



# *A Song at Twilight*

by  
Noël Coward

## Know-the-Show Audience Guide

researched and written by  
the Education Department of  
The Shakespeare Theatre  
of New Jersey





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# The Life Of Noël Coward

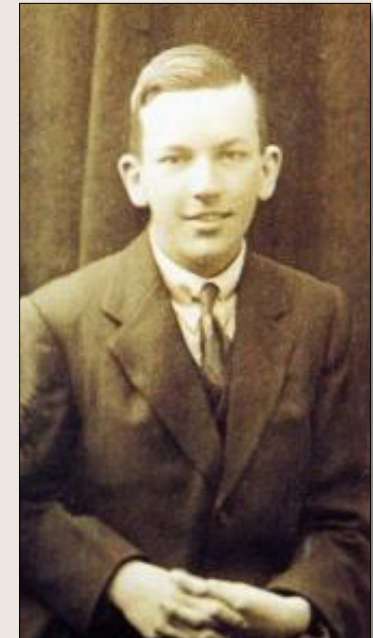
Noël Peirce Coward was born on December 16, 1899, in Teddington, England. His parents, Arthur and Violet Veitch Coward, were not wealthy: his father was an unsuccessful piano salesman. His mother gave him his name because of the close proximity of his birthday to Christmas.

Violet took young Noël to the theatre as often as possible. After seeing a show he was frequently able to play the greater part of the musical score from memory on the family piano. As a child, Noël had a lisp which forced him to develop his trademark clipped, staccato speech to mask it. At the age of six, he started working as a child actor. Charles Hawtrey had seen Noël perform and instantly recognized his potential. Hawtrey recruited him for a production of *The Great Name* and used him again in 1911 in the premiere of *Where the Rainbow Ends*, which became such a popular show that it was revived every year at Christmas-time for 40 years. Noël returned for three of those years and learned stagecraft and playwriting from Hawtrey.

Coward did not receive a very traditional education. At one point, his mother became concerned about how much time he

was spending away from school because of the theatre, and at an auditorium-style psychic performance by fortune-teller Anna Eva Fay, Mrs. Coward asked for advice on the upbringing of her son. Miss Fay replied, "Mrs. Coward, Mrs. Coward. You asked me about your son. Keep him where he is. He has a great talent and will have a wonderful career." Violet never questioned his path again. While in Manchester with a young touring company, Noël and his co-stars were forced by law to attend school. Noël announced to the teacher that he had no intention of answering any questions and if he should be punished in any way he would go back to London. From that moment on he sat in the back of the classroom reading whatever book he chose. A lifetime of reading and keen observation made up for his lack of formal education.

In 1921, at the age of 22, Coward left England and went to New York City. He arrived with very little money and just before the theatres closed for the hot summer. His hope of selling his plays to American theatre companies fell



Noel Coward as a teenager, ca. 1914 (Source: Wikimedia Commons).



Noël Coward in 1972, in a picture taken for his last Christmas card. Photograph by Allan Warren (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

through immediately. He was broke, hungry, and lonely. After surviving the summer on meager means, he managed to sell two short stories, "I'll Leave It To You" and "The Young Idea," for \$500 each. He used this money to improve his situation and

pay back his debts to those who had helped him through the summer. It was at this time that he cemented long-lasting and life-changing friendships with Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt. One evening over dinner, the three friends predicted they would all become international superstars of equal magnitude and they prophesied that Coward would write the perfect play in which all three of them would star. This self-prophecy, like the fortune-teller's pronouncement, would come true – though not for another twelve years, when Coward's play *Design for Living* provided the opportunity of which he and the Lunts had dreamed.

On his 25th birthday, Coward's first big hit, *The Vortex*, premiered in London's West End. Shortly after opening this show, two more – *Fallen Angels* and *On With the Dance* – were up and running in the West End. This was the beginning of the high degree of celebrity that Coward enjoyed for the rest of his life. Until his death on March 3, 1973, Noël Coward continued to work as a dramatist, actor, writer, composer, lyricist, and painter. He wrote over 140 plays and hundreds of songs. Three years before he died, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

### **Did You Know?**

- 1) Noël Coward worked undercover for British Intelligence during WWII.
- 2) Coward was offered, and turned down, the role of Dr. No in Ian Fleming's *Dr. No*, a James Bond film starring Sean Connery.
- 3) Coward started the turtleneck fashion fad of the 1920s.

# A Man with style



A 1932 portrait of Noël Coward by Edward Steichen (Source: Whitney Museum).

Noël Coward is known for a very distinct style in both his writing and his personality. His work explores many social issues but also epitomizes glamorous living through the structure, language, and content of his plays.

Similar to Oscar Wilde before him, Coward makes heavy use of paradox. He first draws the audience in with charm and humor, and then reveals the foibles or

hypocrisies in the characters that have won our affection. Clever use of language is key to Coward's development of character. Always eloquent, his characters often use biting wit to mask their emotional states. Strategic use of song and music also helps dictate the tempo and mood of individual scenes, and Coward's

precise writing guides the actors through intense psychological and often comic minefields.

In the early to mid-20th century, when Coward began writing, English comedy was characterized by a stereotypical English repression. Coward, however, attacked taboo subjects. While Coward explored heterosexual relations overtly, he commented on homosexual orientation in more subtle ways – enough to spark the attention of the new generation without explicitly offending the older generation. The word “gay” had not yet become synonymous with “homosexual,” and, according to scholar Alan Sinfield, Coward used this to his advantage: “*stretching* [the word’s] connotations—almost playing on the fact that there [was] *not* a specific homosexual implication.” His songs also dealt with homosexuality via seemingly innocent lyrics, as Coward reveled in the misunderstanding of a large portion of his audience who did not read between the lines.

Coward's plays, with their unique and sophisticated veneer, are as much social commentary as they are entertainment. By ending his plays with a sense of life continuing after the curtain has descended, Coward leads the audience members to question societal norms in their own lives. By confronting social conventions in this way, Coward did not endear himself to everyone. But as he once wrote, “I write what I wish to write—later the world can decide [what to think about it] if it wishes to. There will always be a few people, anyway, in every generation, who will find my work entertaining and true.”

# A Song at Twilight: *An Introduction*

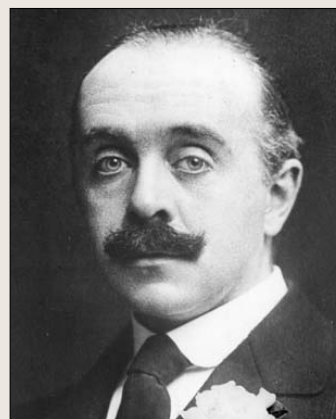
**from director Paul Mullins' program notes:**

Near the end of his career Noël Coward was looking to write a "farewell" play. He said, "I would like to act once more before I fold my bedraggled wings." What emerged was *A Song at Twilight*. After finishing the play in March, 1965, he wrote to Lorn Loraine, his lifelong confidante and secretary:

"Here, my darling, is my new play. I think and hope you will like it. I think it's quite a rouser. It is actually the first of my *Hotel Suite* series. I would like to play it myself with possibly Maggie Leighton and Irene Worth or Irene Worth and Wendy Hiller, or Maggie Leighton and Celia (Johnson)."



Publicity shot of Noël Coward and Lilli Palmer in the original production of *A Song at Twilight*, 1965.



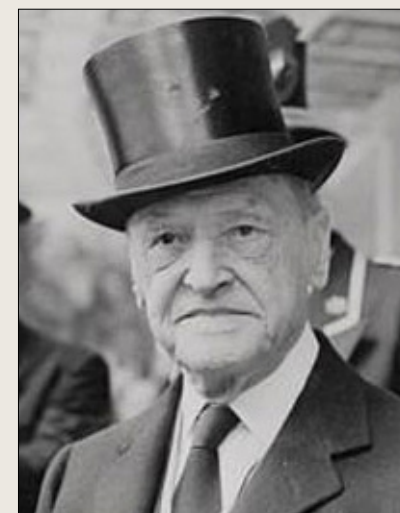
Sir Max Beerbohm. Photo: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

**from The Letters of Noël Coward,  
edited by Barry Day:**

"The idea for the play had been at the back of (Coward's) mind for some time, inspired by an incident recounted in *Max*, Lord David Cecil's biography of Max Beerbohm. Beerbohm in old age was visited by a former lover, the over-vivacious actress Constance Collier. The occasion was humorously embarrassing in real life, but in turning it into drama, Noël admitted

to his Diaries, "My play is more sinister, and there is more Maugham\* in it as well as Max."...

\**Maugham* refers to W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), the celebrated British novelist and playwright who was at one time friends with Coward. "In Maugham's later years Noël had come to see his less likable side... By the time Maugham died that same year, Noël had come to refer to him as that 'scaly old crocodile.'"



Somerset Maugham photographed in the 1950s. Photograph: Bettmann/CORBIS



# A Song at Twilight: *A Synopsis*

***SPOILER ALERT: The following includes some details about the play that you may wish to wait to discover until viewing the production.***

As the play opens in a private suite of an elegant hotel in Switzerland, where Sir Hugo Latymer, an accomplished and celebrated writer, is anxiously awaiting the arrival of Carlotta Gray. Hilde, Hugo's wife and former secretary, worries that the meeting will upset Hugo. Carlotta Gray is an actress Hugo had an affair with many years ago. Neither Hugo nor Hilde know why Carlotta is calling on Hugo.

Despite her concerns, Hilde is unable to stay during Carlotta's visit due to a previous dinner appointment with a friend. After a short introduction, she takes her leave of Hugo and Carlotta. Alone, Carlotta and Hugo quickly get caught up and Carlotta reveals her true reasons for calling on Hugo.

Hugo has recently written a memoir of his life and career; a memoir in which Carlotta figures. Carlotta is not satisfied with how she is depicted in Hugo's autobiography and reveals that

she has plans to write a memoir of her own. She has called on Hugo to request permission to print in her memoirs letters that Hugo sent to her when they were lovers. Horrified, Hugo emphatically denies Carlotta's request and the easy rapport that they established on Carlotta's arrival quickly vanishes. Hugo accuses Carlotta of being mercenary—suggesting that the value of her memoir would be greatly increased by the inclusion of his letters—and asks Carlotta to leave immediately.

Carlotta does not acquiesce timidly: as she is leaving, she offers to give Hugo the love letters he sent her, but not those that he sent to another lover. Hugo is stunned, and she leaves him to consider the implications of what she has said.

Shaken, Hugo calls Carlotta back to explain herself. Carlotta reveals that she has acquired letters that Hugo wrote to another lover, and that there is a Harvard professor who is very interested in them. Old wounds and new strategems bubble to the surface as the two former lovers argue, until Hilde returns from her dinner and makes a startling revelation.





# A Song at Twilight: *Who's Who*

## (NOTES FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT)

**HUGO LATYMER** is an elderly writer of considerable eminence.

**HILDE LATYMER** is a faded woman in her early fifties. She has been married to Sir Hugo for nearly twenty years and was originally his secretary. Apart from being his official German translator, she is capable, dedicated, and orders his life with considerable efficiency.

**CARLOTTA GRAY** is an attractive woman who at first glance would appear to be in her late forties or early fifties. She is heavily made up and her hair is expertly tinted. She is wearing expensive costume jewelry, perhaps a little too much of it.

**FELIX** is the floor waiter. He is a startlingly handsome young man of about twenty-eight, and there is already in his manner that subtle blend of obsequiousness, authority and charm which, if he does not allow his good looks to lead him astray, will ultimately carry him to the top of his profession.

The play's title comes from a Irish song made popular in the Victorian era.

### **LOVE'S OLD SWEET SONG (JUST A SONG AT TWILIGHT)**

by G. Clifton Bingham

Once in the dear dead days beyond recall,  
When on the world the mists began to fall,  
Out of the dreams that rose in happy throng  
Low to our hearts Love sang an old sweet song;  
And in the dusk where fell the firelight gleam,  
Softly it wove itself into our dream.

*Just a song a twilight, when the lights are low,  
And the flick'ring shadows softly come and go,  
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,  
Still to us at twilight comes Love's old song,  
comes Love's old sweet song.*

Even today we hear Love's song of yore,  
Deep in our hearts it dwells forevermore.  
Footsteps may falter, weary grow the way,  
Still we can hear it at the close of day.  
So till the end, when life's dim shadows fall,  
Love will be found the sweetest song of all.

*Just a song a twilight, when the lights are low,  
And the flick'ring shadows softly come and go,  
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,  
Still to us at twilight comes Love's old song,  
comes Love's old sweet song.*



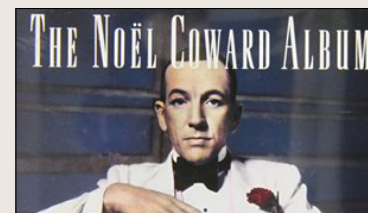


# *Explore Online*

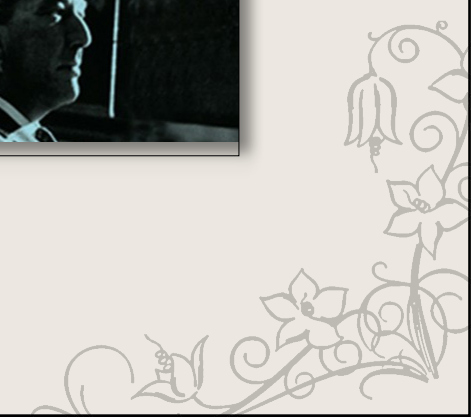
Investigate the New York Public Library's extensive collection of Coward papers, photographs, videos, and more through their web exhibit: <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/NoelCoward/index.html>



Explore the archives of Noel Coward's popular music.  
[noelcowardmusic.com](http://noelcowardmusic.com)



Browse the Noël Coward Society website, which features information, a gallery, blog, and list of additional resources:  
<http://www.noelcoward.net>



# Commentary & Criticism

**A SMASH OPENING NIGHT:** “Well, the most incredible thing has happened. Not only has *A Song at Twilight* opened triumphantly but the press notices have on the whole been extremely good. Most particularly the Express and Evening Standard! Fortunately, the Sun struck a sour note and said, ‘Coward’s Return Very Tedious’, which convinced me that I hadn’t entirely slipped – the play is such a sell-out that we have had to engage extra people to cope with the ticket demand. On the opening night I gave an excellent, un-nervous, controlled performance, thank God – I am back again...where I belong and have always belonged.”

-Noël Coward,  
quoted in *The Theatrical Companion to Noël Coward*

**COWARD, MAUGHAM, AND LATYMER:** “Inspired by and looking like Somerset Maugham, Coward acted out his own obsession with reputation and the creative price he’d have to pay for a lifetime of subterfuge. As Hugo Latymer, Coward was still putting on a masquerade; but he was bravely trying to open a few cracks in the façade. In the brazen mood of the sixties, there was no need for frivolity’s disguise; and Coward’s grave attempt at the provocative signaled the professional entertainer’s instinct for meeting the demands of a new generation of theatre-goers.”

-John Lahr, from *Coward: The Playwright*

**A DEEPER LOOK AT COWARD’S COMEDIES:** “For all their demented glitter and the authentic disclaimers of any purpose beyond entertainment, Noël Coward’s plays are among the most earnestly moral works to be found anywhere in modern drama; and in *A Song at Twilight* he slips off all comic

disguise and returns to the vein of melodramatic indignation with which, in plays like *Fumed Oak* and *The Vortex*, he began his career – it seems, beyond question, to be based on the last years of Somerset Maugham, its central figure being a celebrated old writer who has managed to conceal his weaknesses from the world at the price of warping his talent and cutting off his human sympathies. The title refers to Goethe’s warning against self-denial.”

-The Times review, 1966,  
quoted in *The Theatrical Companion to Coward*

**WHO IS HUGO LATYMER?:** “...It is not altogether surprising that many critics took the play to be firmly based on Somerset Maugham, an illusion which Coward fostered by making up to look curiously like him on the stage. But if Beerbohm and Maugham were the direct influences on the creation of Sir Hugo Latymer, there was also a certain amount of Coward himself in the character he had written and was about to play.”

-Sheridan Morley,  
*A Talent to Amuse: A Biography of Noël Coward*

**A CHANGE OF TONE:** “It is the tone of *A Song at Twilight* which is its most affecting aspect. As with his later short stories, a sense of detachment pervades the trilogy of *A Suite in Three Keys*: Coward is reviewing past lives – his own, those of people he has known; characters in his dramas and those of a greater world. He is the puppetmaster still, and the hotel provides a perfect setting, its rooms echo human frailty and failings, played out as he looks on.”

-Philip Hoare, *Noël Coward: A Biography*

**WHO’S IT ALL ABOUT?:** “I read *A Song at Twilight* to Robin [Maugham] who nearly fainted. He was deeply impressed but agitated because people might think it was based on Willie! Actually it isn’t, although there are many similarities.”

-Noël Coward, in *The Noël Coward Diaries*,  
17th of July 1965 (ed. Graham Payn and Sheridan Morley)



# In This Production

Right: Model of the scenic design by Britney Vasta.

Below: Costume renderings for Hugo, Carlotta, Hilde, and Felix by Nikki DelHomme.



# The music of Noël Coward

While Noël Coward was primarily known as a successful playwright, he also made a huge artistic impact with his music. Often referred to by contemporaries as the English Cole Porter, Coward continually thought of new tunes to entertain all types of audiences. The classic image of Coward holding a cigarette and a cocktail on a chaise lounge can make us forget that he spent hours and hours at his typewriter and piano, fixated on his newest work.

Beginning with a musical revue titled *London Calling!* in which he appeared with Gertrude Lawrence, Coward's musical career flourished. And while Coward composed over 140 tunes, such as "I'll See You Again," "Mad About the Boy," "I'll Follow My Secret Heart," and "Someday I'll Find You," he did it all without learning to read or write music.



Gertrude Lawrence and Noël Coward at the piano in a 1931 production of *Private Lives* (Source: Bettmann/CORBIS).

Characteristic Coward lyrics are especially witty, his words never lacking the flair found in his plays and productions. One representative example is the song "Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans," a clever melody dripping with satire and sarcasm, written during World War II. Coward explained that the lyrics were written "as a satire directed against a small minority of excessive humanitarians, who, in my opinion, were taking a rather too tolerant view of our enemies." While the song was a favorite of Winston Churchill's, it was banned from the airwaves.

*Don't let's be beastly to the Germans.  
You can't deprive a gangster of his gun!  
Though they've been a little naughty  
To the Czechs and Poles and Dutch,  
I can't believe those countries  
Really minded very much.*

*Let's be free with them  
And share the BBC with them.  
We mustn't prevent them basking in the sun!  
Let's soften their defeat again,  
And build their bloody fleet again,  
But don't let's be beastly to the Hun!*

In his later years, Coward turned further towards music as his newer plays fell out of favor with audiences. He was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1988.

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