‘Brief Encounter’

Education Resources
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Introduction

‘Brief Encounter’

A very grown-up fairy tale

by Emma Rice, director and adaptor

In Still Life, later to become Brief Encounter, Noel 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 meetings 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 folk tales 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 in any way victims. 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 folk tales, 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 re-form. 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 re-imagine 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.
Background Information

The film ‘Brief Encounter’, was written by Noel Coward and premiered in 1944. It was based on a one act play that he had written in 1936 entitled ‘Still Life’ in which a love affair takes place between two married people.

It is no secret that the story parallels the emotions felt by Coward as a gay man living in Britain in the 1930’s. Constrained by the judgemental and prudish society of that era, Coward experienced first hand the anguish of not being to love freely.

Most of the filming of ‘Brief Encounter’ took place at Carnforth railway station in Lancashire. It has been suggested that this location was chosen because of its distance from the South East of England. Britain was still at war and blackouts were necessary and Carnforth was thought to be sufficiently far enough away to receive advanced warning of impending attack, thus giving time to turn out the filming lights.

Coward chose the soundtrack for the film, Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto and David Lean was the director. The two co-stars were Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson. Howard was an unknown actor at the time and was not the first choice for the role. Lean originally wanted Roger Livesey but after seeing Howard in a rough cut of ‘The Way to the Stars’ he changed his mind.

Celia Johnson on the other hand was always the director’s choice. It was Celia who needed convincing that the film was
for her. She didn’t enjoy making films and it wasn’t until Coward read the part to her that she wanted to do it.

When the film was first released, it was banned by the censorship board in Ireland who felt it portrayed the adulterers in a sympathetic light. Elsewhere though the film was well received and director David Lean received his first Oscar nomination for his work on ‘Brief Encounter’.
Synopsis of the Play

Brief Encounter is a romantic drama set in 1945, during World War II. The action takes place around Milford Junction railway station, a fictional station where the main characters Laura Jesson and Doctor Alec Harvey meet by chance in the refreshment room. Both characters are married to another, but there is a strong attraction between them and after a couple of chance meetings they soon become more than just friends.

Laura is married to Fred whom she describes as ‘not at all emotional’ a description we later understand to mean lacking in passion. They have two children and appear to lead a financially comfortable life. Every week Laura travels to town to do some shopping and to go the cinema, and it is on one of these trips that she meets Alec. Laura has some grit in her eye and goes to the refreshment room for help; it is Alec who offers assistance. Through their feelings for each other the couple soon realise what is missing from their lives and the story then follows their anguish at discovering that neither of them is truly happily married.

Alec is keen to meet regularly with Laura and soon they are spending every weekly meeting engaging in a form of courtship – going to the cinema together, boating on the lake and dining in restaurants. Before long, it is clear that Laura and Alec have a strong desire to take their affair further. Laura is hesitant, constantly ridden by the guilt, but eventually she agrees to Alec’s suggestion that they meet at his friends flat, presumably to consummate their relationship. Their plan is spoiled however as Alec’s friend returns home early and Laura, riddled with shame, scurries away hurriedly.
Alec later catches up with Laura and they face the harsh reality that their affair cannot continue. Alec breaks the news to Laura that he has accepted a post in South Africa where he can pursue his passions as a doctor. They arrange to meet for a final goodbye the following week. As they agonize over their parting and the end of their affair they are interrupted by a friend of Laura’s. Their final goodbye is then spoilt as they fight to conceal their feelings in front of this intruder. Alec’s train arrives and Laura is left with her friend, wondering what might have been. In a moment of despair she runs to the bridge over the railway line and looks as though she is going to end her life by jumping in front of the express train. Something stops her though and she returns home to Fred, the children and her marriage.

Throughout the play, juxtaposed with Laura and Alec’s love affair are the affairs of Myrtle, the tea room manageress with Albert, the station master and Beryl, the tea room waitress with Stanley, the cake seller. In stark contrast to Laura and Alec, both of these couples are free to love and pursue their affairs. Myrtle and Albert are somewhat jaded by love, but are not romantically linked to any other and Beryl and Stanley are finding love for the first time.
Cast and Characters

Dr. Alec Harvey
(Tristan Sturrock)

Good looking, kind and flirtatious Dr. Harvey feels an instant attraction to Laura after getting some grit out of her eye at Milford Railway Station. He is married with two children and a successful career.

‘if you’d die, you’d forget me. I want to be remembered.’

Laura Jesson (Naomi Frederick)

Gentle, attractive and mild mannered, Laura Jesson thinks she is happily married until she meets Dr. Harvey. She has two children and a husband, Fred, whom she feels guilty betraying.

‘This can’t last. This misery can’t last....Nothing lasts really. Neither happiness or despair.’
Fred Jesson / Albert Godby (Andy Williams)

Fred Jesson, husband of Laura, is a dependable, unemotional and reliable man. He is a creature of habit and routine.

‘You’ve been a long way away……Thank you for coming back to me’.

Albert Godby is a jovial, fun loving man who enjoys flirting with Mrs. Baggot in the refreshment room.

‘…you look wonderful when you’re angry….just like an avenging angel’.

Myrtle Bagot (Tamzin Griffin)

Mrs. Bagot likes to appear to others as a strict, upstanding lady who commands respect from others. She is in fact just as fun loving as Albert with whom she enjoys regular liaisons!

‘If you don’t learn to behave yourself - there wont be a tonight’
Beryl, Waitress  
(Amanda Lawrence)

Beryl is a wonderfully naive young woman who works for Mrs. Bagot in the tearoom. She fancies Stanley the cake seller and enjoys flirting with him.

‘Mother will be waiting up’.

Stanley, Cake Seller  
(Stuart McLoughlin)

Happy go lucky Stanley fancies Beryl and spends most of his time winking at her and playing the fool to make her laugh.

‘Are you walking home?’
Staging of the Play
In Discussion
Amanda Lawrence and Staurt McLoughlin

What is Brief Encounter really about?

Stuart: It’s about love in all its many forms and there are three love stories going on throughout, one of which is the main one and that’s an extra marital affair. Then there’s a second time round love affair which is Myrtle and Albert and our story (Stanley and Beryl) which is their first time round. They are very new to it and very naïve. It’s about what love was like in that period when there was a very British stiff upper lip repressed attitude to love.

Amanda: It’s also about forbidden love. Noel Coward was really writing as a gay man, saying we can’t help what has happened, we can’t stop what has happened, we can’t stop this feeling.

As actors working on a Knee High production, what is the creative process that you go through when working on a show?

Amanda: Emma Rice (artistic director of Knee High) really draws on the personalities and talents in her company. Emma often works from a story; often a fairy tale or a fable and we might read it at the beginning and then put it aside and play and play on ideas. How can we make Geese? In ‘Nights at the Circus’ (Knee High) we improvised how to make lions or tigers onstage. We start at a very playful beginning. With this show, there was a script so we read that at the beginning and then we put it aside and began a
process which a lot of companies do called ‘R & D’ which is ‘Research and Development’ and we just played.

**Is it fun?**

**Stuart**: It’s just playing with your mates really, you regress to a kind of childlike state. It’s very childlike, very simple, very basic emotions and it’s just great, great fun to do. You can work out what you can do and you realize what you can bring to the process, we’re still doing that now, the show has been up and running for a long time, but we’re still finding new things to bring to it. Emma just loves to have lots of skills in the company that she can draw from to make this amazing piece of theatre.

**Amanda**: Yes! Even if you’re tone deaf and you can’t sing she’ll use it. She’ll put you in the spotlight and make you sing!

**S**: It can be quite scary in that sense but you really do face a lot of fears and anxieties that you have as a performer, for instance mine is probably dancing. I often see myself as kind of physically very gawky, but that was brilliant for this because Emma saw that and made me go for it and be as ‘gawky’ as I could.

*It sounds quite different to the more traditional ways of working on a show.*

**A**: Yes, it’s more ‘I want to make sure you can do it’. It’s like when we’re playing games, it doesn’t matter if you don’t get it, they rejoice in the person who’s looking a bit confused or a bit worried.
S : There are lots of buzz words. I remember going to rehearse for ‘Matter of Life or Death’ and they were all up on the wall, things like BRAVERY, GENEROSITY and one of their phrases is ‘hold your nerve’. It’s true that you can be so scared and just get yourself out of it and just go with it and be brave and generous and try and make the other person look good.

So, Amanda, what does Beryl represent in this story?

A : I think Beryl is on the cusp, and struggles slightly between, being a girl and being a woman. I sort of yearn as an actress to be like Laura (one of the main characters) and go really deep and psychological. That’s another thing that Emma says, she’s not interested in all that, she just wants you to tell the story and move it on. So, Beryl is basically just up for Stanley, her objective is to get Stanley, she wants Stanley, she fancies Stanley, it’s basically that. Also she has aspirations, she has dreams, she is a dreamer, she looks up to Mrs. Baggot who is in that mother role. So, she’s very new, bubbling with excitement but at the same time there is this shadow that her mother is dying. But, she is bursting with enthusiasm and wanting to get it right, which is a very clown like thing, always saying yes, always wanting to get it right.

And what does Stanley represent?.

S : I think Stanley is at odds with his own feelings, he’s at a place where he starts to have lots of sexual feelings but doesn’t really know what to do with those so at some points he’s really boyish and at some points he’s really mannish and he sort of flits between the two. He can be a real clown to Beryl but then in the next minute he wants to look really cool in front of Beryl, but then he can’t help but be an idiot again and he doesn’t quite know which one of those to be
because he hasn’t really found himself yet. The music helps because some of the songs I’m singing as Stanley and some as me really, but all the ones that Stanley sings I can really toy with and play around with. What he represents in the play is the first pangs of teenage lust, I suppose, possibly blooming into love – I don’t know if he’s quite there yet but he’s definitely on the way. I think Beryl’s one of the first girls that he’s really noticed.

A: We’re awakening and we’re free to love.

S: Yes, We’re the only couple free to love really, well apart from Mrytle and Albert but they’re second time round and they’ve got all their baggage, whereas we’re completely neutral and completely naive and up for it. It’s lovely to have that juxtaposed against Laura and Alec, sometimes even in the same scene, it’s lovely to get those two relationships together to see the difference between them.
Sir Noël Coward
1899 - 1973

Sir Noël Coward, play boy of the West End world, jack of all its entertainment trades and Master of most, was born on 16 December 1899, just before the last Christmas of the 19th century, hence the name Noël. The second son of an unsuccessful piano-tuner-cum-salesman and a doting, dominant mother, he grew up in suburban, lower middle-class South London in what he would later describe as ‘genteel poverty’.

When he was ten, his mother answered a Daily Mirror advertisement for ‘a star cast of wonder children’ to appear in a fantasy play called The Goldfish at the Little Theatre. He auditioned successfully, tap dancing violently to a selection of hymns, and within a few weeks was on the stage he seldom left thereafter. Two years later he was Slightly in Peter Pan (Kenneth Tynan was to say that he was Wholly in it ever afterwards) and, like his beloved friend and partner Gertrude Lawrence, he then settled through World War I into the life of a fairly successful touring child actor around the British regions: Michael MacLiammoir (then Alfred Willmore and later co-founder of Dublin’s Gate Theatre) was another of the ‘wonder children’ of the time.

In Noël’s own view, he was ‘when washed and smarmed down a bit, passably attractive; but I was, I believe, one of the worst boy actors ever inflicted on the paying public’. Nevertheless he survived, and by 1917 had already made his first movie, DW Griffith’s wartime epic Hearts of the World, for which he was paid a pound a day for making up his face bright yellow and wheeling a barrow on location
down a street in Worcestershire with Lillian and Dorothy Gish. There followed a brief, uneventful and unhappy spell in the army, for which he was summoned to the Camberwell Swimming Baths for training, another five years in the touring theatre with the occasional very minor West End role, and then an unsuccessful trip to Broadway where he hoped to sell some of the early scripts with which he had already failed to impress London managements.

This plan did not work out too well, not least because nobody had bothered to inform Noël that, in those days before air conditioning, Broadway theatre managements were virtually all closed for the summer. Until taken in by Gabrielle Enthoven, whose theatre collection later became the basis for the Theatre Museum, he was reduced to the prospect of a park bench, but even then Coward’s luck did not run out entirely. One evening he was invited to dinner at an apartment up on Riverside Drive by the eccentric actress Laurette Taylor and her husband, the playwright Hartley Manners. After dinner it was the custom of the Taylor clan to play games of charades which grew increasingly acrimonious as the guests began to wish they had never come, let alone joined in; although countless other theatre writers had been to the parties, it was Noël who first realised there might be a play here, and 80 years later the result can still be seen – 2006’s Hay Fever with Dame Judi Dench was a resounding hit at the Haymarket.

Then, in 1924 at the tiny Everyman Theatre in Hampstead, one of the very first London fringe theatres, came the overnight success of The Vortex, a play about drug addiction written at a time when even alcoholism was scarcely mentioned on the stage. The roughly equal amounts of interest, indignation, admiration and money generated by the play, which Noël had written, directed and starred in and for
which he had also helped paint the scenery outside the stage door on Hampstead High Street, meant that at the age of 24 he went from being a mildly unsuccessful playwright, actor and composer to being the hottest theatrical figure in London – a change that came about so fast even he took several months and one nervous breakdown to come to terms with it.

On transfer, The Vortex was joined in the West End by Hay Fever, Fallen Angels and the revue On with the Dance, thereby giving Noël a fourhits- in-one-season triumph only rivalled in the 20th-century London theatre by Alan Ayckbourn and Somerset Maugham. But there followed a year of total critical and public reversal, when boos greeted the opening of Sirocco and Noël was actually spat upon in the street by disappointed theatregoers, happily not a practice which caught on along Shaftesbury Avenue.

Within the next two years however, as the 1920s ended and the 1930s began, Noël wrote and staged three of his greatest successes – the operetta Bitter Sweet, the definitive Cowardly comedy Private Lives and the epic Cavalcade, so that by 1931 the boy wonder of the 1920s had settled into an altogether more stable pattern of theatrical triumph, one which was best characterised by the partnership he had formed with Gertrude Lawrence. For her he had written Private Lives, redolent of Riviera balconies, filled with the potency of cheap music and shot through with the sadness of a couple who could live neither together nor apart, a couple who were in many incidental ways Noël and Gertie themselves. Six years later they played the West End and Broadway together again, though for the last time, in the nine short plays (among them Red Peppers, Shadow Play and the Still Life that became the movie Brief Encounter)
which made up the three alternating triple bills of Tonight at 8.30.

Between those two towering landmarks of their relationship, Coward also found the time to write Design for Living for Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, the revue Words and Music for the producer Charles Cochran, Conversation Piece for Yvonne Printemps and soon afterwards Operette for Fritzi Massary. ‘Throughout the 1930s in fact,’ he wrote later, ‘I was a highly publicised and irritatingly successful figure, much in demand. The critical laurels that had been so confidently predicted for me in my 20s never graced my brow, and I was forced to console myself with the bitter palliative of commercial success. Which I enjoyed very much indeed.’

Just before the outbreak of World War II, Coward had been sent to Paris to set up a propaganda operation, and when hostilities broke out he toured the world extensively doing troop shows which incidentally taught him a new art, the one that was to rescue him in Las Vegas and elsewhere when, in the 1950s, theatrical fashion turned against him – that of the solo cabaret concert. By now he had found a place in the sun in Jamaica where he could indulge his late-life love for painting, but his writing output was still prodigious: plays, films, poems, short stories, musicals, even a novel poured out of him, and increasingly he found character-acting roles in movies as varied as The Italian Job and Bunny Lake Is Missing.

The truth is that, although the theatrical and political world had changed considerably through the century for which he stood as an ineffably English icon, Noël himself changed very little. He just grew increasingly Cowardly, and well into his sixties was ever quick to find new ways to market
himself: in 1955 he and Mary Martin starred alone in Together with Music, the first-ever live 90-minute colour special on American television.

Noël Coward died, peacefully in Jamaica, on 26 March 1973 but (as John O’Hara said of George Gershwin) I don’t have to believe that if I don’t want to, and in any case he lives on in constant revival – not only the Haymarket Hay Fever but Simon Callow with Present Laughter and, at Chichester, several of the plays from Tonight at 8.30. It would be difficult if not impossible to summarise his success, the way he caught the mood of the 20th century’s successive but often very contrasted decades, the sheer energy of the workaholic output of a man who believed that work was always so much more fun than fun.

I’d be happy to leave the last words though with the man many thought of as Noël’s polar opposite, writer of the play which many believed (wrongly, as it turned out) would destroy him, but who in fact was always among his greatest fans. As John Osborne memorably once said, ‘The 20th Century would be incomplete without Noël Coward: he was simply a genius, and anyone who cannot see that should kindly leave the stage’.

Sheridan Morley is drama critic of the Daily Express; he wrote the first Coward biography, A Talent to Amuse, and devised the stage show Noël and Gertie; he is also a trustee of the Noël Coward Foundation.

Further information about Noël Coward may be found at www.noelcoward.com
1940’s Britain

‘Brief Encounter’ provides a great insight into British society, marriage and the role of women in that era. Despite there being a war on, Laura appears to have escaped the hardships of rationing or having to join the war effort, but she is nevertheless a tortured soul. It is clear that Laura’s marriage to Fred is a passionless one and that her role as a wife and mother is not fulfilling her. She is however, a typical middle class housewife of the 1940’s and in those days, to have an affair was truly scandalous.

In the 1940’s women who were married only went out to work if they were poverty stricken or of the right age (20-30) to be conscripted to help with the war effort. Once the war was over they were expected to return to their roles as housewives. It is difficult to imagine now but at that time, women were not welcomed in the workplace and it wasn’t until 1946 the post office and civil service allowed women to work for them.

And so, the average housewife’s routine revolved around her husband and children and any personal goals she may have she pushed aside in order to carry out what was expected of her as wife and mother.

Laura appears to be relatively content but it is clear that her marriage is more a marriage of convenience than of true love. During her encounters with Alec, she reveals her secret desires and passions, and it is through her attraction to Alec that she reveals her hidden personality.

The British ‘stiff upper lip’ is brilliantly demonstrated in ‘Brief Encounter’. It was a time when emotions were reserved and feelings kept secret so for Laura and Alec to have declared
their love for each other was both daring and risky. They both know however that they could not pursue their affair and the guilt that they felt, influenced by society’s view of adultery, forced them to go back to their marriages.
Activities

The following activities are suggestions for ways in which teachers can engage students with the themes and characters in the play.

In order to help you find the right activities for your class please refer to the overview below.

‘Love Letters’

Suggestions for Literacy based tasks exploring the themes of love and marriage. For some tasks the students are required to write from the perspective of a character from the play.

‘Debating Den’

The students are asked to arrange their classroom for a debating session. They need to elect a chair to manage the debate and a panel of experts who need to carry out research to support their argument. The rest of the students form the audience who can be asked for their input. A list of suggestions for debate is provided.

‘My wife is having an affair…’

This is a fun task that can be done prior to seeing the show. It encourages students to consider the viewpoints and feelings of people like Laura and Fred.
‘Reading between the lines’

The students are asked to consider what signals are sent out when two people are attracted to each other. What is acceptable behavior?

‘Examining Brief Encounter’

The students are given a series of questions to answer about the production of ‘Brief Encounter’ which will help them to write their own review of it.
‘Love Letters’

The following Literacy based activities can be used with your students after seeing the play ‘Brief Encounter’.

- **After the Affair** - Imagine you are either Alec or Laura and write a love letter to the other after the affair has ended. Decide how long it is after the affair and write about how life is now. Do you still feel the same way? How has it been since you last saw each other? Do you want to keep in touch?

- **Dear Diary** – Imagine you are Fred, Laura’s husband and write a diary entry for the day that Laura returns home and seems distracted by her thoughts. Do you know why she is like this? Are you aware of the cracks in your marriage? How do you feel about the fact that she went to the cinema with a stranger?

- **Agony Aunt** – Imagine you are an agony aunt for a women’s magazine and you have received a letter from Beryl about Stanley, asking for advice about love. What would you tell her? What sort of questions might she want answered? How will she know if it is love or lust that she feels for Stanley?

- **The Book of Love and Marriage** – Imagine you’ve been commissioned to write a book about attitudes towards love and marriage in 2008. Interview as many people as you can from as many different age groups.
and get their views. Use these to create your book. You could include photographs if any interviewees are willing to lend them. How do the views of different age groups compare or differ?
‘Debating Den’

This activity is designed to get your students debating issues raised by the themes of ‘Brief Encounter’.

The following list of issues can be discussed prior to reading the play or seeing the show or after.

1) **Marriage** – Do you believe in it? What are your views on divorce?

2) **Monogamy** – Can we really be happy if we commit to a relationship with just one partner for the rest of our lives?

3) **Adultery** – What do you think about extra-marital affairs?

4) **Love** – Does love conquer all? What would you do for the one you love?

5) **Sexuality** – Does it matter what your sexual preferences are? Should you keep your sexual habits to yourself? When is it ok to have sex?

**Setting up the Debate**

It is important to give the students the responsibility for setting up the room as they wish it to be. This will give them ownership of the debating den and encourage them to engage. Once the room is organised, introduce the topic for debate.

**Assigning the Roles**

Ask the students to volunteer to take on the various roles needed to hold a debate – chairperson/presenter, audience, experts. It is important to stress that you will need people to take on opposing points of view in order to make the debate
fair. Asking the students to do this will encourage them to consider other points of view and will help keep them engaged. Remember to make it clear to all students that they are in role so some people may be expressing views that are not their own. All students will need to carry out some research into the area for debate, especially those who are taking on the role of an expert.

**Let the Debate Begin**

Try as best you can to allow the students to manage their own debate but be on hand if it gets personal! Again, be clear when the debate is over and make sure that everyone comes out of role. Add to your list of issues for debate after you have seen the show.
‘My wife is having an affair…’

This is an activity which you can do prior to watching the play.

For this activity you will need to move tables and chairs in your classroom to resemble a TV station chat show. The task is to encourage an open debate in which the audience can participate like ‘Jeremy Kyle’ or ‘Trisha’. You will therefore need to identify someone to be the host (a role which you may prefer to take on yourself) and two people to take on the roles of the characters listed below. These two can be assisted with a small team of helpers who can give the characters advice about what they should say. The main dialogue can be improvised but Laura must admit to having the affair so that the audience can help Fred decide what to do.

Laura - Housewife, mother of two children, one boy, one girl. Married to Fred, a reliable, unemotional man who does not always pay great attention to Laura. She is a passionate but restrained woman who feels slightly restless in her married life. She has met another man and had a brief affair which she is deeply ashamed of. She does not ever want her husband to know and does not want her marriage to end.

Fred - Husband to Laura, father of their two children. Hardworking, consistent and steadfast man. Provider. Fred believes all is well in his world until he discovers that his wife Laura is having an affair. He wants to confront her and needs the help of the audience to do this. He does not want his marriage to end but he cannot ignore the affair.

It would be interesting to note what advice is given to Fred and Laura during this interaction and to re-visit the task after
viewing the play. Have people’s sympathies changed? Do they feel more strongly drawn to the plight of one or other character having watched the play? Why? Has the historical context affected their opinion? Does it make a difference that they only kissed?
‘Reading Between the Lines’

Gather together images of couples. It would be useful to have images of both young and old and you may wish to find images of characters from television programmes that the students watch.

Ask the students to get into pairs and to examine an image of a couple. After discussing it with their partner, ask the students to list all that they can read from the image.

Are the couple attracted to each other or are they just friends? How can you tell? Does one person seem more interested in the other? Have they had a row? How can you tell? If the two people are talking, what might they be saying to one another? How does the way they are dressed affect the way they are perceived?

Once they have done this, ask the students to swap their picture with another pair and repeat the exercise. When all pairs have examined two images ask the students to get into groups with those who have looked at the same image and compare notes.

When all groups have had time to discuss the images, ask them to consider what we see as acceptable expressions of love in British society. How does this compare to other countries and cultures?
‘Discussing Brief Encounter’

The following activity is designed to help students to develop a critical mind when viewing a piece of theatre or reading a play.

The following questions can be used as a starting point for discussion, an essay or a review.

1) What does the story of Brief Encounter tell us about marriage in the 1940’s?

2) How is the sexual tension shown on stage between the two characters of Laura and Alec?

3) Compare the courtship of Beryl and Stanley to the affair of Laura and Alec, what are the differences, what are the similarities?

4) What does the tide represent?

5) How effective is the use of screen projection throughout the play?

6) What do the spoof adverts in the interval tell us about how women were viewed at that time?

7) What do you notice about the speech patterns and mannerisms of Laura and Alec compared to the other characters in the play? What does this tell us about their social standing?

8) What do you think stops Laura from ending her life?

9) If Laura and Alec were to have met in today’s society what might happen?
10) In what way does the writing influence your opinion of the characters?
Bibliography

Can Any Mother Help Me? Jenna Bailey

When, in 1935, a young woman wrote a letter to the women’s magazine "Nursery World" women from all over the country wrote back expressing similar frustrations. This work brings together this collection of personal stories following an extraordinary group of women.

Useful Links

The Noel Coward Estate

http://www.noelcoward.com

BBC Radio 4 interviews with Noel Coward

www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/audiointerviews/profilepages/cowardn1.shtml