ace of Clubs*, 1950;
Noël Coward and Mary Martin;
Robert Morley with Noël Coward (photograph by Alan Davidson)



Conversation Piece for Yvonne Printemps and soon afterwards *Operette* for Fritzi Massary. 'Throughout the 1930s in fact,' he wrote later, 'I was a highly publicised and irritatingly successful figure, much in demand. The critical laurels that had been so confidently predicted for me in my 20s never graced my brow, and I was forced to console myself with the bitter palliative of commercial success. Which I enjoyed very much indeed.'

Just before the outbreak of World War II, Coward had been sent to Paris to set up a propaganda operation, and when hostilities broke out he toured the world extensively doing troop shows which incidentally taught

him a new art, the one that was to rescue him in Las Vegas and elsewhere when, in the 1950s, theatrical fashion turned against him – that of the solo cabaret concert.

By now he had found a place in the sun in Jamaica where he could indulge his late-life love for painting, but his writing output was still prodigious: plays, films, poems, short stories, musicals, even a novel poured out of him, and increasingly he found character-acting roles in movies as varied as *The Italian Job* and *Bunny Lake Is Missing*.

The truth is that, although the theatrical and political world had changed considerably through the century for which he stood as an ineffably English icon, Noël himself changed very little. He just grew increasingly Cowardly, and well into his sixties was ever quick to find new ways to market himself: in 1955 he and Mary Martin starred alone in *Together with Music*, the first-ever live 90-minute colour special on American television.

Noël Coward died, peacefully in Jamaica, on 26 March 1973 but (as John O'Hara said of George Gershwin) I don't have to believe that if I don't want to, and in any case he lives on in constant revival – not only the Haymarket *Hay Fever* but Simon Callow with *Present Laughter* and, at Chichester, several of the plays from *Tonight at 8.30*. It would be difficult if not impossible to summarise his success, the way he caught the mood of the 20th century's successive but often very contrasted decades, the sheer energy of the workaholic output of a man who believed that work was always so much more fun than fun.

I'd be happy to leave the last words though with the man many thought of as Noël's polar opposite, writer of the play which many believed (wrongly, as it turned out) would destroy him, but who in fact was always among his greatest fans. As John Osborne memorably once said, 'The 20th Century would be incomplete without Noël Coward: he was simply a genius, and anyone who cannot see that should kindly leave the stage'.

Sheridan Morley was drama critic of the *Daily Express*; he wrote the first Coward biography, *A Talent to Amuse*, and devised the stage show *Noël and Gertie*; he was also a trustee of the Noël Coward Foundation. Further information about Noël Coward may be found at www.noelcoward.co.uk

NOËL COWARD AT THE NOËL COWARD

When he was just 20 Noël Coward's first West End play, *I'll Leave It to You*, was produced at the New Theatre and the critics recognised him as a budding playwright. 1926 saw him playing the uncharacteristically dishevelled composer Lewis Dodd in *The Constant Nymph*. The following year Coward's *Pretty Prattle*, a cabaret scene, was performed at a charity matinee by John Gielgud, with a young dancer called Ninette de Valois appearing as an extra. In 1959 Coward adapted Feydeau's French farce *Look After Lulu*, largely as a vehicle for Vivien Leigh whose performance was highly praised. More recent years have seen productions of *Hay Fever* and a multiple award-winning *Private Lives*.



Main shot: Esme Wynne as Faith Crombie and Noël Coward as Bobbie Dermott in *I'll Leave It to You*, 1920.

Left, from top: Cathleen Nesbitt as Florence Churchill, Helen Spencer as Paulina Sanger, Edna Best as Teresa Sanger and Noël Coward as Lewis Dodd in *The Constant Nymph*, 1926;

Vivien Leigh as Lulu in *Look After Lulu*, 1959 (photograph by David Sim); Maria Aitken as Judith Bliss in *Hay Fever*, 1992 (photograph by Anthony Crickmay); Lindsay Duncan as Amanda and Alan Rickman as Elyot in *Private Lives*, 2001 (photograph by Joan Marcus)