

“Designs for Living”
Christopher Wixson

Noël Coward

The Young Idea (1921)

Private Lives (1929)

Post-Mortem (1930)

Cavalcade (1930-31)

Design for Living (1932)

Point Valaine (1934)

Bernard Shaw

[*You Never Can Tell* (1895-96)]

[*Overruled* (1912)] / *The Apple Cart* (1929)

Too True to Be Good (1932)

[*Back to Methuselah* (1918-20)]

Village Wooing (1933)

The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles (1934)

The Millionairess (1935) / *The World Betterer's Courtship* (1936) / *Buoyant Billions* (1948)



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N.B. It is striking how many of Shaw’s new plays at this time were crafted aboard cruise ships --- for him, “accursed floating pleasure machines” that perhaps made him feel restlessly trapped in a Coward-esque environment. Besides *Too True to be Good* and *The Millionairess*, the second act of *The World Betterer’s Courtship* (a play which would ultimately become *Buoyant Billions*) was likely devised during Shaw’s voyage to Hawaii. Its second act centers around two flippant and affluent refugees from London society, trying to reform their parasitic ways via half-hearted attempts at world bettering in South America. The first conversation of *Village Wooing* pointedly occurs on “the lounge deck of the Empress of Patagonia, a pleasure ship,” and the play’s journey carries A and Z from its privileged but entropic milieu of empty smart talk and callow amusements to a place of physical and spiritual renewal.

Designs for Living: Bernard Shaw and Noël Coward
Christopher Wixson

I would like to begin this double-bill with two vignettes.

In 1921, a then unknown Noel Coward devised a play called *The Young Idea*, a stage version of a comedic novel he had written that was (in his words) “*primarily* inspired” by Bernard Shaw’s *You Never Can Tell*. Audaciously, he sent *The Young Idea* to John Vedrenne. Later, receiving the manuscript back, Coward was stunned to find it heavily annotated by Shaw and accompanied by a detailed, supportive letter that “never even hinted at plagiarism” but exhorted the novice playwright “never to see or read [his] plays” because they would inhibit the cultivation of his own authentic voice. “Unless you can get clean away from me,” Shaw wrote, “you will begin as a back number and be hopelessly out of it when you are forty.” Coward was moved by the extraordinary generosity of the older man, whom he much admired but later would admit that he followed that admonition to stay away from his plays “only half-heartedly.”

Twenty years later, in the early years of the second world war, acting at the behest of the Ministry of Information, Coward conducted tours abroad to covertly gather and gauge foreign perceptions. In the autumn of 1941, a few weeks before *Blithe Spirit*’s arrival in New York, Coward was served a summons for violating an August 1939 law that required English citizens with money in America to declare it and *not* spend it. Advised to plead guilty by his solicitors, Coward was shocked that, “by spending the money I had spent from my *personal* account in New York *on* work for my Government, I had been committing a criminal offence.” He was just as surprised when a letter on the matter soon arrived from Shaw, who expressed bewilderment that the actor George Arliss, similarly accused, had recently pled guilty despite being entirely innocent. “There can be no guilt without intention,” Shaw wrote, “[and] Arliss knew nothing about that law. . . . Therefore, let nothing induce you to plead Guilty. If your lawyers advise you to do so, tell them that I advise you *not* to.” Coward took the advice and got off with only a small fine.

I begin with these two brief encounters because they enable a kind of fantasy of a patient, avuncular Shaw mentoring a junior upstart but one that flattens out what was a much more textured and fertile association. It is along those lines that, when they occasionally have treated their plays in tandem, scholars usually configure the creative flow in only one direction, with Coward always indebted (as one puts it) as Shaw’s “inheritor.” Certainly, the zany and eccentric Bliss family members in *Hay Fever* recall the inhabitants of *Heartbreak House*, and *Design for Living* more than evokes *Getting Married*. Similarly, one might argue that *Cavalcade*, Coward’s historical pageant chronicling the disintegration of late Victorian England into postwar alienation, is a counter-vision to *Back to Methuselah*. And what are we to make of the unusual brawls between spouses in *The Apple Cart* (produced in the West End in 1929) and the second act of *Private Lives* written the very same year? All of these examples again figure Shaw only as an influence on Coward and never the other way around. But the veteran playwright himself provided an early clue that the influence would run both ways. That initial exchange over *The Young Idea* made such an impression on Shaw that he contributed a piece to a periodical the following month, entitled “What a Playwright Should Do With His First Play.” In it, he warns newcomers against sending their manuscripts to their “favorite playwright.” “If [the] play contains a valuable dramatic motive,” he writes, “every born playwright who reads it may assimilate it and use it for themselves, consciously or unconsciously.”

From the start, while he surely considered him part of the tradition of the “dissolute and faithless wits of the Restoration,” Shaw took Coward’s comedy seriously, and, tracing the series of plays both wrote between the wars illuminates a curious daisy chain of intertextual skirmish. Just as the younger consciously re-conceived and talked back to the elder’s plays, Shaw’s attentiveness is also expressed as a kind of creative “re-finishing,” in which he pushes back hard against the cynicism and reshapes those stagnant holding patterns of present laughter into a more efficient and ethical relationship with the rest of the world.

By the end of the 1920s, Coward enjoyed exceptional renown and popularity, eventually having four different plays simultaneously running in London. In 1932, the *Sunday Daily Express*, under the headline “The World’s Richest Writers,” declared Coward #1, with an annual income since 1929 of 50,000 pounds, followed by Shaw at #2. Yet, Coward’s success was not embraced by all, and (in sharp contrast to Shaw’s) some reactions were disappointingly vituperative and often offensive. *Vanity Fair* critic George Jean Nathan excoriated *Design for Living* as “little more than a pansy paraphrase of *Candida*.” In 1936, playwright Sean O’Casey wrote a series of virulent, homophobic essays in which he railed against the ways in which he felt Coward had been coddled by reviewers and obsequiously lauded for what he believed was empty calorie theater. He characterized *Cavalcade* as “tinselled triviality” and rejected *Design for Living*’s core trio as “poor wincing worms in a winecup.” “The merit of a play,” O’Casey maintained, “is in the play and not in the length of its run. Commercial success carries the banner of pleasure, but there is no symbol of honor on that flag.” He dismissed Coward’s plays as lacking political commitment and philosophical depth, its characters repellently reveling in self-indulgence. O’Casey fervently believed that the individual should always be placed in the service of something meaningfully larger. Shaw did too, of course, but took Coward’s plays as an invitation, responding to them not via angry polemic but in a series of 1930s plays about the idle rich: *Too True to Be Good*, *The Millionairess*, and *Buoyant Billions*.

Coward’s *Private Lives* premiered in August of 1930 and, by the time it opened in London a month later, was the hottest ticket in town. The play famously depicts the re-ignition of the passion between former spouses Elyot and Amanda, serendipitously sharing a French hotel terrace while on their respective second honeymoons. Eventually fleeing from their utterly conventional new partners to hole up in a borrowed Parisian apartment, the two discover that, while life without one another is dull and empty, living together is equally impossible. Yet, their resolve to leave one other dissolves over the course of act three, and, ultimately, they again escape together “smilingly” out the flat’s back door. Lacking true closure, *Private Lives* discovers no remedy for those who find themselves stuck in what Elyot calls a “situation without precedent [with] no prescribed etiquette to fall back upon.” For this Lost Generation, Elyot argues that flippancy is the pose to strike, as he explains to Amanda the unimportance of being earnest:

You musn’t be serious, my dear one, it’s just what they want[,] . . . [Laugh at] all the futile moralists who try to make life unbearable. Be flippant. Laugh at everything, all their sacred shibboleths. . . . Let’s be superficial and pity the poor Philosophers. Let’s blow trumpets and squeakers, and enjoy the party as much as we can[.] Let’s savour the delight of the moment.

According to John Lahr, “frivolity, as Coward embodied it, was an act of freedom, of disenchantment in celebrating a metaphysical stalemate, calling it quits with meanings and certitudes.” Camp, as it would be theorized by Susan Sontag in the mid-1960s, puts “everything in quotation marks,” even the veracity and import of language itself. If Shaw had revolutionized English-speaking theater by devoting a disproportionate amount of stage time to meaningful discussion, Coward transfigures it into sparkling banter whose flippancy unpacks constructions of normality and sincerity and enables the skilled expression of generational disillusion. In short, Shaw’s big talk and paratext become Coward’s small talk and subtext. Needless to say, settling for wild laughter amid severest woe in what Lahr called “plotless play for purposeless people” is decidedly un-Shavian.

Whether Shaw read or saw *Private Lives* when it premiered is unknown. If he did, the older playwright surely would have noticed what Fred Crawford identifies as the “considerable debt” it owes to his own 1912 one-act bicker between couples entitled *Overruled*. Brooke Allen and Michael Holroyd each go further, the former calling *Overruled* the “prototype” and the latter calling *Private Lives* Coward’s “version of Shaw’s

world-cruising quadrille.” Writing to Charlotte, Shaw described *Overruled* as “four reasonably amiable people in a matrimonial difficulty [who] find themselves with nothing to guide them but a morality which will not work.” When it was first performed, *Overruled* was greeted with intense audience mockery and disdain, leading Shaw to deem it the “only regular right down failure [he] ever had.” Nonetheless, the play’s multiple revivals in the 1920s indicate its stylistic and thematic prescience. *Overruled* and *Private Lives* share an organizing conceit along with a seaside hotel setting, cascades of frank, careless talk about marital mores, and a distinctive lack of resolution. If, as Eric Bentley claims, the ending of *Overruled* is “a wonderful comma,” *Private Lives* revises it with an equally provocative ellipsis. Based on the similarities, Stanley Weintraub opines it “very likely” Coward saw one of those revivals and “may have read” the play’s 1916 preface in which Shaw tauntingly puts forth *Overruled* as “a model to all future writers of farcical comedy.” That Shaw initially considered “Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted” as a title for his short play is especially rich as it seems *The Young Idea* man struck again.

The clearest clue that Shaw was not only familiar with but galvanized by *Private Lives* and Coward’s by then well-established idiom comes in the form of his 1935 high comedy *The Millionairess*, whose first two acts strikingly form a speculative fourth act to *Private Lives*, opening with a foursome consisting of two unhappily married spouses and their lovers, all gathered in the same attorney’s office in London hoping in vain he can help them resolve their situation. Its style is a significant departure from what had become reified as Shavian, its opening two acts adopting a key of what Margot Peters calls “desperate exaggeration [that] moves its title character away from reality, substituting hyperbole for psychological depth.” With histrionic excess, Epifania stands alongside Coward’s Elyot and Amanda as a consummate performer and fetishized merger of sexiness, privilege, and ferocious domination. For Shaw, though, putting everything in quotation marks may pretend ironic disengagement but in reality masks a disavowal, a refusal to acknowledge the political and moral complicity of style. The arrival of the Doctor brings to Epifania’s genius a motivating commitment to meaningful Life Force service and a set of positive values to be asserted against the romanticism of frustration and despair, a restorative to Coward’s gospel of egoism.

Common thematic threads also run through both playwrights’ 1930s stage experiments that eschew high comedy. Coward’s first of that decade was *Post-Mortem*, a wildly uncharacteristic play that depicts the spectral visitations of a deceased soldier to family members and surviving comrades. The first scene takes place in the trenches in the Spring of 1917 and concludes with the mortally wounded John Cavan being carried into a shelter. The six scenes that follow take place in 1930 but grow out of the character’s belief that, “for a second before one dies[,] one might see the whole business”: “Like going under an anesthetic, everything becomes blurred and enormous and then suddenly clears, just for the fraction of a fraction of a moment.” He hopes the epiphany will confirm for him that positive growth will come out of the sacrifice of the fallen. That Cavan’s visits don’t cause much bewilderment among the living and that he is able to drink and physically interact quite freely further extend the action beyond stage realism.

Cavan’s optimism is counterbalanced in the play with another soldier’s extreme cynicism, a poet called Perry Lomas who will go on to write an exposé entitled *Post-Mortem* that aggressively attempts to disillusion the British public about the war. Cavan arrives in Lomas’s sitting room in scene four just in time to forestall his suicide and occasion a long, hopeless tirade against how nobody has learned anything from the war: everyone still “wanders about aimlessly in chaos searching for some half formulated ideal. An ideal of what? Fundamental good in human nature? Bunk! Spiritual understanding? Bunk! God in some compassionate dream waiting to open your eyes to truth? Bunk! Bunk! Bunk! It’s all a joke with nobody to laugh at it.”

Cavan reaches despair when he eventually discovers that “the ones who came home have slipped back into the old illusions and are rotting there, smug in false security” and plotting against the few who “had the courage to remember clearly and strike out for something new—something different.”

In addition to its violence and its vehemence, *Post-Mortem* is didactically relentless, full of unusually long speeches and rhetorical excess that seem more Shavian than Cowardesque, especially the fifth scene in which Cavan’s media mogul (and Undershaft-ian) father gathers together a local Bishop, a society matron, and a member of the government’s “committee of censorship” for an extended discussion of “the rising tide of “Immoral Thought” about the war.

Post-Mortem was published as an individual script in 1931 and included in a 1933 anthology. Again, certainty as to whether Shaw read it is elusive; however, intriguingly, in the fall of 1930, Coward sent an early draft to and received feedback from Shaw’s close friend T.E. Lawrence just as Shaw was writing *Too True to Be Good*. That play not only contains a character based on Lawrence but also pushes into non-realism with its Germ character and dream-like form and centers upon the figure of the returned soldier, struggling to follow the conventional tides of postwar British culture. Aubrey Bagot conflates Coward’s Cavan and Lomas (though pointedly excising the Thanatos), and *Too True*’s final movement also enacts the dissolution of Realist theatre’s mappings of time and space. Looking back in anger and ahead in uncertainty, Shaw’s and Coward’s disoriented, discouraged, and dislodged veterans each ultimately dematerialize in the mists. But, if Aubrey enabled him to voice the war’s traumatic legacy and experiment with dramatic structure, it would be the journey of Miss Mopply, from affluent invalid to activist, that would be Shaw’s “own favorite.” In his final stage direction, he refocuses the reader’s attention away from the incorrigible Aubrey’s rutterless verbiage to the determined trajectory of the “woman of action” and the “unladylike sisterhood” she ultimately forms. Empty preaching and smart banter get supplanted by purposeful ministering.

If Philip Hoare identifies the moment in which Cavan gives Lomas the gun for his suicide as “perhaps the bleakest moment in Coward’s work,” Shaw’s may well be the shocking prologue of another play crafted at that time.

The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles begins with two suicidal characters --- an emigration officer and his clerk. The latter, singing “Rule Britannia!”, shoots himself at the end of the opening scene, and the former’s subsequent attempt to throw himself into the sea is only by chance diverted by an indigenous priest. Uncannily enough, Shaw’s “tropical turn” with *Too True to Be Good* and *Simpleton* had its mirror in Coward’s 1934 melodrama *Point Valaine* in which the imperial project is also on the rocks and suffused by suicidal ideation. Set in a crumbling colonial West Indian hotel, it depicts an interracial love triangle involving its English proprietor, her own head waiter, and another downed aviator, all inescapably bound for cynical tragedy. In pointed contrast, the interracial union of the English Epifania and the Egyptian Doctor in *The Millionairess* (written the year after *Point Valaine*) enacts that play’s optimistic vision. Both playwrights would also use the imperial settings of *Point Valaine*, *Too True to Be Good*, and the second act of *The World Betterer’s Courtship* to take up questions of the performativity of racial difference.

Pondering systems of privilege and stultifying pessimism, Shaw continues to “assimilate” and respond to Coward’s “dramatic motive” into the late 1940s with *Why She Would Not* and *Buoyant Billions*, which will drop a *Hay Fever*-style manners comedy in the path of a farfetched fable to dramatize a rare Life Force failure that reaches an evolutionary dead-end.

Three years after Shaw’s death, Coward would perform the role of King Magnus in a celebrated revival of *The Apple Cart* and unsurprisingly found it to be (as he put it) “overwritten, like all Shaw” and “terribly

difficult to play.” Shaw wrote of his dialogue that “there is no time for silences or pauses: the actor must play on the line and not between the lines.” In contrast, Coward’s dialogue deliberately plays at the margins, where “words and meaning are at greatest remove from one another.” In his diary, Coward observed that

every word counts [in Shaw’s long sentences]. The speeches cannot be hurried and yet, if they are spoken too slowly, they become ponderous – it is essential though to find places to pause effectively and *think* effectively.

That production nonetheless came off splendidly, and *The New Yorker* raved about Coward’s performance, lauding the “perfect timing [of] lots of crisp Coward lines that happen to have been written by Shaw!” Thirty years after *The Young Idea*, Coward was still at work bending Shaw’s idiom into the shape of his own.

While I have only had time this morning for a broad look at some connective tissue between the dramaturgy of both playwrights, hopefully the implications have been made clear. Just as his Edwardian comedies were informed by and in dialogue with St. John Hankin’s plays, Shaw’s late comedic work shaped and was shaped by Coward’s. The labels of “master and inheritor” are delimiting in obscuring the ways in which their plays from this period are truly in conversation, over form and content, and how, as writers, they re-purposed one another in a vital wrangling to direct the creative evolution of the drama after the war.
