



# DESIGN FOR LIVING BY NOËL COWARD

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK  
RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY  
MITCHELL MORENO

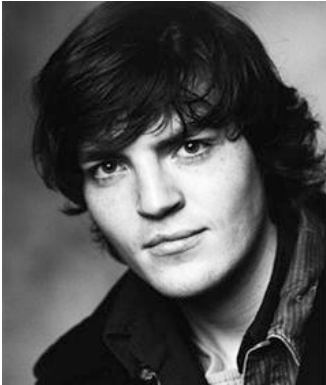
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# DESIGN FOR LIVING AT THE OLD VIC

Director **Anthony Page**  
Designer **Lez Brotherston**

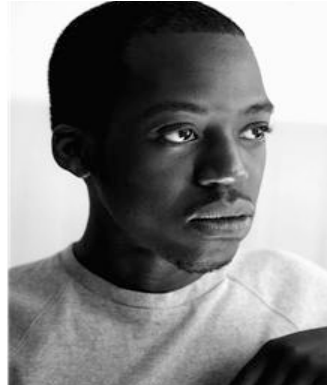
Lighting **David Dersey**  
Sound **Paul Groothuis**



**Tom Burke**  
*Otto*



**Nancy Crane**  
*Grace*



**Edward Dede**  
*Matthew*



**Lisa Dillon**  
*Gilda*



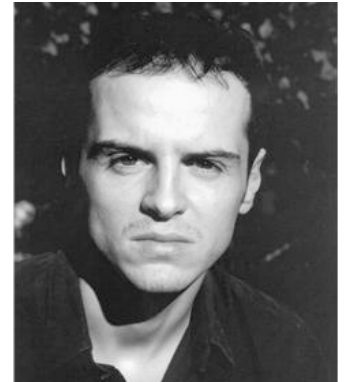
**Matthew Gammie**  
*Photographer*



**John Hollingworth**  
*Henry / Mr Birbeck*



**Maggie McCarthy**  
*Miss Hodge*



**Andrew Scott**  
*Leo*



**Maya Wasowicz**  
*Helen Carver*



**Angus Wright**  
*Ernest Friedman*

# CHRONOLOGY NOËL COWARD'S LIFE & MAJOR WORKS

(Dates plays were written are shown in brackets)

- |             |   |             |  |             |   |
|-------------|---|-------------|--|-------------|---|
| <b>1899</b> | – Born 16 December in Teddington, Middlesex.  | <b>1933</b> | – <i>Design for Living</i> (1932) produced on Broadway.  | <b>1950</b> | – <i>Ace of Clubs</i> (1949) produced.  |
| <b>1911</b> | – Appears as Prince Mussel in <i>The Goldfish</i> , the first of many successful engagements as a boy actor.      |             | – Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany.  | <b>1951</b> | – <i>Relative Values</i> (1950) produced.   |
| <b>1914</b> | – Begins writing sketches and songs with childhood friend Esme Wynne.   | <b>1934</b> | – <i>Conversation Piece</i> (1933) produced.   | <b>1951</b> | – Makes first cabaret appearance at Café de Paris in London singing his own songs. Publishes <i>Star Quality</i> , a collection of short stories. |
|             | – Franz Ferdinand of Austria assassinated, triggering World War I.  |             | – The Unemployment Assistance Board is set up in response to the spread of extreme poverty in Britain.   | <b>1952</b> | – <i>Quadrille</i> (1951) produced.   |
| <b>1918</b> | – Drafted into the Artists Rifles but later discharged on health grounds.   | <b>1936</b> | – <i>Tonight at 8.30</i> (1935) produced (set of ten short plays).   | <b>1954</b> | – Publishes the second volume of his autobiography, <i>Future Indefinite</i> .  |
|             | – The November 11 armistice with Germany ends World War I.  | <b>1937</b> | – Men from Jarrow march against mass unemployment and hunger.  | <b>1956</b> | – <i>Nude with Violin</i> (1954) produced.  |
| <b>1920</b> | – <i>I'll Leave It To You</i> (1919) produced.  | <b>1938</b> | – Publishes the first volume of his autobiography, <i>Present Indicative</i> .   |             | – Leaves UK to take up tax exile in Bermuda. Commissions a house, Firefly, to be built in Jamaica.  |
| <b>1922</b> | – <i>The Young Idea</i> (1921) produced.  | <b>1939</b> | – <i>Operette</i> (1937) produced.   | <b>1960</b> | – <i>Waiting in the Wings</i> (1959) produced.  |
| <b>1923</b> | – Appears in <i>The Young Idea</i> in the West End. Writes and appears in the revue <i>London Calling!</i>        |             | – <i>Design for Living</i> produced in London.   | <b>1961</b> | – Writes and directs the musical <i>Sail Away</i> on Broadway.  |
| <b>1924</b> | – Directs and appears in <i>The Vortex</i> (1923). The play and Coward become an overnight sensation.             | <b>1940</b> | – Britain declares war on Germany.   | <b>1964</b> | – Directs a revival of <i>Hay Fever</i> at the National Theatre.  |
| <b>1925</b> | – <i>Hay Fever</i> (1924), <i>Easy Virtue</i> (1924) and <i>Fallen Angels</i> (1923) produced.                    | <b>1941</b> | – Tours Australia for the Armed Forces.  | <b>1966</b> | – Appears in the trilogy <i>Suite in Three Keys</i> (1965), in what proves to be his last writing and acting for the stage.                       |
| <b>1927</b> | – <i>Easy Virtue</i> and <i>The Vortex</i> made into films.   | <b>1942</b> | – <i>Blithe Spirit</i> (1941) produced. Writes screenplay for <i>In Which We Serve</i> .   | <b>1967</b> | – Sexual Offences Act 1967 passed in Parliament, partially decriminalising homosexual acts between consenting men.                                |
| <b>1929</b> | – <i>Hay Fever</i> (1924), <i>Easy Virtue</i> (1924) and <i>Fallen Angels</i> (1923) produced.                    |             | – <i>This Happy Breed</i> (1939) and <i>Present Laughter</i> (1939) produced. Appears in <i>Blithe Spirit</i> , <i>This Happy Breed</i> and <i>Present Laughter</i> , and in the film <i>In Which We Serve</i> . | <b>1970</b> | – Receives knighthood.  |
| <b>1929</b> | – Writes and directs the operetta <i>Bitter Sweet</i> .   | <b>1943</b> | – Writes song 'Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans'.   | <b>1973</b> | – Dies on 26 March at Firefly in Jamaica, aged 74.  |
|             | – The Wall Street Crash, beginning a decade of global depression.   | <b>1944</b> | – Writes screenplay for <i>Brief Encounter</i> , based on his short play <i>Still Life</i> from <i>Tonight at 8.30</i> .   |             |   |
| <b>1930</b> | – Writes and appears in <i>Private Lives</i> .  |             | – Tours South Africa, Far East and Europe.   |             |   |
| <b>1931</b> | – Writes and directs the historic epic <i>Calvacade</i> .   | <b>1945</b> | – Germany surrenders, ending World War II.   |             |   |
| <b>1931</b> | – Appears in <i>Private Lives</i> on Broadway.  | <b>1946</b> | – <i>Pacific 1860</i> (1945) produced.   |             |   |
| <b>1932</b> | – Writes the revue <i>Words and Music</i> . Its songs 'Mad About the Boy' and 'Children of the Ritz' become hits. | <b>1947</b> | – <i>Peace in Our Time</i> (1946) produced.  |             |   |
|             |   |             | – Writes <i>Long Island Sound</i> , which goes unproduced.   |             |   |

# HOW IT CAME ABOUT THE FRIENDSHIP BEHIND THE PLAY

Noël Coward wrote *Design for Living* to fulfil a pact made 11 years earlier between himself and his friends Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. ‘The Lunts’, as they were known, became the most celebrated theatrical couple in America but in 1921, when Coward visited them in New York, they were just starting out and living in a cheap lodging house for struggling actors. Coward too was at the beginning of his career and relatively unknown but he, Lunt and Fontanne all shared a hunger for fame and success.

In his autobiography *Present Indicative* Coward recalls their time together:

‘From these shabby, congenial rooms, we projected ourselves into future eminence. We discussed, the three of us... our most secret dreams of success. Lynn and Alfred were to be married. That was the first plan. Then they were to become definitely idols of the public. That was the second plan. Then, all this being successfully accomplished, they were to act exclusively together. This was the third plan. It remained for me to supply the fourth, which was that when all three of us had become stars of sufficient magnitude to be able to count upon an individual following of each other, then, poised serenely on that enviable plane of achievement, we would meet and act triumphantly together.’

Within a few years they achieved the stardom they dreamed of but along with success came hectic work schedules and the opportunities for all three to work together grew slimmer. By 1932 Coward was wondering whether the project would ever happen but as he travelled around South America by ship he received a telegram from Lunt and Fontanne saying ‘CONTRACT WITH THE [THEATRE] GUILD UP IN JUNE – WE SHALL BE FREE – WHAT ABOUT IT?’

Coward spent the remaining months of his trip trying out ideas for a suitable vehicle for the three of them, only to reject each one in frustration. Finally, while travelling on a Norwegian freight boat from Panama to Los Angeles, the characters and framework for *Design for Living* crystallised in his mind and he wrote the play in ten days, working mornings only.

The production opened on Broadway in 1933. The box-office draw of the Lunts was much bigger in America than here, and Coward probably anticipated that the play – with its amoral characters and subtext of bisexuality – may not get past the Lord Chamberlain, then official censor of theatre in Britain. It was an immediate critical and commercial hit, prompting Coward to relax his usual rule of not acting in a play for more than twelve weeks, and to extend his engagement to a total of five months. In the final week of the run police had to be called to control the crowds clamouring for tickets.

Despite this, Coward felt that the play never received the level of respect or understanding that it deserved. In the introduction to *Play Parade Volume 1* he wrote:

‘It has been liked and disliked, and hated and admired, but never, I think, sufficiently loved by any but its three leading actors. This, perhaps, was only to be expected, as its central theme, from the point of view of the average, must appear to be definitely anti-social... it seemed to many of them “unpleasant”.’

Discussing the characters Leo, Otto and Gilda, Coward revealed his own thoughts on the mechanics of the central relationship:

‘These glib, over-articulate and amoral creatures force their lives into fantastic shapes and problems because they cannot help themselves. Impelled chiefly by the impact of their personalities one each upon the other, they are like moths in a pool of light, unable to tolerate the lonely outer darkness, and equally unable to share the light without colliding constantly and bruising one another’s wings.’



# DESIGN FOR LIVING SYNOPSIS

## Act 1

Gilda, an interior decorator, lives with Otto, a painter, in a shabby studio apartment in Paris. As she lays the table for breakfast an unexpected visitor arrives. It is her friend Ernest, a middle-aged art dealer, who has come to show Otto a Matisse painting he has just bought. Gilda says that Otto is in bed with neuralgia and cannot be disturbed.

Ernest announces that their mutual friend Leo has returned to Paris from Chicago, where he has scored a hit with his new play. Gilda's conversation and behaviour begin to trouble Ernest and he is on the verge of leaving when, to his surprise, Otto walks in the front door. Otto has been working in Bordeaux on a portrait and has returned unexpectedly after his sitter rejected the painting. Otto picks up on the strained atmosphere in the room but when Gilda announces that Leo is back he rushes off with Ernest to visit him at his hotel.

No sooner have they left than Leo emerges from the bedroom; he has spent the night and slept with Gilda. They discuss what they have done and their need to be honest with Otto. As they laugh over a funny reminiscence, Otto returns. Gilda and Leo confess what has happened and try to reassure Otto of their deep love for him but Otto works himself into a rage and storms out, cursing them.

## Act 2, Scene 1

It is eighteen months later and Gilda is living with Leo in his comfortable flat in London. He has just opened another hit play and is much in demand by the media and at society parties, yet Gilda is troubled by his success. Leo suggests they get married but Gilda declines since it would be against her moral principles and would upset Otto. They haven't heard from him since the blow-up in Paris, although they both still love him.

Leo accepts an invitation to a weekend party in the country, but Gilda decides to stay at home. As they bicker about Leo's social scene and the changes in their relationship, they are interrupted by the arrival of a journalist. Leo is flippant and rude to the reporter, but as Gilda goes out he nonetheless puts on a smile and poses for the camera.

## Act 2, Scene 2

A few days later Gilda is on her own in the flat when Otto arrives; after an awkward few moments they rush into each other's arms. Gilda now realizes that the thing that was missing in her and Leo's lives was in fact Otto. Like Leo, Otto is now critically and commercially successful, with a string of society commissions in London and an exhibition of his paintings in New York. Gilda sees that Otto has changed and grown up, and feels that she is no longer needed. Otto, however, asserts his passion for her, claiming that it wouldn't be wrong to renew their affair since they operate outside ordinary social conventions and are inescapably bound to each other. They end up on the sofa, embracing.

## Act 2, Scene 3

The next morning, Ernest unexpectedly calls to say goodbye before departing for New York. Gilda claims that Leo is in bed asleep having been up all night with stomach ache. She describes herself as a lone woman, unattached and free, and says she is going, although she doesn't know where to. She props two letters against the brandy bottle and leaves the flat with Ernest, planning to take on his taxi after dropping him off at his hotel.

Otto emerges from the bedroom wearing Leo's pyjamas and is confronted by the disapproving daily help, Miss Hodge. Leo enters, having come home early from his house party, to find Otto not yet dressed and smoking on the sofa. Otto immediately makes it clear what happened the night before between him and Gilda. As they wonder what to do Leo discovers the two letters that Gilda has left, one addressed to each of them. She has written the same farewell message to both men: "Good-bye, my clever little dear. Thank you for the keys of the city".

Realising that she has left them, Leo and Otto get drunk together. As it dawns on them how lonely they will be without Gilda, they break down and cry on each other's shoulders.

**Act 3, Scene 1**

Almost two years have passed, and Gilda is now married to Ernest and living in New York. At their luxurious penthouse she is entertaining guests after an evening at the opera. Quite unexpectedly, Otto and Leo arrive, and set out to unsettle Gilda and the visitors with their outlandish conversation and references to the history of their triangular relationship. They succeed in confusing and offending the other guests sufficiently to make them leave. Gilda sees everyone out, but secretly slips Otto and Leo a key, so that they can return without causing a scandal. Once they have gone, however, Gilda runs out via the fire escape.

**Act 3, Scene 2**

The next morning Ernest returns home from a business trip to Chicago. While he drinks his breakfast coffee, Otto and Leo come downstairs wearing his pyjamas. They tell Ernest what happened the previous night and explain that his wife has disappeared. Shocked and irritated, Ernest asks them what they want, and they reply frankly that they want Gilda. She soon arrives home, having spent the night at the Ritz hotel, and informs Ernest that she is leaving him because she has realised she can't live without Otto and Leo. Ernest works himself into a frenzy of rage and disbelief and, storming out, trips on his parcel of paintings. Gilda, Otto and Leo collapse into helpless fits of laughter.



# DESIGN FOR LIVING CHARACTERS

## Gilda

Gilda is an attractive woman aged about thirty years old. At the beginning of the play she lives with Otto in a shabby flat in Paris, and works as a freelance interior decorator. After she moves to London with Leo she continues this work, although she only has four clients in 18 months. When she moves to New York and marries Ernest, however, she becomes very successful in her career.

She worries that she is a “super-egoist”, which she defines as thinking of herself too much. She doesn’t like other women and hates certain traits in herself which she sees as typically feminine, such as archness, aloofness, and “snatching and grabbing”. She has excellent taste and an acute critical faculty when it comes to art and culture.

## Otto Sylvus

Otto is tall and good looking. He and Leo are old friends, sharing a love for each other and a powerful ambition to be successful artists. When they meet Gilda for the first time in Paris Gilda chooses Otto to love “a little bit more” than Leo because Otto is the weaker and therefore needs her more. At that time his painting career is unsuccessful, and Gilda acts as a great support and encouragement. However, by the time he returns from his travels and visits Gilda in London, his career has taken off and he is doing well financially.

## Leo Mercuré

Leo is a writer, who in Act 1 has just had his first hit play produced in America. He returns to Paris newly successful and well off, and this good fortune continues after he moves to London with Gilda. There he opens another well-received play, described by various critics as “daring and dramatic and witty”, “polished”, “gripping throughout”, and “thin”, all terms which might be applied to some of Noël Coward’s own writing. Later, Otto accuses Leo of writing plays “turgid with romance; sodden with true love; rotten with nostalgia”, which are at odds with Leo’s claim to be rational and scientific.

Leo becomes much in demand as a guest at high society social functions, and enjoys this element of his success even though he knows it may not last. He is clever, witty and charming but Otto, when in a rage, suspects that underneath all this he is just “a cheap, second-rate opportunist”.

## Ernest Friedman

Ernest is between forty and fifty years old. He is an art dealer, traveling widely in America and Europe to buy and sell paintings. This has made him rich, enabling him to stay at the most luxurious hotels in Paris and London and to buy a fabulous penthouse in New York. Ernest knew Gilda’s mother when she was alive, and was as fond of her as he is of Gilda. His views on issues like marriage reveal that he is much more orthodox and socially conservative than Gilda, Otto and Leo.



### Miss Hodge

Miss Hodge works as the daily help for Leo and Gilda in their rented London flat. She has been married twice, neither time happily; one of her ex-husbands is dead and the other lives in Newcastle. When she speaks she drops her aitches, and adds extra ones where they shouldn't be: a feature of uneducated speech in this period and also used for comic effect. She has trouble accepting the fact that Gilda and Leo are living together as an unmarried couple, and is scandalised when she discovers that Otto has slept the night.

### Mr Birbeck

Mr Birbeck is a reporter for the Evening Standard newspaper. Leo thinks his questions are mindless and vulgar, the worst kind of popular tabloid journalism.

### Henry and Helen Carver

Mr and Mrs Carver are a young married couple who live in New York. They are friends with Gilda, Ernest, and Grace and, like them, are wealthy and well dressed. Henry presumably comes from a rich family since his father bought a Matisse off Ernest for 11,000 dollars. They have been married for two years and have no children.

### Grace Torrence

Grace is part of Ernest and Gilda's set of rich acquaintances in New York, and Gilda hopes she may be a prospective client. She is slightly older than Henry and Helen Carver and is a "typical Europeanised New York matron". She is wealthy and has spent time in Europe the previous winter, including Paris.

### Matthew

Matthew is a servant in Ernest's New York apartment.



# DESIGN FOR LIVING MAJOR THEMES & INTERESTS

## Alternative lifestyles and the pursuit of pleasure

The three central characters in *Design for Living* share a set of values and desires which bind them together and, at the same time, pit them directly against the norms and expectations of conventional society.

At the beginning of the play Gilda and Leo acknowledge that they and Otto are not “ordinary moral, high-thinking citizens” and this is born out as the action unfolds to the point where Ernest rages, “There isn’t a decent instinct among the lot of you. You’re shifty and irresponsible and abominable”.

Otto, Leo and Gilda unashamedly operate outside the boundaries of respectability, creating rules which work for them and them alone since they “don’t fit” in the everyday world. As Leo says, “We have our own decencies. We have our own ethics. Our lives are a different shape”. They are afforded this privilege because they are not tied to the rhythms and pressures of normal life by family, children, fixed location or the need to work in conventional jobs. Money, talent and success flow freely through their lives. *Design for Living* may have been written at a time of mass unemployment and economic depression but these harsh realities barely penetrate the world of the play.

The central characters’ only responsibility is to themselves and their ambitions. Otto, Leo and Gilda behave like big children – irresponsible, self-obsessed, and hedonistic – a trait we see elsewhere in Coward’s major plays. In *Private Lives* for example Elyot (the part played by Coward on stage) urges: “Let’s be superficial... Let’s blow trumpets and squeakers, and enjoy the party as much as we can, like very small, quite idiotic school-children. Let’s savour the delight of the moment”.

This celebration of flippancy and playful anarchy is seen by some as having its roots in the fact that Coward was gay in an era when homosexuality was illegal and taboo. The gay man, branded degenerate by mainstream society, has no choice but to make fun of its values and to reject its conventions. Thus the critic John Lahr sees the laughter that ends *Design for Living* as a kind of comic revenge, “the victory of the disguised gay world over the straight one”.

Coward argued that at the finale the characters are laughing at themselves, yet in performance it is hard not to take away a sense that the joke is on the conventional respectability of Ernest and the rest of mainstream society.

## Success and fame

Conceived and written as a star vehicle for himself, Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt, *Design for Living* presents characters who themselves achieve prosperity and fame through their ambition and creative talent.

Each successive act shows one of the protagonists fulfilling their professional goals; Leo becomes a celebrated playwright, Otto a successful portrait painter, and Gilda a high society decorator.

The upside of their success is clear, bringing opportunities to live well, travel wide, and connect with interesting people. Leo’s newfound fame even seems to enhance his sexual allure; as Gilda says the morning after she has slept with him, “There seemed to be something new about you: something I’d never realised before. Perhaps it’s having money. Perhaps your success has given you a little extra glamour”.

Coward famously said “I am determined to travel through life first class”. Leo, his fictional alter ego, tries to sell a similar ambition to Otto: “Let’s be photographed and interviewed and pointed at in restaurants! Let’s play the game for all it’s worth, secretaries and fur coats and de luxe suites on transatlantic liners”. It is a game that Leo, no doubt like Coward, feels he must play even when unpleasant, striking a smiling pose for the press while simultaneously thinking that “the whole business is grotesque”.

The problems with celebrity are not just a matter of taste. In the pursuit of success the protagonists put their relationships with each other in jeopardy. Gilda resents Leo for wasting his time with “ridiculous celebrity-hunters”, worrying that “success is far more perilous than failure”. And Otto, after he has discovered Gilda’s infidelity, mocks Leo: “Go ahead my boy, and do great things! You’ve already achieved a Hotel de Luxe, a few smart suits, and the woman I loved. Go ahead, maybe there are still higher peaks for you to climb”. Here ambition is equated with ruthlessness, fame with the loss of principles.

Success allows the rich and famous to operate outside ordinary rules. Otto and Leo are sensationally arrogant to Gilda's guests and to Ernest because they can afford to be: their wealth, independence and professional status give them a sense of power and entitlement. At the same time, however, they imply that life is more real and can be more fully experienced without these trappings, urging Gilda to "come down in the cheap seats again, nearer to the blood and sand and the warm smells, nearer to Life and Death".

### Love and sex

The best known photograph from the original production of *Design for Living* shows a moment from the very end of the play. Gilda, Otto and Leo have collapsed laughing on a sofa, their bodies intertwined, arms and legs draped over each other so that it is hard to tell which limb belongs to who. The men wear short pyjamas, and Gilda's evening gown is so light it too might pass for nightwear.

The image is unexpected, disarmingly intimate, and sexually charged, recalling Ernest's condemnation of the trio's relationship as a "disgusting three-sided erotic hotch-potch!" Earlier in the play Leo describes the structure of the relationship to Gilda in similar, if less moralising terms: "The actual facts are so simple. I love you. You love me. You love Otto. I love Otto. Otto loves you. Otto loves me."

The love between them is seen as having an equal weight and quality, regardless of whether it is male-to-female or male-to-male. Written at a time when gender roles and expectations were much more fixed than today, the characters are surprisingly unbound by their sex: Gilda has her own source of income, Leo and Otto work outside of conventional masculine professions, none of them has children and none of them genuinely desires marriage and the traditional family unit. To an extent the characters and their interactions with each other are de-sexed, something that Gilda hints at when she tells Ernest "Look at the whole thing as a side show... Walk up and see... the Three Famous Hermaphrodites!".

There is nothing in the play script to indicate that the relationship between Otto and Leo is sexual but the two have the characteristics of a couple nonetheless. We learn as part of the back-history that the two of them had a jealous row after they first met Gilda. Since Leo pushed Otto into the bath, we might presume that they were living together or sharing a room at the time. Later, Leo's confession to Otto is couched in the language of conventional romance: "(haltingly) The – feeling I had for you – something very deep, I imagined...". After Gilda has left them, the two men go off travelling the world together in a set up normally associated with couples.

In the context of the original production the potentially sexual subtext of the relationship between Otto and Leo may have been more resonant for the audience due to gossip surrounding the actors playing them: Coward was gay and Lunt rumoured to be bisexual. However, the sex act itself in *Design for Living* is downplayed in value and significance. After Leo sleeps with Gilda for the first time he describes their love for Otto as "deeper than sentiment: far, far deeper. Beyond the reach of small enchantments". Gilda is offended that Leo describes their love-making as a "small enchantment" and asks "Was that all it was to you?", Leo replies "That's all it is to anybody, if only they knew." Like Elyot in *Private Lives* – who describes sex as "vastly overrated" – Leo implies that love is the thing. Sex is merely its by-product: sometimes pleasurable, sometimes inconvenient.

### Destiny and compulsion

*Design for Living* presents three central characters who are inextricably bound up in each other's lives. Though the protagonists make a point of stating their disbelief in God, they acknowledge the universal power of destiny in bringing them together and in preventing them moving apart. Otto describes the bad timing of Gilda and Leo's laughter after their betrayal as "an unkind trick of Fate's", and explains to Gilda: "A gay ironic chance threw the three of us together and tied our lives into a tight knot at the outset. To deny it would be ridiculous, and to unravel it impossible."

The characters are powerless to resist each other or change how they feel. When Gilda leaves the two men, Otto knows "We shall always want her – always always always", and Gilda two years later admits "I can't possibly live without them".

This belief in the inescapability of their situation gives them a certain license to displace responsibility for their actions. After Leo and Gilda betray Otto by sleeping together Leo says "What we did was inevitable". Later, after Otto and Gilda cheat on Leo by sleeping together, Otto says "It was inevitable". The two men use almost identical phrases in almost identical circumstances. As with the central quartet in *Private Lives*, the characters' relationships unfold in symmetrical patterns, as they are drawn back together despite attempts to move apart. The dramatic structure of the play is provided as much by pattern as by the development of plot, with repetition serving to reinforce the sense that the characters are dealing with rhythms and forces beyond their control. As Otto says, "The circle has swung round, and it's my turn again".

In the final scene of the play Otto, Leo and Gilda are reunited and reconciled. But the audience is left to wonder whether they will go forward in straightforward harmony, or whether the complicated patterns of the past will be repeated.



# DESIGN FOR LIVING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Written in 1932, *Design for Living* bridges two radically different decades: the 'Roaring Twenties' and the 'Dirty Thirties'.

While Coward was never a political writer, his work captures the spirit of his times as experienced by a privileged section of society, so that even in the 1930s the critic Cyril Connolly complained that his plays were "written in the most topical and perishable way imaginable, the cream in them turns sour overnight".

Below are some of the events and trends which are either directly or indirectly referred to in *Design for Living*.

## The Great Depression

After a decade of growing prosperity and optimism, the stock market crash of 1929 signalled the end of the good times and the beginning of a period of severe economic depression affecting millions of people in America and Europe.

The divide between rich and poor grew. In Britain, a third of the population lived for the whole of the 1930s below the poverty line, and mass unemployment and hunger forced the Government to form The Unemployment Assistance Board.

The despair and deprivation of these times barely touches *Design for Living*, though Gilda's wealthy guest Grace Torrence does allude to people having had "the most dreadful winter" financially, and observes how the economic climate has caused Paris to lose its vitality.

## The role of women

Gilda's dislike of other women and hatred of the feminine aspects of her own personality point to the gender inequalities and misogyny still prevalent at this time. In *Design for Living*, as elsewhere in Coward's comedies, to behave like a typical woman is to be needy, clingy and scheming. When in *Private Lives* Elyot says to Sybil "You're a completely feminine little creature aren't you?" he means it as a criticism, not a complement.

Nevertheless the 1920s and '30s were also a time of positive change for women. In 1928 full voting rights were finally granted to women in Britain (America had done the same eight years before). An increasing number of women expanded their lives beyond the domain of child rearing and home keeping to take on fulltime careers or to study at university.

This was made possible in no small part due to major advances in the availability and effectiveness of birth control. Marie Stopes in Britain and Margaret Sanger in America both opened family planning clinics in the 1920s, and campaigned to remove the stigma surrounding contraception and challenge widespread beliefs that diaphragms caused cancer, infertility and hysteria.

The central trio in *Design for Living* use the fact that they are not populating the world with illegitimate children as a justification for their unconventional sexual behaviour, and Gilda is adamant that she doesn't want a family, a choice that would not have been possible ten years earlier.

The new freedoms that women were winning in public and private were reflected in the fashion of the day. Rigid, corseted and body-hiding forms gave way to a looser and more comfortable style, as exemplified in the sportswear-inspired clothes of Molyneux and Chanel.



### Cinema and television

In *Design for Living* the Evening Standard journalist asks Leo what he thinks of the “talkies”. Sound pictures were still a novel and recent phenomenon when the play was written, the first full-length talkie being *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. Silent movies were still being made into the early 1930s and there was uncertainty about whether the talking pictures would be simply a passing fad, hence the reporter’s question.

The references in the play to television are also highly topical. In the late 1920s John Logie Baird gave a series of demonstrations of his increasingly sophisticated television invention, and Germany was the first country to begin regular broadcasts in 1929.

### Loose living

The years between the wars saw a great deal of debate around issues of moral decay and the degenerate behaviour of the young. Coward rode the wave of these issues early on in his career. His first major success, *The Vortex*, was about a nymphomaniac and a cocaine addict. His follow up to this, *Fallen Angels*, was branded disgusting and obscene by critics, with the London Council for the Promotion of Public Morality lobbying for the play to be shut down on the ground that “The whole is a revolting sex-play and has not the redeeming feature of containing a moral lesson”.

*Design for Living* continues the author’s interest in dramatising unconventional and ‘amoral’ lifestyles, dealing as it does with issues of bisexuality, sex before marriage, and Free Love. The wit, polish and lightness on the surface of the play serve to an extent to mask the radical themes which lie beneath, so that the play is daring enough to provoke and entertain, yet at the same time get past censorship laws.

Coward played up to his reputation for hedonism in his celebrity persona, teasing the Evening Standard “I am never out of opium dens, cocaine dens, and other evil places. My mind is a mass of corruption”.

### The Lost Generation

When we first meet Otto and Gilda they are living in Paris, and we later learn as part of the back-history of the play that Leo lived there too when all three were poor and struggling to get their creative careers off the ground.

This motif of expatriates living in Paris and working as artists is suggestive of The Lost Generation. The term was coined by the gay writer and art collector Gertrude Stein to describe those who left their homes in America, England and elsewhere in Europe due to a sense of frustration and disillusionment in the years after World War I.

They were drawn to Paris for its vibrant creative and intellectual scene, liberal Bohemian lifestyle, and the respect afforded to artists there.

### Travel

*Design for Living* is a play full of travel. The central characters take international trips by sea for work, relocation, and as a tool for self-discovery and emotional healing. The 1920s and 1930s represented a golden era for ocean liners, which became symbols of luxury, cutting-edge technology and national pride. They popularised transatlantic travel between America and Europe, and created a new industry of high-class pleasure cruises for the wealthy.

The late 1920s also saw a massive growth in the automobile industry. Cars became safer due to advances in technology such as hydraulic brakes, and more affordable due to the production line innovations of Ford and other companies.

In the play Grace and Henry both make it clear that they have cars outside – a must-have luxury status symbol for the ostentatiously wealthy at this time.

# IN CONVERSATION WITH THE PRODUCTION'S LEAD ACTORS

**TOM BURKE, LISA DILLON AND ANDREW SCOTT – WHO PLAY OTTO, GILDA AND LEO – TAKE TIME OUT OF PREVIEWS TO TALK TO MITCHELL MORENO**

**What was your response to the play when you first read it?**

**Lisa:** I adored it. In particular I was simply blown away by Gilda, staggered at the complexity Coward pitches her at. I fell in love with her completely. Coward allows Gilda to be as intelligent and brilliant as any woman could be, and also very self-aware regarding her own moral dilemma.

The whole play I think is truly astonishing for the time it was written, and even now it still feels incredibly modern in its outlook. People who have seen the play have commented on that.

**Tom:** People have also been moved by the production. There's a very strong emotional undercurrent. Although it's about people being silly, it's in fact about people being very *serious* about being silly. We're not silly enough, most of us, in real life. The play is about listening to that quiet voice in our heads guiding us how to live our own lives, instead of hearing the louder voices around us.

But my impression when I first read the play was that I found it quite violent, the ending in particular is very violent.

**Coward said that the ending has been interpreted, or misinterpreted, in lots of different ways. What decisions have you made about how to play it?**

**Tom:** Coward wrote that it was them laughing at themselves. We had a long discussion about what they were laughing at, but in fact when you're playing the scene you can only play what is in front of you, respond to what is happening. So yes we're laughing at ourselves, but very much in the context of Ernest being in there shouting at us. The audience will have their own reactions, even two people sitting next to each other seeing the same show will take away different things.

**Lisa:** Initially I thought it was a laughter at Ernest which absolutely continued throughout as we found each other. This was a much madder laughter, but I think we slightly lost a potential ambiguity in that. So now as much as we laugh at Ernest, there is a slight hiatus in it. There's lots going on. I think I'm also laughing at the complete lunacy of the situation, and with absolute relief that the boys are back.

**Gilda's behaviour to Ernest here is very cruel, isn't it? Can that be hard to get over as an actress?**

**Lisa:** You're right it could be seen as very cruel but she has her moment where she tries to offer an explanation and I've tried to be as truthful in that moment as I can be. I hope people see how agonised she's been in making the decision. She's been living a dead existence in a completely wrong marriage and therefore I hope people don't think too badly of her. Nobody surely would want her to stay in a marriage that's so grim. And wrong for Ernest too. But then on top of that of course she's selfish. They're all selfish.

**How did you build the characters in rehearsal. Did you work on back-history – the characters' lives before the start of the play?**

**Andrew:** I did a little bit of work on back-history but privately really, rather than in the rehearsal room. Certainly we talked



about how our characters would have met, the fact that Otto and Leo would have known each other before meeting Gilda, that's explicit in the text, it's a long standing friendship. But I think that if you do too much background stuff you can begin to know more than the audience does, and I think that's not necessarily beneficial.

**Lisa:** We began straight away with the text. Anthony [Page, the director] is a real truth guru and won't let you play a false note, even in an elaborate comedic moment he wants to nail the truth of it. When you're doing Coward and you know something's funny, sometimes you just want to play the laugh. But Anthony is rigorous with that.

There's this whole idea that Coward can be superficial. You've got to just bed the characters in as real, living human beings. But we got to that through the text not through working on back-history.

**Tom:** Each of us has our own ideas and I'm not sure they would absolutely meet like a jigsaw puzzle on every point.

**But there must be some things which you have to agree on, for example whether the relationship between Otto and Leo was in the past sexual, or just a deep friendship?**

**Andrew:** Absolutely they had a sexual relationship, I think it's stupid to suggest they didn't. That's something Coward was trying to write about but under the cover of the attitudes of the time and censorship. Because we can now talk about those things, it would be wilful to decide not to. I think it's pretty obvious. It's not about two guys fighting over a girl, it's about three people loving each other.

**Tom:** It makes sense to me that something would have happened. The only debate about it for me was whether when something happens on stage between Otto and Leo, whether it's less exiting for an audience to watch if they feel it's happened before.

**Lisa:** From Gilda's point of view Otto and Leo were together, yes completely. She has a line early on when Ernest says to her something about Otto and Leo knowing each other first, which is Coward's potent but slightly coded way of saying they were together. And then I came along and I spoiled everything. I got myself involved with two bisexual men, and fell in love with them, and things got very complicated.

**After Gilda leaves them, and Otto and Leo go off travelling together, did you decide whether they pick up their relationship again or are they just travelling as friends?**

**Tom:** When we see them again in New York they act like a couple but it's unclear how much they're putting it on. They're really nervous about going in there. They get there and they start playing up. They don't really know where to stop. They're like children who have had too many sweets, and they're doing it for each other. Remember they live in a world where if you're not married people have a strong opinion about it, a time where if you're gay or bi you're screwed. So they come in and are deliberately playing up to that and deliberately trying to alienate the Americans. It's almost a pre-emptive strike so they don't get that treatment themselves.

**Andrew:** I think they become a couple again, yes. To a certain extent all the relationships work as a couple or a pairing, but they don't completely work, there's always the ghost of the other thing, the other person.

When we were approaching the drunk scene, as we call it, we'd rehearsed it a few times without any sort of kissing or sexual contact, then we rehearsed it where they kissed at the end. But it didn't feel right – just because that's what happens in the Otto and Gilda scene, doesn't mean you can transplant the same pattern there. You have to be true to what they're talking about, and what they're talking about is how much they miss Gilda. So it would seem inappropriate to start snogging, that would be forcing something on to it. So we decided to put it a little bit earlier to suggest their physical relationship, but not



interrupt the sense of loneliness about Gilda.

### Have your performances changed since you've been playing in front of an audience?

**Andrew:** Hugely, the preview period has been huge. You find out about the play again: oh that's a really funny line, that can be taken down, that's something that the audience are not getting. You learn what needs speeding up, slowing down.

**Tom:** And learn about moments which for reasons beyond my comprehension work one way and not another, weird stuff, that if you stand still on the line it's funny and if you're moving it's not, but if you're standing still stage left it works but if you're stage right it doesn't. In terms of the deeper underlying things being played, what you're trying to do to the other person, how you're reacting to what they're doing, that's stayed in the same ballpark because that was fully explored in rehearsals and not papered over.

### Is it a challenge doing what is quite a domestic, intimate play in the big space of The Old Vic?

**Lisa:** Well people say that the Old Vic is a hard space to play but I don't think we have found it so. I keep thinking it feels like a big hug, because it's very wide. Although it's high, it's not ridiculously steep, so I'm not really aware of it being tricky. Though Kevin Spacey did say to us you've still got to flick it out, give the words and the emotion behind them an edge.

**Andrew:** The very first play I did in London was here so I knew the space quite well. I was surprised then how good the space was, it's really well designed, the acoustic is very good. You can be quite intimate in here, the focus is great. And as you go through the run you think "I could take that down, that needs to go up a little bit". What's important here is articulation. And that's sometimes more to do with psychology- if you really enjoy saying something it will be clear because there will be a stronger connection. Luckily there's a lot to enjoy.

**Tom:** People said to me after the show last night "You look like you're really enjoying it". Well you couldn't do this play if you weren't enjoying it, it would be impossible. You need to enjoy it to understand it. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to summon any of the things you need to summon.





# REHEARSAL NOTES

## BRAVE BEGINNINGS

### ASSISTANT DIRECTOR MARK LEIPACHER OFFERS A BEHIND THE SCENES GLIMPSE INTO THE REHEARSAL PROCESS USING EXTRACTS FROM HIS *DESIGN FOR LIVING* PRODUCTION DIARY.

‘I’m worried we look like Torvill and Dean,’ chuckles Lisa Dillon (Gilda) as she and Andrew Scott (Leo) inadvertently strike a pose with a chair poised precariously between them. It is a brief and light-hearted break in the middle of a complex scene. Usually, large portions of the play’s scenes are covered in one uninterrupted pass and discussed at their conclusion.

From the outset, Anthony Page, the director, has made it clear that the best way to rehearse is with the actors knowing all their lines in advance of running a scene. He works unobtrusively, playing sections through, then returning to the beginning and playing it over and over again. This seems to invite the actors to explore all the subtle variations and possibilities of Noël Coward’s lines, allowing them to rely on their instincts.

When there is a pause, conversations focus on adjustments, changes of tone and what solution works best.

There is a discussion about the clues that Coward has covertly sewn into the text, suggesting bisexuality. It is inferred that a deep, sexual relationship already exists between Leo and Otto (played by Tom Burke) before Gilda even arrives. Anthony is clear that: ‘Coward was gay and he went as far as he could get under the censorship system to represent this on stage. It’s part of the pattern of the play.’

That, of course, is just one side of the triangular relationship between the three main characters. ‘I love you. You love me. You love Otto. I love Otto. Otto loves you. Otto loves me,’ says Leo to Gilda later in the scene. Their equal passion for one another after all is something that they’re struggling to comprehend, just as much as society may disapprove.

During rehearsals, we’ve all been surprised by how strikingly modern the play is for a period piece; the depth of exploration of an ‘abnormal’ sexual relationship – a permanent and shifting *ménage à trois* that might still raise eyebrows today.

When giving notes Anthony is positive, creating an environment within the rehearsal room where the actors can explore any decision and continue to investigate the play. He has been working with them on plotting the emotional landscape, developing a skeleton structure for each of the scenes, and making clear, specific choices. With these elements in place, the actors are free to negotiate with one another.





Tom, Lisa and Andrew are drawing from the table-work discussions that took place in advance of the first week of rehearsals. This was an opportunity to consider the script prior to getting scenes on to their feet. The actors were encouraged to slowly pick through the truth and emotional reality of the situation. This has all been good preparation for the approaching 'test' audiences that are going to be introduced to the rehearsal room to start watching full run-throughs this coming Thursday and Friday.

When they're not required in the rehearsal room, the lead actors can often be found cradling their scripts in the Green Room, taking every chance to tackle the sheer volume of text they need to memorise. These characters can be operatic and grandiloquent, and Lisa is getting to grips with what Anthony calls Gilda's 'neurotic arias'. In Paris, Gilda has always acted as critic and muse but when Leo and Otto become successful, she questions her place within the triangle. Success is a large part of *Design for Living* – private lives and public faces. Although Gilda spends some of the play in high society, Anthony reminds us that 'she has a strong bohemian ideal of where she fits in. It's about making choices: living the way you want to live and dealing with the consequences.' During the filming of the video diaries – used to promote the production via The Old Vic's Facebook page – Tom talked eloquently about the universality of what Coward was exploring: how divided your emotions can be when you discover there are two people in your life that you love so completely and equally.

Andrew talked with admiration for what he called, 'a really brave play', one that deals with this issue. He believes the audience should want the three of them to be together. 'All they're doing is loving one another.' Otto, Gilda and Leo are not simply sexual provocateurs; there is a high level of care, passion and love in the relationship and they cannot be apart from one another.

It is a viewpoint that Anthony responds to wholeheartedly. He's fascinated by how Coward doesn't 'resist or shy away from the predicament. It is a romantic fantasy and something he believed he could make an entertaining story out of – it gets very, very messy and awkward.' We're finding these people are incredibly, irresistibly attracted to one another, and they cannot be separated, the relationship simply doesn't function when one member of the triangle is absent.

