

Radio "Conversation Piece"

AS any delver into the byways of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries knows, a "conversation piece" is a delightfully stylised group painting, usually of a family relaxing on the exquisitely-tended lawn of a Stately Home, or sitting with stiff grace around the dining-table in a panelled salon. In their charming way these "conversation pieces" re-create the air of a society and an age, much as the novels of Jane Austen or Mrs. Mitford do.



NOËL COWARD, who will present his own "Conversation Piece" in ZB "Sunday Showcase" on November 14

Noël Coward's delicate and beguiling *Conversation Piece* is an animation of such a painting, a witty and quaint telling in theatrical terms of an entertaining episode set in the Brighton of 1811. It was the England of fat, pleasure-loving Prince George and scheming Becky Sharp, of Keats and Shelley, of Byron and of Wellington. It was an age of gossip and intrigue, of brilliant, mannered conversation, of dazzling balls, of rich clothes, of brittle gaiety. Mingling somewhat uneasily with English society were members of the French aristocracy who had managed to escape Napoleon's clutches. Such a French aristocrat is Paul, Duc de Chaucigny-Verennes, played by Noël Coward. He has brought with him the lovely and innocent Melanie (played by the opera star Lily Pons), whom he proposes to marry off to the highest bidder among wealthy young Englishmen. How Paul's plot seems at first to flourish and how in the end it is happily thwarted is the theme of the play.

Noël Coward wrote *Conversation Piece* for the exquisite French singer-

actress Yvonne Printemps. She and the author played the principal roles when *Conversation Piece* was first presented in London in 1934. Also in the cast were George Sanders and Louis Hayward. When the play crossed to America in the same year the distinguished French actor Pierre Fresnay took over the Coward role.

Arranging *Conversation Piece* for recording and radio presented special problems of indicating time and place. However, the happy thought occurred to Coward of writing some new verses which would set the scene brightly and informatively. He speaks them himself.

Every member of the radio version's cast is a player of distinction. Cathleen Nesbitt (Lady Julia Charteris) played another Julia in the American company of T. S. Eliot's *Cocktail Party*; Richard Burton (the Marquis of Sheere) created the hero's role in *The Lady's Not for Burning*, and has since been outstandingly successful in films and on the stage with the Old Vic Company. Ethel Griffies (the Duchess of Beneden) is an experienced Broadway actress. The songs are fragrantly romantic, like "I'll Follow My Secret Heart," or typically, wittily caustic, like "Roistering Regency Rakes."

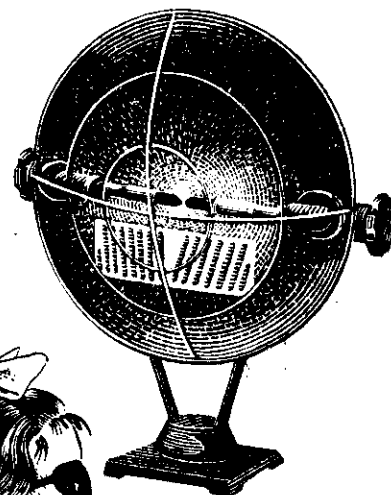
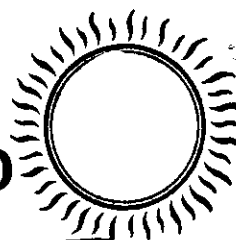
ZB "Sunday Showcase" features *Conversation Piece*, by Noël Coward, on Sunday, November 14, at 9.35 p.m. Lily Pons (see also page 28) has the leading role of Melanie, and Coward himself takes the male lead as Paul, Duc de Chaucigny-Verennes.



RICHARD BURTON

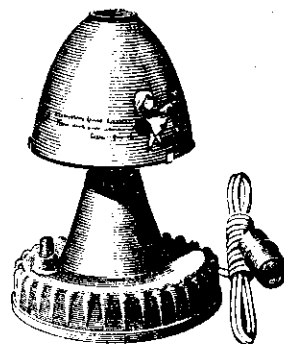
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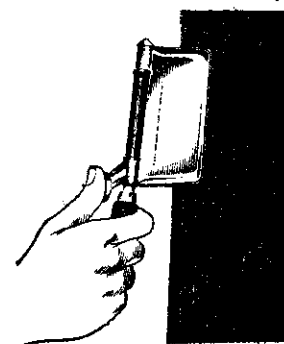


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