

**Central Washington University Theatre Arts Department presents**



# **Hay Fever**

## **By Noel Coward**

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Central Washington University Theatre Arts Department

## Hay Fever Study Guide

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**Student matinee Nov. 22 at 11 a.m.  
TOWER THEATRE**

**Produced by special arrangement with SAMUEL FRENCH, INC.**

### Synopsis

A luminous and entertaining comedy, *Hay Fever* introduces you to the Bliss family: a retired actress mother, a novelist father, and two children for whom all the world, literally, is a stage. Their outrageous antics alternately infuriate and astound their hapless weekend guests, all of whom have been individually invited up for a weekend tete-a-tete. Rousing fights, surprise engagements, and fevered declarations of love drive the poor guests from the house, leaving the

family happily bickering and playing amongst themselves as this stylish comedy bounces to its inevitable and intoxicating end.

## **Noel Coward**

**Life of Noël Coward: Actor, Composer, Playwright, Director, Author, Celebrity**  
**\*(Classic Magazine)**

- 1899** Born in Teddington, Middlesex 16th December.  
**1907** First public stage appearances.  
**1922** Spends winter in New York on a subsistence income, and becomes frequent guest at the home of Laurette Taylor and Hartley Manners.  
**1923** Composes *London Calling*; writes *The Vortex* (produced 1924); writes *Fallen Angels* (produced 1925); *Weatherwise* (produced 1932).  
**1924** Appears in *The Vortex*; writes *Hay Fever*; produced *Easy Virtue*.  
**1925** Directs *Hay Fever* at the Ambassadors and Criterion Theatres. Production transfers to Maxine Elliott Theatre, New York (in collaboration with Laura Hope Crews).  
**1930** Writes the songs, "Mad Dogs and Englishmen", "Any Little Fish", "Half-Caste Woman", "Someday I'll Find You". Writes *Private Lives*. Plays Elyot Chase in *Private Lives*.  
**1932** *Hay Fever* revived in New York.  
**1937** Writes autobiography *Present Indicative*.  
**1941** Writes and directs *Blithe Spirit*.  
**1944** *Blithe Spirit* filmed, Coward writes screenplay for *Brief Encounter*.  
**1945** *Brief Encounter* filmed.  
**1954** *Future Indefinite* (autobiography) published in London and New York.  
**1955** Plays Hesketh-Baggott in the film *Around the World in 80 Days*.  
**1961** *The Vortex* and *Hay Fever* revived on British television.  
**1964** *Hay Fever* revived at Royal National Theatre London.  
**1973** Noël Coward dies, in Blue Harbour, Jamaica 26th March.

## **"A Tribute to Mr. Coward"**

(from *Playnotes*)

To be famous young and to make fame last—the secret of combining the two is glandular: it depends on energy. Someone once asked Demosthenes what was the most important quality in an orator. "Action," he said. And the second? "Action." And the third? "Action." So with a talent. Noel Coward, who was performing in public at ten, has never stopped being in action. . . His triumph has been to unite two things ever dissociated in the English mind: hard work and wit. Toil is commonly the chum of serious-mindedness; and though, within Coward, a social historian and philosopher are constantly campaigning to be let out, they seldom escape into his work. His wit . . . in private. . . is unflagging. It took Coward to describe an American adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*, set in the deep South, as "A Month in the Wrong Country"; and many other theatrical mots have been fathered on him.

Coward took sophistication out of the refrigerator and set it bubbling on the hob. He doses his sentences with pauses, as you do epileptics with drugs. To be with him for any length of time is exhausting and invigorating in roughly equal proportions. He is perfectly well aware that he possesses 'star quality', which is the lodestar of his life. In his case, it might be defined as the ability to project, without effort, the outline of a unique personality, which had never existed before him in print or paint.

Even the youngest of us will know, in fifty years' time, exactly what we mean by 'a very Noel Coward sort of person.'

The world has never seen a man quite like Noel Coward. As a writer he could knock off a hit show in a matter of days, as an actor his career spanned five decades and as a cabaret performer he won the hearts of a whole new generation. He was, undoubtedly, a star.

Born in Teddington, England in 1899 to Violet and Arthur Coward, Noel came into this world determined to make his mark. Encouraged by an ambitious mother he wasted no time in starting what would be a long and varied career. By the age of twelve he had made his first professional appearance on the stage and couple of years later he had his first encounter with the irrepressible Gertrude Lawrence when they appeared together in the play *Hannele*. The stage - as they say - was set.

In 1924 Coward starred in the first production of his play *The Vortex*. The young Coward could have had little idea how dramatically this event would change his life. The play dealt with the scandalous issue of drug abuse and caused the Lord Chamberlain to declare one particular scene as revolting in the last degree. It created an enormous stir on the London theatre scene and literally catapulted its writer and star into the public eye. By the time he was in his mid-thirties Coward had written over fifteen plays including *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives* and *Cavalcade*. Despite his comparative youth the first of many Coward biographies had already been written. In 1930 Coward starred with Gertrude Lawrence in *Private Lives* and captured the glamorous image of his generation. With the outbreak of the Second World War the 'balconies and cocktails' image fell out of fashion and by the 1950s Coward had turned to the world of cabaret to earn his living.

This shift in his career was kick-started by his cabaret show at The Desert Inn in Las Vegas. The Vegas show was given a particularly special boost by Frank Sinatra. Sinatra traveled from Hollywood to see the show, and then went on to announce on national radio, "*If you want to hear how songs should be sung, get the hell over to The Desert Inn!*". Four weeks later Coward left The Desert Inn a star reborn. As an added bonus he had a classic live-recorded album of the show which, forty-five years later, has yet to go out of print.

Of course Coward is as much remembered now for his films as for his live performances. His 1942 film *In Which We Serve* brought Coward an Oscar nomination for Best Writer and was ranked in the top 100 British Films ever in a recent BFI poll. As a writer he went on to produce such classics as *Brief Encounter*, but his career as a film actor is perhaps more notorious for its 'might-have-beens'.

When approached to play the King in *The King & I* he politely declined and pointed Rogers and Hammerstein in the direction of a little-known young actor called Yul Brynner; when offered Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* he said no, and the part was then immortalized by Rex Harrison; he was asked to take the role of Colonel Nicholson in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* but turned it down - Alec Guinness later won an Oscar in the role, and finally Harry Lime in *The Third Man* was refused by Coward before being snapped up by the young Orson Welles.

Despite the inevitable ups and downs of such a lengthy and diverse career Coward finally received the recognition he truly deserved in 1970 when he received knighthood. His failing health was evident at the ceremony and three years later he died at home in his beloved Jamaica.

But what really keeps the memory of Coward alive are the songs, the plays, the films and the irrepressible one-liners he left behind. Famous for his razor-sharp wit he once said:

*"Wit ought to be a glorious treat, like caviar. Never spread it about like marmalade"*

Wherever he is now, Noel Coward is feasting on caviar.

## **The Taylor Family**

In the years prior to Noel Coward writing *Hay Fever*, he spent many an enjoyable evening with the Taylor family in New York, playing games and entertaining their endless stream of houseguests. Anton Chekov heralded Laurette Taylor as "America's greatest actress," and her flair for drama did not stop at the stage door. Her and her family's antics were Coward's inspiration for *Hay Fever*'s Bliss family, and the personality of Laurette, her husband, and her two children are very evident in this wonderful play.

"On Sunday evenings... we had cold supper and played games, often rather acrimonious games, owing to Laurette's abrupt disapproval of any guest (whether invited by Hartley, Dwight, Marguerite, or herself) who turned out to be self-conscious, or unable to act an adverb or a historical personage with proper abandon. There were also, very often, shrill arguments concerning rules. These were waged entirely among the family, and frequently ended in all four of them leaving the room and retiring upstairs, where, later on, they might be discovered, by any guest bold enough to go in search of them, amicably drinking tea in the kitchen.

It was inevitable that someone should eventually utilize portions of this eccentricity in a play, and I am only grateful that no guest of the Hartley Manners thought of writing *Hay Fever* before I did." (N. Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 136)

## **Laurette Taylor:**

"Laurette... was frequently blunt to the point of embarrassment. She was naïve, intolerant, lovable, and entirely devoid of tact. Her humor was quick as lightning, and she could pounce from a great height with all the swift accuracy of a pelican diving into the sea, seldom failing to spear some poor, wriggling fish, and disquieting considerably the other fish present. Her taste in dress was poor, and her loveliness triumphed over many inopportune bows and ostrich feathers, but her taste as an actress was unassailable." (N. Coward, *Present Indicative*, p.135)

“By Laurette’s fiat people were sharply divided into two groups, the talented, and the “others.”  
(Laurette, p.253)

## **Historical Events:**

1920, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment gives American women the right to vote  
1920, short hair styles become the norm for women throughout the decade  
1923, Mother’s Day, first celebrated in America in 1907 (in reaction to suffragette’s disrupting Wilson’s inauguration), is celebrated in Europe.  
1923, the first birth-control clinic opens in New York  
1925, Mrs. Nellie Taylor Ross of Wyoming becomes the first woman governor in America  
1925, *Hay Fever* premieres in London  
1925, female fashions feature straight dresses (which meant women no longer wore corsets) without a waistline and the skirts above the knee  
1925-1927, with short skirts, flesh colored stockings are introduced  
1925, the Charleston becomes fashionable  
1925, the state of Tennessee forbids sex education in the schools  
1926, Gertrude Ederle becomes the first woman to swim the English Channel  
1927, African-American Josephine Baker becomes a dance sensation in Paris  
1928, Women’s vote in Britain reduced from age 30 to 21  
1928, Amelia Earhart is the first female pilot to fly across the Atlantic  
1929, the stock market crashes  
1929, Margaret Bondfield becomes first woman British Privy Councillor

## **Glossary of Terms**

(from Classic Magazine)

### **Setting: Cookham**

Cookham is a small village North of Windsor and South of Oxford on the river Thames. It is probably about 45 minutes drive from London.

### **Potty**

Slightly crazy

### **Poseuse**

means one (in this case a female) who poses; a phony

### **Au fond**

literally: at the bottom; or in the end, or, in the deepest sense.

### **Caste**

A division of society based on differences of wealth, inherited rank or privilege, profession, or occupation

### **oil of cloves**

An oil made from the dry bud of a tropical tree; dentists traditionally used this essential oil for its healing and soothing properties, to ease pain, of their patients – hence Sorel’s suggestions. It is also used in perfumes and soaps.

### **dresser**

In theater cliché, the dresser is the star’s main connection to reality. The dresser is expected to know everything about his or her charge. In addition, the dresser takes care of costuming the star. For an actor at that time, an actor/manager is running the business, and the entire character comes from the costume, so the person in charge of

the star's "look" was very important. Probably the closest contemporary analogy is that of a movie star's personal assistant.

Movies with dressers: "All about Eve," "The Dresser."

**delphiniums**

kind of flower

**asters**

Asters are often used as "filler" flowers in bouquets. They are small flowers the size of coins distributed over airy sprays, visually connecting one flower to another within an arrangement. These dainty, daisy-like flowers with yellow centers, come in a rainbow of pastels.

**callow**

lacking adult sophistication; immature

**ingénue**

the stage role of a naïve young girl or woman: also the actress playing that role

**dandle**

to move up and down in one's arms or on one's knee in affectionate play; pamper or pet

**punkah**

a fan used especially in India that consists of a canvas-covered frame suspended from the ceiling and that is operated by a cord

**punt**

a long narrow flat-bottomed boat with square ends usually propelled with a pole.

**milieu**

environment or setting

**landed gentry**

a member of the aristocracy having an estate in land

**cur**

a mongrel or inferior dog – a surly or cowardly fellow

**arrant**

being notoriously without moderation, usually used in the context of a quote from *Hamlet*, "we are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us."

**ripping**

excellent or delightful

**Marlow**

Marlow is the next village North of Cookham along the Thames.

**calceolarias**

Tropical American plants with flowers shaped like little slippers and that are mostly yellow colored

**You're so gallant and chivalrous—much more like an American than an Englishman.**

This is an interesting and early to mid-century cliché about Americans. That is that a slight provincialism is a cover for a more genuine way of behaving and the Puritanical background leaves way for very nice manners indeed. This idea also comes up in the works of Henry James. It's interesting that an English person's idea of an American today has changed to be loud and boorish (an idea that began when all the GIs were stationed in England).

**Borgia of Rosine**

Myra's perfume:

**Dieppe**

City in France and a resort destination for English lower class travelers on summer holiday. A bit tacky.

**Mah Jong**

A game of Chinese origin usually played by four persons with 144 tiles that are drawn and discarded until one player secures a winning hand.

**frowsy**

having a slovenly or uncared-for appearance

**Maidenhead**

Maidenhead is in the county of Berkshire and about 25 miles (40 kilometers) west of London. Maidenhead is only 2 miles South of Cookham.

**Crippen**

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century murderer who murdered his wife and then flayed her, hiding her body in the cellar. He was eventually caught.

**reformatories**

a penal institution to which young or first offenders are committed

**susceptible**

open, subject, or unable to resist some stimulus, influence, or agency

**cap**

Judith means a sign of respectability. Caps are used as a sign of a respectable married woman, esp. in the wedding scene in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Judith sites an archaic custom.

**spurious**

false; outwardly similar or corresponding to something without having its genuine qualities

**cad**

a person without gentlemanly instincts; meaning in this case that Sandy didn't have any more than physical desires for Sorel and feels (when caught by Judith) a bit guilty

**barometer**

an instrument for determining the pressure of the atmosphere and hence for assisting in judgment as to predicting the weather and determining the height of an ascent

**haddock**

food fish; a relative of cod that occurs on both sides of the Atlantic

**ten bob**

bob is British slang for a shilling, which is a now obsolete British monetary unit equal to 12 pence or 1/20 of a pound. So even in 1920s money, Sandy and Jackie are not being very generous.

**the Haymarket**

A London theatre near Piccadilly Circus. The Haymarket is still a working theater, part of the West End theater row.

**waifs and strays matinee**

like a student matinee, but a performance for children in an orphanage

**perambulators**

British word for baby carriage

**Scarlet Hispano**

A hispano is a French car with a long body made from about 1907-1936.

## Comments on Hay Fever

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

To begin with, it has no plot at all, and remarkably little action. Its general effectiveness therefore depends upon expert technique from each and every member of the cast. I am very much attached to *Hay Fever*. I enjoyed writing it and producing it, and I have frequently enjoyed watching it."

~Noel Coward, *Play Parade*

## Sources



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