



## **Patriotism in Three Keys, With a Twist**

Noel Coward in World War II

By Jerry James

*“I belonged to that exasperating, weather-sodden little island with... its muddled thinking and its unregenerate pride, and it belonged to me whether it liked it or not.”*

—Noel Coward, *Future Indefinite*



*Noel Coward in 1937*

Urbane, witty, rich—Noel Coward (1899-1973) was born none of these. The son of a feckless, shabby-genteel family, he was put on the stage at twelve to support them. Fortunately, Coward took to the theatre as Br'er Rabbit took to the briar patch. By the age of 24, his ambition, talent and hard work had led to success as playwright, songwriter and actor.

When World War II came, Coward sought to repay his debt to the England that had enabled his rise, fully aware that this England would also condemn him, as it had Oscar Wilde, should his homosexuality ever become public knowledge.

Coward wrote, “In the last war... I had distinguished myself by falling on my head... If I bungled this moment... I should never be comfortable with myself again.” He would not bungle. But neither would he succeed as he had hoped, sitting behind a desk producing propaganda. Success would come from his wartime creation of a play, a song and a film, each with a twist. And it would be his sexuality that denied him the honor he deserved.

## Propaganda

Was Coward a spy? Still unknown, despite tantalizing hints. What *is* known is that shortly after the war began on September 1, 1939, he was named head of the top-secret British Bureau of Propaganda in Paris. His appointment had been requested by his French counterpart, playwright Jean Giraudoux.

The BPP was not very successful. Coward claimed to have written a memo stating, “If the policy of His Majesty’s Government was to bore the Germans to death, I didn’t think we had enough time.” By March 1940 he had taken leave and was in the USA, where he made pro-England broadcasts and met with President Roosevelt. After the Nazis invaded Holland in May, Coward struggled to return to Paris, eventually wrangling a flight to Lisbon.

The British ambassador there forbade Coward’s return and put him on a plane to London. This was providential, because had he taken the train to Paris, he would have arrived a day before Adolf Hitler. After the war, his name was found in the Black Book of those marked for immediate execution, a list described by Stephen Citron as “dissenters, intellectuals, patriots, spies, homosexuals and Jews.” Coward’s friend Rebecca West, who was also on the list, said, “My dear, the people we should have been seen dead with!”

Winston Churchill thought Coward should merely entertain the troops. He would do that, going as far afield as Burma, Australia and South Africa. But he would also do more.

## The Play

Having had to use his own money in the USA, Coward arrived back in London nearly broke. Ergo, he began thinking of a new play. His diary entry for April 22, 1941, reads, “Title *Blithe Spirit*. Very gay superficial comedy about a ghost.” On May 2, he set off on holiday with his friend, the actress Joyce Carey. They discussed the play exhaustively for a day. (Coward never began writing Act I without knowing what was going to happen in Act III.) For the next six days, he wrote for ten hours a day—talent and hard work—and finished the play.



Lauren Bacall, Noel Coward and Claudette Colbert  
“*Blithe Spirit*,” CBS TV, 1956

Coward called *Blithe Spirit*, “a light comedy about death,” a twist indeed. To open it not only in the middle of a war but also in the middle of the London Blitz, with Londoners dying every night, was not only audacious but scandalous. The play’s opening on July 2 was inauspicious. “Rubbish!” people shouted. The clergy asked, “Should we laugh at the dead?” The answer was a resounding, “Yes!”

*Blithe Spirit* proceeded to run for 1,997 performances, thereby outrunning WWII. It has appeared four times on Broadway, twice on American TV and was made into a musical. First filmed in 1945, a remake will open in 2020.

One night, or so the story goes, a V-1 loudly approached the theatre just as Charles Condomine said, “Well, Madame Arcati—the time is drawing near.” At that moment, the V-1’s engine cut out. Everyone in the theatre knew the bomb would now fall straight down. Madame Arcati replied, “Who knows? It may be receding!”

The V-1 missed.

## The Song

During rehearsals for *Blithe Spirit*, Coward found himself waiting for a train “on the morning after a bad blitz... I... watched the Londoners surging about in the thin spring sunshine. They all seemed to be gay and determined and wholly admirable...” Deter-

mination based on devastation—another twist. Very quickly, he wrote “London Pride.”



*Paddington Station after a blitz, 1941*

The tune is based on the old street-seller’s cry, “Won’t You Buy My Sweet Blooming Lavender,” later sampled by Lionel Bart in *Oliver!* Coward wrote, “[This] age-old melody was appropriated by the Germans and used as a foundation for ‘Deutschland Uber Alles,’ and I considered that the time had come for us to have it back in London where it belonged.”

London Pride (*Saxifraga x urbium*) is a small perennial flower. It is said to have provided rapid ground cover over the rubble left by the Blitz, thereby becoming a symbol of British resilience. Coward’s song was not the least of the contributions to this feeling.

*London Pride has been handed down to us.  
London Pride is a flower that’s free...  
Ev’ry blitz your resistance toughening  
From the Ritz to the Anchor and Crown.  
Nothing ever could override  
The pride of London Town.*

### **The Film**

On May 23, 1941, HMS *Kelly*, Lord Louis Mountbatten commanding, was sunk in the Battle of Crete. He later told the story to his friend Coward, whose great-uncle had been an admiral. Coward was fielding film offers after the success of *Blithe Spirit*, and now had an idea—he would film a tribute to the Royal Navy, culminating in the *sinking* of a British ship, a twist indeed.



*Captain Kinross and his crew, sunk  
“In Which We Serve,” 1942*

But *In Which We Serve* (1942) would also follow the lives of the crew and their loved ones, still in danger at home, focusing on the upper-class captain and a working-class ordinary seaman.

Coward wrote and directed *In Which We Serve*, in addition to playing Captain Kinross of HMS *Torrin*. John Mills played the ordinary seaman. Richard Attenborough, only 19, made a striking impression in an uncredited role. And because Coward knew nothing about making movies, he hired a co-director, David Lean. All these men would later earn both an Oscar and a knighthood.

The film was nominated for two Academy Awards. Coward was given a special Oscar for his “outstanding production achievement.” It is available on Amazon Prime.

### **The Aftermath**

During WWII, Noel Coward had made the English laugh, made them defiant, and made them proud—all with a twist. He had every reason to expect a knighthood. Although Churchill appears to have been responsible for denying this, his stated reason (a currency violation) seems thin. Coward’s use of his own money in the USA was technically illegal, but he had been On His Majesty’s Service. The real reason may have been Coward’s past relationship with Prince George, Duke of Kent, dead in a 1942 plane crash.

During the 1920s, Philip Hoare writes, George was “rumored to be particularly debauched,” interested in “black women, hard

drugs and young boys.” Addicted to morphine and cocaine, he was finally dried out by his brother David, the Prince of Wales.



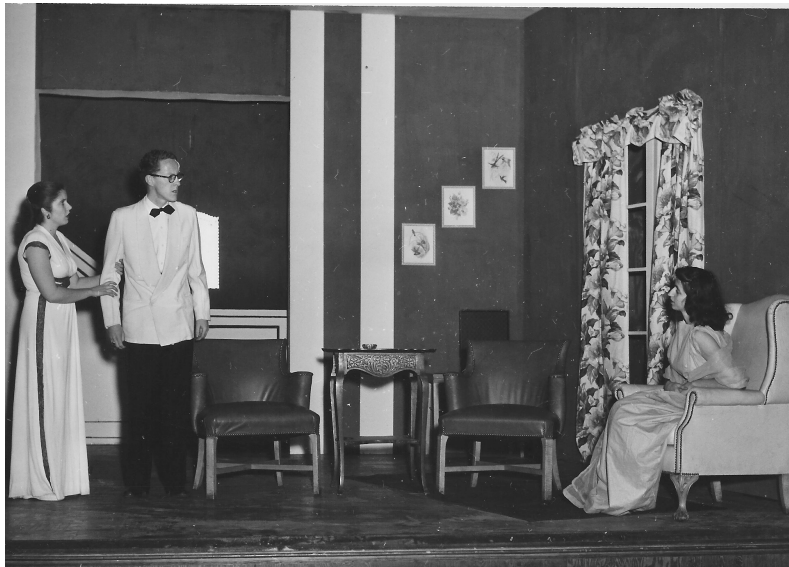
*Noel Coward and Joyce Carey, after his being knighted, April 13, 1970*

The Royal Family doubtless knew about the affair with Coward, who provided a handy scapegoat for George’s peccadilloes. (Theatre

people, you know.) Coward, who kept his sexuality intensely private, was in no position to protest. When it became clear that no knighthood was to be offered, he broke down and cried.

In 1947, Coward wrote *Peace In Our Time*, an alternate history play about an England conquered by the Nazis. Perhaps he was asking what might have happened had he—and others like him—not rallied to the call of King and Country. The play was a box-office failure.

Noel Coward would not be knighted until 1970, three years before his death, this time at the Queen’s insistence, over the homophobic protests of Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Kudos to Elizabeth II (who had once visited the set of *In Which We Serve*) for setting things right.



*“Blithe Spirit,” Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, late 1940s*

*Ruth and Charles Condomine (at left) are played by Rae Marsteller and Joseph E. McGrath, later to become the parents of Rogue Artistic Director Joseph A. McGrath.*

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