

# HAY FEVER

*by Noel Coward*

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**April 22 - May 16**

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## WHO'S WHO IN HAY FEVER

### The Bliss Family

Judith Bliss, the mother, is a retired actress. She is trying to enjoy life in the country, but can't survive without the work and the attention of a life in the theatre, and has converted all the world to a stage and all the men and women to supporting players. She likes to "dabble" with admiring young men.

David Bliss, the father, is a successful novelist. "He writes brilliantly" according to one admirer, but, his son adds, "drinks too much tea."

Simon Bliss, their son, is a cartoonist. He is quite content with the eccentricities of his family.

Sorel Bliss, their daughter, is, in her mother's words a "vigorous ingenue of nineteen." She has her doubts about the peculiarities of her family and wishes they were more "normal and bouncing."

Clara used to be Judith's dresser; now she is the maid-of-all-work for the Blisses, since other servants won't stay with them.

### The Guests

Sandy Tyrell is a young admirer of Judith's. He has "an unspoiled youthful sense of honor and a misplaced enthusiasm for boxing."

Myra Arundel is an older woman with whom Simon is infatuated, although she has her eye on David. Both men refer appreciatively to her intelligence; Judith, on the other hand, calls her "a self-conscious vampire."

Richard Greatham is a diplomatist who has traveled to foreign countries a great deal. Sorel's doubts about her family spring from her fear that their behavior will shock the proper "Pet of the Foreign Office."

Jackie Coryton is David's guest. He calls her "a perfectly sweet flapper" and "an abject fool, but a useful type," and he wants to make notes so he can use her in a novel.

## HAY FEVER--a synopsis

ACT I: The beautiful retired actress Judith Bliss is spending the weekend at her country house near Cookham with her husband, David Bliss, the author, their hobble-dehoy artist son, Simon, and their pretty daughter, Sorel. Unknown to the others, each of them has invited someone to stay: Sorel's choice is a suave diplomatist, Richard Greatham; Simon has an "awfully amusing" friend, Myra Arundel (whom Judith considers "a self-conscious vampire" and far too old for him); Judith's own guest is a young sportsman named Sandy Tyrell; while David has invited "a perfectly sweet flapper", who is an abject fool, he admits, but a useful type for him to study. Each wants the "Japanese room" reserved, and Clara -- the ex-dresser housekeeper -- is thoroughly out of temper, especially as the housemaid is ill with toothache.

In the family scene that follows these revelations, Sorel bursts into tears and Judith announces her intention of returning to the stage. They are in the midst of acting a dramatic moment from one of her successes, LOVE'S WHIRLWIND, when the door-bell rings. The first guest -- Judith's hearty young admirer, Sandy Tyrell -- has arrived. Sorel and Simon give him a chilling reception and go off upstairs.

Sandy is surprised that Judith has grown-up children, and even more so to learn that she is living with her husband (whom he thought dead). However, his admiration withstands these shocks and he is soon settled comfortably on the sofa with Judith, deciding that they must have been friends in a previous reincarnation, when they are interrupted by the arrival of Myra. She greets Judith effusively, explaining (untruthfully) that she has been invited by Sorel.

Judith takes Sandy upstairs and sends Simon down. He has spruced himself up for Myra's benefit and makes love to her with an engaging youthful awkwardness.

The remaining guests --Richard Greatham and David's "sweet flapper", Jackie Coryton -- arrive together, having waited for the return of the only station taxi engaged by Myra. Unceremoniously, Simon takes Myra off into the garden, leaving the visitors alone. They are making polite conversation when Judith comes downstairs, followed by Sandy, his arms full of cushions. Without paying any attention to the others, they go out into the garden.

Richard goes on trying to entertain Jackie until at last Sorel appears, full of apologies, sends the girl off to find David in his study, and settles down to talk to him. Clara then begins to set the tea; the rest of the party gather and are mutually introduced. The curtain falls on their disjointed attempts to get a conversation started.

ACT II: Parlour games after dinner on Saturday evening are not a success. The family choose "adverbs", which none of the guests

knows how to play, but which Judith enjoys, as she is the one person who knows how to act "in the manner of the word". Sorel is sent outside while, after protracted argument, the others decide upon "winsomely". Jackie, who is (or pretends to be) very shy, says it is a hateful game and she doesn't want to play; but she apologises so "winsomely" to Sorel for her stupidity that the word is guessed at once.

There is a general family quarrel, which ends in Simon taking Jackie into the garden and Sorel retreating into the library with Sandy. David pairs off with Myra, leaving Judith and Richard all alone.

This is Judith's opportunity to make a dead set at him. After she has sung him a French song, told him she is "wistful and weary", and established themselves on a Christian-name footing, she asks for a cigarette. Bending forward to light it, he kisses her on the neck. Judith then dramatically declares that her husband must be "told everything"....Her life had been only a hollow shell, but now once more she is under the magic spell of romance. She pushes her highly embarrassed and alarmed victim out into the garden, telling him to "wait for her".

Opening the library door in search of her husband, she is shocked to find Sorel and Sandy embracing. They come out, looking rather sheepish. Judith plays a grand "renunciation" scene, giving Sandy up to Sorel, and goes upstairs, leaving her daughter to explain that, in their family, no one ever means what they say. She knows perfectly well that Sandy doesn't love her, and insists that he is under no obligation to her.

They go back into the library just as David comes in with Myra, who tells him that she only accepted the invitation because she admired his work so much and wanted to meet him. On the contrary, admits David, his novels are very bad, and she, being an intelligent person, must know it. After a sparring flirtation, when he exasperates her into slapping his face, he takes her in his arms and kisses her.

From the top of the stairs Judith sees this and, with tremendous enjoyment, stages another renunciation scene, sweeping aside Myra's attempts to protest. She has barely finished when Simon rushes in from the garden announcing his engagement to a bewildered and somewhat reluctant Jackie.

Myra at last makes herself heard, declaring that: "This house is a complete feather-bed of false emotions -- you're posing, self-centered egotists, and I'm sick to death of you." This precipitates a scene in which they all try to shout one another

down. In the midst of it Richard enters, somewhat apprehensive that this may be a result of Judith having confessed that she loves him.

"What's happened?" he asks. "Is this a game?"

"Yes!" replies Judith. "And a game that must be played to the finish." It is a cure for the melodramatic finale of LOVE'S WHIRLWIND, and the family, who know it by heart, play up to her. They go through it with gusto, up to the point where Judith falls in a swoon, while the guests look on, "dazed and aghast".

ACT III: It is about ten o'clock on Sunday morning. Sandy is making a hasty breakfast when Jackie comes downstairs looking very miserable. She bursts into tears and opines that the Blisses are all mad and that she doesn't want to be engaged to Simon. Sandy agrees that Judith's forcing tactics are very upsetting, and that he was relieved when Sorel released him from their engagement. Having bolted his breakfast, he gets hiccups, and Jackie, picking up the sugar-bowl, takes him into the library to try a cure that consists of drinking coffee from the wrong side of the cup, "sort of upside-down".

Myra and Richard then appear and discuss the situation. After a night in the suffocating boiler-room (known to the family as "Little Hell"), he feels unwell, but Myra is very bright. As there is no sugar, they ring for Clara, who is mystified at its disappearance; but at a shriek from Jackie she rushes into the library: the hiccups experiment has led them to break the cup and spill coffee all over the carpet....However, the shock has effected a cure.

All four guests then agree that they cannot stand another day in the house. There is no train for some hours, so Sandy offers to take them all back to London in his car. Richard, on behalf of the party, tips Clara, and they go upstairs to pack.

Judith then comes down, followed by Sorel, and they look at the theatre news in the Sunday papers. Simon brings in one of his sketches, while David, in great glee, announces that he has just finished his novel. He starts to read the final pages, with interruptions from the family.

A violent argument ensues when he makes his heroine, in her scarlet Hispano, sweep "out of the Rue St. Honore into the Place de la Concorde". They have no map of Paris, but Judith declares categorically that this street does not run into the Place de la Concorde; David demonstrates with the breakfast crockery; Simon starts to draw a map, and they work themselves up to such a pitch of fury that they do not even notice when the visitors,

suitcases in hand, creep downstairs. They are, however, roused by the slam of the front door, and when Sorel sees the car drive away they realise that everyone has gone. Beyond a casual comment that "people really do behave in a most extraordinary manner these days", they take no notice, but, the dispute forgotten, let David go on reading out the end of his novel.

## PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Noel Pierce Coward was born in Teddington, Middlesex, England on Dec. 16, 1899. From a modest middle-class background with a father who sold pianos and a mother who ran a boardinghouse, Coward appeared in local school and church concerts until the age of 12, when he appeared in his first professional role as Prince Mussel in *THE GOLDFISH* (1911). Over the next eight years, Coward's reputation as a child star grew, his smugly clean appearance and precociously glib sense of humor bringing him roles in no less than 24 professional productions.

His career as an author began with *THE RAT TRAP* (1918) and *I'LL LEAVE IT TO YOU* (1919) in which he starred. This was the beginning of the Coward author-performer style: he would appear regularly and almost exclusively in plays he wrote. The list of his 27 plays includes *THE VORTEX* (1923), *HAY FEVER* (1925), *PRIVATE LIVES* (1930), *DESIGN FOR LIVING* (1932), *BLITHE SPIRIT* (1941), *QUADRILLE* (1951), and *NUDE WITH VIOLIN* (1954). Always fashionable and immensely popular, his plays have introduced and showcased such now famous stars as Gertrude Lawrence, Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Mary Martin, Claudette Colbert and Rex Harrison.

Coward wrote over 280 songs, many of which he premiered, a remarkable feat for someone who never learned to read or write musical notation and had to rely on a transcriber and his own natural sense of tone. In addition to his theatrical work, Coward's credits include three autobiographies, a number of volumes of short stories, a novel, the screenplay to his critically acclaimed film *IN WHICH WE SERVE* (in which he starred), and countless newspaper and magazine articles. A successful cabaret entertainer as well, Coward's life was spent in or near the spotlight and his image is a curious mixture of aristocrat, raconteur, social commentator and comedian; the elegant philanderer whose good humor and tolerance of the follies and foibles of people is presented to the audience to amuse, careful never to become overly critical, sentimental or cynical.

While preparing for a new show in 1973, Noel Coward died of a heart attack at his villa in Jamaica. His work remains popular today. After all, as he once asked, "Since when has laughter been insignificant?" The plays of Noel Coward continue to be performed and enjoyed throughout the English-speaking world.

## NOEL COWARD AND THE POPULAR THEATRE

Students of theatre often find themselves baffled when asked to place the plays of Noel Coward in the history of modern drama. Should you put his work in chronological order with the other writers of his day, say between Strindberg and Tennessee Williams? Somehow the lightness and frivolity of Coward seems far removed from the more solemn and serious works of Eugene O'Neill, John

Synge, or Arthur Miller, all of whom wrote during the same years as Coward. There seems a difference between them (how we should classify their achievements) and there is. These playwrights wrote mainly innovative, serious plays which dealt with the moral and intense emotions of characters caught up in psychological intrigues or dramatically revealing situations. Often powerful and didactic, many of the works of these playwrights were considered avante-garde or unorthodox and experimental at the time, diverging from the more generally accepted and enjoyed classical theatre of Shakespeare, and very different from the light comedy and highly popular musicals and drawing room plays of what is known, then as now, as Popular Theatre.

This kind of theatre, the Popular Theatre, is the theatre to which Noel Coward belonged. Flocked to by audiences in the 1920's and 1930's who didn't feel self-conscious or ashamed to be entertained and amused, plays "for the great public" were actually preferred over the often scolding and harrowing sessions of rebuffs and misery which serious drama always seemed to hinge on. The art of Popular Theatre is not to introduce new ideas or delineate moral lessons but to entertain in the simplest sense of that word. Melodramas, light comedies, musicals and revues which featured dancing and singing were the mainstay of Popular Theatre, all performed with a showmanship of style and panache which highlighted not only the material presented but the star, whose personality could not be contained in a role but extended beyond the footlights directly to the audience.

Often witty, satirical and always amusing, the tradition of Popular Theatre can boast a long list of the famous and glamorous, whose talents have elevated and supported its perennial success. The works of such writers as Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Somerset Maugham, such actors as Maurice Chevalier, Rex Harrison, Lawrence Olivier, Beatrice Lillie, Alfred Lunt and Gertrude Lawrence and great songwriters such as Gershwin, Kern, Porter, Rogers and Lowe all could be found in the mainstream of Popular Theatre in their day. Coward, whose versatility in so many fields of theatre placed him at one time or another in comparison to these artists, was devoted to Popular Theatre despite the laments of critics who thought his talents demanded he write more 'serious' drama. To make certain that his idea of what theatre should be was understood, Coward offered a definition of good "important" theatre:

"I believe that the great public by which I've lived all these years should not be despised or patronized or forced to accept esoteric ideas in the theater in the name of culture or social problems or what not. I'm sick



of the assumption that plays are "important" only if they deal with some extremely urgent current problems.

Problems? We live with them all day, every day, all our lives. Do we have to have them in the theater every night, too? I was brought up in the belief that the theater is primarily a place of entertainment.

The audience wants to laugh or cry or be amused. Swift entertainment - not strange allegories."

#### HAY FEVER, STYLE AND THE ACTOR

HAY FEVER is considered by many to be Coward's best comedy. First performed at the Ambassadors Theatre, London, on June 6, 1925, it was an instant success. The central recurrent spark of energy throughout the play is rudeness, but of an affectionate and positive stamp. The Blisses are unconsciously rude mainly because they are totally comfortable with each other and presume no malice. Their put-downs and defenses are casual, as if part of a game; they are simply too fond of one another to be seriously offended or vindictive.

By creating a simple setting and avoiding any complicated plot, Coward gives the characters full rein to indulge in the poses and affectations of sentimental melodrama. The Blisses play to the hilt the required dismay, courage or passion the scene they are in requires. It is all marvelous good fun, touched with satire and a veneer of stylized theatricality.

The script itself is razor sharp and economic; words and scenes are placed carefully like tiles in a mosaic or musical notes in a song to create a fine coolness of rhythm and balance between egotistical vanity and witty charm. Although seemingly light in content, the dialogue is constructed to reveal with pinpoint accuracy the truth of what is going on, while being certain never to sacrifice one smile of amusement or delight inherent in a curt reply or sudden pose.

Because of the play's fine drollness, the audience must be able to read a character's thoughts and to understand what is left unsaid. For this to occur the expert technique of each actor must be called upon; he or she must create the correct attitude of sophisticated detachment and originality of wit recognized as the Coward style. Posture, for example, or the way one pronounces a word, or how one picks up a coffee cup must convey a sense of style, mannered elegance and lightness of mood for the quick repartee and witty finesse which are the keystones of HAY FEVER and other Coward Comedies. Coward

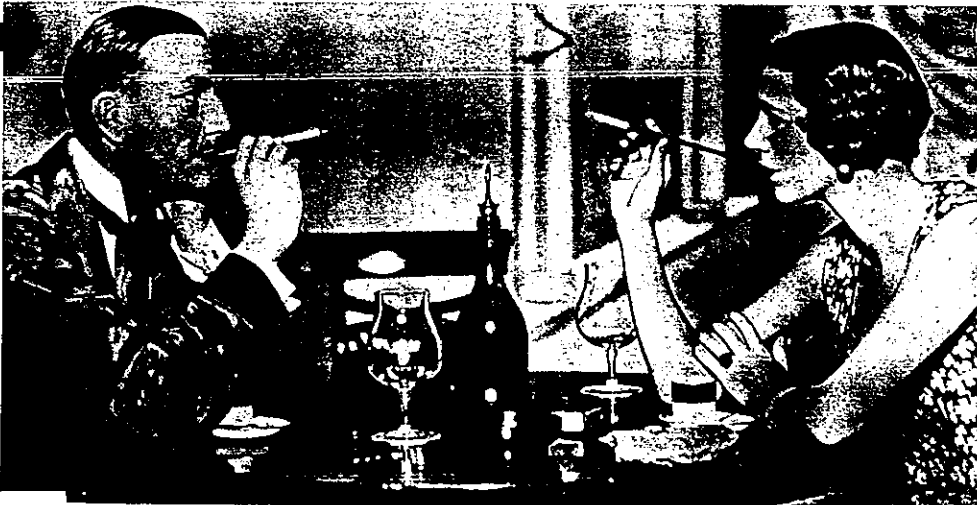
was very much aware of this. He once said that "from the professional standpoint HAY FEVER is far and away one of the most difficult plays to perform that I have ever encountered."

This challenge to the actor is a consistent element in the performance of Coward's plays. When it is met, the result is brilliant and dazzling. Witnessing such a union, one critic has likened it to a "Sparkling moment which seemed to send forth a marvelous light, enhancing our view of human nature with a delightful fineness and joy for living."

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# Noel Coward's Comedy of Bad Manners

In May 1921, a 22-year-old British writer and actor, Noel Coward, set sail for the United States in what was to be the first of many visits in a long and famous career. Far from being the international raconteur he was to become, he was, in fact, nearly penniless, and



Coward and lifelong friend and frequent co-star, Gertrude Lawrence, in Coward's *Private Lives*, London, 1930.

On Sunday evenings up on Riverside Drive we had cold supper and played games, often rather acrimonious games, owing to Laurette's abrupt disapproval of any guest (whether invited by Hartley, Marguerite, Dwight or herself) who turned out to be self-conscious, nervous or unable to

## The Creation of Hay Fever

still virtually unknown. He wrote, many years later, in his autobiography **PRESENT INDICATIVE:**

*To have embarked for America with a bundle of manuscripts, a one-way ticket, and only 17 pounds to spare was, I suppose, rather foolhardy. . . . Admittedly, my faith in my own talents remained unwavering, but it did seem unduly optimistic to suppose that the Americans would be perceptive enough to see me immediately in the same light in which I saw myself. In this I was perfectly right. They didn't.*

Of course the light in which Coward saw himself was as an aspiring and deserving star. Having performed professionally since age 12, Coward had already landed two or three leading parts in London and in 1920, had written and starred in his own play, a tradition he was to continue through much of his career. But New York was not as kind to the youthful Coward, and much of his maiden trip to America was spent bemoaning the fact that most of the Broadway theatres

were closed in the summer and "every theatrical manager in America seemed to have vanished completely."

Over this summer of 1921, Coward did make some influential friends: David Belasco, George Kaufman, Tallulah Bankhead, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, and an eccentric theatrical family comprised of British playwright J. Hartley Manners, his American wife, actress Laurette Taylor (for whom Manners had written *PEG O' MY HEART*), and Laurette's grown children from an earlier marriage, Dwight and Marguerite. Coward was to spend some pleasant hours that summer in the Manners' household—in addition to meeting some very interesting people at their parties, including Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford—but most importantly, these visits to the Manners' oddly populated house planted the seed for what was to become his wittiest early comedy, *HAY FEVER*.

In recalling the genesis of this play Coward wrote:

*act an adverb or an historical personage with proper abandon. There were also, very often, shrill arguments concerning rules. These were waged entirely among the family, and frequently ended in all four of them leaving the room and retiring upstairs, where, later on, they might be discovered by any guest bold enough to go in search of them, amicably drinking tea in the kitchen.*

*It was inevitable that someone should eventually utilize portions of this eccentricity in a play, and I am only grateful to Fate that no guest of the Hartley Manners thought of writing *HAY FEVER* before I did.*

Coward didn't think of writing it himself until three years later when the idea struck him as he was recovering from a cold at his mother's suburban cottage:

*The idea came to me suddenly in the garden, and I finished it in about three days, a fact which later on, when I had become news value, seemed to excite gossip-writers inordinately, although why the public should care*

*whether a play takes three days or three years to write I shall never understand. Perhaps they don't.*

Upon reading the finished play, Coward concluded, with characteristic presumption, that it would be a good stage vehicle for Marie Tempest, a leading actress of the day. Although Tempest considered the 25-year-old playwright "as clever as a bag of monkeys," she refused the play, claiming it to be too light and plotless. Again Coward retired to his mother's, this time to create the play which was to establish him as a theatrical sensation, *THE VORTEX*, in which he also starred, in the autumn of 1924.

In less than a year, Coward became the talk of the town, and this time it was Marie Tempest's agents who approached Coward on the subject of *HAY FEVER*. The play had suddenly begun to appeal to her and the youthful playwright was engaged to direct it. Despite mixed reviews—"the gayest, brightest, most amusing entertainment in London," "amusing, slight, tedious, witty and brittle"—the play ran triumphantly for a year, and added considerably to the reputation of its playwright who was quickly becoming known as the master of the comedy of bad manners.

Coward's plays typify the spirit of gayety and momentum which permeated the 1920's. He became the darling of a giddy generation dancing as fast as they could away from the "narrowmindedness, the moral righteousness and the over-rigid social codes" of their parents' Victorian world. His comedies are peopled with flippant members of the high-society, who discuss frankly every aspect of their new Bohemian lifestyles with careless abandon. Coward saw himself as holding up a mirror to the manners of his age which were "no more degenerate or decadent than any other civilized age, the only difference is that the usual conglomeration of human vices have come to the surface a little more lately, and there is mercifully a little less hypocrisy about."

World War I had made it easy to

doubt the certainty that ordered, genteel behavior could save society, and Coward's generation, like Fitzgerald's in America, turned to the pursuit of pleasure and the self-centered development of one's own talents and opinions as the only surety in a rapidly changing world. Coward himself personified this generation, devoted to the development of "talentocracy," as critic John Lahr has so aptly christened the 20's international set. It was no longer sufficient merely to be a member of the aristocracy, one must also be some sort of performer—one's life must achieve the lofty heights of art. Coward's life became his art form and like that later phenomenon of self-marketing, Andy Warhol, his genius was for style. Coward's massive output of 60 produced plays (including *PRIVATE LIVES*, 1930; *CAVALCADE*, 1931; *DESIGN FOR LIVING*, 1933; *PRESENT LAUGHTER*, 1939; *BLITHE SPIRIT*, 1941), over 300 published songs, screenplays, short stories, autobiography and fiction made him legendary and all were, in one manner or another, vehicles for his own talent.

This brand of self-absorption so typical of the 20's and 30's faded in the wake of the Depression and World War II, but Coward's dedication to high spirits remained unswerving. His wit,



Adele Astaire, Noel Coward, and Fred Astaire in London, 1923.

charm and sentiment seemed trivial beside such inescapable facts as the decay of the British Empire, the welfare state and the threat of nuclear annihilation. As charm fell victim to social conscience in the 50's Coward's fame faltered and English critics came to consider his light entertainments outdated. He then turned his attentions to America where, in places such as Las Vegas, the time-honored traditions of sheer entertainment and performer charisma held secure. There, Coward experienced a renaissance as a nightclub performer in the 1960's.

And just as *HAY FEVER* had been instrumental in launching Coward's career 40 years earlier, so it was *HAY FEVER* that made Coward a classic. In 1964, the National Theatre, under the leadership of Coward's old friend Laurence Olivier, proposed a revival of *HAY FEVER* starring Dame Edith Evans and directed by the playwright himself. The cast included Robert Stephens, Maggie Smith and Lynn Redgrave, and proved a smash hit, which reinstated Coward into the ranks of the esteemed. He was knighted on his seventieth birthday and died shortly thereafter, in 1973. Fashions had come and gone and come again, and Coward's distinct brand of urbane wit and charm remained constant.

Janet Allen

# COWARD

## ON COMEDY



"It has always seemed to me to be the business of comedy to hold the mirror up to the foibles of humanity--vanity, prejudice, sexual confusion, and so on. These were the materials of comic writers since the time of Aristophanes. If comedy is also useful in bringing about social change, that is all to the good. Since I first began to write plays, the world has changed considerably, but not in the least bit because of them.

... In my deep Christian subconscious there was the gnawing suspicion that I was nothing but a jester, a foolish, capering lightweight with neither depths nor real human understanding; that immediately after my death, if not a long while before, my name would be obliterated from public memory. ... It was only a little while ago that, to quote one of my own characters, 'it came upon me in a blinding flash' that I had already written several important plays ... important because they had given a vast number of people a great deal of pleasure."

"I believe that the great public by which I've lived all these years should not be despised or patronized or forced to accept esoteric ideas in the theatre in the name of culture or social problems or what not. I'm sick of the assumption that plays are 'important' only if they deal with some extremely urgent current problems.

Problems? We live with them all day, every day, all our lives. Do we have to have them in the theatre every night too? I was brought up in the belief that the theatre is primarily a place of entertainment. The audience wants to laugh or cry or be amused."

"When I was one-and-twenty I was ambitious, cheerful and high-spirited. I had never heard of the Death Wish and was briskly unaware that I belonged to a dying civilization. Today this dubious implication is pitched at me from all directions. Despair is the new religion, the new mode; it is in the books we read, the music we hear and, very much too often, in the plays we see. Well, I am no longer one-and-twenty but still I have no preoccupation with the Death Wish. I am still ambitious and cheerful and not offensively high-spirited and still unaware that I belong to a dying civilization. If I do, there really isn't anything I can do about it and so I shall just press on with my life as I like living it until I die of natural causes or an H-bomb blows me to smithereens. I knew, in my teens, that the world was full of hatred, envy, malice, cruelty, jealousy, unrequited love, murder, despair and destruction. I also knew, at the same time, that it was full of kindness, joy, pleasure, requited love, generosity, fun, excitement, laughter and friends. Nothing that has happened to me over the years has caused me to re-adjust in my mind the balance of these observed phenomena. I do become increasingly exasperated however when in my own beloved profession all that I was brought up and trained to believe in is now decried. Nowadays a well-constructed play is despised and light comedy whose only purpose is to amuse is dismissed as 'trivial' and 'without significance.' Since when has laughter been so insignificant?"