

Alan Cumming: 'Noël Coward was a victim of the English class system'

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It was doing some of Noël Coward's short plays at drama school that exposed me to him — he hadn't been a huge figure to me before that. My real breakthrough came when I acted with Dominic West and Jennifer Ehle in his 1932 play *Design for Living* on Broadway in 2001. That was a very big thing for me. And that play is still ahead of its time in terms of what it was talking about. I guess you'd call it polyamory now. The idea that he wrote that when he did was fascinating to me.

Certainly he started out as more of an activist than we tend to think. It's Coward the light comedian that has won out in the public consciousness, the veneer of martinis and bons mots. But underneath that there were some beautiful songs that are much more telling of his character — and those great early plays.

In between *Design for Living* and *Barnaby Thompson* getting in

touch to ask me to narrate his new documentary film *Mad About the Boy*, I had read many books about Coward and sung a few of his songs on stage. I found I loved the work, but was really taken by the way he came in and out of favour and fashion as the decades went on. And also how he was a man with a secret.

To some extent that's about his sexuality. Yet there is the character of Nicky Lancaster in his breakthrough play *The Vortex* (1924) and the threeway of *Design for Living*. At that stage in his career in particular he would challenge things, push boundaries and upset depictions of relationships or sexuality. And that was at the time of the lord chamberlain censoring theatre.

You didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to work out that he was a gay man. It was in his work and his appearance. Even if he couldn't be open to the public about it: that wasn't an option. The bigger secret was his class. You could say he was a class traitor — he didn't want to admit where he was from [a lower-middle-class background in south London]. Again, he was a victim of his time, of a rigid English class system where you can't leave your bracket.

For Coward to be the artist he wanted to be and to have the life he wanted to have, he had to invent this kind of aristocratic persona. I suppose we've all done that in some way. We're all in a state of transition, from where we were born to where we end up. We go down or we go up. Still, he was ashamed of where he came from and went to great lengths to hide it. He radically changed his place in the world. In those days before social media, before documentary series, it was easier to keep up a façade in this way. People weren't encouraged to be authentic. They were encouraged to invent a persona and stick to it. He certainly did that.

And a persona can be misleading. When I did *Design for Living* I had

just come off the back of a success on Broadway, playing the emcee in *Cabaret*. I was seen as sexually free or ambivalent, a pansexual sprite. The only thing we added was that Dominic and I had a kiss at the end of the second act. Yet because it was me and because I brought a lot of unuseful baggage to that production at the time, people thought we had formed it around me and my "brand". We hadn't done anything. We just added a kiss. So I really admired how Coward had managed to put his message out in the Twenties.

History didn't really treat Coward that kindly for a while. With the arrival of the Angry Young Men in playwriting in the Fifties he became an object of derision. He was probably overexposed: the plays are easy to do, they don't have huge casts, they were done by a lot of rep theatres and they were taken as a safe option. Yet he got his reputation back. He ended up doing cabaret in Las Vegas, hugely successfully. His old plays started to reappear in London.

There is a story about a young actress in the Sixties who went for lunch with Coward and made the mistake of not complimenting him. After the meal, he said: "You know my dear I haven't heard you say a single word about my work." She said: "Oh no, Mr Coward, I'm a huge fan, it's such an honour to work with you." He said: "My dear, everybody needs jam." And as funny and dopey or camp as that seems, it's true.

So, when we did *Design for Living*, I gave everyone jars of jam for opening night. And on the jars was written the acronym SNET, which Jennifer Ehle had got from [the actress and director] Maria Aitken when she spoke to her about how to play Coward. SNET stands for Style, Naturalism, Energy and Turning on a sixpence. It unlocked Coward for me.

Style: definitely. Naturalism: well, it's not really naturalism, it's a

heightened reality, but . . . Energy: of course. And you have to be able to make it erudite and snappy, but be able to change the mood in a moment, turn it on a sixpence. It was only with SNET that I finally grasped what my teachers had been trying to teach me at drama school about Coward. You have to find the music in it.

At the time we were a ragtag bunch of young Scottish actors wanting to be doing more contemporary things, not be coerced into using English accents in drawing rooms. But we learnt to enjoy doing this weird little dance with these characters who are not real people, but who you feel for all the same.

And it's the same with the range of his songs. Some of them are really clever. You can't possibly understand all the gags when you first hear one. And then there are beautiful, soulful ones about yearning and longing and loss as well. I love singing *If Love Were All*, for example.

As a singer, Coward is one of those people who is so brilliant and fast; his diction is incredible. I've never sung any of his quick songs. I think it's a skill, but it's not something that I want to be able to do. I only sing the mournful ones.

That was Coward. And in a way it goes back to this persona he created, masking the true self. He dazzles with his wit and genius and brilliance. You're not always getting the true thing. Once in a while you do. In a way, it left him as this brilliant puppet in the end, because he didn't know who he was. He invented this character so well, he couldn't get away from it.

And, in a way, who cares? The documentary is all about that, of course, but his legacy is some incredible pieces of writing, incredible prewar explorations of social mores and sexuality that no other British playwright was doing. He was, and remains, utterly

fascinating.

As told to Dominic Maxwell

Mad About the Boy — The Noël Coward Story is in cinemas nationally on June 1 with a Q&A with Barnaby Thompson, then on general release from June 2, altitude.film