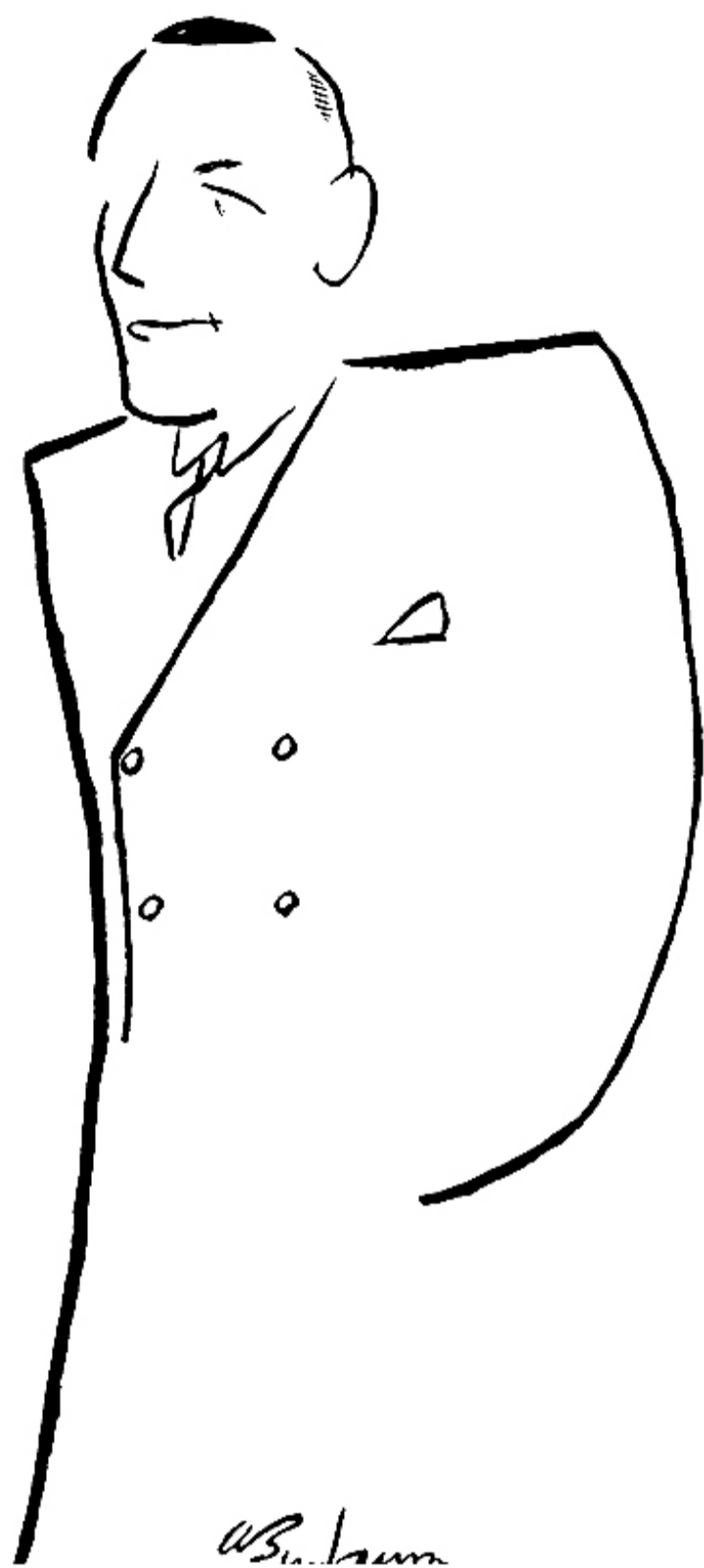


# STAGE

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p. 37

# NOËL COWARD



**I**t is agreed by the critics of two continents that Noel Coward is unique as a dramatist. But they also say that he is the British Sacha Guitry, and that his characters are the children of Oscar Wilde. They say that *The Rat Trap* is only watered Shaw; *Sirocco*, dirtied Henri Bernstein; *The Queen Was In the Parlour*, flighty Anthony Hope; and that *Easy Virtue*, according to the way you look at it, is not only Pinero, Eugene Walter, and George Kelly, but that it shows all over it "the dowdy hand of Alexandre Dumas, fils."

In spite of all this Noel Coward has the position that he wants. His newest piece, *Design for Living*, took in over \$29,000 the first week with sixty persons standing at night performances. He and his two stars, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, are each drawing about \$3,000 a week. To this he adds his royalties as author, and his percentage as director. Just down Broadway is *Cavalcade*, in its movie version, with seats sold for weeks ahead. In the bookstores are three new little green and gold jacketed volumes, *Design for Living*, *Cavalcade*, and *Spangled Unicorn*.

On his opening night, three hundred telegrams for him passed through the stage doorman's hand. On Thursdays when he goes to the matinees of other plays, willing hands thrust at his aristocratically sloppy clothes. He is in demand for parties. There his thin paleness adds a note of cleverness. His chop-

Playwright: *Cavalcade* . . . . .  
 Actor: *Design for Living* . . . . .  
 Composer: *Words and Music* . . . . .  
 Director: *Private Lives* . . . . .  
 Producer: *Bitter Sweet* . . . . .  
 Singer, Dancer, Town Wit . . . . .

py, nervous gestures are vitalizing. His gaiety, his funny quick walk with the left shoulder raised, his sudden laugh, point him. Most pleasant of all to him is the knowledge that he is too old to be called *Enfant Terrible* any longer.

That phrase has ridden his nerves for years. He does not mind if audiences see that his comedies are thin, airy, or tenuous, so long as they notice that his acting is superb, hysterical if necessary, and always finely textured. He writes at will dramas, operettas, farces, or revues. He will appear in them in emotional, or comic roles, singing, dancing. He will write them historically accurate, or merely amusing, with no cord binding them to this world.

He is full of creative plans—plays, music, lyrics. In the early days he wrote them off flippantly, showing how smart he was, never rewriting, never scraping down his ideas, just popping them into the theatre. The only good that came out of that method was *Hay Fever*. Its lunacy never allowed it to be pulled into any shape.

Although it only takes him a week-end or so to write down his comedies, he now plots them intricately for months. The bubble ones, *Design for Living* and *Private Lives*, went quickly on the typewriter, but *Bitter Sweet* and *Cavalcade* needed the slowness of longhand. Before he came to America in 1930 with *Private Lives*, he outlined to Charles B. Cochran the story of *Cavalcade*. Cochran sent him a cost sheet, figuring on scenery and cast, before the play was ever written. After research reading Coward went back to his Elizabethan farm in Kent to write it. He gave Mrs. Gladys Calthrop, who has designed all the sets for him since *The Vortex*, a table downstairs. Every morning at six-thirty the pair started work. Coward wrote upstairs, sending down the script scene by scene until lunch time. It took them six weeks.

*Private Lives* was written hastily in a Shanghai hotel room. *Design for Living* was done in six months on a freighter in South America. The latter was ready last May. The Lunts, however, had promised to go on the road with *Reunion in Vienna*. They would

not be ready until January. Disappointed, Coward went back to Kent. There, because he had five songs stored in his head, he wrote a revue, *Words and Music*, which has just stopped running at the London Adelphi. *Design for Living* had been in his head for some ten years, ever since the days when Lynn Fontanne lent him twenty dollars on his first visit here. (They are sick of hearing it now.) He wrote the piece purely as an omnibus to carry Miss Fontanne, Mr. Lunt, and himself. He worked up tricks for all. His ideas on polyandry came later.

All his plays rise in the same way from a desire, not to express certain convictions, but rather to do a certain stunt. *Cavalcade*, his finest, and most serious work, was not the result of a patriotic gesture, or primarily a cry against war and its futility. It was written because he wanted to do something on the grand scale. History gave him the widest sweep. He liked the period (flowers under glass amuse him) and he wanted to do the story of a woman's life. Three days before the opening England went off the gold standard. Suddenly the Press cried that *Cavalcade* was a patriotic pageant where Britons could see the glory of their Empire. Audiences hastily decided for themselves that Noel Coward should be knighted.

Just as spontaneously and from an equally artificial notion came his first major success, *The Vortex*. He thought it would be magnificent to write a play in which a son denounced his mother against a crescendo of music, broken abruptly by the smash of a statue. He had no message then about sons who take dope and mothers who take lovers. He wrote *Private Lives* out of a desire to play opposite an intimate friend, Gertrude Lawrence. He knew it would be fun if Miss Lawrence cracked a set of victrola records over his head.

All the characters whom he likes have bad tempers. They must in addition have sophistication. They must know Chanel as Gabrielle; they must know Proust, Matisse, and Ravel before the *Bolero*. If they know all that it is permissible for them to yell, "contemptible second-rate opportunist", to scream that someone has a mind like an "old sardine tin with a few fins left in it". It is good theatre for these sophisticates to relieve their nerves by smashing crockery, statues, all accompanied by magnificent geysers of abuse.

All these worldly persons come from the mind of the boy who started out to be a ballet dancer. Noel Pierce Coward was born at Teddington, near London, in 1899. His

father, Arthur Coward, was known chiefly because his father had been the organist at the Crystal Palace. The high spot of the family of Noel's mother was an uncle who had been an Admiral. At the age of nine the fatherless Noel went off to a ballet school in Hanover Square. There was no reason to account for it except that he was light on his feet. The next years were a struggle, but he was eventually noticed by Charles Hawtry who taught him pretty much all he knows of acting.

In 1917 the Coward resources were so low that he ran an apartment house on Ebury Street with his mother by day and acted by night with Hawtry at the Garrick Theatre. Then he joined the army, though he never reached France. When he was twenty-one he saw his first play, *I'll Leave it to You*, an arid little piece, in production for five weeks. He followed this with *The Young Idea*, in which he not only was rude to the hunting and bohemian sets but acted as well the part of the rude young brother. It lasted for eight weeks, and now is included in one of the volumes of *Great Modern British Plays*.

On the buoyancy engendered by these mild failures, Coward alighted in New York in 1921 to sell his plays. He had little money, and no fun. After six months he returned to London. (When he came back here on his next visit he lived at the Ritz.) At home he was soon involved in a revue, *London Calling*, which had bad notices, ran a year, and made some money for him.

He was not really famous until after *The Vortex*, whose hysteria mounted it to success before the defects of theme, artificiality, and reproof, were discovered. Before the rehearsals of this were ended, the money ran out. He went to Michael Arlen, suddenly wealthy from *The Green Hat*, to ask for two hundred pounds for a play. Stipulating only that no one know of the loan, Arlen gave him a check.

In the next three years Noel Coward, pushing his sophistication, wrote *The Rat Trap*, *Fallen Angels*, *Hay Fever*, *Easy Virtue*, *The Queen Was in the Parlour*, and *The Marquise*. Besides these he did some skits and music for *Charlot's Revue* and *On with the Dance*. They called him the playboy of the theatrical world. He was seen constantly. He was audacious, and naughty, and loved.

Then *Home Chat* was produced. It was a dull discussion of adultery, lasting two weeks. *Sirocco* immediately succeeded it. On the opening night the audience screamed its dislike. The curtain rang down and rang up

with Noel Coward furious, almost purple for the only time in his life, on the stage. He had decided that the screaming was unfair to the cast. He was responsible. For seven minutes he, booed, stood there outstaring the audience with a hot blue eye. It left. A hundred of them rushed to the stage door to spit on him.

*Sirocco* was merely the story of an English wife, bored with her husband, who took an Italian lover and threw him out violently, thus freeing herself from all bonds. *The Daily Express* said it was dirty, immoral, although English audiences were accustomed enough to wives and lovers. For two months the newspapers gustily hung Noel Coward to a sour apple tree. All said that he was a flash in the pan, that he was finished, and that they had known it all along. Only Edgar Wallace and St. John Ervine defended him. Since then he gives no interviews in England.

A year later he opened in *This Year of Grace*, book, lyrics, and music by Noel Coward. Afterwards came *Bitter Sweet*, then *Private Lives*, *Cavalcade*, *Words and Music*, and now *Design for Living*.

He gave his newest play to Gordon as a badge of moral courage. When Coward was playing *Private Lives* in London, on a strictly treacle diet, Gordon, whom he had met casually, went backstage. Gordon said: "Why do you overact so badly in the third act?"

Now in the intermissions Max Gordon goes backstage at the Ethel Barrymore theatre to see his star, Noel Coward. He watches the flurry in the large dressing room, once used by chorus girls, and hung these days with beige monk's cloth. There he hears the sharp voice of Coward with the words rolling out clearly like oranges out of a bag. Thin, with a long tired face, Coward receives the celebrities who visit him. Direct, forceful, with a strongly equipped ego, he is always the dominant one. On the stage in his own comedies he plays Noel Coward, and plays him well.

Noel Coward owns an Elizabethan farm in Kent from which he can look across the marshes to the Channel and over to France. He has a London studio, made out of a garage, where the modern sofas are covered with whites and beiges and two pianos rest on a dais. In New York he lives in a small rented apartment by the East River.

There is constantly about him at least one of his foursome of close friends. Wherever he is, there are usually the Earl Amherst, Mrs. Calthrop, John C. Wilson, his business manager, and Mrs. Lorn Loraine, his Lon-

don secretary. Outside the rim of that group there are in London Gertrude Lawrence, Raymond Massey, and Adrienne Allen, and in New York Alexander Woollcott, Neysa McMein, and the Lunts. Beyond them lies the whole world.

Now that he is acting here, the schedule is arranged to give him time for a daily game of backgammon with Woollcott, usually winning, angry losing. *Design for Living*, incidentally, is dedicated to him. No longer does Coward give supper parties after his openings. He goes instead to a friend's house with none to tell him that he was simply marvelous.

When he is in London he has luncheon daily at the Ivy, to whose head waiter he dedicated *Terribly Intimate Portraits*, a volume of dank parodies that is only equalled by the witless ones in *Spangled Unicorn*. Rarely does he dine out, mainly because it interferes with his attending the theatre or movies every night. These are the interludes between writing, playing, or traveling.

Several years ago he went off with the Earl Amherst to see the world. In Singapore his companion became sick. Bored and lonesome, Coward quickly discovered a British company, touring with *Journey's End*. He announced three special performances with himself in the lead, learned the part in two days, doubled the prices, and played Stanhope for fun with the temperature at 115 degrees.

It was on that trip that he wrote *Private Lives*. He kept thinking of comic situations in twos, for he designs many of his plays on a system of reversed symmetry. It is one of the three ways of distinguishing a Coward piece, if you do not notice his nasty comments on civilization, his bustling snips of dialogue, moving to a moment of hitting the nerves with abuse. Most of his work, except for *Cavalcade*, has been concerned only with nerves and not with heart or brain. There alone have audiences cried with the latest *Homme Terrible*.

ALLENE TALMEY