



A "Mad Dog of an Englishman"

Noel Coward Talked of "Cavalcade" to Margaret Macpherson, the Writer of this Article

"THERE are some people," I said to a Theosophist friend of mine the other day, "who are so far ahead of the rest of us in brains, kindness and comprehension, that they might have come from another planet. They're a different species from the inhabitants of this world."

"I know," he nodded sapiently. "They are souls from the planet Venus. They incarnate in this world for some special mission. They're usually blue-eyed and musical, and they believe in everyone."

Blue-eyed and musical and infinitely tolerant and kindly. . . . I see it all! That's how we got our Noel Coward and his music. This boy who throws off a three-act play with the ease that you throw off your hat seems to have overcome all the clumsy laws of life (except, perhaps, that of gravity) as though he were a fairy.

As a matter of fact, Noel *was* once a fairy. His first appearance on any stage took place at Manchester when he was eleven. He was Prince Mussel in a fairy play called "The Goldfish." Since then Fate has tried to turn him from a mussel into a whale, but Noel Coward, despite his brilliant successes, remains an irritatingly modest young man who entirely fails to impress you with his importance.

I first came into contact with him over a theory I had about his great play "Cavalcade." It was put on, as you know, as a patriotic play, all flags and drums and national glory. But when I saw it at Drury Lane Theatre, I said to myself "Unless I am a born fool, this is not a jingoistic play, but the opposite. Unless I am completely misunderstanding this young man, the public are misunderstanding him, for he has written a peace play, an inspired and impassioned protest against war." Having hatched this idea, my next action was to put it to Mr. Coward. He received me very kindly and he was genuinely grateful for my recognition of what "Cavalcade" was driving at. He thanked me for the "kindness," the "generosity" and the "insight" of all I said. Really, I was touched to the heart.

In a world which worships male beauties like Ramon Novarro and Clark Gable, it is refreshing to find that our greatest young man has a most endearing ugliness of countenance. But his eyes are of twilight blue and his smile lights up his face. He himself does not at all consider that he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He remembers many bitter failures and disappointments in his career. His first important adult appearance was a dismal failure—that was as leading actor in "I'll Leave It to You," in 1920. The play only

ran a few days. But Noel has not only gifts, but "guts." He has received many knock-out blows, but he always stepped smiling into the ring again until the wonderful time came when he had five plays all running at one time in London and America.

He considers that "Bitter Sweet" is his best musical piece; "Hay Fever" his best comedy (this delicious and impish play took him exactly three days to write), and "The Vortex" his best drama. But the "very best" is always, of course, the next . . . the one that he is about to write.

Mr. Coward is an actor as well as a playwright. His plays don't, as a matter of fact, "read" well, but they "act" beautifully. He is not married. Listening to one of his love-songs on the wireless the other day, I said, "He will never marry. It all goes into this."

"What? Who? What do you mean?"

"Noel Coward. All the love and tenderness and care and resourcefulness that others give to their homes and children he gives to his work. The world is richer because he doesn't marry and produce children—he produces his art instead."

And, supposing he did come from Venus on a mission, what *is* his mission? Is it to entertain us? Or is it to teach us something? When the indignant wowers attacked him for his drunken-woman scene in "Fallen Angels," why were they so angry? Was that scene a malicious invention, or was it too true to be good? The Twentieth Century Blues song in "Cavalcade"—does it show us a worthless English youth or does it accuse us of making such a mess of society that our young folks won't work and plan simply because working and planning under present conditions is futile? Is Coward merely exploiting our follies and miseries, or is he holding up the mirror before us so that we may see them clearly and redress them?

The answer is simply: It all depends on how you look at it. Some people feel simply entertained by him; some feel rebuked; some feel inspired. But when I hear people contend that Noel Coward is not serious, then I remember his gratitude to one of the few people who tried to think out for themselves what "Cavalcade" really meant. When Jesus of Nazareth taught his flock I have no doubt there were hundreds who followed him because it was so entertaining to see him do his wonderful conjuring tricks, blind alike to the meaning of the miracles and the lessons. So it is with our great men; we do not value them until they have passed. (Yes, yes, I know Noel makes £100,000 a year. But do you call that valuing him?)