

# **Mad About the Boy — Noël Coward's wit and charm remain undimmed**

A new documentary adds to play revivals and a hefty biography in appreciation of the Master 50 years after his death

yesterday



Noël Coward in the Nevada desert, 1955 © Bettmann Archive

We shouldn't need an excuse to celebrate the genius of Noël Coward but the 50th anniversary of his death has triggered a string of stage revivals, a major new biography and the documentary *Mad About the Boy*. Directed by Barnaby Thompson, it draws on an extensive archive of diaries, letters, images and films to illustrate Coward's multi-faceted talent and his rise from genteel suburban poverty to global stardom — "to tell the story in Noël's own words". Coward's extraordinary career — writer, actor, singer, songwriter, spy — is narrated by Alan Cumming and peppered with Coward quotes read

by Rupert Everett who wisely (*veddy* wisely) avoids imitation.

Much of Coward's output survives only in fading monochrome stills but *Mad About the Boy* deploys the usual box of tricks to jazz up the slideshow. The trademark carnation buttonhole blushes crimson, smoke rises magically from the omnipresent Player's cigarette and parallax animation allows subjects to float free of their backgrounds.

The film is richly fruited with home movies of Coward's extensive travels to China and Japan. The cine camera, however, seldom strayed backstage. There is frustratingly little record of his theatrical heyday, although the [78rpm record](#) of the *Private Lives* balcony scene captures the fragrance of the early Coward style. A long stay in New York in 1921 had made him master of the rapid-fire crosstalk of the American stage. Yet there is a delicious call-and-response musicality to his dialogue and the exchanges are surprisingly naturalistic — and they weren't always delivered in a Sulka dressing gown.



Alfred Lunt, Noël Coward and Lynn Fontaine in 'Design for Living', 1933 © Bettmann Archive



Gertrude Lawrence and Noël Coward ham it up at the piano in 'Private Lives', 1931 © Bettmann Archive

It is fashionable to sneer at Coward's renderings of lower middle-class speech in kitchen-sink dramas such as *Fumed Oak* or *This Happy Breed* ("She didn't pass on, pass over or pass out: she *died*") but anyone who ever had an Aunt Sylvia will acknowledge its authenticity. Like Harold Pinter (a huge fan), Coward used repetitive, banal-seeming utterances to mask undercurrents of love — or menace.

In 1919, Coward wrote about 30 plays and when one of them, *I'll Leave It to You*, went into production, his piano-salesman father had

to sign the contract as he wasn't yet 21. By 1925 he had four plays and revues running in the West End, and when he starred in *Private Lives*, he was already a hit on both sides of the Atlantic, earning £50,000 a year (£4mn today): the highest-paid writer in the world.

Hollywood might have seemed an obvious next step but Coward only made one film in the 1930s: *The Scoundrel* (1935), an underrated masterpiece. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's Oscar-winning script tells of an acid-tongued lady-killer who returns from his watery grave in search of someone who will mourn his passing. Coward was dream casting for this urbane, waspish anti-hero, yet he did not enjoy the business of filmmaking: "It's so terribly, terribly monotonous, acting all day in front of a tired electrician and a lamp." He wasn't tempted back in front of the camera until *In Which We Serve*, the wartime flag-waver depicting the sinking of a British destroyer. Coward, who starred, wrote, directed and scored the film, received an honorary Oscar and a royal visit during filming in 1942.



Noël Coward photographed by Lenare in 1925 aged 26 © Getty



Noël Coward at the coronation of King George VI in 1937 © Alamy

Although Coward, the boy from the south London suburb of Teddington who left school at the age of nine, was a student of the mores and manners of the British aristocracy, he had the grace and



good sense never to deny his origins — and to retain a sense of humour. Yes, he attended George VI's coronation and could sing music-hall duets with the Queen Mother at Sandringham, but he was no snob. Mischief bubbled away below the surface: "It isn't that I have a basic urge to say 'fuck' every five minutes, but I'm conscious of a faint resentment that I couldn't if I wanted to..."

His evident ease in the highest society prompted the diplomat Robert Vansittart to recruit him to British intelligence, gauging support for the British war effort while trilling his hits to Roosevelt on the White House Steinway. "My celebrity value was wonderful cover," conceded Coward. His wartime exploits earned him a place on the Gestapo's list of 2,820 undesirable Britons, an honour he shared with Rebecca West who telegraphed: "My dear — the people we should have been seen dead with."

In 1943, his war work entered a more straightforward phase when he embarked on tireless tours of the Middle East, Africa and Burma, performing his hits for British troops: "I know I can do good by hopping about and entertaining people." He wrote more than 300 songs, some tragic, some comic, some frankly forgettable, and his wicked wartime lyrics were a long way from the White Cliffs. Churchill adored "Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans" but the public, with a tin ear for irony, thought Coward was advocating appeasement. The scheduled record release was shelved and it was duly banned by the BBC.

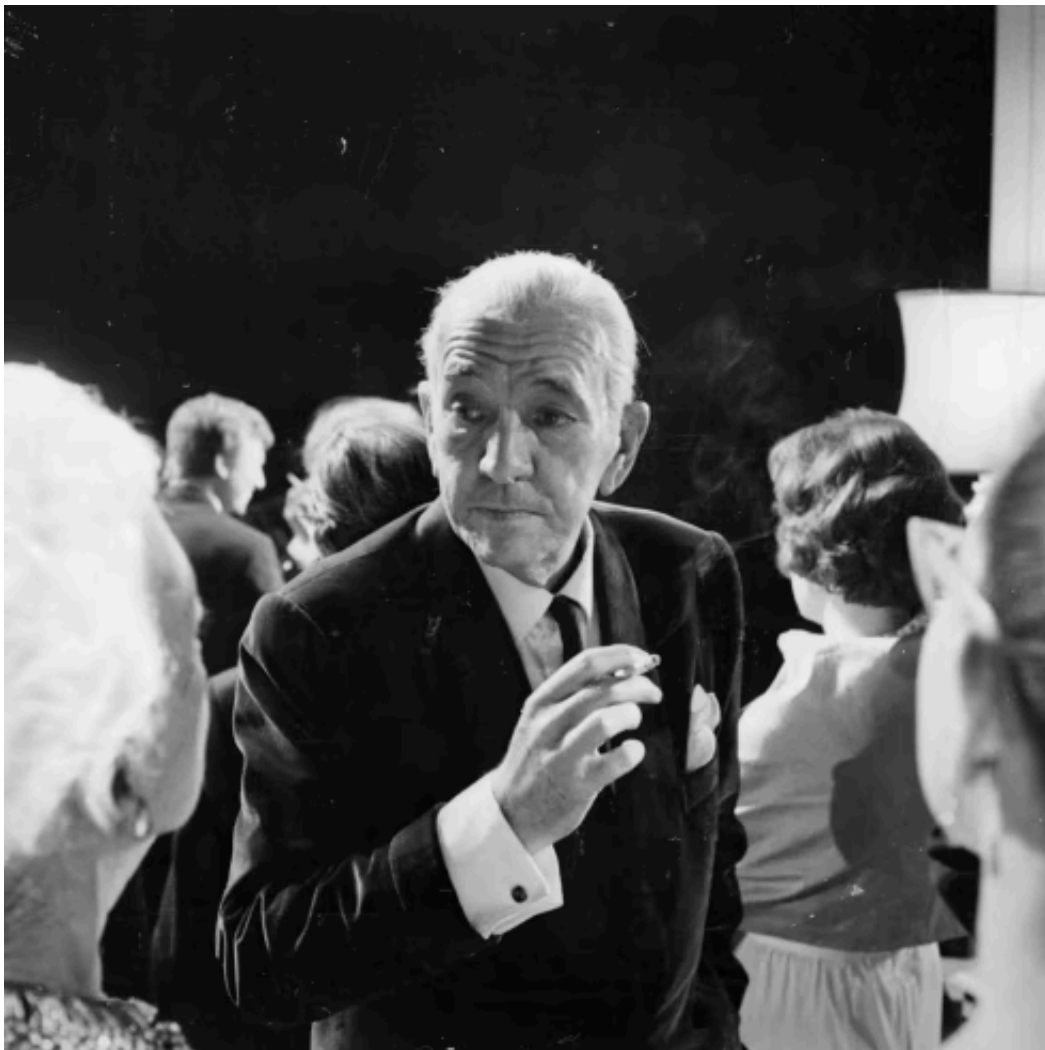


Noël Coward in the mid-1960s © Alamy

The glory days of revue were over by the 1950s but television — panel shows, interviews, play revivals — offered a lucrative sideline and a one-month Las Vegas season earned him \$40,000 a week and a whole new public. Happily, a lot of this material survives, including the 1956 TV version of *Blithe Spirit* made with Claudette Colbert and Lauren Bacall and some stunning (if grainy) footage of the cabaret years, in which old favourites such as "[Mad Dogs and Englishmen](#)" and "[Nina from Argentina](#)" were taken at a dazzling Bensedrine lick. The Las Vegas season was promoted using a snap of the dinner-jacketed Master, sipping tea in the Nevada desert (he was driven back in his underwear, sandbagged by ice packs).

Recommended

Coward turned down any number of film roles, including *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* ("pornographic" and "disgusting"), and the part of the supervillain in the very first Bond movie ("No, no, no, a thousand times no!"). Happily, the need for hard cash in his fifties and sixties led to scene-stealing cameos in *Our Man in Havana* (1959), *Bunny Lake is Missing* (1965) and *The Italian Job* (1969), all proof of his delight in self-parody and an unexpected lack of personal vanity. What could be seedier than his landlord in [Bunny Lake](#)? "An elderly drunk, queer masochist," wrote Coward in a letter to a friend. "Hurray! That's me all over!" Yet in public Coward was almost pathologically discreet about his sexuality and early biographers were forbidden to mention it — "There are still a few old ladies in Worthing who don't know."



Noël Coward attends the premiere of 'A Song at Twilight' in London, 1966 © Getty

Ultimately, the acid test for any life of Coward is whether it sends you back to his work. Oliver Soden's eccentric but elegant biography and Thompson's admiring, affectionate documentary pass that test very comfortably, inviting us to revisit his talent, wit and irresistible charm. Who else, days after reading a filthy review, could beard the critic Kenneth Tynan, sitting alone at Sardi's restaurant, with a four-letter word, followed by: "Come and have dinner with me."

*'Mad About the Boy: The Noël Coward Story' is in cinemas from June 1*

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