



Private Lives by John Knowles

Noël Peirce Coward was born at the end of the 19th century into a world bursting with the inventions of the Victorian age. Son of a domineering mother and a lacklustre father he invented himself in a career that ensured his name and work would be celebrated through to the 21st century. He became the best all-rounder of the theatrical, literary and musical worlds of the 20th century. He invented the concept of celebrity and was the essence of chic in the Jazz Age of the 20s and 30s. His debonair looks and stylishly groomed appearance made him the quintessential icon of ‘the Bright Young Things’ that inhabited the world of The Ivy, The Savoy and The Ritz. Following his theatrical successes in the 1930s he was regarded as ‘The Master’, a nom d’honneur that indicated the level of his talent and achievement in so many of the entertainment arts.

His private life was dominated by a desire to succeed. In a life of 73 years Coward wrote nearly 50 plays, over 400 songs and lyrics, books of verse, sketches, satire and short stories and a single novel – and he performed as one of the most successful cabaret artists to ever appear in Las Vegas. His disciplined approach to work and his commitment to his craft brought him great success in the 1920s and 30s following a writing and acting breakthrough with *The Vortex* performed in an ex-drill hall in Hampstead, North London. During the next 20 years *Fallen Angels*, *Hay Fever*, *Easy Virtue*, *The Marquise* and, as the 30s began, *Private Lives*, were all to celebrate success in London’s West End.

In 1929 at the end of an exhausting decade of writing, acting and public adoration Coward set sail from San Francisco on a journey to join Geoffrey Holmesdale (Lord Amherst) in Tokyo for the start of a Far Eastern holiday. Whilst on board ship he received a daily reminder from Gertrude Lawrence in the form of her photograph staring at him from a travelling clock she had given him as a parting gift, that he had promised to write a play for them both. He discovered on arrival at The Imperial Hotel, Tokyo that Geoffrey was delayed and would not be with him for three days. The night before his arrival Noël went to bed early –

“...but the moment I switched out the lights, Gertie appeared in a white Molyneux dress on a terrace in the South of France and refused to go again until four a.m., by which time *Private Lives*, title and all had constructed itself.”

With the wisdom he had gained during the past decade he realised that it would be wise not to welcome a new idea too ardently so he –

“...forced it into the back of my mind, trusting to its own integrity to emerge again later on, when it had become sufficiently set and matured.”

Noël and Geoffrey travelled on to Shanghai where Noël developed –

“A bout of influenza ... and I lay sweating gloomily in my bedroom in the Cathay Hotel for several days. The ensuing convalescence, however was productive, for I utilised it writing *Private Lives*. The idea by now seemed ripe enough to have a shot at it, so I started it, propped up in bed with a writing-block and an ever-sharp pencil, and completed it, roughly, in four days.”



After revising and typing the script in Hong Kong Noël sent a copy to Gertrude Lawrence who started a confusing exchange of cables saying that she had read *Private Lives* and that there was nothing wrong in it that couldn't be fixed. He wired back that the only thing that was going to be fixed was her performance. Her hesitation was in fact over whether she could get out of a contractual agreement to be able to do the play.

The play opened on tour starting in Edinburgh and then to Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester and Southsea before settling at The Phoenix in the West End for just over 100 performances. It was greeted as Coward says –

“...as being ‘tenuous’, ‘thin’, ‘brittle’, ‘gossamer’, ‘iridescent’ and ‘delightfully daring’. All of which connoted, to the public mind, ‘cocktails’, ‘evening dress’, ‘repartee’ and irreverent allusions to copulation, thereby causing a gratifying number of respectable people to queue up at the box office.”

The original cast of Noël and Gertie plus a young Laurence Olivier and Adrienne Allen (married in the previous year to actor Raymond Massey) in what Coward describes as parts that are –

“...little better than ninepins, lightly wooden, and only there at all in order to be repeatedly knocked down and stood up again.”

In the 1944 revival at the Apollo Theatre, London it ran for 716 performances after a 14 week provincial tour starring Peggy Simpson, John Clements, Raymond Huntley and Kay Hammond

In the 2001 a revival of *Private Lives* directed by Howard Davies received ‘rave reviews’ when it played for 5 months at the Albery theatre, London, and a further 5 months at the Richard Rodgers theatre on Broadway. Alan Rickman and Lindsay Duncan won the Best Actor and Best Actress at The Variety Club Show Business Awards for their performances.

As Alan Rickman said at the time – “I think we instinctively knew we would basically be saying the lines without any of the usual stuff that comes with Noël Coward. It’s at that point that you start to realize how brilliantly constructed the play is.”

His co-star Lindsay Duncan said – “What Coward understands is that if someone makes you laugh, it’s a direct line to your heart. It is quite sophisticated wit, but it’s also ridiculous and childish, and that’s the intimate side of it. He is showing something very private about them.”

People mistakenly believe that Coward’s plays are light-hearted drawing-room comedies – they couldn’t be more wrong. Most of his plays are about people drawn from all classes and backgrounds struggling with life and the frailty of the human condition. That is why they continue to be revived across the world every year since his death in 1973.