

Noël  
Coward

*methuen* | drama

MODERN CLASSICS



# Present Laughter

1942

## Methuen Drama Modern Classics

Methuen Drama's *Modern Classics* series showcases landmark plays from around the world. Drawing on the *Modern Plays* series, which launched in 1959, *Modern Classics* celebrates plays from the contemporary repertoire by world-leading dramatists and presents their work in a definitive edition, alongside new introductions by leading scholars and industry professionals. With writers such as Pulitzer Prize-winners Jackie Sibblies Drury, Ayad Akhtar and David Mamet through to Lucy Prebble, Katori Hall and Caryl Churchill, *Modern Classics* are ideal for students and anyone wanting to deepen their knowledge of the plays that form part of the modern dramatic canon.

### Present Laughter

At the centre of his own universe sits matinée idol Garry Essendine: suave, hedonistic and too old, says his wife, to be having numerous affairs – his line of harmless, infatuated débutantes is largely tolerated but playing closer to home is not. Just before he escapes on tour to Africa the full extent of his misdemeanours is discovered . . . and all hell breaks loose.

Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* premiered in the early years of the Second World War just as such privileged lives were threatened with fundamental social change, and remains one of the playwright's most enduring hits.

This new edition is published in Methuen Drama's iconic *Modern Classics* series to coincide with the 125th anniversary of Coward's birth and features a new introduction by Russell Jackson.

'An honest, even profound reflection on the price of fame, with some genuine sexual frisson and an undercurrent of pathos.' – *The Hollywood Reporter*

**Noël Peirce Coward** was born in 1899 and made his professional stage debut as Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish* at the age of eleven, leading to many child actor appearances over the next few years. His breakthrough in playwriting was the controversial *The Vortex* (1924), which featured themes of drugs and adultery and made his name as both actor and playwright in the West End and on Broadway. During the 1920s and 1930s, Coward wrote a string of successful plays, musicals and intimate revues including *Fallen Angels* (1925), *Hay Fever* (1925), *Easy Virtue* (1926), *This Year of Grace* (1928) and *Bitter Sweet* (1929). His professional partnership with childhood friend, Gertrude Lawrence started with the musical revue, *London Calling*, and was followed by *Private Lives* (1930) and *Tonight at 8.30* (1936).

During the Second World War, he remained a successful playwright, screenwriter and director, as well as entertaining the troops and even acting as a spy for the Foreign Office. His plays during these years included *Blithe Spirit* (1941), which ran for 1997 performances, outlasting the War (a West End record until *The Mousetrap* overtook it), *This Happy Breed* and *Present Laughter* (both 1942). His two wartime screenplays, *In Which We Serve*, which he co-directed with the young David Lean as well as starring in, and *Brief Encounter* quickly became classics of British cinema.

However, the post-war years were more difficult. Austerity Britain – the London critics determined – was out of tune with the brittle Coward wit. In response, Coward re-invented himself as a cabaret and TV star, particularly in America, and in 1955 he played a sell-out season in Las Vegas featuring many of his most famous songs, including ‘Mad About the Boy’, ‘I’ll See You Again’ and ‘Mad Dogs and Englishmen’. This was followed by three live television specials on CBS including *Together With Music* with Mary Martin. In the mid-1950s he settled in Jamaica and Switzerland, and enjoyed a renaissance in the early 1960s, becoming the first living playwright to be performed by the National Theatre when he directed *Hay Fever* there. Late in his career he was lauded for his roles in a number of films including *Our Man in Havana* (1959) and his role as the iconic Mr Bridger alongside Michael Caine in *The Italian Job* (1968).

Writer, actor, director, film producer, painter, songwriter, cabaret artist as well as an author of verse, essays, autobiographies and a novel, he was called by close friends ‘The Master’. His final West End appearance was *Song at Twilight* in 1966, which he wrote and starred in. He was knighted in 1970 and died peacefully in 1973 in his beloved Jamaica.

For further information on Noël Coward’s life and work, visit [www.noelcoward.com](http://www.noelcoward.com).

# Present Laughter

Noël Coward

*With an introduction by Russell Jackson*

*methuen* | drama

LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

METHUEN DRAMA  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA  
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, METHUEN DRAMA and the Methuen Drama logo are trademarks  
of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

*Present Laughter* was first published in 1943 by Heinemann and republished in 1954 in *Play Parade*  
Vol. 4, and then published in 2007 by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama  
This edition with new cover and introduction first published 2023

Copyright © NC Aventales AG, successor in title to the Estate of Noël Coward  
Introduction © Russell Jackson, 2023

The authors have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be  
identified as authors of this work.

Cover design: Ben Anslow

Cover image: Head and shoulders portrait photo of British actor Noel Coward (1899–1973), c. 1950.  
(© John Springer Collection / CORBIS / Corbis via Getty Images)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any  
means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or  
retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-party  
websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time  
of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have  
changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

No rights in incidental music or songs contained in the work are hereby granted and  
performance rights for any performance/presentation whatsoever must be obtained  
from the respective copyright owners.

All rights whatsoever in this play are strictly reserved and application for performance etc. should be  
made before rehearsals by professionals to Alan Brodie Representation Ltd, 14 Red Lion Square,  
London WC1R 4QH, email: [abr@alanbrodie.com](mailto:abr@alanbrodie.com) and website: [www.alanbrodie.com](http://www.alanbrodie.com); and by amateurs  
to Concord Theatricals Ltd, Aldwych House, 71–91 Aldwych, London WC2B 4HN,  
email: [licensing@concordtheatricals.co.uk](mailto:licensing@concordtheatricals.co.uk).

No performance may be given unless a licence has been obtained.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Coward, Noël, 1899–1973, author. | Jackson, Russell, 1949- editor.

Title: Present laughter / Noël Coward ; with an introduction by Russell Jackson.

Description: London ; New York : Methuen Drama, 2023. | Series: Methuen Drama modern classics |  
Identifiers: LCCN 2022059700 (print) | LCCN 2022059701 (ebook) | ISBN 9781350354029 (paperback)

| ISBN 9781350354043 (pdf) | ISBN 9781350354036 (epub)

Subjects: LCGFT: Comedy plays. | Drama.

Classification: LCC PR6005.O85 P65 2023 (print) | LCC PR6005.O85 (ebook) |

DDC 822/.912—dc23/eng/20230105

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022059700>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022059701>

ISBN: PB: 978-1-3503-5402-9

ePDF: 978-1-3503-5404-3

eBook: 978-1-3503-5403-6

Series: Modern Classics

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

To find out more about our authors and books visit [www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)  
and sign up for our newsletters.

## Introduction

Noël Coward described *Present Laughter*, written in the spring of 1939, as ‘a very light comedy . . . written with the sensible object of providing [him] with a bravura part’.<sup>1</sup> He told John C. Wilson, who directed the New York production in 1946, that it was ‘not so much a play as a series of autobiographical pyrotechnics’ that needed ‘over and above everything else, abundant physical vitality [. . .] I played it more violently than I have ever played anything, and swept everything and everybody along with me at breakneck speed’.<sup>2</sup> The references to the author’s public image could hardly be missed, but audience members outside the theatrical profession would have been unlikely to recognize specific aspects of Coward’s private life. Sexual relations between consenting male adults would not be legalized until 1968, and Coward was discreet about his sex-life, although it was common knowledge in the theatrical world. He was a master of subtext, in which seemingly trivial dialogue moves inexorably towards deeper feelings. This particular personal dimension of *Present Laughter*, already noted by critics, would not be brought out in a major production until Mathew Warchus’s staging in 2019.

Coward’s avatar, Garry Essendine, is a star actor whose entourage, led by his secretary Monica Reed, have to manage the vagaries of his love-life and the very considerable demands of his ego. They also have to protect him from outsiders, in this case the stage-struck débutante Daphne Stillington, the avant-garde playwright Roland Maule, and the predatory seductress Joanna Lyppiatt, who happens to be the wife of his best friend. Matters are complicated by the fact that Garry’s Manager, Morris Dixon, has been paying her inappropriate attention. Daphne has spent the night in Garry’s apartment, and it is clear that she is not the first woman to have occupied the spare room, and it is strongly implied that this commonly follows some time in Garry’s bed.

<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Plays of Noël Coward: Play Parade*, Volume 4 (London, Heinemann, 1954), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to John C. Wilson, 12 November 1946: Noël Coward Collection, University of Birmingham.

Unsurprisingly, to some reviewers the play's situations seemed risqué. This was a time when the Lord Chamberlain's office kept a close watch on the morality of the stage: humorous treatment of extra-marital sex and divorce might entail the refusal of a performance licence. But similarities between Coward and Garry were self-evident. In the first act, Roland Maule, an aspiring avant-garde playwright, rebukes him with the waste of his potential: 'Every play you appear in is exactly the same, superficial, frivolous and without the slightest intellectual significance. You have a great following and a strong personality, and all you do is prostitute yourself every night of your life. All you do with your talent is to wear dressing-gowns and make witty remarks when you might really be helping people, making them think! Making them feel!' (38). This was the kind of reproach that recurred in the critics' treatment of his work, and he had learned (in one of his favourite expressions) to rise above it. As for Garry's entourage, at the time of writing Coward was the same age as Garry, and his secretary and confidante Lorn Loraine was the same age as the calmly efficient and wise Monica. Joyce Carey, a close friend, played Liz, the wife who lives apart from Garry but remains an intimate friend and counsellor. Other roles – manager and best (male) friend – reflect influential relationships in Coward's circle, which included the West End producer Hugh 'Binkie' Beaumont and his partner John Perry. But there is no direct suggestion of the homosexual coterie of which he was a prominent member.

The greatest threat to the Essendine enterprise is Garry himself. The first scene shows the steps taken not only to minimize the consequences of his casual *amours*, but more generally to save him from errors of judgement. His conventionally heterosexual intrigues are important driving force in a 'light comedy' that has much in common with the more strenuous genre of farce: awkward situations are dealt with by dexterous use of the doors that lead to off-stage rooms. In Act Two, Liz reports that Joanna, concealed in the spare room, feels as if she were 'in a French farce' and at the height of the confusion in Act Three the doorbell rings and Garry says 'With any luck it's the Lord Chamberlain' (100). Daphne Stillington, Roland Maule and Joanna Lyppiatt are dealt with expeditiously, and their re-emergence during the course of the play forms its structure. They provide the situations from which Garry has to escape.

Ironically, Joanna's seduction of Garry in the second scene of Act Two fulfils his warning to Morris in Act One. This is a 'finger wagging' of the kind Coward was famous for: 'Here we are, five people closely woven together by affection and work and intimate knowledge of each other. It's too important a "set up" to risk breaking for any outside emotional reason whatsoever. Joanna is alien to us. She doesn't really belong to us and never could . . . She's a hundred per cent female, exceedingly attractive and ruthlessly implacable in the pursuit of anything she wants' (48). Liz is equally capable of wagging the finger, and in the past she has organized concerted efforts by the allies to keep Garry on the right track. In Act One she tells him that he has 'reached a moment in life when a little restraint would be more becoming': 'You are no longer a debonair, irresponsible juvenile. You are an eminent man advancing, with every sign of reluctance, into middle age'. Garry's response is 'May God forgive you' (28). It is she who sorts out the Joanna problem in the play's final scene, and who accompanies him as he leaves for his tour of Africa. In the course of the scene, Roland has locked himself in the spare bedroom and Daphne has been concealed in the office. After asking whether Liz has a sofa in her flat – thus avoiding the suggestion that they will sleep together – Garry announces 'You're not coming back to me, dear, I'm coming back to you' (109) and '*does an elaborate pantomime pointing first to the office and then to the spare room.*' She '*looks bewildered for a minute and then begins to laugh*' and they make their escape together, as the curtain falls on an 'open' ending of the kind Coward favoured. They never 'got round to' divorcing, and whether or not they resume their marriage, they are united as a professional partnership. Like Elyot and Amanda in *Private Lives*, they have been saved from a pair of worrisome outsiders.

His friends manage Garry's vanity and his less realistic ambitions by frank opposition – he will never play Peer Gynt – or by simply ignoring the outbursts that supply much of the play's energy. He indulges in tirades, such as his homily to Maule ('this time my highbrow young friend you're going to get it in the neck') (39); the declaration that he is expected to go 'tramping all over darkest Africa' (Monica points out that he will be in the cities) in order to make money for his associates; and his insistence in the final scene

that, while his friends ‘believe in [their] lachrymose amorous hangovers’ he at least has ‘the grace to take [his] lightly’ (105). The final scene of the acting edition published by Samuel French in 1949, after Coward had played Garry in the 1947 revival, includes a fuller development of Garry’s lament (delivered ‘*brokenly*’) about having to face ‘that dreadful sea voyage’ followed by ‘months of agonising drudgery all across the length and breadth of what is admitted to be by everybody, the most sinister continent there is’.

This comic exaggeration of descriptions of Africa of a kind commonplace at the time, but by no means shared by the well-travelled author, and the waspish comments on theatres and actors – the very idea of Phoebe Lucas ‘playing a glamorous courtesan with about as much sex appeal as a haddock’ (30) – are camp exaggerations of a kind expected from a flamboyantly theatrical character like Garry but not identified exclusively with homosexuality. His total absorption in the theatre and his place in it produces one of the play’s finest comic effects, a feat of timing built deftly into the dialogue. In the third act Joanna gives him a piece of her mind: ‘I consider you, Mr Garry Essendine, to be not only an overbearing, affected egomaniac, but the most unmitigated cad that it has ever been my misfortune to meet and I most devoutly hope that I shall never set eyes upon you as long as I live’. With this, ‘*she gives him a ringing slap on the face and walks off*’. Garry does not even notice the slap and continues the argument with Henry that Joanna interrupted: ‘Do you mean that you signed a contract for that theatre when I particularly told you that no power on God’s earth would induce me to play in it?’ This was ‘nothing more nor less than the most outrageous betrayal of faith’ and he is ‘deeply, deeply angry’ (107).

The original title was *Sweet Sorrow*, but the implied reference to ‘parting’ and the absence of any indication that it was a comedy seem to have suggested this was inappropriate for the wartime circumstances of the first performances. (In 1948 Coward reverted to an approximation of the original title for a French version, *Joyeux Chagrins*.) The intention was that it would be played in tandem with the family saga *This Happy Breed* – also written in 1939 – with Coward directing and starring in both. This plan was abandoned with the declaration of war on 3 September and the immediate

closure of London theatres. Although the ban was subsequently lifted, until the autumn of 1942 Coward was preoccupied with his war work and the making of the acclaimed film *In Which We Serve*. In the spring and summer of 1941, he wrote *Time Remembered*, which remained unproduced, and *Blithe Spirit*, which opened in Manchester in June 1941 and ran for 1,997 performances in London. The postponed tour of *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed* (plus a 'road' production of *Blithe Spirit*) began in Blackpool on 20 September 1942. The two plays alternated from 19 April 1943 at the Haymarket Theatre in London. *Present Laughter* was played thirty-eight times in this season, and in the 1947 revival at the same theatre it achieved 528 performances.<sup>3</sup>

The defiance of conventional morality, though, remained a problem. W. A. Darlington in the *Daily Telegraph* declared: 'Let us be clear about it. There is no edification in this play, but there is any amount of fun.' Coward presented a 'mad little world with a topsyturvy code of its own'.<sup>4</sup> Ivor Brown, in the *Observer*, cast the play's success in terms of the triumph of dialogue over plot: 'The story just lasts the distance, but what matters with Coward to-day, as with Congreve of old, is not the complication of events but the commentary upon them. It is the snip-snap of the dialogue, the febrile absurdity of the chatterbox types, that animates the play.' *The Stage*, commenting on this 'leap into the atmosphere of pre-war London', claimed that, as in the earlier comedies, '[b]ehind a façade of smartness nearly all the subsidiary characters in *Present Laughter* have also the morals and manners more or less of the farmyard'. Coward's own performance as Garry Essendine was praised for 'bringing out the man's essential charm in the course of his entirely disgraceful behaviour'.<sup>5</sup> (Some reviewers – and his friend David Niven – thought that in the final scene when Henry asks 'Have you or have you not had an affair with Joanna?', Garry's frank 'Yes, I have' forfeited sympathy for him.)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mander, Raymond and Joe Mitchenson, *Theatrical Companion to Coward* (London, Rockliff, 1957); updated by Barry Day and Sheridan Morley (London, Oberon, 2000), 255.

<sup>4</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1943.

<sup>5</sup> *Observer* and *The Stage*, undated clippings in scrapbook, Noël Coward Collection, University of Birmingham.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from David Niven: Barry Day, ed., *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London, Methuen, 2007), 483–4

Because Coward had directed and played Garry Essendine in both 1943 and 1947, the alterations recorded in Samuel French's acting edition, many of which relate to his own part, probably reflect his experience of performance. Some of these found their way into subsequent productions, although they do not appear in other editions. For example, in Act One, when Garry embraces Daphne Stillington as he gives his performance of romantic parting – '*Au revoir*, my sweet – not good-bye – just *au revoir*' – he '*closes his R. arm round her, then looks at his wrist-watch on the other, and kisses her*'.<sup>7</sup> Roland Maule has been given a '*wrist-breaking*' handshake that he inflicts on each new person he meets, and Garry looks in the mirror each time he goes to answer the door.

Later productions proved the play's enduring qualities, and the opportunities it provides for bravura acting, but at the same time raised questions regarding the social attitudes and kind of theatre it embodies. Reviewing a 1965 production directed by and starring Nigel Patrick, Anthony Burgess welcomed 'some of the most laughable and enjoyable light comedy that the century has produced', but noted that there could be 'no new approach, no fresh interpretation for a "new age", only a kind of *commedia dell'arte* perfection, worked for with the fanaticism of a hobby'.<sup>8</sup> A sign of the (somewhat later) times was the response of two critics to Stephen Unwin's 2016 production with Samuel West as Garry. Lyn Gardner wrote in the *Guardian* that 'the smug or hysterical self-regard of the characters soon renders them increasingly tedious company', and in *The Sunday Times*, Patricia Nico asked 'what is the relevance of this cynical snobbish, sometimes misogynistic and never outrageously funny Noël Coward bedroom farce if played straight?'<sup>9</sup>

Burgess's claim that 'no new approach' could be possible was answered with Matthew Warchus' production at the Old Vic in 2019, in which Andrew Scott gave a virtuoso comic performance while (in the words of Ann Treneman in *The Times*) allowing a glimpse of Garry's 'insecurity and loneliness'. Warchus achieved a remarkable coup in shifting its sexual politics, so that Joanna became Joe, and

<sup>7</sup> *Present Laughter. A Light Comedy in Three Acts* (London, Samuel French, 1947), 14.

<sup>8</sup> *The Spectator*, 30 April 1965.

<sup>9</sup> *Guardian*, 6 July 2016; *The Sunday Times*, 9 July 2016.

not only Garry, but Morris and Henry were gay or bisexual. Treneman felt that this 'bisexual update' added 'some zest and surprise to a play that can feel just a bit dated when played straight'. In the *Financial Times* Sarah Hemming observed that that this brought 'new urgency' to 'Liz's determination that this tight-knit group doesn't fall apart', although Michael Billington felt that, despite 'a hint of misogyny', there was 'more dramatic logic' in Coward's original.<sup>10</sup> The general verdict, though, was that new life had been found in a play that some had dismissed as a relic. John Nathan, in *The Jewish Chronicle*, reflected that for modern audiences 'the sense of how transgressive Coward's original play must have felt' had been 'lost forever'. But the quality had been rediscovered, and the scene in which Joe and Garry 'disrobe[d] each other while disagreeing on art' felt like 'the one Coward would have preferred to have written if only he could have'.<sup>11</sup>

*Russell Jackson is the author of* Noël Coward. The Playwright's Craft in a Changing Theatre (2022)

<sup>10</sup> *Financial Times* and *Guardian*, 26 June 2019.

<sup>11</sup> *The Jewish Chronicle*, 27 June 2019.

