

## Noël Coward on TV: Tears in Champagne



*With onstage appearances from Dame Penelope Keith, Alistair McGowan, Barry Day, Keith Barron, Maria Aitken, John Gorrie and Kit Hesketh-Harvey*

### Monday 30 March 2015, London.

Throughout May 2015 BFI Southbank will celebrate the television work of the ground-breaking playwright, musician and cabaret performer **Noël Coward**. Coward was a playwright way ahead of his time. Hiding behind glamour and sophistication, his plays were radical and often morally ambiguous, from the shocking representation of drug addiction in *The Vortex* (Granada TV, 1964) to the hedonistic ménage-a-trois in *Design for Living* (BBC, 1979). Highlights of the season will include an illustrated talk from Coward expert **Barry Day**, a panel discussion featuring **Dame Penelope Keith** and **Alistair McGowan**, and very rare screenings of *Jazz Age: Post Mortem* (BBC, 1968), unseen since 1968, and a US production of *Blithe Spirit* (CBS, 1956) starring Coward himself opposite Lauren Bacall and Claudette Colbert.

It has been said that Noël Coward fell out of fashion with the arrival of the new breed of ‘angry’ radical playwrights that emerged in the late 50s. While these new plays came to dominate theatre, TV broadcasters continued to see the value in Coward’s work, resulting in a string of fine TV productions which will screen in the season, including *Private Lives* (BBC, 1976), *Fallen Angels* (Anglia TV, 1974) and *The Kindness of Mrs Radcliffe* (BBC, 1981). Coward’s unique blend of high-octane wit and sophistication translated easily to the small screen, and provided glamorous roles for big-name TV stars including Penelope Keith, Susannah York and Joan Collins. But beneath the glittering façade, these plays show the moral complexity of a writer way ahead of his time, who confronts society with its own failings, and offers no easy solutions to the dilemmas of love.

Further highlights of the season will include a talk by renowned Coward expert **Barry Day** on how Coward used the medium of TV in the USA to reinvigorate his career in the mid-50s and become reborn as a sophisticated cabaret artist and household name. Alongside this talk will be a very rare opportunity to see *Ford Star Jubilee: Blithe Spirit* (CBS, 1956), a live US television production starring Coward, Lauren Bacall and Claudette Colbert. Another highlight will be a screening of Coward’s ‘angry young man’ play *Jazz Age: Post Mortem* (BBC, 1968). Unseen since its original transmission in 1968, *Post Mortem* challenges preconceptions about Coward’s work, being both radical in subject and structure. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion hosted by **Alistair McGowan**, and featuring **John Gorrie**, **Keith Barron**, **Maria Aitken** and **Dame Penelope Keith**. The season will also take a look at *The Music of Noël Coward* with composer **Kit Hesketh-Harvey**, who will provide his personal views on Coward’s musical legacy, illustrated by a collection of clips.

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**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

**SCREENING IN THE SEASON:**

**Noël Coward on TV: An illustrated talk by Barry Day**

*TRT 45min*

Aided by rare footage, Barry Day, renowned Coward expert and editor of *The Letters of Noël Coward*, discusses how Coward used the medium of TV in the USA to reinvigorate his fading career in the mid-50s, and reinvent himself as a sophisticated cabaret artist and household name.

**+ Ford Star Jubilee: Blithe Spirit**

*1956 CBS. Dir Noël Coward. With Noël Coward, Lauren Bacall, Claudette Colbert. 75min*

One of the live US TV productions that changed Coward's fortunes, and a very rare opportunity to see 'The Master' in action. Bacall is superb as a deceased wife summoned by a séance, and Coward's direction ensures the action fizzes along with sophisticated *élan*.

**FRI 1 MAY 18:10 NFT3**

**Jazz Age: Post Mortem + discussion with Keith Barron, Maria Aitken, Dame Penelope Keith and John Gorrie, director of 'Private Lives', hosted by comedian, actor and writer Alistair McGowan**

*BBC 1968. Dir John MacKenzie. With Keith Barron, Moira Redmond, Bernard Lee, Nora Swinburne. 55min*

Not seen since its original transmission in 1968, this play challenges all our preconceptions about Coward's work, being both radical in subject and structure; it's Coward's 'angry young man' play. As a soldier lies delirious and dying in the trenches of WWI he imagines returning to those he loves 12 years after the Great War has ended, only to be confronted by their platitudes and indifference. Coward rails against the futility of dying for king and country, and there's something highly contemporary about the alienation the soldier feels on returning to civilian life. After the screening, our special guests will discuss this important play and the wider subject of adapting Coward's works for television.

*With thanks to The Noël Coward Foundation and the BBC for assistance in making a screening copy of Post Mortem*

**THU 7 MAY 18:15 NFT1**

**Private Lives**

*BBC 1976. Dir John Gorrie. With Penelope Keith, Alec McCowen, Polly Adams, Donald Pickering. 90min*

In this stylish production of perhaps Coward's most popular play, McCowen and Keith give highly nuanced performances that capture the witty eloquence of Elyot and Amanda – a couple who have divorced and remarried – to perfection. Gorrie's direction ensures that the heart of the play is never lost as we share the couple's realisation that they cannot live without each other, yet are doomed to go on tormenting themselves.

**TUE 5 MAY 18:25 NFT2**

**Fallen Angels**

*Anglia TV 1974. Dir Donald McWhinnie. With Susannah York, Joan Collins, Sacha Distel, Lally Bowers. 52min*

This perfectly constructed comedy of manners, a TV adaptation of Coward's play by William Fairchild, provided the perfect star vehicle for Susannah York and Joan Collins. Sacha Distel gives a surprisingly good cameo as the dashing Frenchman with whom both women are infatuated, while Lally Bowers' servant is a miracle of comic timing, undercutting her mistress at every turn.

**+ Playhouse: The Kindness of Mrs Radcliffe**

*BBC 1981. Dir Chris Menaul. With Elizabeth Spriggs, Annie Leon, Leon Sinden 55min*

Dramatised by Stanley Price from a short story by Coward, this fascinating morality tale sees Coward holding up what he considers to be the vices of the age to scrutiny. Elizabeth Spriggs perfectly captures the terrifying self righteousness of Mrs Radcliffe, a pillar of the community whose utter insensitivity sows discord and misery in her wake.

**FRI 15 MAY 20:45 NFT3**

### **Choice of Coward: The Vortex**

*Granada TV 1964. Dir Joan Kemp- Welch. With Margaret Johnston, Faith Brook, Nicholas Pennell. 70min*

This was the play that launched Coward's career amid a blaze of controversy in 1924, and with its open discussion of sexual permissiveness and drug taking it branded him a hedonistic, immoral young aesthete – a reputation he later regarded as a creative millstone. This fine TV production, with an introduction by Coward himself, shows how the play trumpeted the arrival of a major new talent: after *The Vortex*, the English stage would never quite be the same.

### **+ Noël Coward: A Private Life**

*BBC 1983. Dir Laurence Rees. 65min*

This documentary, written and narrated by Michael Dean, uses Coward's work as the way in to examine the man himself. With contributions from friends and colleagues such as Maggie Smith, John Mills, Joyce Carey, Graham Payn, Harold Pinter and Sheridan Morley, Coward's whole career is put into perspective and his attitudes to life revealed.

**SAT 16 MAY 15:50 NFT3**

### **The Music of Noël Coward + intro by composer and performer Kit Hesketh-Harvey**

Coward was more than just a playwright. When he began writing for musical revue his talent for composition resulted in some of the finest standards of 20th-century popular music, famed for their perfect synthesis of lyric and tune. Kit Hesketh-Harvey provides his personal views on Coward's musical legacy, followed by a collection of clips that demonstrate his prowess as a cabaret performer, and the enduring popularity of his compositions. Clips include: *Together with Music* (CBS 1955), *Song by Song: Noël Coward* (1980), *Let's Face the Music: Noël Coward* (1989) and *The Songwriters: Noël Coward* (1978).

**WED 27 MAY 18:10 NFT3**

### **Play of the Month: Design for Living**

*BBC 1979. Dir Philip Saville. With Rula Lenska, Clive Arindell, John Steiner, Dandy Nichols. 100min*

Probably the finest of all the TV adaptations of Coward's work, this production boasts fantastic designs by Colin Shaw and a sublime performance from Rula Lenska. Saville's direction ensures that the play's full power to shock us (even today) is revealed. Underneath the glittering allure to the *ménage-a-trois*, we gradually begin to see the cruelty of the trio's hedonistic actions as they bring hurt and confusion to all who stand in their way. One of Coward's most morally complex plays, *Design for Living* continues to delight and intrigue with its surprisingly modern sensibility.

**FRI 22 MAY 18:15 NFT3**

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