**England’s Chekhov**

by Stephen Unwin

Noel Coward is cold, artificial and a snob. That’s how I dismissed him as an ambitious young theatre director starting out in the early 1980s. In my ignorance, I’d decided that “The Master’s” plays were heartless and shallow, patronising about ordinary people and shamefully lacking in depth of feeling. The theatrical revolution of the 1960s had, I assumed, safely swept these glittering ephemera into the dustbin of history and no serious theatre artist could possibly think they were worthy of attention. Brecht, Ibsen and living young playwrights beckoned. Why would anyone bother with Noel Coward?

It took a decade or two for me to discover that these relics of a disappeared world were, in fact, intricate and subtle works of art, which anatomized the human heart with tremendous tenderness and startling insight. I realized that the famously clipped dialogue suggested an aching world of repressed desires and misunderstandings. What’s more, I saw that far from being a privileged Oxbridge dandy, Coward made his money and name by his talent and capacity for hard work. He came from lower middle class stock and wrote about people like himself with affection, sympathy and sensitivity. For all his formidable⎯and self-proclaimed “talent to amuse”—here, I eventually realised, was a dramatist to take seriously.

To my amazement I find that I’ve now directed five of his plays and am greedy to do more. *Hay Fever* (1925) at the Rose Theatre, Kingston, in 2010 with Celia Imrie as Judith Bliss, was the first. In rehearsing I was astonished to discover just how deeply bohemian the Bliss family is. With their open sexual relationships, stubborn refusal to conform and deeply unconventional behaviour towards their houseguests, theirs was the most colourful rebellion imaginable against the khaki ghastliness of the First World War. Polite society is shown to be repressed, hypocritical and absurd, and the noisy, witty and glorious Blisses carry all before them. This perfectly structured comic masterpiece opened up a whole world for me.

Having achieved global notoriety for his dazzling comedies largely set among the *beau monde*, Coward surprised his many fans by penning an epic of working class life. *This Happy Breed* (1939)⎯which I directed in Bath in 2011⎯is a heartbreaking chronicle of a very ordinary family in South London in the twenty years between the two world wars, and dramatises an area of experience which conventional drama often ignores. Written on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, the play is patriotic, polemical and occasionally sentimental, but catches with striking power the chiselled scepticism with which many working people view the shenanigans of their ‘betters’. When we remember that Coward’s mother ran a lodging house in Clapham, we’ll see that in *This Happy Breed* Coward wrote a homage to his own people.

Turning to *The Vortex* (1924)⎯back at the Rose in 2013⎯I was confronted by a darker drama of repressed homosexuality, surreptitious drug taking, and an unresolved Oedipal relationship. Though the influence of *Hamlet* (and *The Seagull*, perhaps) is never fully disguised, the 24 year old Coward wrote an astonishing firework of a play which fizzed and blazed and still has the power to provoke, shock and amaze. There’s certainly nothing remotely cosy or safe in this youthful *jeu d’esprit*. Something new had been created and Coward never looked back.

In 1942, Coward and his company of actors toured wartime Britain playing *This Happy Breed* in repertoire with his uproarious comedy *Present Laughter* (1939). Its central figure, the celebrated actor manager, Garry Essendine (played in my production by Samuel West, also in Bath, in 2016), is a thinly veiled portrait of the playwright: stylish, witty and talented, the part also suggests something of the loneliness of fame, the fickleness of a life in the theatre, and the underlying and all too real difficulties faced by anyone trying to make a living in it. Scratch the surface of this brilliant comedy of manners and you quickly find surprising darkness. The highly polished façade gives only partial cover to the melancholia and sense of waste lurking beneath.

After the war Coward’s star began to wane. A new generation of theatre artists dismissed his plays⎯as I was to do⎯as merely flippant, with little to say about the challenges of the time. Certainly, the older Coward was lofty in tone and could be very prickly. What’s more, in the meritocratic 1960s, his infatuation with royalty and the international jet set, as well as his decision to become tax exile, put him at odds with the political radicals establishing firm footholds in the culture establishment. More significantly, many of his later plays don’t live up to the great promise of his earlier ones and it’s fair to see these declining years as that of a great talent starting to stultify.

An intriguing exception is *Suite in Three Keys* (1965), a double bill of short plays and one full length piece, set in a luxury hotel room in Switzerland. They have different sets of characters, but the handsome floor waiter, Felix, is common to all three. They played in the West End in 1966 with Lilli Palmer and Irene Worth and saw Coward’s own carefully planned swansong as an actor. It was a remarkable success and received some of the best notices Coward had had for years, with the critic of the *Daily Mail* describing feeling “oddly elated, as if I had recaptured the flavour of an exclusive drink which one tasted when young but has never been mixed quite right since.”

The first of the double bill, *Shadows of the Evening* is a powerful and haunting meditation on death, while the second, *Come Into the Garden Maud*, is a delicious, if rather slight, comedy of manners. But it’s the full length play, *A Song at Twilight*, which is regarded as the best. In writing it, Coward had been inspired by two biographical accounts. The first was the recently published memoir of his great contemporary, Somerset Maugham, which notably omitted any mention of his 30 year relationship with his secretary, Gerald Haxton. But he also drew on a biography of the essayist and dandy Max Beerbohm, which describes the actress Constance Collier’s descending on him late in life in Italy. Coward found the situation rich with comic potential: “There was Max’s old flame coming to visit him,” he wrote, “but so much more vital still than him that she totally exhausted him in seconds”.

Although partially a study of the ageing Maugham (Coward’s costume even suggested Maugham’s style), the play was interpreted by some as autobiographical. And although the tetchy, troubled and misanthropic novelist Sir Hugo Latymer is a long way from the declining but still glamorous Coward, the sense of golden youth facing up to the ravages of age, and the call to resolve certain contradictions in his private life, is all too recognisable. By conflating these two real life stories, Coward found a way to talk about the challenges of getting old and dramatise the bringing to light of a buried part of his own life.

The play resembles Ibsen in the gradual process of peeling away the evasions and lies that encrust Coward’s central character. And like *Ghosts* or *John Gabriel Borkman* it remorselessly explores the dangers of denying one’s own nature and deliberately extinguishing one’s own capacity for love. But where his great Scandinavian predecessor is determined to show that the truth, however painful, will set you free, Coward opts, ultimately, for a less exposing form of psychotherapy, which allows for wit, style and grace. If any play contradicts the accusation of shallowness or artificiality it’s this deeply felt—and surprisingly revealing—miniature.

Coward is rightly admired for his coruscating wit and⎯perhaps surprisingly⎯described *A Song at Twilight* as a ‘comedy’. But what the play demonstrates, with startling honesty, is that laughter is often a deflection from the deeper truths that trouble us and, while readily deployed to put others down, is more rarely⎯but more nobly⎯used to laugh at oneself. Paradoxically, the play also recognises that facing up to the truth of life carries its own perils, and while Hugo’s nemesis, Carlotta, may argue for a modern acceptance of his disguised true nature, his long suffering wife, Hilde⎯Latymer’s shield against the probing eyes of the modern world⎯prefers a philosophical acceptance of the *status quo*, and, ultimately, a prioritising of stability over confusion, acceptance over challenge and care over cure. It could be argued that the conclusion offers Coward convenient cover for his own secrets; alternatively, we can say that he is insisting (in a way that is strikingly relevant today) on the sanctity of the private sphere, and a recognition of the inevitable contradictions of the human spirit.

Through working on these five productions, it’s now clear to me that Coward is much more than the spoilt, heartless snob of my inherited prejudices. There’s something restless and revealing, paradoxical and inquiring, about this greatest of twentieth century English dramatists. Though I suspect that Coward might pooh-pooh the comparison, I increasingly see him as our own answer to Chekhov and Ibsen, those great masters of hidden depth and disguised feeling in drama. It’s certainly right that he is still read and staged by those of us who want the theatre to speak profoundly about the great truths of life.

(1551)