WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Noël Coward’s
Brief Encounter

DIRECTED AND ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY EMMA RICE
ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY DAVID PUGH & DAFYDD ROGERS AND CINEWORLD
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF BRIEF ENCOUNTER

Kneehigh Theatre’s production of Brief Encounter was originally produced by Birmingham Repertory Theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse, and David Pugh & Dafydd Rogers in 2007. Pugh and Rogers presented it with Cineworld at the Cinema on the Haymarket in London in 2008 before the production began a U.K. tour that ended in July 2009. Emma Rice adapted Brief Encounter from Noël Coward’s 1935 play Still Life and 1945 screenplay Brief Encounter, with additional songs and poems by Coward.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

LAURA       Hannah Yelland
ALEC        Milo Twomey
ALBERT/FRED Joseph Alessi
BERYL       Beverly Rudd
MYRTLE      Annette McLaughlin
STANLEY     Stuart McLoughlin
MUSICIANS   Eddie Jay, Adam Pleeth

SETTING


SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE. The Palladium Cinema. A projected image shows Laura Jesson’s suburban home: a still life of her living room with two empty armchairs. Sitting with Laura in the audience, Alec Harvey professes his love to her. Though she feels the same about him, she insists that they be sensible. Meanwhile Laura’s husband, Fred, enters the projection onstage and calls out to his wife. Laura dives through the screen and seems to land in one of the projected armchairs. The living room fades into the image of a train before the screen flies out to reveal a train station tearoom.

ACT I. SCENE I. Milford Junction. A train station tearoom. Laura sits drinking tea while Beryl Waters and her boss, Myrtle, tend the shop. Stanley, another employee, enters to replenish his concession tray and flirts with Beryl before returning to the trains to sell refreshments to the passengers. Soon Albert Godby, a ticket inspector, enters to visit
Myrtle, who receives him coolly. The station bell rings and Laura goes out to the platform as Alec enters and orders tea. Laura returns holding a handkerchief to her face: a piece of grit has lodged itself in her eye. Alec, a doctor, offers his expertise and removes the grit. Laura thanks him. Her train arrives, and the two say their goodbyes. Stanley reenters and serenades Beryl with “Any Little Fish.”

**Scene 2.** *The Jesson home.* Laura arrives home to find Fred waiting. He announces that the children, Bobbie and Margaret, have been arguing. Laura goes upstairs to the nursery to mediate the dispute, then returns to her husband and teases him about spoiling the children.

**Scene 3.** *In transit.* Alec and Laura happen upon each other and exchange pleasantries before parting ways.

**Scene 4.** *The Kardomah Restaurant.* Alec sees Laura, who is sitting at a table. He asks if he may join her, as there is nowhere else to sit. She obliges. An orchestra begins to play nearby and Laura recalls how she played piano as a child. She gave it up because her “husband isn’t musical at all.” As they eat, she explains that as part of her weekly routine she comes to this restaurant before heading to the cinema. Alec suggests that he play hooky from the hospital that afternoon and accompany her to a movie. Laura agrees.

**Scene 5.** *The Palladium Cinema.* Laura and Alec take their seats. Myrtle and Beryl dance.

**Scene 6.** *The tearoom.* Alec and Laura return from the cinema. Laura asks Alec if he feels guilty about neglecting his work; he replies that a little relaxation never hurt anyone. Laura recounts that, as a child in Cornwall, she and her sister would sneak out and go skinny-dipping at night. Alec assures her that they have done nothing wrong by spending the afternoon together, saying, “There must be a part of you, deep down inside . . . that still longs to splash about a bit in the dangerous sea.” They talk about their spouses. Then Alec excitedly discusses his profession—preventative medicine—and Laura is mesmerized by his passion. A bell rings, and Laura ushers Alec towards his train. Alec asks Laura to meet him the following Thursday, and she agrees. Myrtle sings “No Good at Love.”

**Scene 7.** *The Jesson home.* Fred tells Laura that Bobbie was knocked down by a car on his way home from school, but he was not seriously injured. Laura runs to her son and rocks him to sleep as she sings “The Wide Lagoon.” She returns to Fred, who is distracted by a crossword puzzle, and tells him about her date with Alec. He is unconcerned. Laura suggests they invite Alec over for dinner, but Fred jokes that he would prefer her friend visit for lunch because he is never home during the day and would, therefore, not have to entertain an afternoon guest. Laura begins to laugh uncontrollably at herself for worrying “about things that don’t really exist.” Assuming that she is referring to Bobbie’s injury, Fred comforts her.
scene 8. In front of curtain. Then, the tearoom. Beryl sings “Mad about the Boy.” Laura is alone in the café. As Myrtle shovels coal, Albert sneaks up behind her and gives her a spank. Myrtle yells at Albert, concerned that Mr. Saunders, their boss, might have seen this unprofessional display. Albert serenades Myrtle, not caring about the consequences. Stanley interrupts to replenish his food tray, then leaves before Beryl announces to Albert that Mr. Saunders wants to see him. Albert goes.

A soldier enters singing “Goodbye Dolly Gray.” He orders a drink from Myrtle, knowing that she is not legally permitted to serve alcohol at this time of day. When Myrtle refuses to break the law, he becomes belligerent. Myrtle sends Beryl to get Albert; they both return quickly, and Albert sends the boy on his way.

A train bell rings and Laura heads to her platform. Alec rushes in, apologizing and explaining that he was detained at the hospital and had no way of sending word to her. Laura tells him that it doesn’t matter. Alec’s train whistles as they rush to his platform. He had feared he would never see her again and—as he jumps onto his train with Laura running alongside—he asks her to meet him again the following Thursday. She giddily accepts his invitation before she is swept into the memory of swimming as a young girl. Meanwhile, the company reprises “The Wide Lagoon.” Suddenly, an announcement over the loudspeaker brings Laura to the realization that she is about to miss her train.
interval. Myrtle introduces Albert’s performance of “World Weary.”

ACT II. SCENE 1. In a boat on a lake. Then, the train station. Laura and Alec share an afternoon on the water. Laura accidentally steers the boat under a low-hanging branch: Alec is forced into the water, and Laura dives in after him. They enter a boat hut, where they undress, careful not to show too much. “Go Slow Johnny” is heard. Laura and Alec sit on the upturned boat while their wet clothes dry nearby. Alec confesses he has fallen in love with Laura, and Laura admits that she feels the same. Yet she desperately pleads that they remain “sensible” because neither is free to love the other. They dress. A whistle blows, and they are transported to the platform as Alec’s train arrives. Alec takes Laura in his arms and, despite her warnings, kisses her.

SCENE 2. The Jesson home. Laura is daydreaming. Fred attempts to entertain her with a magic trick, but Laura doesn’t seem to notice. He goes to kiss her, but she evades him. Fred heads to bed.

SCENE 3. The Royal. Alec and Laura lunch together, drinking champagne. Laura laments that their love has made her a stranger in her own life and asks if such things are easier for men. Alec denies that it is any easier for him. They console each other by singing about hopeful lovers (“Romantic Fool”), but are rudely interrupted by Laura’s friends Mrs. Hermione Rolandson and Mary Norton, who spotted Laura from across the room. Laura introduces Alec as someone she has known for years and unsuccessfully attempts to persuade the two women that they have met him before. Hermione and Mary take their leave. Alec tells Laura he is going back to his friend Stephen Lynn’s empty flat.

SCENE 4. In front of curtain. Then, the tearoom. Myrtle and Albert dance and sing about being “So Good at Love.” Myrtle warns they should be more discreet, but Albert ignores her. Beryl is alone in the tearoom when Stanley enters. He asks if he can walk her home, but she explains she has to hurry to be with her ailing mother. He recommends that Beryl close the shop early. She agrees.

SCENE 5. Stephen Lynn’s flat. Laura arrives at Stephen Lynn’s flat and Alec meets her at the door. He kisses her and they begin a tender, if clumsy, dance of kisses and embraces. At the sound of someone opening the front door, Laura escapes gracelessly out the backdoor. As Laura pulls herself together, Stephen enters his apartment. He finds Laura’s scarf on a chair and hands it to Alec. He confesses he had never suspected Alec would be unfaithful to his wife and apologizes for interrupting the tryst. He then asks Alec to return the apartment key, admitting that he is disappointed in his friend’s behavior. Alec apologizes and leaves.

SCENE 6. The tearoom. Beryl is almost ready to lock up when Laura enters and asks for a glass of brandy. Beryl explains that she is closing up, but Laura insists. Beryl takes off her
hat and coat and serves Laura the drink.

Alec rushes in and apologizes for humiliating her. Laura cries that they have both lost all self-respect and decency and declares their relationship cannot continue. Alec acknowledges that this moment is the beginning of the end of their fantasy affair. He explains to Laura that he has been offered a job in Johannesburg, where his brother is helping to open a new hospital. He hadn’t decided whether or not to go because he wasn’t able to bear the idea of leaving Laura. Now he sees that it is necessary that he go away. He asks Laura if she wants him to stay, and she calls him unkind for asking her such a question. Her train arrives; she embraces Alec and runs out to the platform. Alec stands in the darkness singing “A Room with a View.”

Scene 7. The tearoom. Stanley rushes in to tell Beryl that her mother is very sick; Beryl leaves with him, sobbing. Alec sits with Laura drinking tea in silence. They sadly and slowly say their goodbyes: this is to be their last meeting. Suddenly, Dolly Messiter, an acquaintance of the Jessons, enters and sees Laura. She flops down at the table and blathers on until Alec’s train arrives, oblivious to the suppressed emotion of the parting lovers. Alec says his goodbyes. Dolly continues to prattle, and, as an express train roars through the station (and Myrtle sings “Always”), Laura races out to the edge of the platform.

Epilogue. The Jesson home. Fred guides Laura to an armchair and thanks her for coming back to him. He exits. Laura goes to the piano and starts to play. On the screen we see Laura swimming in the ocean. She loses herself in the music and floats freely.
I love romance. I also love folktales. Brief Encounter has surprisingly embraced both these passions.

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 meeting 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 folktales 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 believe that their marriages are all bad or that they are being abused in any way. 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 folktales, 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 reform. 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 reimagine herself, not just as a “respectable wife and mother” but as a person in her own right.

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.
Emma Rice is the artistic director of Kneehigh Theatre and the director of Brief Encounter, which she also adapted for the stage. She joined Kneehigh as an actor in 1994 and is responsible for pushing the company towards its internationally recognized style of idiosyncratic, intelligent storytelling. She has also directed for Kneehigh The Itch, Pandora’s Box, Wild Bride, The Red Shoes, The Wooden Frock, The Bacchae, Tristan & Yseult, Nights at the Circus, Cymbeline, Rapunzel, A Matter of Life and Death, and Don John.

You began in theater as an actor?
Yes, I trained as an actress and certainly worked the first 15 years of my career primarily acting. But I started to become involved with devising work, so I think I started developing my directorial skills as an actor and it became a very natural progression to gently slip out of acting and become a director.

So it was a gradual process rather than a definitive moment?
No, there was a definite shift: I was working with Kneehigh as an actor and they said to me, because I was so bossy by that point and shaping rehearsals during tours and having lots of ideas, “When are you going to direct a show?” And I said, “No, no, no, I don’t need to direct.” And they said, “Go on, Emma, go on. What would you direct?” And I knew exactly what I’d do, so they gave me a show. That very first show I directed I acted in, as well, and that continued for a few years: I put myself in shows and kept acting. Now I try not to. I love directing so much that I don’t miss acting anymore.

What was that first show?
The Itch, which was a version of a Jacobean tragedy called The Changeling.

Was Kneehigh your first artistic home after you trained at Guildhall School of Music and Drama?
I did lots of bips and bobs and I was with another theater company called Theatre Alibi for many years before I joined Kneehigh. And with Theatre Alibi I traveled to Poland, where I worked with the Gardzienice Theatre Association as a performer. I’ve had three theater homes really.
BUT YOU’VE BEEN WITH KNEEHIGH SINCE 1994?
Kneehigh is extraordinary and it was love at first sight. The Kneehigh barns, where we rehearse, are on the south coast of England in the county of Cornwall, so it is very wild and very beautiful. Kneehigh was this band of gypsies to my eyes, not like actors you’d meet in London. They were browned from the sun with wild hair and playing music. It was very exciting and very sexy. They were more like brigand rock stars than finely coiffured actors. I came with quite a serious and rigorous theater ethos, and they very much came from a comedy and clowning background, and I think there was a fantastic chemistry between us instantaneously, and that continues to this day really. I think that is why the Kneehigh brand works so well, because the comedy and the tragedy sit so beautifully next to each other. They gave me a sense of humor and brought a huge amount of joy into my work. And we sit outside the capital, which really makes a difference to us all: we are not part of the business. We are our own world that we create and inhabit.

DOES THAT GIVE YOU MORE FREEDOM?
It’s freedom from the fear of being accepted. We do what we do. We’re not constantly judging ourselves based on what other people think or, indeed, where our next job will be.
We are supported by our community, and we’re also a community in ourselves, so we support each other. I think it’s very freeing for the work that we come together here [in the barns] and make theater. We challenge ourselves on our own terms; we’re not really guided or influenced by other people.

**WHEN DID YOU TRANSITION FROM A DIRECTOR WITH KNEEHIGH TO THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE COMPANY?**

It was such a gradual progression I can’t even remember. I think it was five years ago now. It was natural. Kneehigh’s been going for 30 years, and I’ve certainly learned from my predecessors that the only way to survive is to embrace change. And change was coming: my directing style was taking the work to different places and to different audiences.

**HOW SO?**

Kneehigh was famous because there were no theaters in Cornwall until about ten years ago, so Kneehigh traditionally has always performed outdoors: in woodlands and on beaches, on cliff tops and in car parks. And that meant the work was very bold, with broad brushstrokes, and often very funny. Because it started in the daylight, the work had to have a sort of almost brazen quality.

I think my work has kept a lot of the boldness, but it has fine-tuned a lot of the art and a lot of the performance. Also, the work has come indoors and, although I think we’re still improved by the elements, I’ve really distilled a lot of the work we’d done in the open air. Another company was spawned out of Kneehigh called WildWorks, which has really taken all the open-air work. They keep working on a very big scale with lots of people. They have 200 people in a show and it’s fantastic, but it’s not what I want to do. I want to tell stories and find the emotion and the finely drawn human relationships that I think theater is about.

**DO YOU HAVE A PERFORMANCE SPACE IN CORNWALL NOW?**

Yes, there’s a theater called Hall for Cornwall. It used to be the old town hall. We share it. It’s not ours. And I say that we don’t perform outdoors, but we still try to find unusual places [to perform], and our plan is to have a huge tent [The Asylum] that we can hitch up in exciting places in Cornwall. We would control the food and the music and the whole experience, and you’d still get to smell the sea air. We hope to tour nationally and internationally with The Asylum and really be able to deliver an experience from the minute people arrive at the space to the minute they leave.
HOW IMPORTANT IS TOURING FOR KNEEHIGH?
We’ve always toured because we’ve never had a theater of our own. And we’ve been touring internationally more and more with the work, which we love. I can’t think of anything better than traveling with the group of people you make work with and meeting other communities across the world. We’ve been to Colombia and Brazil and China and Lebanon—we’ve been to some amazing places in the last few years. And, of course, the States!

YET KNEEHIGH PRADES ITSELF ON BEING TRUE TO ITS CORNISH ROOTS. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING YOUR WORK FOR OTHER CULTURES, BOTH IN ENGLAND AND INTERNATIONALLY?
It’s not really quantifiable; it’s something that is rather than something we nurture. We had the oddest thing happen when we went to Australia with our show Tristan & Yseult. We started the show and suddenly all these Cornish flags were waving: the black and white flag of Cornwall. And you realize that so many people emigrated from Cornwall and there’s a great sense of ownership of that.

I think that the main thing is that people realize we’re not just a company of actors but a community, and that we’re from somewhere. I think people are very excited when they see pictures of where we make the work and where we live. It’s not just a city. It’s somewhere very special. I think people really do respond to that, and we do as well: we not only know what we do, we know who we are, and where we come from, and I think that’s a very strong and privileged thing in life.

TELL ME ABOUT THE BARNS WHERE YOU MAKE THE WORK.
It’s a mini world. We’ve got a huge kitchen because food is very important. We love to eat and talk together: that’s where a lot of the relationships and ideas are made. And we’ve got a rehearsal space, a music room, costume [storage], workshops. Also we can go and stay there when we make work. So for those weeks we drop everything and say, “We’re going to make a show.” We certainly don’t live together all of the time. We all go and descend on the barns, and what’s amazing is that, because there is nothing to do there apart from be there and be with each other, we keep working. People play music into the night. People have ideas. We laugh. Two weeks at the barns is like two months in the rehearsal room, and the work is so deep and such fun that you don’t notice it’s happening.
**WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS THE DIRECTOR WHEN THE WORK IS CREATED BY AN ENSEMBLE?**

I’m definitely the author of the work and the world that I wish to create, but the collective imagination is far greater than the individual’s, so as a director I try to lay as many foundations as possible for the piece and then let the actors be as free within that world as they can possibly be, because they will always surprise me. They will always come up with something I would never have thought of. Many ideas come from many places. The trick is to have a strong enough vision that people have those good ideas because they understand the world that we’re making. Nothing gets by me. I’m tougher than I pretend. I’m a collector and an editor, as well as an author.

**ONE OF THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN A.C.T. AND KNEEHIGH IS THE DESIRE TO REINVIGORATE CLASSIC LITERATURE. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT WHY YOU’RE ATTRACTIONED TO THESE STORIES?**

Theater is storytelling. Sometimes it becomes about lots of other things, but ultimately human beings like to come together and be told a story and to be transported. There’s something very simple about that notion. I think there are probably very few great stories, and the great stories have survived because they hit a fundamental human nerve. So *Cinderella* is a classic story because there aren’t many of us who, when we were young, didn’t feel unloved, didn’t feel ugly, and didn’t feel that the world was turned against us. So those stories are told for good reason. They speak to us on a very profound level.

As a director I’m interested in those tales that talk to us about freedom and how to negotiate the responsibility of life with the needs and possibilities of being a human being. One of my first pieces of work was *The Red Shoes*, which is very much about how you deal with desire and obsession when society is telling you not to, what can go wrong, what the dangers are. With *Brief Encounter*, I’ve used a lot of scenes from the selkie tales, which tell of the seal woman who comes onto dry land and marries and has children, but ultimately kisses her children goodbye and swims back into the sea because that is who she is.

Different stories come to you at different times in your life and they’re very, very powerful, and they do help you. A lot of them are about endurance, about when you think you can’t go on. These stories say, “You can. You will. There are ways.”

**WHEN DID YOU REALIZE YOU WANTED TO REVISIT BRIEF ENCOUNTER?**

It happened almost by accident, which is, of course, the best way. Stories visit you when you least expect them, and if you concentrate too hard—get too academic—you cut off your instincts. *Brief Encounter* literally caught my eye. Somebody was talking to me about
doing *Peter Pan* (which I didn’t want to do), and I flicked my eye [towards the bookshelf] and said, “I don’t want to do *Peter Pan*, but if you’d asked me to do *Brief Encounter* this would be a very different conversation.” So that is how it started: my eyes catching sight of a book.

And, of course, I love it because I love love, and I love romance. It’s the best feeling in the world, and a lot of my work is about that heady feeling of love and what happens to us. I love *Brief Encounter* because it is so British and so elemental. It’s about falling in love with somebody that you can’t have. I don’t think there are many adult human beings who haven’t been in that situation at some point in their lives. Then I started working on it. I had had that very instinctual draw towards the piece, but then I was knocked out with how sensational Noël Coward’s words are: how beautifully observed they are. Then thinking about Laura’s freedom on a feminist level . . . The first version of this play, called *Still Life*, is about choosing: you can choose to live or you can choose to have this still life in which your true desires and needs as a human being aren’t being met, which I think happens to so many people.

**DOES LAURA CHOOSE THE STILL LIFE IN THE END?**

I hope not. In my version, she might not get her man, but I hope she gets herself.

**WHY DO YOU THINK IT’S A BRITISH PIECE?**

Maybe I’m wrong, but I think culturally in Britain we are very aware of how repressed we are and how restrained we can be. I think *Brief Encounter* is a lesson in restraint. Nobody really talks about their emotions. Laura never says, “I love you.” There are things that are never said in this story, which I think is very British, but I hope that’s also universal. I have no doubt an American audience will understand and respond to the piece and understand the human situation. I’m not worried about that at all and I’m very excited. But I would be interested to wonder if you could ever do an American production. Would Americans have had this relationship?

**I WONDER IF IT IS SLIGHTLY FOREIGN LESS BECAUSE IT IS IN BRITAIN AND MORE BECAUSE IT TAKES PLACE 70 YEARS AGO?**

In Britain people discussed how this affair wouldn’t happen now: they would just sleep together. I really dispute that. I think all sorts of things are acceptable in society, but that doesn’t mean they are less painful or that the issues are less fundamental. So, from my own experience, it doesn’t feel dated. The accents might feel a little dated, but the situation . . . we all struggle to do our best and at times that is incredibly painful.
**WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF CREATING BRIEF ENCOUNTER LIKE?**
I was working with a script, which I don’t normally do. I normally devise work, so this was a new process. Before I started working with any actors, I worked through Coward’s songs and poetry and layered in lots of his lesser-known works, elements that delighted me and I had no doubt they would delight audiences as well. And then we worked. We did some what we call “r & d”—research and development. We did a week in advance, when, with the actors, I explored if this idea was going to work and worked on the design. Then we got together and started to put it together.

Our process always involves improvisation with character work. There’s a great freedom in that process. Things come together very late. If you direct very strongly from word go you never know what you’re going to miss. You just have your own vision. So it was a very playful process. And it’s still changing now. There will be changes coming to the States. I still look at it and think, “Oh, I could do that a little bit different. Or a little bit better.” Nothing fundamental, but I feel that a piece of theater is never done because the world around us changes. You always find new things to discover.

**WHEN WAS THE DECISION MADE TO HAVE LIVE THEATER AND FILM EXIST ON THE STAGE AT THE SAME TIME?**
I never wanted to replicate the film because, Why would you do that? It’s a brilliant film that people can watch, so that was never the aim. But because it is such an iconic British film my first idea about the piece was that it had to be really referential to that film. But it also had to be very referential to theater. I wanted to boldly play with both those forms so that the audience would delight in the live event. This is why at times the curtain will come down and people entertain in front of it—that’s a very British theatrical tradition. But we’ve also got the big cinema screen with people bursting in and out of it. I thought this had to be totally about film and totally about theater all in one evening.

**WHERE DOES THE MUSIC FIT INTO THIS?**
We’ve woven in not only some of Noël Coward’s beautiful music but also there’s an under-score of music that, with the film on the back wall, acts as a kind of metaphor for what’s going on underneath the very restrained simple conversations. The sea on the back wall and this rolling live music (as well as some carefully chosen bits of Rachmaninov) takes us into that emotion, casting a spell over the whole production that is really irresistible.
HOW DID YOU CHOOSE THE NOËL COWARD SONGS FOR THE SHOW?

I feel the show is about love in all its forms. The three couples represent three different stages and parts of love. There’s that beautiful song called “Any Little Fish”—“Any little fish can swim . . . But I can’t do anything at all, but just love you”—which fits very nicely at the beginning when everyone is hopeful, before anything goes wrong. Then there’s that fantastic poem we used called “I’m No Good at Love”; I feel the bitterness of the end the moment it begins. It’s the most heartbreaking poem that Coward wrote, and he wrote it about himself. What a terrible thing love is: it’s the most glorious sensation, but we also feel excluded from it at times. That fits in one of the characters’ mouths so beautifully.

I went through Coward’s whole canon looking for his insights into love. He was gay in the 1930s. He would have experienced more sadness and anger and shame than most, and you feel that coming through in his writing, as well as the beauty of it. When I hear the lyrics of the song “A Room with a View”—“A room with a view and you / No one to worry us”—it breaks my heart because, in his time, if he met somebody, that would have been all they wanted. Just some privacy to be themselves. So the songs chose themselves, really, and it was just the most wonderful task to look through his words. Because he’s brilliant, as well: so naughty! He wrote some really naughty lyrics! I would have loved to have met him because he was bloody funny and bloody honest. It would have been remarkable.
Neil Murray is an associate director and designer at Newcastle’s Northern Stage, the largest producing theater company in northeast England. His design for Brief Encounter won the Evening Standard and Critics Circle awards and was nominated for the Olivier Award for Best Design.

**How did you become involved with Brief Encounter?**

I’ve known Emma [Rice] for a long time, and I worked with her and Kneehigh a few years ago [as codirector on Pandora’s Box]. I came on board early on and we talked a lot about the world of Brief Encounter and what we needed to do given that there was going to be film. There are three different kinds of film [in this production]. There is the film that acts as a backdrop that establishes where we are. Then there is a screen that makes the audience actually feel as if they are in the cinema. We were always keen to merge live acting with film, so we devised a screen made of elastic with slits in it allowing characters to emerge from and disappear into film. They would, live, move into and through the film, and then we would be left with a film image of them, and vice versa.

Then there is the moment Laura is contemplating suicide, this incredible, fabulous moment when she climbs up on the bridge. We use a screen that runs on a wire, and someone tears across the space [with the screen] and immediately this train rushes across the stage [projected onto that screen]. It’s a good moment.

We also talked a lot about the nature of the story and the kinds of locations. It was going to be a composite world, a strange world of amalgamate elements that somehow gel together. Brief Encounter is not a naturalistic world, but it is made up of naturalistic elements juxtaposed in a poetic way. For instance, when we first opened [at Birmingham Repertory Theatre], we had an enormous stage. So spilling into this world we had two enormous heaps of coal. Then we went to London and moved into a three-screen Cineworld cinema [previously the Carlton Theatre on London’s Haymarket, not far from where Brief Encounter the film opened in 1945], which was extraordinarily small given where we’d been. It was a bit of a nightmare. The coal heaps got very, very reduced.

**What adjustments had to be made for a U.S. tour?**

After London we did the British tour, which was months of touring to lots of theaters. We’d go to different-sized places, as with any tour. Also, because of the nature of touring,
you have to do a get-in on Monday morning and do your first performance on Tuesday night. That’s tight. That’s a bit scary. Adjustments were made. For instance, the coal heaps became sacks of coal because they are easy to get in and out. So what you have in San Francisco is what has just toured Britain because it fits into your theater as it is.

**IS KNEEHIGH BRINGING OVER THE COAL WITH THEM?**
Yes, as far as I know. But it’s just the sacks. The coal is less significant now. It used to be a wonderful feature. But, hey.

**WERE THERE ANY DEBACLES WITH THE SPLITS IN THE SCREEN?**
It was a complete nightmare. We’d seen a film of a Spanish company doing it, so we knew it was possible, and I’d seen a Dutch dance company use a similar thing, so I knew the process, but the making of it was a bit of a challenge.

**IS YOUR DESIGN OF THE TEAROOM AND RAILWAY STATION BASED ON A REAL LOCATION?**
No, because it came out of the workshops in Cornwall. The buffet bar—where the women serve tea and buns from—is the piano that, most importantly perhaps, the Rachmaninov is played from. And that is a very Kneehigh way of working: they are rather anarchic, I suppose. They take the elements of a buffet and add a multifunctional piano.
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SIR NOËL COWARD

Born in Teddington, Middlesex, on December 16, 1899, to Violet and Arthur Coward, the second of three sons, Noël Coward had little formal education. From a very early age he—and his mother—knew that the theater was to be his education and his world. He was enrolled in the Italia Conti stage school and at the age of 11 appeared as Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish*. From then on he was a child actor and was soon cast as Slightly, one of the lost boys in the perennial *Peter Pan*. Critic Kenneth Tynan was to observe many years later of the mature Noël: “Forty years ago he was Slightly in *Peter Pan* and you might say that he’s been wholly Peter Pan ever since.” One benefit of those early years was meeting another child actor, Gertrude Lawrence, who was to become his closest friend and favorite stage partner.

By the age of 16 Coward had played his first adult role in *Charley’s Aunt* and written the music and lyrics to his first song, “Forbidden Fruit.” By 20 he had begun writing plays and revues, in most of which he fully intended to star. *I’ll Leave It to You* (1920) and *The Young Idea* (1923) were only moderate successes, but the Coward name was becoming known. The breakthrough came in 1924 with *The Vortex*—a play that was shocking for its time in its portrayal of adultery and drug addiction. The play and its young author became a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic. Three more major hits soon followed—*Hay Fever* and *Fallen Angels* (both 1925) and *Easy Virtue* (1926).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s success followed success. There was the operetta *Bitter Sweet* (1929); *Private Lives* (1930), which defined the legend that became “Noël and Gertie”; the play-cum-patriotic *Cavalcade* (1931); and *Design for Living* (1933), the starring vehicle he wrote specifically for himself and his close friends Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne.

The year 1935 saw one of Coward’s most ambitious ventures—*Tonight at 8:30*, a series of ten one-act plays in which he and Gertie played all the leads. Several of the plays were subsequently filmed, none more effectively than *Still Life*, which Coward himself adapted to make *Brief Encounter* in 1945. He considered *Still Life* “the most mature play of the whole series.” He later observed, “I am fond of both the play and the film with, as usual, a slight bias in favour of the former.”

There was also Coward the songwriter, who turned out ballads like “I’ll See You Again” and “I’ll Follow My Secret Heart,” as well as comedy numbers such as “Mad Dogs and Englishmen,” “Mrs. Worthington,” and “The Stately Homes of England.” He published a number of short stories and verse, as well as the novel *Pomp and Circumstance* (1960), which was a great success on both sides of the Atlantic.
Sir Noël Coward, by Dorothy Wilding (1930) (photo © William Hustler and Georgina Hustler/National Portrait Gallery, London)
The year 1939 brought a different kind of theater—World War II. Coward was sent to Paris to open a bureau of propaganda, and then to neutral America to assess opinion. Before the outbreak of war he had been recruited by the British Foreign Office, and in performing this intelligence work, he became technically a spy. While his own countrymen were unaware of his activities—in fact he was constantly criticized for seeming to avoid the deprivations on the home front—the Germans certainly were not. At the end of the war the German “Black List” had Coward’s name near the top. Had they won the war, he would have been shot.

Perhaps his greatest wartime achievement was the 1942 film *In Which We Serve*, the story of a British destroyer and her crew based on the real life story of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Louis Mountbatten’s own experience. Coward starred as the captain and codirected with David Lean. The film was immensely popular on both sides of the Atlantic and honored with a special Academy Award in 1943.

London theaters were briefly closed at the outbreak of war, and some of Coward’s plays had to wait for production. *This Happy Breed* and the autobiographical comedy *Present Laughter* were both written in 1939, but neither was seen until 1942—by which time he had
written and staged *Blithe Spirit* (1941), a comedy that went on to hold the London record as the longest-running play for many years.

*Brief Encounter* was released in Britain in November 1945. Starring then relatively unknown stage actress Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard and featuring a soundtrack selected by Coward (Rachmaninov’s second piano concerto was one of his favorite pieces of music), the film was Coward’s fourth and final collaboration with director Lean (who had also directed film versions of *This Happy Breed* [1944] and *Blithe Spirit* [1945], as well as *In Which We Serve*). Shooting took place at night in Carnforth Station in the northwest of England, believed to be sufficiently far enough away from Britain’s populous southeast to receive advance warning of impending German aerial attack, thus giving the filmmakers time to turn out the filming lights. Although the movie was banned in Ireland, it earned Oscar nominations for best actress, director, and screenplay, won the Cannes Film Festival’s grand prize, shared the 1946 Palme d’Or, and went on to become one of Britain’s most celebrated films. Critic Roger Manvell extol led, “Its passing express trains have the rush and power of passion, its platforms and subways the loneliness of waiting lovers.”

With the war over, England’s mood changed and with it the critical attitude toward Coward. He continued to produce plays and musicals, but they found little favor. He reappeared as a successful cabaret entertainer, first at London’s Café de Paris and later in Las Vegas. America took him to its heart; he turned up in live television broadcasts—*Together with Music* (1955) with Mary Martin, *Blithe Spirit* (1956), and *This Happy Breed* (1956).

In the late 1950s, he started yet another profitable career, as a cameo actor in such films as *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Our Man in Havana*, *Surprise Package*, *Boom!* and *The Italian Job*.

“Dad’s renaissance”—as Coward called it—started in 1963 with a small-scale London revival of *Private Lives*. A year later he was invited to direct *Hay Fever* at the National Theatre, the first production there by a living playwright.

His final appearance as an actor was in his own *Suite in Three Keys* (1966), another personal triumph. But by this time his health was beginning to fail. He was not well enough to take the play to what he had hoped would be a triumphant Broadway farewell.

Honors fell thick and fast, and in 1970 Coward finally received a long-deserved knighthood (“You must call me Sir Noëlie now,” he instructed his friends).

In 1973 he died peacefully in Jamaica.

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*Biography courtesy The Noël Coward Estate. If you have an interest in Noël Coward—his plays, music, and writing—contact The Noël Coward Society at cowardusa@nyc.rr.com. Further information at www.noelcoward.com.*
Of all of Noël Coward’s considerable body of work, his film Brief Encounter has proved to be among the most durable, and, by virtue of its being a hit film, certainly has been seen by more people than anything else he wrote. It began life as a short play called Still Life, part of a series of one-acts collectively named Tonight at 8:30. Coward wrote the series (there were ten all told, presented over three evenings) in 1935 as vehicles for himself and his friend, the enormously popular star (and chronically cash-starved) Gertrude Lawrence. In 1945 he adapted it into the full-length screenplay Brief Encounter. Ten years later he rewrote it for radio, then in 1956 adapted it yet again as a play for two voices, which he recorded with the actress Margaret Leighton. In 1968, Still Life, paired with another Tonight at 8:30 one-act, Fumed Oak, was made into a musical (not by Coward) called Mr. and Mrs. Yet another incarnation appeared in 1974, a television movie of Brief Encounter starring Richard Burton and Sophia Loren as the supposedly average middle-aged couple. Just last May, a new opera by André Previn based on the film premiered in Houston. And now comes a new version by Britain’s Kneehigh Theatre, combining spectacular techniques of film and stage, not to mention several wonderful Coward songs.

What accounts for Still Life’s and Brief Encounter’s durability (or rather perhaps, its ability to survive so many incarnations) through the passage of 73 years and vast changes in culture? The reason was quite clear to Coward: “[Still Life] is well written, economical, and well constructed,” he wrote. “The characters, I think, are true and I can say now, reading it with detachment after [18] years, that I am proud to have written it.”

Both works—Still Life and Brief Encounter—have strengths other than those pointed out by their proud author, but ones he was not likely to talk about. According to one of Coward’s biographers, Philip Hoare, some of Coward’s more serious work just prior to Still Life lent it new maturity. One of those plays was Point Valaine (1934), in which, Coward wrote, he was “honestly attempting to break . . . new ground by creating a group of characters and establishing an atmosphere as far removed as possible from anything I have done before.” Point Valaine takes place on a tropical island not unlike Point Balaine, off Trinidad, where Coward had holidayed, and centers around a hotel owner and her lover. It is, as Hoare writes, about thwarted love, includes a “sexually ambiguous male couple,” and a character based on the sexually unambiguous Somerset Maugham. Point Valaine, starring Coward’s friends Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne (for whom he’d written the daring and subversive Design for Living in 1932), opened and closed quickly, but the story
of illicit love and unrealized dreams (also to be found in *Design for Living*) stayed with him. Shortly before *Point Valaine*, Coward had written, for the decidedly unserious musical called *Conversation Piece* (1933), what was to become one of his best-known songs, “I'll Follow My Secret Heart”:

I'll follow my secret heart  
My whole life through,  
I'll keep all my dreams apart  
Till one comes true.

No matter what price is paid,  
What stars may fade above,  
I'll follow my secret heart  
Till I find love.
Having transmuted illicit love into thwarted love and thwarted love into secret love, Coward then wrote *Still Life*, which combined all three.

“I’m a respectable married woman with a husband and a home and two children,” Laura says to Alec, fighting off the yearnings of her secret heart. Alec responds, “But there must be a part of you, deep down inside, that doesn’t feel like that at all—some little spirit that still wants to climb out of the window—that still longs to splash about a bit in the dangerous sea.” Images of ideals that must be hidden, desires that must be stifled abound, even when Alec describes his life as doctor. “Most good doctors have private dreams—that’s the best part of them; sometimes, though, those get over-professionalized and strangulated,” he says. Of all the specialties that Coward could have chosen for Alec, he gave him the prevention of pneumoconiosis, or black lung disease: “It’s nothing but a slow process of fibrosis of the lung due to the inhalation of particles of dust,” which can lead to death by strangulation, Alex explains to Laura over a tea charged with subtext.

*Brief Encounter* examines secret longings that, because they are disallowed by society, must be kept deep inside. As a gay man, Coward knew all about unconventional feelings and secret longings, so both play and film combine Coward’s recently found seriousness with emotional authenticity. Just before working on the screenplay, he began a relationship with a young actor named Graham Payn that would last the rest of his life. Of course Coward’s close friends knew of his new partner, but it could not be mentioned in public, unlike the relations of his heterosexual acquaintances. And although Coward refers to Payn many times in his diaries, even there, he is reticent. But in his work, wearing the mask that art provides, he could be open about the costs, the strain, of proscribed love.

When Alec says to Laura, “All the shame that the world might force on us couldn’t touch the real truth of it,” the guises of art and artifice transform love between men into another kind of forbidden love story, one that Britain *could* allow itself to contemplate (as long as certain conditions about the ending were met). After all, in a society whose rules were as rigid as Britain’s (and America’s, for that matter), the love between a couple married to other people was condemned with almost as much force as was the love that dared not speak its name. It was understood that well-bred people didn’t do such things. In those days, such strictures were available for all to absorb, as in *Everyday Living for Girls*, published in 1936:

The unescorted woman of good breeding does not encourage acquaintances with strangers, either men or women. It is understandable that strangers sitting together in the train or diner will perhaps converse in an impersonal way; but one should never let conversation develop into personalities, nor tell one’s
intimate life history to casual acquaintances. . . . A man may suggest that a woman eat lunch or dinner in the dining-car with him. The woman may refuse politely by saying that she is not yet ready. If his company is congenial, she may accept. However, she must pay for her own meal. The end of the journey should terminate the acquaintance. Common sense dictates prudence in contacts with strangers.

And if well-bred people did do such things, then at least, as Dolly reminds Laura, they should have the good taste to keep it to themselves.

Reticence and the stiff upper lip were all. Coward cultivated these in his own life; Hoare refers to his “demanding mores: duty and discipline, the pull of emotion and one’s place in the scheme of things,” which are reflected in Brief Encounter. Indeed, as powerful as the external restrictions on behavior may be, they are often less demanding than the ones we impose on ourselves. We may place great stock in duty and discipline precisely because we feel a powerful urge to break the rules; duty and discipline are the bulwarks that keep those disruptive, unconventional urges from breaking through. The duty and discipline that Coward felt it necessary to display, however, also served another, positive end: they made it possible to channel those unruly, illicit desires into art.

It was this conflict between the deep longings of the heart and the obstacles to expressing them that made the filmmakers nervous that Brief Encounter might be rejected by the British Board of Film Censors (whose seal of approval is still seen at the beginning of the film—and in a slightly different rendering at the opening of this production). According to the film historian James Robertson, Brief Encounter was “the first film which dealt with middle-aged love outside the confines of marriage.” As Hoare points out, this same subject was being gingerly faced by hundreds of couples recently reunited after six years of the war that had just ended, which made the film uncomfortably timely. In the end, the British censors passed the film. The Irish censorship board, however, did not: in their view, Brief Encounter provided too sympathetic a view of adultery. They found that the truth of the film cut too close to the bone. Even in today’s culture of openness, who’s to say that for many this is still not the case?
SONGS OF NOËL COWARD IN *BRIEF ENCOUNTER*

“ALICE IS AT IT AGAIN”
Cut in rehearsal from *Pacific 1860* (1946); performed in cabaret 1951–55. “Originally titled ‘Sweet Alice,’ it was composed along with most of the music for *Pacific 1860*. However, Mary Martin [playing the heroine] refused to sing it. Noël Coward later rewrote the lyrics of the last verse to make them more ‘modern’ as opposed to the original ‘period’ lyrics for *Pacific 1860* and inserted it into his cabaret performances. It became well known as a result of the Las Vegas cabaret recording and was published that year.”
—The Noël Coward Music Index, http://www.noelcoward.net/ncmiindex/mainindex.html

“ANY LITTLE FISH”
Written in 1930; performed in *Cochran’s 1931 Revue* and *The Third Little Show* (u.s. tour only). “This is a mature revue-type point number, where Coward is really at the peak of his 20s comedy dance-song powers. Noël Coward might have lifted his title line from Gershwin’s ‘Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,’ which includes the lyric ‘Fish got to swim and birds got to fly,’ and which was a u.k. popular success in mid 1928.”
—The Noël Coward Music Index
“BORA BORA” (“THE WIDE LAGOON”)
The original verse poem can be found in Noël Coward Collected Verse. “[Bora Bora] ranks high among the few really lovely places I have been to. . . . We paddled about the unbelievably lagoon in a pirogue and snorkled among the fabulous reefs. I have never in my life seen anything so beautiful as that particular reef and this particular lagoon. The myriads of coloured fish, the coral formations, are all beyond description.”
—“Sunday, March 18, 1962,” The Noel Coward Diaries, Graham Payn and Sheridan Morley, eds.

“GO SLOW, JOHNNY”
In Sail Away (1961), young cruise-ship passenger Johnny sings this ballad after a brush-off from Mimi, an acerbic but attractive older woman.

“NO GOOD AT LOVE” (“I AM NO GOOD AT LOVE”)
Sail Away (1961). “The lyrics of the song version are different to those of the published poem of the same title, but with much shared material. The overall mood is wistful, even a touch elegiac. Noël Coward’s demo recording presents the piece in the form refrain-verse-refrain; but the written-down version done at the time of preparations for Sail Away is much shorter, with no middle verse section.”
—The Noël Coward Music Index

“A ROOM WITH A VIEW”
Originally intended for the abortive 1927 musical Star Dust; later used in This Year of Grace (1928). “[A Room with a View’] was originally conceived on a lonely beach in Honolulu where I was convalescing after a nervous breakdown. The title, unblushingly pinched from e. m. Forster’s novel, came into my mind together with a musical phrase to fit it and I splashed up and down in the shallows, searching for shells and rhymes at the same time. When I was singing it in the American production of This Year of Grace the late Alexander Woollcott took a black hatred to it. The last couplet . . . sent him into torrents of vituperation. He implored me to banish the number from the show . . . when I refused to pander to his wicked prejudices he decided to make a more formal protest. . . . One evening he sat in a stage box with a group of ramshackle companions, including Harpo Marx, and when I began to sing the verse they all, with one accord, ostentatiously opened newspapers and read them. . . . With what I still consider to be great presence of mind, [I] sang the last couplet in baby talk, whereupon Woollcott gave a dreadful scream and, making sounds only too indicative of rising nausea, staggered from the box.” This song ranks eighth in the list of top Coward royalty earners.
—The Noël Coward Song Book, by Noël Coward
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What aspects of love does each of the three couples represent?
2. Why do you think Laura and Alec are dissatisfied in their marriages?
3. Ultimately, why do Laura and Alec call off their affair?
4. In her interview, Emma Rice remembers, “In Britain people discussed how this affair wouldn’t happen now: [Laura and Alec] would just sleep together.” What do you think?
5. Do you agree with Rice that Brief Encounter is a very British story?
6. What does this staging say about the relationships among theater, film, music, and storytelling?

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION