

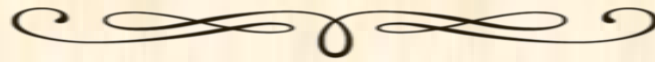
NOËL COWARD'S  
*BRIEF ENCOUNTER*



STUDY PACK

*"I'm not very keen on Hollywood... I'd rather have a nice cup of cocoa really"*

*- Noël Coward*



## Highlights Of A Life And Career

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**1899** 16 December, Noël Peirce Coward born in Teddington, Middlesex, eldest surviving son of Arthur Coward, piano salesman and Violet. His early circumstances were of refined suburban poverty.

**1907** First public appearances in school and community concerts.

**1908** Family moved to Battersea and took in lodgers.



*Coward as a teenager*

**1911** First professional appearance as Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish*, produced by Lila Field at the Little Theatre and revived in same year at Crystal Palace and Royal Court Theatre. Cannard, the page-boy, in *The Great Name* at the Prince of Wales Theatre and William in *Where the Rainbow Ends* with Charles Hawtrey's Company at the Savoy Theatre.

**1912** Directed *The Daisy Chain* and stage-managed *The Prince's Bride* at Savoy in series of matinees featuring the work of the children of the *Rainbow* cast. Mushroom in *An Autumn Idyll* ballet, Savoy.

**1913** An angel (Gertrude Lawrence was another) in Basil Dean's production of *Hannele*. Slightly in *Peter Pan*, Duke of York's.

**1914** Toured in *Peter Pan*. Collaborated with fellow performer Esmé Wynne on songs, sketches, and short stories.

**1915** Admitted to sanatorium for tuberculosis.

**1916** Five-month tour as Charley in *Charley's Aunt*. Walk-on in *The Best of Luck*, Drury Lane. Wrote first full-length song, 'Forbidden Fruit'. Basil Pycroft in *The Light Blues*, produced by Robert Courtneidge, with daughter Cicely also in cast, Shaftesbury. Short spell as dancer at Elysee Restaurant (subsequently the Café de Paris). Jack Morrison in *The Happy Family*, Prince of Wales.

**1917** "Boy pushing barrow" in D.W. Griffith's film *Hearts of the World*. Co-author with Esmé Wynne of one-actor *Ida Collaborates*, Theatre Royal, Aldershot. Ripley Guildford in *The Saving Grace*, with Charles Hawtrey, Garrick. Family moved to Pimlico and re-opened boarding house.

**1918** Called up for army. Medical discharge after nine months. Wrote unpublished novels *Cats and Dogs* and the unfinished *Cherry Pan* and lyrics for Darewski and Joel, including 'When You Come Home on Leave' and 'Peter Pan'. Also composed 'Tamarisk Town'. Sold short stories to magazines. Wrote plays *The Rat*

*Trap*, *The Last Trick* (unproduced) and *The Impossible Wife* (unproduced). Courtenay Borner in *Scandal*, Strand. *Woman and Whiskey* (co-author Esmé Wynne) produced at Wimbledon Theatre.

**1919** Ralph in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Birmingham Repertory. Collaborated on *Crissa*, an opera, with Esmé Wynne and Max Darewski (unproduced).

**1920** Wrote and played Bobbie Dermon in *I'll Leave It to You*, New Theatre, London 1921. On holiday in Alassio, met Gladys Calthrop for the first time. Clay Collins in American farce *Polly with a Past*: during the run. First visit to New York, and sold parts of *A Withered Nosegay* to *Vanity Fair* and short-story adaptation of *I'll Leave It to You* to Metropolitan. House-guest of Laurette Taylor and Hartley Manners, whose family rows inspired the Bliss household in *Hay Fever*.

**1922** *Bottles and Bones* (sketch) produced in benefit for Newspaper Press Fund, Drury Lane. *The Better Half* produced in 'grand guignol' season, Little Theatre. Started work on songs and sketches for *London Calling!* Adapted Louis Verneuil's *Pour Avoir Adrienne* (unproduced).

**1923** Sholto Brent in *The Young Idea*, Savoy. Juvenile lead in a musical review for which he wrote book, music and lyrics: *London Calling!*

**1924** Wrote, directed and starred as Nicky Lancaster in *The Vortex*, produced at the Everyman by Norman MacDermott and transferred to the Royalty Theatre .

**1925** *The Vortex* moved to the Comedy Theatre. Noël became established as a social and theatrical celebrity. Wrote *On With the Dance* (a musical revue), with London opening in spring followed by *Fallen Angels* and *Hay Fever* (which Marie Tempest at first refused to

do, feeling it was "too light and plotless and generally lacking in action"). *Hay Fever* and *Easy Virtue* produced, New York. Wrote silent screen titles for Gainsborough Films.

**1926** Toured USA in *The Vortex*. *This Was a Man* was refused a licence by Lord Chamberlain in the UK but produced in New York (1926), Berlin and Paris. *Easy Virtue*, *The Queen Was in the Parlour* and *The Rat Trap* produced, London. Played Lewis Dodd in *The Constant Nymph*, directed by Basil Dean. Wrote *Semi-Monde* and *The Marquise*. Bought Goldenhurst Farm, Kent, as a country home. Sailed for Hong Kong on holiday but trip broken in Honolulu by nervous breakdown.

**1927** *The Marquise* opened in London while Coward was still in Hawaii and *The Marquise* and *Fallen Angels* produced in New York. Finished writing *Home Chat*. *Sirroco* produced, London.



Beatrice Lillie, Bobbie Andrews, Gertrude Lawrence & Coward, 1920s

**1928** Clark Storey in S. N. Behrman's *The Second Man*, directed by Dean. Gainsborough Films productions of *The Queen Was in the Parlour*, *The Vortex* (starring Ivor Novello), and *Easy Virtue* (directed by Alfred Hitchcock) released – but only the latter, freely adapted, a success. *This Year of Grace!* produced, London and, with Coward directing and in cast, New York. Made first recording featuring numbers from this show.



**1929** Played in *This Year of Grace!* (USA) until spring. Wrote and Directed *Bitter-Sweet*, London and New York. Set off on travelling holiday in Far East.

**1930** On travels wrote *Private Lives* (1929) and song "Mad Dogs and Englishmen", the latter on the road from Hanoi to Saigon. In Singapore joined the Quaints, company of strolling English players, as Stanhope for three performances of *Journey's End*. On voyage home wrote *Post-Mortem*. Directed and played Elyot Chase in *Private Lives*, London, alongside Gertrude Lawrence, Laurence Olivier and Adrienne Allen.

**1931** Elyot Chase in New York production of *Private Lives* with Gertrude Lawrence. Wrote and directed *Cavalcade*, London. Film of *Private Lives* produced by MGM. Set off on trip to South America.

**1932** On travels wrote *Design for Living* (hearing that Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne finally free to work with him) and material for new revue including songs 'Mad about the Boy', 'Children of the Ritz' and 'The Party's Over Now'. Produced in London as *Words and Music*, with book, music, and lyrics exclusively by Coward and directed by him. The short-lived Noël Coward Company, an independent company which enjoyed his support, toured UK with *Private Lives*, *Hay Fever*, *Fallen Angels* and *The Vortex*.

**1933** Directed *Design for Living*, New York and played Leo. Films of *Cavalcade* (which won a 'best picture Oscar'), *To-Night Is Ours* (remake of *The Queen Was in the Parlour*) and *Bitter-Sweet* released. Directed London revival of *Hay Fever*. Wrote *Conversation Piece* as vehicle for Yvonne Printemps and hit song 'Mrs. Worthington'.

**1934** Directed *Conversation Piece* in London and played Paul. Cut links with C. B. Cochran and formed own management in partnership with John C. Wilson and the Lunts. Appointed President of the Actors' Orphanage, in which he invested great personal commitment until resignation in 1956. Directed Kaufman and Ferber's *Theatre Royal* at the Lyric and Behrman's *Biography*, at the Globe. Film of *Design for Living* released, London. *Conversation Piece* opened, New York. Started writing autobiography: *Present Indicative*.

**1935** Wrote and Directed *Point Valaine*, New York. Played lead in film *The Scoundrel* (Astoria Studios, New York).

**1936** Wrote and Directed and played in *To-Night at 8.30* – 9 short plays, which included *Still Life* that was later adapted for the screenplay of *Brief Encounter*. Coward and Gertrude Lawrence starred in tonight at 8.30 at the Phoenix theatre, London and National Theatre, New York. Directed *Mademoiselle* by Jacques Deval, Wyndham's.

**1937** Played in *To-Night at 8.30*, New York, until second breakdown in health in March. Directed (and subsequently disowned) Gerald Savory's *George and Margaret*, New York. *Present Indicative* published, London and New York.

**1938** Wrote and Directed *Operette*, London with hit song 'The Stately Homes of England'. *Words and Music* revised for American production as *Set to Music*. Appointed adviser to newly-formed Royal Naval Film Corporation.

**1939** Directed New York production of *Set to Music*. Visited Soviet Union and Scandinavia. Wrote *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed*; rehearsals stopped by declaration of war. Wrote for revue *All Clear*, London. Appointed to head Bureau of Propaganda in Paris to liaise with French Ministry of Information, headed by Jean Giraudoux and Andre Maurois. This posting prompted speculative attacks in the press,

prevented by wartime secrecy from getting a clear statement of the exact nature of his work. Troop concert in Arras with Maurice Chevalier. *To Step Aside* (short story collection) published.

**1940** Visits USA to report on American isolationism and attitudes to war in Europe. Return to Paris



David Lean, Ronald Neame, Noël Coward, Anthony Havelock-Allan

prevented by German invasion. Returned to USA to do propaganda work for Ministry of Information. Propaganda tour of Australia and New Zealand and fund-raising for war charities. Wrote play *Time Remembered* (unproduced).

**1941** Mounting press attacks in England because of time spent allegedly avoiding danger and discomfort of Home Front. Wrote *Blithe Spirit*, produced in London (with Coward directing) and New York. MGM film of *Bitter-Sweet* released, London. Wrote songs including 'London Pride', 'Could You Please Oblige Us with a Bren Gun?' and 'Imagine the Duchess's Feelings'.

**1942** Wrote, produced and co-directed (with David Lean) *In Which We Serve* and appeared as Captain Kinross. He also composed the film's score. Played in countrywide tour of *Blithe Spirit*, *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed* and gave hospital and factory concerts. MGM film of *We Were Dancing* released.

**1943** Played Garry Essendine in London production of *Present Laughter* and Frank Gibbons in *This Happy Breed*. Produced film of *This Happy Breed* for Two Cities Films. Wrote 'Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans', first sung on BBC Radio. Four-month tour of Middle East to entertain troops.

**1944** February-September, toured South Africa, Burma, India and Ceylon. Troop concerts in France and 'Stage Door Canteen Concert' in London. Screenplay of *Still Life*, as *Brief Encounter* is written. *Middle East Diary*, an account of his 1943 tour published in London and New York. The film adaptation of *This Happy Breed* by David Lean, Anthony Havelock-Allan and Ronald Neame showcased in London.

**1945** *Sigh No More* with hit song 'Matelot' completed and produced, London. Started work on *Pacific 1860*. Film of *Brief Encounter*, directed by David Lean is released starring Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard.

**1946** Wrote and Directed *Pacific 1860*, London. *Brief Encounter* won the Grand Prix award at Cannes Film Festival.



Coward & Gladys Cooper, Blue Harbour

**1947** Garry Essendine in London revival of *Present Laughter*. Supervised production of *Peace in Our Time*. *Point Valaine* produced, London. Directed American revival of *To-Night at 8.30*.

**1948** Replaced Graham Payn briefly in American tour of *To-Night at 8.30*, his last stage appearance with Gertrude Lawrence. Max Aramont in *Joyeux Chagrins* (French production of *Present Laughter*). Built house at Blue Harbour, Jamaica.

**1949** Wrote screenplay and starred as Christian Faber in film of *The Astonished Heart*. Wrote *Ace of Clubs* and *Home and Colonial*



(produced as *Island Fling* in USA and *South Sea Bubble* in UK).

**1950** Wrote and Directed *Ace of Clubs*, London. Wrote *Star Quality* (short stories).

**1951** Deaths of Ivor Novello and C. B. Cochran. Paintings included in charity exhibition in London. Wrote and Directed *Quadrille*. One-night concert at Theatre Royal, Brighton, followed by season at Café de Paris, London and beginning of new career as leading cabaret entertainer. Wrote and directed *Relative Values*, London, which restored his reputation as a playwright after run of post-war flops. *Island Fling* produced, USA.

**1952** Charity cabaret with Mary Martin at Café de Paris for Actors' Orphanage. June cabaret season at Café de Paris. Directed *Quadrille*, London, starring Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt. *Red Peppers, Fumed Oak* and *Ways and Means* (from *To-Night at 8.30*) filmed as *Meet Me To-Night*. September, death of Gertrude Lawrence.

**1953** Completed second volume of autobiography: *Future Indefinite*. King Magnus in Shaw's *The Apple Cart*. Successful Cabaret at Café de Paris. Wrote *After the Ball*.

**1954** *After the Ball* produced, U.K. July, mother died. September, cabaret season at Café de Paris. November, Royal Command Performance, London Palladium. Wrote *Nude With Violin*.

**1955** June, opened in cabaret for season at Desert Inn, Las Vegas. Played Hesketh-Baggott in film of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, for which he wrote own dialogue. Directed and appeared with Mary Martin in a live television spectacular: *Together with Music* for CBS, New York.

**1956** Charles Condomine in television production of *Blithe Spirit* for CBS, Hollywood. For tax reasons took up Bermuda residency. Resigned from presidency of the Actors' Orphanage. *South Sea Bubble* produced, London. Directed and played part of Frank Gibbons in television production of *This Happy Breed* for CBS, New York. Co-directed *Nude With Violin* with John Gielgud (Eire and UK), opening to press attacks on Coward's decision to live abroad. Wrote *Volcano*, not produced in his lifetime.

**1957** Directed and played Sebastien in *Nude With Violin*, New York.

**1958** Played Garry Essendine in *Present Laughter* alternating with *Nude With Violin* on US West Coast tour. Wrote ballet, *London Morning* for London Festival Ballet.

**1959** *Look After Lulu!* produced, New York and by English Stage Company at Royal Court, London. Film roles of Hawthorne in *Our Man in Havana* and ex-King of Anatolia in *Surprise Package*. *London Morning* produced by London Festival Ballet. Sold home in Bermuda and took up Swiss residency.

**1960** Wrote *Waiting in the Wings* – produced Eire and UK (Duke of York's, London). *Pomp and Circumstance* (novel) published, London and New York.

**1961** Wrote and directed American production of *Sail Away* starring Elaine Stritch. *Waiting in the Wings* published, New York.

**1962** *Sail Away* produced, UK (Savoy Theatre, London).

**1963** Wrote music and lyrics for *The Girl Who Came to Supper* (adaptation of Rattigan's *The Sleeping Prince*, previously filmed as *The Prince and the Showgirl*) – produced, USA. Revival of *Private Lives* at

Hampstead signals renewal of interest in his work in the UK.

**1964** “Supervised” production of *High Spirits*, musical adaptation of *Blithe Spirit*, Savoy. Introduced Granada TV’s ‘A Choice of Coward’ series, which included *Present Laughter*, *Blithe Spirit*, *The Vortex* and *Design for Living*. Directed *Hay Fever* for National Theatre – the first living playwright to direct his own work there. *Pretty Polly Barlow* (short story collection) published.

**1965** Played the landlord in film – *Bunny Lake is Missing*. Badly weakened by attack of amoebic dysentery contracted in Seychelles.

**1966** Wrote and starred in *Suite in Three Keys* at the Queen’s Theatre London, which taxed his health further.

**1967** Caesar in TV musical version of *Androcles and the Lion* (score by Richard Rodgers), New York. Witch of Capri in film *Boom*, adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ play *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Any More*. Lorn Loraine, Coward’s manager and friend for many years, died, London. Worked on new volume of autobiography: *Past Conditional*. *Bon Voyage* (short story collection) published.

**1968** Played Mr. Bridger, the criminal mastermind, in *The Italian Job*.

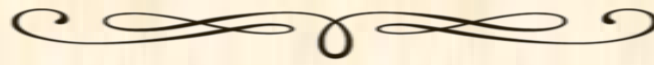
**1970** Awarded knighthood in New Year’s Honours List.

**1971** Tony Award, USA, for 'Distinguished Achievement in the Theatre'.



**1973** 16 March, died peacefully at his home in Blue Harbour, Jamaica. Buried on Firefly Hill.

*“It turned out to be a very good picture”*  
- Noël Coward



## *Brief Encounter* - An Introduction



*The original theatrical release poster*

*Brief Encounter* was David Lean's fourth collaboration with Noël Coward, and the one, understandably, where the creative responsibility for the film as a whole is most evenly divided between the two of them. It constitutes almost a declaration of independence on Lean's part from his fruitful but by 1945 no doubt increasingly constricting association with Coward's writing. On his first film, *In Which We Serve*, he had been brought in as co-director with Coward, taking care of the technical end in a sort of one-man-band operation, featuring Coward as author of the original screenplay, director, star and composer of the music. The next two films *This Happy Breed* and *Blithe Spirit*, were smooth, easy, essentially faithful adaptations of recent Coward stage successes. *Brief Encounter* is something rather different. Though it takes as its starting-point *Still Life*, a one-act play from Coward's 1936 collection, *Tonight at 8.30*, the screenplay elaborates considerably to fill in the background of the two principle characters' 'brief encounter' in a railway station buffet/ And it is not just the conventional 'opening-out' process by which snatched of dialogue and whole scenes from the stage play are arbitrarily scattered in a variety of improbable locales in the cause of Cinema. The whole thing is radically rethought in terms of the screen and its possibilities, to such an extent that it becomes more or less an original screenplay on the same theme as the stage play.

The play is a classic essay in British understatement and the good old stiff upper-lip. Two sublimely improbable people, married, settled, middle-aged, find themselves embarrassingly involved in a great romantic passion that they can do nothing about. People like them don't do things like that, and the only possible answer is the decent, dutiful one: they must part for good. The film, by telling us a lot more about them, about their background, about the circumstances of their meetings and their parting, intensifies our understanding of and belief in both their passionate feelings for each other, and the very real problems that they have of squaring these with their normal codes of duty, their natural desire not to hurt people they also love, if not quite with the same intensity.

The film, in fact, becomes a far more emotional, far more romantic statement of the play. Partly this is the effect of a very simple device: that of making Laura the narrator, and telling the whole story from her point of view after the parting, when her despair has reached and just passed its moment of maximum intensity. The narration provides us ready-made with an emotional colouring, an



attitude to the story we are being told – and came in for criticism at the time because this was felt to be somehow not playing fair, not doing things the ‘cinematic’ way. However, the device does work, despite occasional moments of weakening duplication: as a rule what Laura tells us about that is going on inside her, complements the visuals without overwhelming or replacing them.

Much of the effect of the film, though, resides in the way David Lean directs it (something which could not really be said of his three previous films). Throughout his career Lean seems to be rather a cold director, a brilliant technician who steers clear of leaving any personal mark on his subjects and appears, if anything, to be positively embarrassed by any displays of emotionalism. *Brief Encounter* might, therefore, depending which way one looks at it, be the ideal subject for him, matching his reticence with its own, or a disaster, encouraging him to cool down to freezing point something which was already pretty chilly and undemonstrative. As it turned out, the first pattern seems to be that which prevailed: the film has, unlike any of Lean’s other films, the feeling that intense emotions are there, underneath, made all the more intense by their iron control under which they are held.

Partly this is effected by the moody, chiaroscuro camerawork, which makes the most of rain-washed night streets, clouds of smoke and steam from the steam trains that still rumble or roar through Milford station. Occasionally the camera takes over on its own, as in the once-renowned sequence of Laura’s temptation to suicide, in which the angles become more and more extreme until after the express has rushed through (its presence made palpable by the soundtrack and the flashing lights on Laura’s anguished face) and our viewpoint is gradually returned to the everyday horizontal, as Laura goes back sensibly to the buffet she just precipitately left.

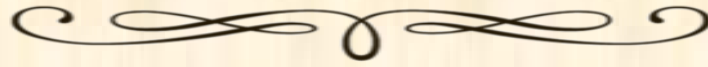
But most of all the mood of the film, its emotional temperature, is created by one stroke of something like genius: the use of Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto on the soundtrack (the practical motivation for this being that the work in question is being played on the radio as Laura starts her reverie). Again, maybe the use of this very highly charged, emotional music is not quite playing fair, at any rate by conventional canons of cinema. But it works, triumphantly by giving at once an extra dimension to the most prosaic, seemingly unemotional exchanges, making us aware that we are in the presence of Harold Pinter’s second silence: ‘below the words spoken, is the thing unknown and unspoken...’

At this distance of time *Brief Encounter* assumes another, rather surprising quality – that of a documentary insight into a vanished scene, a vanished way of life.

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by John Russell Taylor  
(Lorrimer Publishing Ltd, 1984)

# Original Cast & Credits



## Credits

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In Charge of Production	Anthony Havelock-Allan/ Ronald Neame
Producer	Noël Coward
Director	David Lean
Screenplay	Noël Coward
Director of Photography	Robert Krasker
Art Director	L.P. Williams
Editor	Jack Harris
Sound Editor	Harry Miller
Sound Recordists	Stanley Lambourne/ Desmond Dew
Production Manager	E. Holding
Assistant Director	George Pollock
Camera Operator	B. Fancke

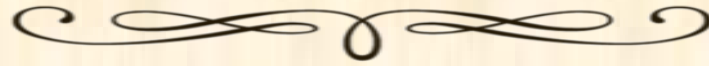
## Cast

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Laura Jesson	Celia Johnson
Alec Harvey	Trevor Howard
Albert Godby	Stanley Holloway
Myrtle Bagot	Joyce Carey
Fred Jesson	Cyril Raymond
Dolly Messiter	Everley Gregg
Beryl Waters Stanley	Margaret Barton
Stephen Lynn	Dennis Harkin
Mary Norton	Marjorie Mars
Mrs. Rolandson	Nuna Davey
Woman Organist	Irene Handl
Bill	Edward Hodge
Johnnie	Sydney Bromley
Policeman Waitress	Wilfred Babbage
Margaret	Henrietta Vincent
Bobbie	Richard Thomas
Clergyman	George V. Sheldon

*“It’s a little film, so it needs a brief something – something short.”*

*- Noël Coward, on the title of *Brief Encounter**



### Extract from ‘Coward On Film’

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*Brief Encounter* was to be the last collaboration between Noël and the trio from Cineguild, whom he now regarded as his “little darlings”. All of them were lucky to be able to make the film in the first place. Back in the thirties Noël had cheerfully sold the rights to several of his properties to MGM – including *Tonight at 8.30*. While the rest remained under Hollywood lock and key – and still do – British producer Sydney Box managed to persuade the studio to sell him the rights to the nine plays. Over the next few years he resold them piecemeal to J. Arthur Rank for a healthy profit. The first of them was *Still Life*, which cost Cineguild £60,000, a lot of money for that time. The film came in at £270,000.

The choice of subject was accidental. Disappointed by the outcome of *Blithe Spirit*, the trio had started work on another project, which could hardly have been more of a contrast. It was *The Gay Gallard*, a costume piece about Mary Queen of Scots. To offer Cineguild an incentive to do one more Coward piece, Noël went away and reappeared ten days later with a first draft film script based on *Still Life*. Although Lean was not happy with everything he saw there, once again he was hooked by the possibilities.

Were the comedy interpolations absolutely necessary? Havelock-Allan remembered Noël’s firmness on the point: ‘(He) was an extremely skillful theatre writer and he knew that the story would have been intolerably sad otherwise. They provided some relief from the central situation, which was building up to be increasingly painful, both for the audience and for the two principals, for whom the audience feels sympathy.’

Did Noël have to tell the events from A to B – Just because that was the way he had written the original? Suppose we start the film with the scene where the couple part? Get the audience involved with them, asking questions about them? Then we tell the story in flashback. The rest was a virtual rerun of what happened in *In Which We Serve*.



*The film begins with the scene where Laura & Alec part.*



Undoubtedly, the final film contains many such suggestions. As the professional filmmakers opened the story out from the original single set, they would often need linking passages that have been unnecessary in the stage version. Noël appears to have become a constructive collaborator. When the trio came up with a short early scene, Neame recalls, “He read it, remarked – ‘And which of my little darlings wrote this brilliant Coward dialogue?’ – and used it just as it was. But on other occasions, when new material was needed, he would say ‘Get out your little pencils.’ We would get out our little pencils and he would walk up and down the room and out would pour dialogue – wonderful, brilliant dialogue. It came out just like that.”

Circumstances sometimes dictated that their writing was done at long distance. Havelock-Allan: “At one stage...he was actually in India with an entertainment troupe; we managed to get cables through to him saying we needed thirty seconds of dialogue for the scene in the boat and we got a cable back giving us two lines of dialogue and saying: ‘This runs for forty-eight seconds: if you want to shorten it, take out the following words...’”

Once again the film editor’s eye influenced the shape of the final film, even before the shots were locked into the detailed shooting script, which was invariably the Lean “Bible.”

Then the *title*. “It’s a little film,” said Noël, “so it needs a brief something – something short.” It was Gladys Calthrop, Noël’s friend and personal artistic advisor, who came up with the final form of words.

*Brief Encounter* is easily Noël’s most successful screenplay; the film pulls together the promising elements in David Lean’s emerging directorial style and turns them for the first time into a cohesive whole. The confidence the whole team developed in each other by this time is clearly apparent. Apart from *In Which We Serve*, an original screenplay, the other two collaborations have perhaps been overly faithful to the material with only the occasional embellishment. This time the story and characters – while faithfully rendered – are used confidently as the basis of something created with a totally different medium in mind. To use your source material without being used by it is arguable harder than starting from scratch. In the event, Noël manages to keep the narrative simplicity of the original, while extending its emotional complexity.

The ‘translation’ begins with the film’s point of view. Even though those who saw the original play grant that Noël ‘gave’ it to Gertie, it nonetheless remained a two-hander, the story of two people sharing the same illicit emotion. But *Brief Encounter* is Laura’s story almost entirely. Not only is she favoured in most of the shots but the story is linked by her interior monologue narration in which she ‘tells’ her story to her husband, Fred, in her mind.

Noël made it a professional habit to know his characters before he wrote about them. His notes on *Still Life* contain her and Alec’s biography. The Laura of *Still Life* is an outline; the Laura of *Brief Encounter* has the outline filled in. She is a real person of a certain class and time – the film is set in 1939 – which is why so many other women could relate to her and turn her story into one of the perennial ‘women’s pictures’ of the time. Laura Jesson came within a touch of fulfilling the dreams of many a middle class, middle-aged woman who fantasises about the great love she would never know, except through the library books she religiously borrows each week. In Laura’s case not from

the public library but from the more upmarket Boots, and not the vulgar 'bodice rippers' but the more genteel fiction of Kate O'Brien, a writer who specialized in the conflict between romance and everyday life. In that sense, one of the morals of the film is that you are what you read.

Put this way, the film does sound like a psychological case study but it is much more than that, for Coward and Lean – and one must view the final execution as a true collaboration – are confident enough by now to temper emotion with irony. They let us smile before emotional tension causes us to laugh in self-defence. One of the films Laura and Alec go to see on the Thursday afternoon outings is called *Flames of Passion*. It is so bad that they leave and go out for a boat trip, where the intimacy of this unscheduled event starts to trigger their latent feelings for each other. As things turn out, they would have been safer in the cinema.

The whole structure of the film is Laura's subjective account of events and feelings and, time and again on repeat viewing, one finds oneself asking – is this what really *happened* or is this a visualisation of what she thinks she might have felt? Are we sometimes drifting into her novelisation of events? The fact that this objectivity is impossible on first viewing and irrelevant to one's involvement in the mood of the film is a mark of the technical skill with which Lean manipulates what we see and feel.

A good example of this directing of our attention comes in a particular pair of scenes which virtually open and close the film. In the first the camera explores the geography and the denizens of the refreshment room, establishing the resident characters we shall come to know throughout the film; all of this is seen from an uncommitted point of view. Then at the back of the room we pick up this unexceptional middle aged couple sitting silent and sad. We overhear Myrtle, the manageress, repeating one of her endless genteel clichés—"Time and tide wait for no man, Mr. Godby"—which later takes on an added significance, should we happen to recall it. It is only when another character, Dolly Messiter, enters and recognizes Laura that we are allowed to move in and concentrate on Laura and Alec as the protagonists. Even so, we have been told nothing about who the couple are or what their relationship is. Dolly proceeds to dominate the conversation of empty suburban chatter. All of this we watch as uninvolved observers.

At the end of the film, when we have heard Laura's story—the scene is virtually repeated but this time the point of view is very different and imbued with what we know and what Lean would have us feel. The camera, as it were, is loaded. We now see things through Laura's emotional perspective.

For instance, we now discover the lovers in a much closer mid-shot. The decor of the room—which we know so well by now—is irrelevant. Now we have to hear what they are saying. Their grief at parting is not nearly expressed but, as Laura says desperately: "We've still got a few minutes." At which moment Dolly Messiter—whom we have not seen enter due to the tightness of the framing—literally pushes herself into the picture. The shock of the intrusion says everything about our involvement with the distracted pair. She is interrupting *us*. Every shot now focuses on Laura. The lighting changes, her thought voice and the Rachmaninoff on the soundtrack swell . . . Lean pulls out every trick to isolate her and focus on her.

David Lean considered that he was running a distinct risk by using the device of dimming the lights, so that the two main characters were the only things to be lit during the moments of most intense emotion. By doing so he hoped to increase the intimacy of the scene but he was afraid it might look tricky. In the event, he needn't have worried. Most audiences didn't even notice the effect, though they most certainly *felt* it.

Alec's train is announced and again, the hand on the shoulder. The gesture which had seemed so casual earlier now says everything about the pain of saying goodbye—without being able to actually say it. Behind the façade the defences crumble quietly.

In *Brief Encounter* David Lean learned to specialise in these dramatic juxtapositions. There is the early scene where Laura goes out on the platform to watch the express blast through and gets the speck of grit in her eye, which leads to the beginning of the brief encounter. Without becoming unduly Freudian, it is hard to avoid the interpretation that the unstoppable train symbolises the male excitement her life misses and which she sedately seeks in novels and films. At later dramatic points of the film the train is used as sexual punctuation, if one accepts this interpretation.

Again, near the end of the film—with Alec gone out of her life—we recall her words—"I want to die . . . if only I could *die*"—as she rushes out on the platform with the clear intention of throwing herself (like Anna Karenina) under the express. At that point the shot takes on a shocking meaning, emphasised by the camera angles Lean employs. Quite out of keeping with the ordered look of the rest of the film, the sequence starting in the refreshment room—uses disturbing tilted shots, more typical of the German neo-expressionist cinema, to reflect Laura's unbalanced state of mind. The rhythmic lights of the express flash across her face. And then normality returns and we re-enter the ordered world of Milford Junction.

There are other, smaller touches that one only notices on a second viewing. To begin with their world is normal, even mundane, as they sit in tea shops, walk through shopping streets, laugh in the cinema. Later the night scenes take on a certain threat. As they run to catch Alec's train through the subway corridor linking the platforms, their shadows precede them, dwarfing them. Are they anticipating themselves with the shadows, threatening themselves by what they are doing?

Then, as Laura flies from the borrowed flat and the near discovery, we see her tiny, solitary figure from a bird's eye view, divorced from the safety of her cosy environment. As she passes a lamp post her own shadow suddenly elongates and looms at her. It makes an ironic counterpoint to Alec's earlier and equally ironic remark: "What exciting lives we lead . . ."

While it's hardly true to say that this kind of device abounds in the film, it occurs often enough to create an attitude towards the material and help us feel the powerful internal drama that is accentuated rather than diminished by the apparent ordinariness of the people and their situation. As Noël replied to a questioner almost a quarter of a century later: "I've always liked suggestion rather than flat statement. My best things are always written a bit obliquely. I wasn't at all sure it would work (with *Brief Encounter*) but it did." In another interview he would conclude: "The thing I like best about *Brief Encounter* is that the love scene is played *against* the words. . . He's a doctor and he talks about preventive medicine and the different diseases one gets, and all the time he's looking at



her. And then she says, 'You suddenly look much younger'—which cuts right through and forces them back to ordinary dialogue." *Brief Encounter* has been called for good reason the quintessential "British picture," largely because of that quality of understatement.

Laura's words are those of a woman used to absorbing and accepting the words of others but never using them to express her own feelings, except on the most unexceptional subjects. Some things lie too deep for words with women like her. Noël's skill in writing for her is to let us know what is behind the ordinary words she does permit herself; how the retreat to domestic cliché signals her fear of the "awful feeling of danger."

The more obvious stroke of brilliance is in his choice of the film's music. When Laura and Fred are spending a typical evening at home—an evening that is proving extraordinarily tense for her—she turns on the radio. "Would some music throw you off your stride?" she asks, using one of the many phrases from the film that have entered the language of "camp." (To "shop until you drop" began life here.) The music she settles for is Rachmaninoff's second Piano Concerto with its soaring emotional flights. From that point it becomes thematic to her story, underscoring the highs and the lows, counterbalancing with its lushness the flatness of her words. Harold Pinter, a writer often compared with Coward, once described the process as "below the words spoken, is the thing known and unspoken."

The choice of the music was not unanimous to begin with. Musical director Muir Matheson believed every film should have a specially composed score and there were others who agreed with him. Many other British films of the period had "sold" on the strength of their overt theme music. Noël, however, was adamant. If he didn't actually say, "Extraordinary how potent popular classical music can be," he must certainly have thought it. What he actually said was, "No, no, no. She listens to Rachmaninoff on the radio, she borrows her books from the Boot's library and she eats at the Kardomah." End of debate.



*In the film, we get the inner reflections of Laura Jesson who was originally played by Celia Johnson*

Richard Winnington wrote in the *News Chronicle*: "Much of the power of the love passages is due to the acting of Celia Johnson, who, without manufactured glamour or conventional good looks, magnificently portrays the wife and mother meeting passion for the first time; who wants to die because of it and goes back to her husband and the books of Kate O'Brien, knowing that this golden brief encounter will die in her memory."

The *New York Times* critic felt that she gave "a consuming performance. . . she

is naturally and honestly disturbing with her wistful voice and large, sad saucer-eyes." In a later interview she came up with some sort of rationale of her undoubted appeal: "It's my eyes. It's a great advantage when everything is a blur beyond a certain point."

David Lean had his own explanation for her quality on film: "Movie acting is thinking, which a lot of people don't understand. If you're thinking right, it changes the way you walk, the way you put your head and it is all completely subconscious, because the thought just makes you walk or put your head or whatever it is in the correct way."

As an example he was fond of quoting the scene where Laura decides to join Alec at the flat and hurries to the station exit. "On her back you could read her thoughts . . . and all this thinking is transferred into the physical." When the scene had been shot, Lean congratulated Johnson and asked her how she had worked out what to do. "I didn't work it out," she replied, "She would just do that, wouldn't she?"

Of the film as a whole Lejeune concluded:

“ *Noël Coward's Brief Encounter is, to my mind, not only the most mature work Mr Coward has yet prepared for the cinema, but one of the most emotionally honest and deeply satisfying films that has ever been made in this country. It represents a confidence so utterly frank that few people will be simple enough to accept it as true.* ”

In that last remark she was particularly perceptive. Early British audiences *were* made uncomfortable by the emotional power of the film and were inclined to make fun of the accents and habits of the characters in self defence. Until the film won the cachet of a prize at the Cannes Film Festival, the French saw no point in a love affair that never was but later adopted the film as if they had made it themselves. America strangely took to it from the first. *Time* called it "a heart-throbbing little valentine made with great skill."

Lean was cautious in his assessment: "As films go, it was inexpensive [but] it was not a big box office success. The greater proportion of filmgoers are under twenty-one mentally and physically; they go to the movies to escape from reality." A conviction which perhaps explains why his later career—when he could exercise full control over what he chose to do—was devoted to spectacular films that were anything but "inexpensive."

Noël himself was "delighted with it. Celia quite wonderful; Trevor Howard fine and obviously a new star. Whole thing beautifully played and directed—and, let's face it, most beautifully written." On another occasion, however—in his introduction to *Play Parade (Vol. IV)*—he clearly felt he was being disloyal to his first love, the theatre. "I am fond of both the play and the film with, as usual, a slight bias in favor of the former."

David Lean became the second British director to be nominated for Best Director in the 1946 Oscars. Celia Johnson was nominated for Best Actress. She lost to Olivia de Havilland in *To Each His Own*. However, *Blithe Spirit* did win the award for Best Special Effects.

From Lean's point of view, though, the most important accolade was perhaps Noël's when he first saw the film. "Well, my dear, I must tell you. You're the most resilient young man I have ever met."

Fifty years later the film is likely to found on almost every critic's top ten list. It takes time, it would appear, to accept the simple truths.

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by Barry Day, O.B.E

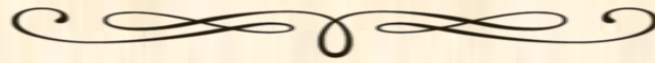
*From Coward on Film - The Cinema of Noël Coward*

Barry Day is Vice President of the Coward Society, Literary Advisor to the Coward Estate and Trustee of the Noël Coward Foundation. He is the author and editor of numerous books and plays with an emphasis on theatre, particularly musical theatre. In more than twenty years working with the Noël Coward Estate, he has produced *Noël Coward: The Complete Lyrics*, *Noël Coward: A Life in Quotes*, and *The Unknown Noël: New Writing from the Coward Archive*, as well as concert versions of the Coward musicals *After the Ball* and *Pacific 1860*. He has an M.A. from Balliol College, Oxford and was Media Advisor and speechwriter for Prime Ministers Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher. He also served as communications advisor to American actor/director Sam Wanamaker in his successful project to rebuild Shakespeare's Globe at Bankside, and remains a U.S. Board Member and Member of the Globe International Advisory Board. In June 2004 he was awarded the O.B.E in the Queen's Birthday Honours List.



*“The theme and situation are universal”*

*- Roger Manvell*



*Brief Encounter* from ‘The Film and The Public’

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*Brief Encounter* is one of those rare films for which one can never be sure to whom the real credit is due, one of those films one can offer to critics of the artistic integrity of the medium as an example of the unity achieved by the co-operation of many creative minds. That devoted care was given to this picture the result itself is evidence. I do not remember any more moving performance than that given by Celia Johnson. The theme and situation are perfect for so sensitive an actress, and there are the work of Noël Coward. The visual conception, the sympathetic eye that watches Miss Johnson, and relates her work to that of the other people, and to the environment of home, and street, and station which are so much part of her life, if the creative work of the director David Lean.



*The evocative poster used to advertise Brief Encounter*

The theme and situation are universal. They belong to all human beings whether they have individually endured a similar love-tragedy or not. Laura Jesson is a kindly attractive woman with two children. She is married to a kindly, unimaginative husband and lives a contented, unawakened life. She visits the small town of Milford each Thursday, shops, goes to the pictures, and catches her evening train home from Milford Junction. She has a brief encounter in the

station refreshment room with a

doctor who removes some grit from her eye. He also visits Milford on Thursdays. A chance tea together follows. Then lunch. Then the pictures. Their acquaintance grows into an intense and passionate love. He also is married and has children. But unlike her husband he is a man with a genuine belief in his vocation, and the vital appreciation of life and need for love which go with it, and the sight of him stirs her to her depths and turns each Thursday into a vortex of emotional anticipation. They realise the dangers and difficulties of their situation. They experience the shame of domestic evasion, and lies, and subterfuge. They decide to part.

The film begins with their parting, mercilessly ravaged by an unsuspecting garrulous woman who is one of Laura's acquaintances. We ourselves know little more than this intruder. At home again, stricken with emotional sickness, Laura tells her story in imagination to her husband, who sits trite

and dull over his crossword puzzle. The story takes us back and so leads through to their parting again, with our full realisation of its pain and tension. It is a brilliant piece of structure and directing. We see the same final touch of his hand on her shoulder with new eyes.

I do not remember a moment when Celia Johnson's performance falters in a part where emotional over-playing or false intonations would have turned the film from a study of life itself into another piece of cinema fiction. It is a uniquely beautiful portrait: our sympathy grows with knowledge, and Laura's beauty grows with our sympathy. The movement of the film and our relation to the character develop with the same tempo of understanding with which we all live and meet and love. It is this quality which makes the film inescapably human, and whilst we watch it we are with this other human being as with a friend.

Celia Johnson has a small pointed face with wide emotional eyes. She looks quite ordinary until it is time for her to look like what she feels. Trevor Howard plays his first considerable part in the film: he does not look ordinary, but he is not required to do so. He has the strength, ease, and charm; his performance is quiet and assured. The poetry of this film, its revealing study of a man and a woman almost out of control, reveals a fine balance of their strength and weakness, now one taking the lead, now the other. It would be difficult to find a more profound study of distressed love in the history of the cinema.

Into all this complexity, Milford Junction enters as a poetic image. Its passing express trains have the rush and power of passion, its platforms and subways the loneliness of waiting lovers. Its local trains jerk and shunt with their faithful service of routine domesticity. The imagery of trains has seldom been so finely used as in that last terrifying shot when the express screams by with its windows flashing a staccato rhythm of white lights across Laura's agonized face. It is hysteria visually and aurally personified. It is the image of a moment of intended but uncommitted suicide.

Each detail of background is authentic, the streets, shops, café and cinema. To tough the film with humour Stanley Holloway and Joyce Carey play out a grotesque love-affair in the station bar, and whilst this happens we can rest from the intense emotions of the main story in the comic casualness of their love-making. All the other characters, too, are exaggerations of reality. But this, strangely enough, does not matter, for they are all seen through the eyes of Laura, and in her suffering are as grotesquely different from herself as the close shots of Dolly Messiter's chattering lips are from Laura's pale face as she sits opposite her in the village train. The film always returns to Laura: it is her story told by herself and addressed without his knowledge to her husband. The main achievement is that of Celia Johnson, but supported throughout by the creative sympathy of her director, David Lean.

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by Roger Manvell

*“The film is a shining testament to the talent of Noël Coward”*

*- Philip Hoare*



## It's All A Question Of Masks

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In one of the seemingly endless compendia created to celebrate and summarise the passing of a century, *Brief Encounter* was voted number two in a list of the hundred best British films in September 1999. That week, a leader in the *Independent* newspaper, attempting to come to terms with this apparently retrogressive barometer of British popular culture, asked ‘Should we conclude that the country is hopelessly nostalgic? That it is still obsessed with the last war?’

The very fact of the film’s survival is remarkable enough, let alone its extraordinary and continuing popularity. Ostensibly, *Brief Encounter*’s tale of a would-be extramarital affair in a mythic mid-century English suburbia, memorably portrayed by a love-torn Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard as Laura and Alec, would seem to be supremely irrelevant now, little more than an excuse for camp parody. But the fact that the rolling chords of Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto and the luminous close-ups of Jonson and Howard have the ability to affect contemporary audiences almost as much as they did half a century ago is a tribute not only to the art of David Lean, but to the story’s original creator. As much as any of his other works (and perhaps more so, because it survives where theatre is evanescent), the film is a shining testament to the talent of Noël Coward.

Yet the question remains: how far does our chronological distance from *Brief Encounter* – and the play that inspired it, *Still Life* from *Tonight at 8.30* – conspire with the mores of an ironic age to render any real connection with its creator’s spirit and intention virtually impossible? As we move into a new century, are we just too far away from Noël Coward, and what he meant, either to appreciate or preserve for a new generation his sterling genius? Indeed, should we attempt to preserve it at all?

Noël Coward, the twentieth century’s quintessential Englishman, was able to conjure deep emotion in a superficially facile manner which epitomizes what is seen as a national characteristic: that of almost disdainful reticence. The cloud of steam which wreathes the characters as they part on the railway platforms seems to be the veil of English reticence falling over the love they must end, for their own good and that of their respective families and, indeed, of Britain itself. As the *Independent*’s leader noted, ‘The repressed sexual longing in *Brief Encounter* still gives cold railway stations a hint of romance.’



*Laura & Alec’s romantic liaisons at Milford Junction*



To some is also reeks of complacency of a blind acceptance of social stasis and the status quo, and perhaps arrogant (and now redundant) superiority of the nation state. As Frances Gray notes in her critique of Coward, he 'took Laura's return to suburban normality for granted'. In both play and film, the cosy suburbia of the Kardomah tearooms, Boots lending library and Laura's stalwart husband sitting by the fireside with *The Time* crossword calls her back from the edge of emotional anarchy; back to the old, reassuring middle England of restraint and duty. Unlike Coward's more sophisticated heroines from the inter-war Society fantasies of *Private Lives* and *Easy Virtue*, divorce is not an option for Laura Jesson.

As a child of the Victorian century, Noël Coward believed implicitly in duty; it was the bedrock of his birthright. The country might have proscribed his sexuality and censored his work, yet he still felt – almost perversely – the age-old tied that bound him. As early as 1925 Coward had declared that 'England's played out' and that he intended to make his creative life in America (and was shortly after arrested for throwing flower baskets in the street), yet he would remain irrevocable and emotionally associated with England – even when it rewarded his wartime work for the Street Service by fining him for contravening currency regulations on his propaganda trips to the USA, and when a long-deserved knighthood was 'sabotaged' by political elements working against him – the stirrings of a new national ethos which would seek to render him, and his values, obsolete.

It was only with his mother's death in 1954 that Coward claimed to feel released from his atavistic contract with his homeland. He told Joyce Carey, his confidante, 'I think on the whole that I have not done badly by England and I also think that England has not done very well by me.' Yet ten years later in 1965, he was declaiming imperially to a reporter from the *Sunday Express*, 'I am England and England is me.' Such hubristic statements were an expression either of a deluded ego, or of one culture – a sensibility which was defined by reticence. With his upper lip perennially stuff, his face a solemn mask of apparent taste and behaving well were the gods to whom Coward prayed (he didn't believe in the other sort).

These, then, were the ruling values that created a *Still Life* (its very title seemed to reference stasis) and which made *Brief Encounter*. As social documents, the latter had a historical context which was perhaps more urgent, cogent and pressing than the former. Lean's and Coward's film dealt with adultery at a time when it was a serious issue: the steady pre-war world was threatened by moral anarchy; as husbands and lovers were engaged in the arena of war, women were vulnerable to affairs. Marital infidelity was a theme Coward had explored for much of the two previous decades, albeit in the fantasies of *Mayfair* and the *Cote d'Azur*; now, social changes brought the adulterous dilemmas, the 'what is' of *Private Lives* and *Easy Virtue* to the Home Counties. Indeed, in Coward's original play, the would-be lovers consummate that which in Lean's film is kept at bay.

Then (and perhaps more so now) both film and play seemed to access a sense of break point with the world of Coward's early work – challenged as they were by post-First World War neurosis – and an ever more uncertain future after the Second World War. For both *Still Life* and *Brief Encounter*, England's reassuring Metroland was already under threat from a second world war, which changed society as irrevocably as the first had done. Coward's plays, songs and short stories stood as both a symptom and valediction of an in-between period bookended by global conflagration; the 1940s the last of that burst of creativity, with *Blithe Spirit* (another comment on wartime mortality, as well as a supremely sophisticated working out of Coward's themes of fidelity) and the collaborations with

Lean.

It was as though the reality of war had brought Coward's career to a premature close, and his values could not survive. (As the dust died down, the critic Beverley Baxter would ask, not altogether rhetorically, 'Did Noël Coward survive the war?'). In this scenario *Brief Encounter* becomes a fascinating – and perhaps unsung – creative bridge between the fantasies and inter-war delusory optimism of British theatre and popular culture, and the starker tone of the post-war culture that followed it. The close-ups of Johnson and Howard may be made misty by steam, but there is a sharp focus to their composition, a polarizing black and whiteness that seems to put an end to the fantasy of the era they left behind.

The fact that Coward's writing career peaked creatively in the Forties (and in many ways his part in the Second World War sealed his reputation as the representative of all that was English) makes it pertinent, at the end of a troubled century, to examine why *Brief Encounter* still works. Evidently a sense of nostalgia underlies its popularity – perhaps the film was nostalgic even as it was premiered – a reassuring backward glance. It represented a country united not only in the shared experience of cinema (at a time when thirty million went to the movies each week, and when the National Anthem was still played at the end of the evening), but in a shared experience of life – and death – that the Dunkirk spirit (so acutely caught by Coward in his Blitz soundtrack of 'London Pride') had underlined.

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by Philip Hoare

from *Looking Back in Pleasure*

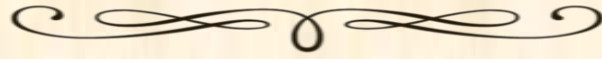
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*"Sixty years on, Brief Encounter is likely to be found on every critic's top ten list. It takes time, it would appear, to accept simple truths: but then they are timeless."*

*- Barry Day*



## *Brief Encounter* – A Timeline Today

**1974** Television remake of the film, shown in the US on the Hallmark Hall of Fame, starring Richard Burton and Sophia Loren.

**1996** First adaptation of *Brief Encounter* for stage goes on national tour, sourcing both the screenplay and the original stage play of *Still Life*.

**1999** *Brief Encounter* comes second in the BFI poll of the 'Top 100 British Films'



**2000** Stage adaptation transfers to the West End's Lyric Theatre, starring Jenny Seagrove.

**2004** Total Film names *Brief Encounter* the 44<sup>th</sup> Greatest British film of all time.

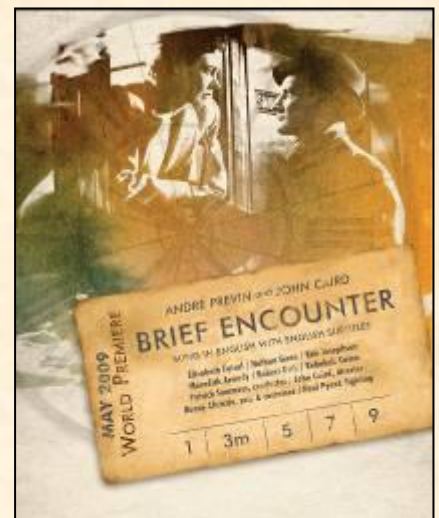
**2008** Kneehigh Theatre production adapts *Brief Encounter* for the stage. Directed by Emma Rice, this adaptation was a mixture of the film and stage play, with additional musical elements. It played at the Haymarket Cinema in London, which was converted into a theatre for the play, for 27 weeks.

**2009** Jenny Seagrove and Nigel Havers star in a special Radio 2 production of *Brief Encounter*, performed live from Maida Vale's studio. Houston Grand Opera premiere a two-act opera *Brief Encounter*, based on the story, with music by André Previn from a libretto by John Caird.

**2010** Kneehigh's production tours USA, playing in San Francisco, New York and Minneapolis

**2013** Australian tour of Kneehigh's production

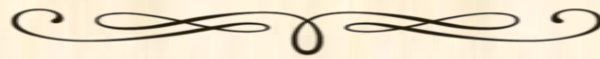
**2015** *Brief Encounter* appears as part of BFI's Love Season, which celebrates a broad sweep of film and TV, from the swooning silent era to the present day.





*“That is the power of a great and enduring story; we can all own it and feel it and find something of ourselves in it.”*

*- Emma Rice*



## A Very Grown-Up Fairy Tale

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In *Still Life*, later to become *Brief Encounter*, Noël Coward wrote a play about an affair. Not a sordid affair but a love affair between two married people. An impossible affair, a painful affair, an unacceptable affair. It is written with such empathy, such observation, and such tender agony. This man knew what he was writing about. Imagine being gay in the 1930s and you begin to understand *Brief Encounter*.

Imagine the impossibility of expressing the most fundamental of human needs and emotions. Imagine the enforced shame, lies and deceit. Imagine the frustration, imagine the loss, and imagine the anger. Each of these emotions is delicately and Britishly traced through the meetings of our lovers. They experience a micro marriage, a relationship from beginning to end in a few short hours – and how many of us cannot relate to this careful and painful liaison? Not many, I'm sure. Can many of us go through a lifetime without meeting someone and feeling a spark of recognition that we shouldn't, an attraction that goes beyond the physical? And what a terrible world it would be if our emotions and spirits and psyches were amputated at the altar.

And here is where real life ends and folk tales begin. In the language of stories, we are able to examine the bargains that human beings make. We see how we bargain our own needs, the needs of the self, for various reasons.

These reasons will be familiar to us all: the fear of being alone or of being excluded from 'normal' life. In the language of folk stories the price of this bargain is often physical. A part of the body is chopped off - a hand (*The Handless Maiden*) or feet (*The Red Shoes*). We literally cut a part of ourselves off in order to conform or to be accepted. In *Brief Encounter*, both our lovers have chopped off part of themselves. It is delicately referred to, but Laura talks of swimming wild and free and of playing the piano. Both of these are forms of personal expression - not pleasing anyone but exploring the deep waters of the soul. Alec turns into a child when he talks of his passions, and fears that Laura will be bored. These are people trapped by the bargains that they have freely made - they have bargained their inner lives for stability, family and love. Oh yes, love. I don't for a moment



*Kneehigh Theatre Production visually portraying Laura's trapped nature and yearning to be 'wild and free'*

believe that their marriages are all bad or that they are in any way victims. Presumably, their respective partners are as trapped by their own bargains and by the rules of society itself. None of us are victims, but we can review the bargains we make and escape in a profound way.

I have been reading many Selkie stories whilst making this piece. In these stories, a fisherman falls in love with a Selkie - or Seal Woman - whom he sees dancing on the rocks having slipped out of her sealskin. She too, falls for him. He takes her home and hides her skin. He cares for her and she for him; they have children and live a life of contentment. One day, she finds her old skin in a cupboard. She washes and dresses the children, kisses them goodbye, puts on her sealskin and dives back into the sea. She never returns but sometimes the children will see a beautiful seal swimming far out at sea. This teaches us about our true self. No matter how much we try to repress our feelings or how much we wish to conform, our true self will always emerge. There can be no happily ever after until this true self, or nature has been accepted and embraced.

In the language of folk tales, in order to find one's true self, it is often vital that there is a near-death experience before our heroes and heroines can begin to heal and to re-form. In *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* our heroines are unconscious, almost dead, for long periods of time. In *Brief Encounter* our lovers also die spiritually when they part. 'I never want to feel anything again,' says Laura. This deep depression is an essential part of the process of change. It is something to be endured, understood and then moved away from. The end of the affair is not the end of hope or of love. It is part of the process of change. Alec will travel and see the world in a wider context. Laura will have to re-imagine herself, not just as a 'respectable wife and mother' but as a person in her own right.



*Laura and Alec in Kneehigh's adaptation of Brief Encounter*

My hope is that, like the Seal Woman, Alec and Laura escape. Not with each other in some idealistic romantic way but an escape provoked by the profound and personal awakening they felt when they met. We humans are fearful by nature - it is often somebody else who provides the catalyst for change but they are not the cause. Change can only happen from within. After our story ends, I like to think that our lovers will

change. I imagine that Alec will make a real difference in Africa and find an expanse of spirit that seems untouchable in our story. I hope and dream that Laura will take up the piano again and perform on the world's greatest and most awe-inspiring stages.

As I write this, I wonder if these are, in fact, my dreams? That is the power of a great and enduring story; we can all own it and feel it and find something of ourselves in it.

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by Emma Rice  
Director of Kneehigh Theatre's Production of *Brief Encounter*

## The Noël Coward Room

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This newly-established room located in central London is dedicated to the life and work of Noël Coward. It provides a space where anyone wishing to explore Coward's world, either as a professional or an enthusiast, can come and spend time amongst rare material and view a colourful wall display of posters, sheet music covers, letters, production photos and other artwork set amongst some of Coward's own personal effects, including his desk and typewriter.

- Watch unique film footage from Coward's own home collection and view DVDs of his films and television appearances.
- Browse through photographs from his professional and personal worlds, including superb stereoscopic images, many not seen before
- Explore his vast collection of letters from the stars of the day

The Noël Coward room also contains an excellent collection of books, plays and CDs by and about Coward, as well as information about Coward papers and memorabilia held at Birmingham University, Bristol University and The New York Public Library. If we don't have it... we'll know where to find it.

**To make an appointment or register interest please email: [cowardoffice@alanbrodie.com](mailto:cowardoffice@alanbrodie.com)**



# Useful Resources

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## Websites

[www.Noëlcoward.com](http://www.Noëlcoward.com)

The World of Noël Coward

[www.Noëlcoward.org](http://www.Noëlcoward.org)

The web home of the Noël Coward Foundation including information on applying for grants

[www.Noëlcoward.net](http://www.Noëlcoward.net)

The web home of the Noël Coward Society

[www.Noëlcowardmusic.com](http://www.Noëlcowardmusic.com)

The web home for information on Noël Coward's music including musicals, operettas and lyrics)

[www.Noëlcowardpaintings.com](http://www.Noëlcowardpaintings.com)

This website contains images of all the known Coward paintings in their historical and geographical context

[www.ncmi.info](http://www.ncmi.info)

The Noël Coward Music index which contains information on every known music and lyric by Coward

[www.firefly-jamaica.com](http://www.firefly-jamaica.com)

The website for Coward's former home 'Firefly' near Ocho Rios, Jamaica

You can also find Coward on IMDB and Wikipedia

## Social Media

Follow Noël Coward on Twitter @NoëlCowardSir or find him on facebook:

[www.facebook.com/Noëlcowardauthor](https://www.facebook.com/Noëlcowardauthor)

## Archives

To access more information about the archives of Noël Coward, held by Alan Brodie Representation and the universities of Bristol and Birmingham, please see the links below:

[www.Noëlcowardroom.com](http://www.Noëlcowardroom.com)

A website for the Noël Coward Room located at the offices of Alan Brodie Representation containing research material

[www.bristol.ac.uk/theatreollection/manderandmitchenson](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/theatreollection/manderandmitchenson)

[www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury)

## Publications

Noël Coward playtexts can be purchased from the following vendors:

[www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk](http://www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk)

[www.bloomsbury.com/uk/academic/academic-subjects/drama-and-performance-studies](http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/academic/academic-subjects/drama-and-performance-studies)

## Rights

All professional enquiries should be directed to Alan Brodie Representation

[www.alanbrodie.com](http://www.alanbrodie.com)

email: [abr@alanbrodie.com](mailto:abr@alanbrodie.com)

All amateur/stock enquiries should be directed to Samuel French Inc if in America

[www.samuelfrench.com](http://www.samuelfrench.com)

[info@samuelfrench.com](mailto:info@samuelfrench.com)

Or Samuel French Ltd if in the UK and Europe

[www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk](http://www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk)

[licensing@samuelfrench-london.co.uk](mailto:licensing@samuelfrench-london.co.uk)

For any enquiries concerning licensing of Coward's music please consult Warner Chappell

[www.warnerchappell.com](http://www.warnerchappell.com)