

PLAY PARADE

by
NOEL COWARD



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INTRODUCTION

WHEN it was suggested to me that I should publish an omnibus volume containing seven of the most representative of my works, I stepped, for an instant, into eminent old age, and, smiling quaveringly across the years at irresponsible youngsters ploughing through my musty old plays, I thanked God that the hurly-burly was over. I could now retire in peace to my dim library and mellowing Kentish garden, and there, with my memories as sole companions, dream away the end of my days.

A little of my old fire returned to me in course of the ensuing argument as to which *were* the most representative of my works, and with senile obstinacy, I insisted upon the following. *The Vortex*, *Hay Fever*, *Bitter Sweet*, *Private Lives*, *Post Mortem*, *Cavalcade*, and *Design for Living*. These seem to me to be the most successfully experimental among my output of the last ten years.

I find it very interesting nowadays, now that I have fortunately achieved a definite publicity value, to read criticisms and analyses of my plays written by people of whom I have never heard and whom I have certainly never seen, and who appear to have an insatiable passion for labelling everything with a motive. They search busily behind the simplest of my phrases, like old ladies peering under the bed for burglars, and are not content until they have unearthed some definite, and usually quite inaccurate, reason for my saying this or that. This strange mania I can only suppose is the distinctive

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feature of a critical mind as opposed to a creative one. It seems to me that a professional writer should be animated by no other motive than the desire to write, and, by doing so, to earn his living.

The original motive for *Cavalcade*, for instance, was a long-cherished ambition to write a big play on a big scale, and to produce it at the London Coliseum. I toyed for a while with the thought of a French Revolution epic, a pageant of the Second Empire, and various other ideas which might give me enough scope for intimate characterizations against a background of crowd scenes. One day I happened to see in a back number of the *Illustrated London News* a photograph of a troopship leaving for the Boer War. Very soon after this the whole scheme of the play fell into my mind, and, after relating it to C. B. Cochran, and asking him to get me the Coliseum at all costs, I left for New York to play *Private Lives*. A few months later I received a cable from him saying that the Coliseum was unobtainable, but that I could have Drury Lane provided that I would guarantee an approximate opening date. This was slightly agitating, but I cabled back that the play would be ready for production by the end of September.

When I returned to London in May, I carefully examined the facilities of the Drury Lane stage in company with G. E. Calthrop, who constructed the whole show with me in addition to designing all the scenery and dresses, and we retired to the country, after a series of conferences, to build the play according to blueprints, time changes, electrical installations, and hydraulic lifts. I had not one moment to waste on patriotic fervour.

After a slight delay, owing to two extra hydraulic

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lifts which we had to install, *Cavalcade* was finally launched in October, and with it came the Deluge. A very gratifying Deluge. Letters of congratulation. Crowds in the streets. Superlatives in the Press. I was told, on all sides, that I had done "a big thing" and that a peerage was the least I could expect from a grateful monarch. I was also congratulated upon my uncanny shrewdness in slapping on a strong patriotic play two weeks before a general election which was bound to result in a sweeping Conservative majority. (Here I must regretfully admit that during rehearsals I was so very much occupied in the theatre and, as usual, so bleakly uninterested in politics that I had not the remotest idea, until a few days before production, that there was going to be an election at all! However, there was, and its effect on the box office was considerable.)

The excitement continued for the two weeks that I remained in London after the play had opened, and I left for South America, flushed with heroism and extremely tired. I could relax on the boat and reflect that although it was undoubtedly very pleasant to read in the Press that my country was proud of me, I had escaped the grave danger of taking the idea seriously. True there had been a few uneasy highbrows who had deplored my fall from sophisticated wit into the bathos of jingoism, and had even gone so far as to suggest that the whole thing was a wily commercial trick, conceived, written, and produced in a spirit of cynical mockery, with my tongue fairly wedged in my cheek, but these shrill small voices were drowned out by the general trumpeting of praise.

The only thing that escaped notice in the uproar was the fact that *Cavalcade*, apart from its appeal as a spectacle

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actually possessed two or three really well-written scenes, notably the funeral of Queen Victoria, and the outbreak of the war in 1914. These two scenes had both dignity and brevity.

Now that the whole thing is done, and has become an "epic," and "The Play of the Century," and "The Picture of the Generation," I can meditate blissfully upon the good fortune that prompted me to pick up just that particular number of the *Illustrated London News*, instead of one of a later date depicting the storming of the Winter Palace at St. Petersburg.

The Vortex was written in 1923 and produced on November 25th at the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead. It was an immediate success and established me both as a playwright and as an actor, which was very fortunate, because until then I had not proved myself to be so hot in either capacity. With this success came many pleasurable trappings. A car. New suits. Silk shirts. An extravagant amount of pyjamas and dressing-gowns, and a still more extravagant amount of publicity. I was photographed, and interviewed, and photographed again. In the street. In the park. In my dressing-room. At my piano. With my dear old mother, without my dear old mother—and, on one occasion, sitting up in an over-elaborate bed looking like a heavily doped Chinese Illusionist. This last photograph, I believe, did me a good deal of harm. People glancing at it concluded at once, and with a certain justification, that I was undoubtedly a weedy sensualist in the last stages of physical and moral degeneration, and that they had better hurry off to see me in my play before my inevitable demise placed that faintly macabre pleasure

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beyond their reach. This attitude, while temporarily very good for business, became irritating after a time, and for many years I was seldom mentioned in the Press without allusions to "cocktails," "post-war hysteria," and "decadence."

My original motive in *The Vortex* was to write a good play with a whacking good part in it for myself, and I am thankful to say, with a few modest reservations, that I succeeded. It is a good play, and although I am fully aware that it could be a good deal better, I am quite reasonably satisfied with it. At the time, I need hardly add, I considered it a masterpiece. At all events, the first night of its production at the Henry Miller Theatre, New York, was a very great moment in my life, and for this I shall never cease to be grateful.

Hay Fever is considered by many to be my best comedy. Whether or not this assertion is true, posterity, if it gives it a glance, will be able to judge with more detachment than I. At any rate it has certainly proved to be a great joy to amateurs, owing, I suppose, to the smallness of its cast, and the fact that it has only one set, which must lead them, poor dears, to imagine that it is easy to act. This species of delusion being common to amateurs all over the world, no word of mine shall be spoken, no warning finger of experience raised, to discourage them, beyond the timorous suggestion that from the professional stand-point, *Hay Fever* is far and away one of the most difficult plays to perform that I have ever encountered.

To begin with, it has no plot at all, and remarkably little action. Its general effectiveness therefore depends upon expert technique from each and every member of

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the cast. The level of acting in the original London production, led brilliantly by Miss Marie Tempest, was extremely high, consequently the play was a tremendous success. The Press naturally and inevitably described it as "thin," "tenuous," and "trivial," because those are their stock phrases for anything later in date and lighter in texture than *The Way of the World*, and it ran, tenuously and triumphantly, for a year.

In America it fared less well. Miss Laura Hope Crews was enthusiastically torn to shreds by the critics for overacting, which indeed she did, but with the very extenuating circumstance that her supporting cast was so uniformly dreary that if she hadn't, I gravely doubt if any of the audience would have stayed in the theatre at all. I am very much attached to *Hay Fever*. I enjoyed writing it and producing it, and I have frequently enjoyed watching it.

Bitter Sweet has given me more complete satisfaction than anything else I have ever written up till now. Not especially on account of its dialogue, or its lyrics, or its music, or its production, but as a whole. In the first place, it achieved and sustained the original mood of its conception more satisfactorily than a great deal of my other work. And in the second place, that particular mood of seminostalgic sentiment, when well done, invariably affects me very pleasantly. In *Bitter Sweet* it did seem to me to be well done, and I felt accordingly very happy about it.

The late William Bolitho, in an article on *Bitter Sweet* published in the *New York World* (one of the very few journalistic excursions relating to myself that I have ever wished, proudly, to keep), finished his essay with a

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discussion of the quality of the play. He said of this: ". . . You find it faintly when you look over old letters the rats have nibbled at, one evening you don't go out; there is a little of it, impure and odorous, in the very sound of barrel organs, in quiet squares in the evenings, puffing out in gusts that intoxicate your heart. It is all right for beasts to have no memories; but we poor humans have to be compensated."

Private Lives was conceived in Tokyo, written in Shanghai, and produced in London in September, 1930, after a preliminary try-out in the provinces. It was described in the papers variously, 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.

There is actually more to the play than this, however, but on the whole not very much. It is a reasonably well-constructed duologue for two experienced performers, with a couple of extra puppets thrown in to assist the plot and to provide contrast. There is a well-written love scene in Act One, and a certain amount of sound sex psychology underlying the quarrel scenes in Act Two.

As a complete play, it leaves a lot to be desired, principally owing to my dastardly and conscienceless behaviour towards Sibyl and Victor, the secondary characters. These, poor things, are little better than ninepins, lightly wooden, and only there at all in order to be repeatedly knocked down and stood up again. Apart from this, *Private Lives*, from the playwright's

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point of view, may or may not be considered interesting, but at any rate, from the point of view of technical acting, it is very interesting indeed.

To begin with, there is no further plot and no further action after Act One, with the exception of the rough-and-tumble fight at the curtain of Act Two. Before this, there is exactly forty minutes of dialogue between the leading protagonists, Amanda and Elyot, which naturally demands from them the maximum of resource and comedy experience, as every night, according to the degree of responsiveness from the audience, the attack and tempo of the performance must inevitably vary. This means a constant ear cocked in the direction of the stalls, listening for that first sinister cough of boredom, and, when it comes, a swiftly exchanged glance of warning and an immediate and, it is to be hoped, imperceptible speeding up of the scene until the next sure-fire laugh breaks and it is permissible to relax and breathe more easily for a moment.

This strenuous watchfulness is of course necessary in the playing of any high comedy scene, but as a general rule the considerate author provides lifelines for his actors, in the shape of sharply etched cameos for the subsidiary members of the cast, who can make bustling little entrances and exits in order to break the monotony. He may even, on occasion, actually provide a sustained plot for them to hang on to when all else fails.

In the second act of *Private Lives*, however, there was no help from the author over and above a few carefully placed laugh lines, and, taken all in all, it was more tricky and full of pitfalls than anything I have ever attempted as an actor. But fortunately, for me, I had the inestimable advantage of playing it with Gertrude

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Lawrence, and so three-quarters of the battle was won before the curtain went up.

Post Mortem was written primarily as a gesture to myself. And now that the hysteria of its mood has evaporated from my mind, I perceive that it is a slightly more "jejeune" gesture than I altogether bargained for.

There are certain moments of genuine passion in it which redeem it from bathos, but on the whole I fear that it is sadly confused and unbalanced. All the same, it was an experiment, and, far from regretting it, I am exceedingly glad I made it, because, as a writer, it undoubtedly did me a power of good. It opened a lot of windows in my brain and allowed me to let off a great deal of steam which might have remained sizzling inside me and combusted later on, to the considerable detriment of *Cavalcade* and *Design for Living*.

My emotions while writing it were violent. Much more violent than in any of my previous labours. And I can only say that it was fortunate for my immediate friends that this particular confinement took place on a P. and O. boat returning from the East, where my alternate moans of despair and screams of ecstasy could only disturb two acidulated planters' wives in the adjoining cabin.

Post Mortem was not actually written for the theatre. But, as I felt at the time, perhaps erroneously, that I had a lot to say, I put it into play form, for the simple reason that I felt more at home in that than in any other.

It has not yet been produced, although one day perhaps it will be. I think it might probably be quite effective, provided that it is expertly directed and acted.

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Design for Living as a project rather than as a play sat patiently at the back of my mind for eleven years. It had to wait until Lynn Fontanne, Alfred Lunt, and I had arrived, by different roads, at the exact moment in our careers when we felt that we could all three play together with a more or less equal degree of success.

We had met, discussed, argued, and parted again many times, knowing that it was something that we wanted to do very much indeed, and searching wildly through our minds for suitable characters. At one moment we were to be three foreigners. Lynn, Eurasian; Alfred, German; and I, Chinese. At another we were to be three acrobats, rapping out "Allez Oops" and flipping handkerchiefs at one another. A further plan was that the entire play should be played in a gigantic bed, dealing with life and love in the Schnitzler manner. This, however, was hilariously discarded, after Alfred had suggested a few stage directions which, if followed faithfully, would undoubtedly have landed all three of us in gaol.

Finally, when the whole idea seemed to have sunk out of sight/for ever, I got a cable from them/in the Argentine, where I happened to be at the moment, saying, "Contract with the Guild up in June—we shall be free—what about it?"

From that moment onwards my travelling lacked that sense of detachment which up to then had been its principal charm. Patagonia, Chile, Peru, and Colombia presented themselves in turn, less as strange thrilling countries brimming with historical interest than as painted theatrical backgrounds, against which three attractive, witty characters changed their minds and their colours with the rapidity of chameleons, but

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failed, unlike chameleons, to achieve even the meagre satisfaction of being alive.

It was not until several months later, when I was on a small Norwegian freight boat travelling from Panama to Los Angeles, that the play suddenly emerged, and, with a superb disregard for the mountains and jungles and plains I had traversed in search of it and, without even a salute to the flamboyant Mexican coastline on the starboard horizon, placed its own *mise en scène* firmly in Paris, London, and New York.

Since then *Design for Living* has been produced, published, and reviewed. It has been liked and disliked, and hated and admired, but never, I think, sufficiently loved by any but its three leading actors. This, perhaps, was only to be expected, as its central theme, from the point of view of the average, must appear to be definitely anti-social. People were certainly interested and entertained and occasionally even moved by it, but it seemed, to many of them, "unpleasant." This sense of "unpleasantness" might have been mitigated for them a little if they had realized that the title was ironic rather than dogmatic. I never intended for a moment that the design for living suggested in the play should apply to anyone outside its three principal characters, Gilda, Otto, and Leo. These glib, over-articulate, and amoral creatures force their lives into fantastic shapes and problems because they cannot help themselves. Impelled chiefly by the impact of their personalities each upon the other, they are like moths in a pool of light, unable to tolerate the lonely outer darkness, and equally unable to share the light without colliding constantly and bruising one another's wings.

The end of the play is equivocal. The three of them,

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after various partings and reunions and partings again, after torturing and loving and hating one another, are left together as the curtain falls, laughing. Different minds found different meanings in this laughter. Some considered it to be directed against Ernest, Gilda's husband, and the time-honoured friend of all three. If so, it was certainly cruel, and in the worst possible taste. Some saw in it a lascivious anticipation of a sort of triangular carnal frolic. Others, with less ribald imaginations, regarded it as a meaningless and slightly inept excuse to bring the curtain down. I as author, however, prefer to think that Gilda and Otto and Leo were laughing at themselves.

NOEL COWARD.

PLAY

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