

Fun and Games with Noël Coward:

A Practical Way into the Coward Style for Young Actors

"I am just an ingénue

And shall be till I'm eighty-two."

"Little Women" from THIS YEAR OF GRACE, 1928

Children who want to play find adults who prefer to talk very, very boring. They will reach an age however when the balance changes, they will play less and less and begin to talk more and more. Eventually they will recognise that conversation itself is *a form of play*. Better still, they will realise that if they go to see a Noël Coward drama it is also quite fun observing the talk and conversations of others at play. Both playing games and exchanging words can be fun, but it is my view that they are not mutually exclusive. And what this summary and the classes it describes hope to show is that actors, especially student actors, can learn through game-playing the art and style of Noël Coward.

I say especially student actors because the game-playing I suggest is meant as a 'way in' for those unfamiliar with Coward's work or unsure how to approach it. Having said that, as the song suggests, perhaps we all need a way of staying at the age of the ingénue if our minds are to remain open to new things and so I hope too that this article will be helpful and insightful for all those with an interest in The Master, whether you be an ingénue or an octogenarian. When I call this article "Fun and Games with Noël Coward: A Practical Way Into the Coward Style for Young Actors" what I'm really saying is that I hope I can offer a practical way in to Coward style for any actor who is young enough at heart to try it.

The basic aim of my work with students has always been to let the actor/student discover the various aspects of Coward's high comedy acting style for themselves. It should be stressed, therefore, that the purpose of doing these exercises and taking part in these games is not

to show the performer *how to act* (or indeed tell the director how to direct) but instead to allow the actor a fuller understanding of the style *through play*. Of course, the exercises and games can be used as part of a rehearsal process aiming towards a full scale production, but equally they can be presented in a single workshop where the end purpose is simply to discover a new approach to the plays of Coward.

Fun exercises and silly games are not always at the forefront of the academic mind, but students on the whole love them. This summary of my work and classes though is for everyone from those with a passing interest in Coward's work to the Coward aficionado, from the inquiring reader to university lecturer or theatre historian. My aim is to show how the classes have been an illuminating and insightful way of pinning down some of the problems and difficulties performers over several generations have had in getting Coward right.

The notes and observations are based on the 'Comedy of Manners' course I taught at the University of Birmingham Drama Department for several years as part of the undergraduate programme and now continue to teach on a freelance basis. The aim of the classes is always to use physical and mental exercises and games as techniques that work from *the outside in* rather than *from the inside out*. What this means is that the exercises themselves should do the work for the actor, and if they pay dividends in finding the craft of the comedy of manners style it is then up to the actor to take that understanding and apply it to the text. Of course there is nothing wrong in principle with the other approach, where actors are asked to bring something out from inside of themselves to help create character and so on. However, the simple truth is that most students or young actors don't have the life experiences necessary and certainly don't, in terms of the acting style, understand the delicacies of comedy of manners theatre.

Coward just won't go away. It is likely that at some stage in an actor's career they will be faced with performing in a Coward production. Having said that, there are certain prejudices that many actors, both young and old, have towards Coward and comedy of manners in general and the course I teach is aimed in part at dispelling these attitudes and at the same time introducing the craft itself. Let's have a look at a few of these prejudices and attitudes straight away.

The first is that the students sometimes regard Coward's plays as "plotless". To some degree they have a point. Coward is more interested in creating and exploring a *situation* rather than the mechanics of plot twists besides which actors are usually able to separate their critique of a drama, or lack of it, from the attitude they take to their character. However, a real problem does arise when actors take the next step and regard the dialogue of Coward as lacking in *dramatic action*. Plotlessness and lack of dramatic action are easily confused in the mind of young actors and so this article takes some time to look at this issue and suggests several exercises to re-evaluate this perspective. My classes aim to show that Coward's work is full of dramatic action and that it is there in almost every line. It also demonstrates that lack of plot is not the same as a lack of dramatic structure as it is clear to anyone who works on Coward that the composition of the plays is brilliantly shaped and balanced.

Another major prejudice actors have towards Coward is that he is "too wordy and too static". They think of his plays as people standing around talking. And then talking some more. It's just "words, words, words". Again, there is an element of truth in this but there is far more potential movement and physicality in Coward than people realise, including directors. Again, there is an exercise I do that aims to make the actor and any potential director think creatively about movement and the physical and often comic action that can arise naturally out of the dialogue.

The next attitude that the course has always aimed to reverse is the idea that the characters who populate the plays "lack depth". The criticism here is that the characters are "light" or worse, "one dimensional" or even "empty". Young actors brought up on psychological realism, which often wears its emotions on its sleeve, find it difficult sometimes to see any other theatrical style as possessing emotional truth, especially comedy of manners. They find it difficult to grasp that it is often what is not said that is more truthful and indeed more passionate than confrontational nose-to-nose encounters. This way of communicating though does not come naturally to them, at least on stage, and again there is a series of exercises that aims to allow

the actor to get a sense of what is below the surface and ways it can manifest itself in performance.

Another attitude I've repeatedly come across when discussing Coward with actors is that because comedy of manners often requires a light touch, it is therefore "easy and simple". What sad fools they are. Because comedy of manners at its best is performed by the great exponents of the craft who make it look light and easy, young actors ignorantly think it is easy. If there is one thing the students who have taken my course have soon realised it is that they have seriously underestimated how much work is required to get even close to pulling off a high comedy performance. I confess that their exhausted faces of realisation when they recognise this is one of my secret pleasures whenever I teach the course.

There are other attitudes and prejudices I will discuss along the way but for now just one more observation and that is about the performance style itself. Actors forget that the humour of comedy of manners does not come from being funny or a knowing wink but instead from the reality of what they are doing. Actors I work with considerably underestimate the sense of *realness* that is needed. Worse, if they can't capture that realness for real they then start 'acting', which is often a disaster. I say this because many have become so indoctrinated by Coward pastiche, which clouds a truthful and fresh response to the plays, that their idea of what 'Coward acting' is becomes detrimental to the drama. The sad truth is that they have probably seen more skits on 'the Coward acting style' than good Coward productions. The result I find is that because they view the style of high comedy as somehow 'false' they are therefore inclined to see a truthful performance as something alien to Coward. As my actors work on their exercises, I always stress that they must never be camp or knowing or try to be funny because it is the knowingness of camp that is the real enemy of the Coward style.

This article inevitably raises questions about the very principle of using games and exercises to explore a particular style of theatre practice. For example, one question that always arises is to what extent the student's able to carry through whatever he or she has learnt when playing a game or doing an exercise into the speaking and moving of the actual text. Another concerns what is the balance between the use of an exercise to create an effect and letting an actor use their acting instinct. Ultimately such questions are at least in part dependent on the nature of the students in question, though it is precisely because student actors find a way into Coward so difficult that I came up with the course in the first place. Another response is that the answer depends on what the ultimate goal is. My aim with students is simply to use the classes as an introduction to comedy of manners, taking the actors from learnt principles to practical application by working on specific scenarios and scenes. The classes were not a rehearsal process for a full scale production, though some exercises could certainly be used in that context. As the article progresses, aims and purpose will, I hope, become clear.

A huge issue which I have, quite frankly, side-tracked in this discussion is the actual social manners and class behaviour of the period. There are of course numerous questions that are central to a true comedy of manners performance such as: How do you hold a cigarette? Should one ever have one's hands in one's pockets in mixed company? Is there a right or wrong way to sip a cocktail? How does one address one's servants? And the biggest question of all is: Which accent, if any, should the actor use in performing a Coward play? The problem in raising these and other such quite legitimate questions is that when you are trying to concentrate on another and very specific area of performance such as rhythm it gives the actor, especially a young actor, simply too much to think about. Indeed many of the exercises depend on the actor not thinking in order that whatever happens in the game occurs as naturally as possible! Nothing would kill off the purpose of many of the exercises and games more than giving the actor a note on how the angle of his cigarette is wrong for the period. That simply isn't the main purpose of the work I do with my students. I acknowledge it is a central, if not essential, element of

comedy of manners performance, but I think it is important to let actors learn to walk before they learn to deport, as it were.

As I have said, the exercises may be used as part of a rehearsal process or simply as a means to learning something of the style of Coward's comedy of manners. The earlier exercises in the article are, I would suggest, the easier ones and so I begin with them. Some of the later exercises involve a greater understanding of the practice of theatre in terms of blocking and actual staging. Because I use these exercises as an introduction to performance style it is important to get the actor to think about what went on in the exercise *after the exercise has been completed*. The way the course has worked at the University of Birmingham Drama Department involves each actor going home and then writing a diary. This diary covers what happened in the class, how the actor felt about it and what they have learnt. Later, these diaries are read by me, the course director. All the students on my course have very kindly agreed to let me include extracts from these diaries for this article, though names have been replaced by initials. The diary extracts offer a variety of insights as to how the exercises actually worked in practice, or indeed didn't work. If they didn't work then it is important for the student actor to ask themselves *why they didn't work* and whether that can in itself be an equally valuable learning experience. I personally prefer to offer answers only when an actor has had enough time to think about the question. Having taught the course over many years *my* lesson was learning to be flexible. I also learnt to adapt the exercise or somehow change its direction if it wasn't working out as I had hoped or expected and so be prepared as well with a Plan B. I learnt too to go with the unexpected and if the exercise revealed something useful but unintended then go with that more than whatever idea I had in mind. Putting it simply, I learnt that having a recipe isn't the same as knowing how to cook!

I have broken this article into several basic headings. Each offers its own focus but, having said that, each area is interdependent on the others when it comes to creating a final performance. There are so

many aspects to the style it is very difficult to tackle all together, another reason why student actors usually respond well to the course as it allows them to build up a comedy of manners technique layer upon layer.

The first section I have called **Coward at Battle Stations**. This is mainly concerned with how to create changing rhythms and energy levels in Coward's heated love-hate dialogue. Often these arguments involve insecurity and sexual jealousy as a result of a former partner or would be lover. Some would say the continuing hold of a former lover on a new and often developing relationship is at the emotional heart of Coward's classic dramas. The exercises in this section are especially useful therefore when looking at scenes from *Private Lives*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Design For Living* and also a famous section of *Red Peppers*.

The second heading I call **Coward's 'Behind the Scenes' Dialogue**. This covers a series of exercises concerned with subtext, which in Coward is as much about revealing as it is about masking, at least as far as the audience watching is concerned. As so often with Coward and comedy of manners in general it is the putting on of a mask to hide behind that is ironically so revealing of character.

Coward's Words and the Need to Move Them About a Bit is concerned, not surprisingly, with creating movement and focus when performing the text. There is a physicality to Coward's work that is often overlooked. Movement and its counterpoint stillness are often essential to making Coward plays come alive and also in making them funny. This aspect of the course proved to be a little controversial with some of the student actors, as will be explained.

Coward's Game of 'Outsiders-Insiders' in *Hay Fever* is a detailed look at one of the major themes of Coward's work and that is the role of the outsider in an insider world. Instead of exercises this section suggests a series of games that should help actors understand the underlying tone of *Hay Fever* and introduce the important aspect of game playing itself that is central to the play.

Steve Nallon

COWARD AT BATTLE STATIONS

Amanda: "Do you remember that awful scene we had in Venice?"

Elyot: "Which particular one?" PRIVATE LIVES, ACT II

When it comes to couples having an "awful scene" in Coward plays you are somewhat spoilt for choice. Many Coward characters spend their time having a good old-fashioned ding-dong of a row, especially those who are supposed to be in love with each other. And the mention of another lover, present, previous or would-be, often fuels these colourful argy-bargies. However, underneath the fracas these same characters are also often revealing both their love for their present partner and their own deep insecurity as a result of any comparison to former lovers. The difficulty then for the actor is how to make the row convincing on the surface but at the same time still manage to reveal the various emotional undercurrents.

With the following exercises my aim is to help actors separate these problems into specific areas. Each exercise has a particular function but it is only when the work from all the exercises is put together that the actor begins to get a complete picture of how a scene could work. The comparison I make to students is to think of these exercises as several beams of blue, green and red light all coming from different lanterns to illuminate an area, there are seemingly contrasting and different but when they are all finally brought together a completely clean white image emerges.

EXERCISE: 'The European Community'

This exercise aims **to create different rhythms and changing energies in the ongoing quarrel**. The play the group works on is *Red Peppers*. The scene I chose comes immediately after the music hall duo has sung "*Has Anyone Seen Our Ship?*" Lily has dropped her telescope, mucking up the whole exit, and so the husband and wife team are already rowing as they enter their dressing room.

First I get the actors to read out and sometimes act out the scene to get a basic idea of what is going on. Invariably there is a flatness to

the vocal patterns. A key aspect of all comedy of manners performance from Restoration through to Wilde and on into the twentieth century with Coward and Orton is vocal dexterity and colour. To inject energy into the scene the student actors are therefore asked to think of the most energetic and physical accent in the 'European Community'. Invariably they say Italian. The actors then repeat the scene with Italian accents. They are specifically told not 'to act' but to let the accent and the exercise do the acting for them. Once they repeat the scene with the Italian accent the energy level quadruples and the rest of the group will hopefully begin to see how potentially funny this scene is. Once the 'Italian' exercise and flavour has seasoned the scene, so to speak, it is then time to add a second vocal quality with accent number two. It is suggested to the student actors that this second accent should have an opposing energy and rhythm as changing dynamics like vocal range is an important aspect of the style. The group are therefore asked to think of a European accent of resistance and stillness. Usually German is suggested. The scene is then repeated so that George keeps the Italian accent but Lily now has a German accent. Also Lily is asked to remain stationary whereas George is still allowed to move around and encouraged, albeit in a terrible Italian stereotype, to wave his hands around like some kind of maniacal or demented windmill. The exercise should now reveal the opposing general rhythms of the two characters.

Next the group discuss which accent in the European Community is the most 'snide and sarcastic' (English is usually suggested) and then which accent is the most expressive of 'possessive sexually jealousy' (French is often the obvious choice). Incidentally, if the group do not make these specific choices the principle of the exercise still applies as it is about creating different rhythms and changing energies rather than putting on a funny voice. I then get the group to repeat the exercise but now using English and French accents. After seeing how both German/Italian and English/French works it is time to ask the group to break down the scene and decide phrase by phrase which accent should be used for which particular line. The scene is then tried again this time with one of the four accents for the different lines. Hopefully this brings out the changing nature and dynamics of Coward's dialogue.

It is important to stress throughout the exercise that it is the accent that should be doing the work for the actor at this stage. This is because the exercise is primarily concerned with giving the row a high energy and an ever changing rhythm rather than producing any sort of final performance level. When I feel as much has been gained from this exercise as is possible it is then time to apply what has been learnt. I ask the students to try and keep as much of the variety of rhythm, tone and pitch that they achieved in the voices when they go back to the text with their own speech patterns and so the scene is then repeated this time with the actors now using their own voices. Hopefully a residue of the energy of the accent and the changing contrasting rhythms resulting from the various juxtaposing accents should still be present in the performance, even though the accents themselves have now been removed. By the end of 'The European Community' exercise the group usually have better understanding, first, of the pace needed to keep up the energy of the scene and, second, of the mental and physical dexterity required by the actor to make it work at its optimum.

Here are a few comments from student diaries about 'The European Community' exercise.

"I had to deliver my lines in a very German accent but also keep physically still. The physical immobility really reinforced a sense of controlled and continued rage and it made it imperative that this should be expressed vocally."

"The contrast of the two accents worked because Lily's standoffish, insular character seemed to aggravate and provoke George's passionate character more than if they had just been Italian. It created a sense of flux and the rhythm was very much up and down, and the mis-matched styles of delivery gave a sense of lack of communication, or banging your head against a brick wall."

"The British accent was terribly snooty and snide; perfect for the sarcastic moment, 'Whose fault was it then, Mussolini's?'"

"We then attempted to incorporate all the differing styles, accents and energies into the text to allow more changes of direction, sometimes even in mid-line. For example, we decided that the line, 'No I don't, so shut up' could be split into an excitable Italian 'No I don't' and a threatening [German] 'so shut up'."

A useful idea to introduce after this exercise is the concept of **“turning on a sixpence”**. Spinning or turning on a sixpence is a phrase experienced actors often use when discussing the comedy of manners style. It simply refers to the massive mood changes that can occur within the shortest possible time in much of Coward’s dialogue. Maria Aiken in her excellent book *Style: Acting in High Comedy* ¹ refers to this aspect of the comedy of manners acting style as *slalom* because of the need to execute rapidly changing moods at speed. Hopefully ‘The European Community exercise goes some way to helping the actor to begin to understand the importance of this technique in comedy of manners. As one of the students pointed out in the above diary extract, this spinning or turning of moods can even happen within a single line.

“When reading the text using the accent deemed suitable for that particular line it brought a huge amount of energy to the readings. The humour was not only because of the foreign accents but also because of the incongruity of mixing the different accents combined with the spontaneity achieved when working with a stereotyped accent which is not your own. The foreign accent brought an emotional colouring that would not have been so easily achieved with our own accents; when speaking in the Italian accent, for example, a high energy level was very easily achieved. When jumping from a ranting Italian to a sneering Englishman you got an almost perfect example of turning on a sixpence.”

Later in the course some of the scenes such as the one from *Red Peppers* were returned to with some of the students now directing pairs of actors. Here is one inventive variation on the game the students came up with:

“The mismatch of accent characteristics also helped to create tension and emphasised the lack of communication. R and G also experimented with this extract, delivering the lines as two eight year olds would. This added another layer of meaning to George and Lily’s relationship, depicting them as childish and petty. I found myself really involved with this exercise and was excited by how fitting certain elements of all the accents and styles were to the text; it really helped to emphasise how important a tool the voice is for conveying meaning.”

¹ “Style: Acting in High Comedy” by Maria Aiken (APPLAUSE 1996) page 54.

Many of the students in the Drama Department had studied Laban and so were also able to categorise the energy using Laban terminology, which is basically different expressions for physical actions that can have a corresponding parallel in vocal dimension and power.

“To differentiate all these we used different accents: Italian for excited energetic exchanges (in Laban terms a flick); for the sarcastic bits an upper class English accent (glide); for the interrogative bits German accent (a punch or press) and for anything remotely sexual, a French accent (a float). I really enjoyed this exercise, partly because I feel confident doing accents, but also because I really saw the sense in it, as it found the energy of a line by colouring it in a suitable way. It was difficult choosing where to swap between accents, but this ‘turning on a sixpence’ was often where the humour was found, illustrating that the comic rhythm is constantly changing.”

It is essential for young actors to learn that comedy of manners requires considerable vocal dexterity for it to work well. I tell my actors that mumbling away in the style of ultra naturalism is not going to get you anywhere. Nor, it should be said, is the skill of ‘spinning on a sixpence’ confined to just vocal dexterity as anyone who saw Maggie Smith as Lady Bracknell in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Leaving Mr Worthing’s drawing-room, having rejected Cecily as a prospective niece-in-law, she suddenly spun her whole body round on the spot upon hearing that Miss Cardew had a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in funds. A champion figure skater could not have matched that particular example of ‘spinning on a sixpence’! And that is where so much of the laughter and the ‘comedy’ of comedy of manners comes from, because perfectly executed physical alacrity is comic reversal in its purest form – and always very funny!

Just one further point. The idea of the course is to try to look at all the different aspects of comedy of manners performance so that the students, as the classes progress, gain a complete picture. Towards the end of the course I encourage students to choose a scene they had worked on previously and would like to return to in order to put all the work together, as it were, combining blocking, physicality and vocal work. Several students chose the *Red Peppers* scene. Here is an extract from one of the group watching this final presentation. It is interesting

to see how they had used physicality to bring out the humours and comedy in the scene:

“As they are arguing J and L decided to have George and Lily undressing in front of the mirror. Their movements were synchronised as it by habit, which demonstrated how much of a routine this was for them. They emphasised the sense that even though the characters are arguing it is not serious and is just an element of their relationship. George and Lily’s synchronisation was also all the more funny because they were unaware of it themselves. I think this performance was a brilliant testament to what much of this course has been about – bringing life, energy, precision, clarity etc to a theatrical style that can be very daunting for the actor.”

EXERCISE: ‘What I Really Think of Her’

One of the many themes of Coward’s work is how past lovers can haunt current relationships. The metaphor of a *ghost* is made very real and literal in *Blithe Spirit*. However, most of Coward’s ‘Ghosts of Lovers Past’ remain unseen but their memory still troubles many characters and this presence, at least in spoken dialogue, often disturbs their lovers in the present. They can even be used as weapons in an on-going argument or as a means of riling a partner, needling them like someone with a pin poking inside the shell of a snail. It is not always an easy task to bring these off-stage characters to life, yet for the threat to be real the off-stage character must at least seem alive for both the actor and the audience. A useful exercise to try whenever the text mentions a former lover or would be lover is the exercise ‘What I Really Think of Her’.

This exercise is short if not always sweet. Basically the actor says what he or she really thinks of the character before the name of that character is actually spoken. This exercise aims **to give the actor an immediate and specific attitude to a character who may be known to them but remains unknown to the audience**. As with the exercise ‘The European Community’, the tone of the thought should filter through, as it were, into the very sound of the name as it is spoken. The audience

should be able to tell what the actor thinks of any off-stage character purely from the tone of voice. The advantage of saying what you think of a character before the name is spoken is that it helps the actor to steer clear of a generalised performance and instead allows for a specific and distinct thought to shine through.

This exercise was particularly useful when working on Act II of *Private Lives*. Both 'Claire Lavenham' and 'Peter Burden' come in for some very unpleasant name calling. Of course the exercise is not just limited to characters that never appear. As Elyot says of Amanda's tone of voice on the subject of Sibyl, "Your voice takes on an acid quality whenever you mention her name." For the young actor I find it is useful before you ever mention her name to know exactly what you think of her by saying it out loud, the aim being to help create that acid quality with a *specific thought* rather than just 'acting' in a generically unpleasant bitter manner. Here it is not about just colouring the word or in this case the name, it is about defining what that word and name specifically means to you.

Another exercise for bringing off-stage characters to life is to be found in Maria Aiken's book on high comedy. She suggests replacing the names of off-stage characters with contemporary names known to all. The group used this exercise and replaced the likes of 'Mabel Grace' and 'Irene Baker' both off-stage fellow performers in the *Red Peppers* scene with the names of female lecturers within the Drama Department, bringing the text alive in a most unexpected way!

"Possibly the best little game that arose today was replacing names in Red Peppers with names that we know – namely MG and BM. In the scene Lily and George are talking about actresses. Replacing the names mean that they know who they were talking about. A simple trick and highly effective."

"The substitution of BM and MG for 'Mabel Grace' and Irene Baker was an extremely good way of adding credibility to George and Lily's discussion of them. Furthermore, all the associations and meaning that went with them were brought forward by L and R when they replaced them with character names. So simple and yet soooo effective."

There is a half attempt with George's line "That's all you know" to suggest he would like Lily to think 'Irene Baker' and he might have had something going though Lily's smart comeback soon ends that. Having a clear defining image of who you are talking about certainly helps to make this exchange real. Making real by substitution is a 'simple trick' but not only is it effective in making mere names on a script real living people it also serves to do something else that young actors struggle with in playing Coward and that is *existing in the moment*. Sometimes a young actor even after weeks of rehearsal can occasionally make the words sound *learnt* rather than having the immediacy of something just said that is so important in comedy of manners, and is indeed the key to all good acting. In my opinion student actors with Coward in particular are too often afraid of the text. They look at all those words and panic. Simple substitutions, and there are many at the disposal of the director, partly solve that by giving the actor a recognisable connection. They are suddenly alive and suddenly how they are spoken become magically alive too.

EXERCISE: 'I-Love-You'

For young actors especially – bless them – the love-hate relationships of Coward can prove difficult both to understand and to perform. Students simply do not know what it is to be in a marriage such as the one between George and Lily in *Red Peppers*, where bickering is part and parcel of the relationship and has probably helped keep them together for so many years. Many young actors can capture the hate or vitriol but are unable to communicate the true affection that lies beneath these exchanges. And this affection is essential if the latter half of the scene, where George and Lily unite to defend themselves against the insults of Bert Bentley, is to work. Also, if there is no warmth in the relationship and all we see is pure bitterness then the audience can sometimes find this uncomfortable and may not always be willing to laugh. The following "I-Love-You" exercise should prove useful if actors have difficulty revealing the more sentimental

side of Coward, an often neglected side of his work that counter balances the quick repartee and smart acerbic remarks.

The basic aim of the exercise is **to establish an emotional connection between the two characters**. The exercise itself is very simple. Each actor repeats “I love you, I love you, I love you” to the other until a rhythm is established. Once both are happy with this rhythm, they then perform the scene as scripted. The undercurrent rhythm of affection should hopefully still manifest itself from beneath the words, even if the surface dialogue is antagonistic or of a seemingly different nature.

My students used this exercise when working on the latter half of the famous ‘Balcony Scene’ in *Private Lives*. Amanda is asking a series of questions about China and Japan, and Elyot is replying to them while all the time seemingly to be putting something off, and that something is finally revealed when he says, “Darling, darling, I love you so.”

The actors realised that the build up to this moment wasn’t working and so the ‘I-Love-You’ exercise was used just before Amanda’s line, “What have you been doing lately?” Here are some comments on how this exercise worked in practice for the actors.

“I found when I had a go at this exercise that it really was the first time since working on these pieces that I actually felt an emotional connection with the lines. This technique means that you are thinking about anything but what you are saying and the words become secondary to the feelings behind them.”

“This exercise seemed to establish a rhythm before beginning the dialogue, not only with your partner but internally... I really did feel that the words I was saying were simply there to stop me from saying what I was truly thinking.”

“My favourite exercise today however was the ‘I-Love-You’ which isn’t usually apparent in the work we’ve been doing. The phrase ‘I love you’ was repeated until we felt there was a genuine connection and then we went into the lines. I have to say that L did this brilliantly and I found myself with a little lump in my throat as he went through the dialogue with a wonderfully real subtext of a wounded lover... I did find that after the exercise I felt emotionally charged and hopefully some of that was apparent when I spoke the lines.”

EXERCISE: 'Bladder Desperation'

This exercise is useful **to give a sense of underlying emotional pain, especially if the actors are too young or too inexperienced to produce an emotional response from within themselves.** The elementary nature of this exercise shouldn't goad the actor, or director for that matter, into underestimating its effectiveness.

In the exercise **the actor simply says the lines as if he or she is desperate to go to the toilet.** This exercise is particularly useful when looking at Coward, firstly because real pain is established in the voice and secondly, because when you are desperate to go to the toilet you often intentionally think of something else to take your mind off the pain. The actors in the group found this exercise surprisingly helpful when they were working on the 'Balcony Scene'. I say surprisingly because you wouldn't normally expect this famous scene to have the slightest connection with anything remotely scatological. It is an exercise, incidentally, I have stolen from Joan Littlewood who found it very useful when actors were 'acting' emotional pain without it penetrating the surface of the performance.

The context of the exchange is that for Amanda the surprise of meeting Elyot and their subsequent conversation is now getting too much for her. She says to him, "We won't talk about ourselves any more, we'll talk about outside things, anything you like, only just don't leave me until I've pulled myself together." The exchanges that follow are about China being very big and Japan being very small, but of course that's not what they are *really* about.

The various actors playing Amanda were finding it very difficult to find the true emotional pain of this woman. Nor were they quite able to capture the way in which Amanda uses small talk as a distraction or cover up for other thoughts going on underneath. The 'Bladder Desperation' exercise proved very effective in solving both problems. Here are a few comments from student diaries.

"Physically your need for the loo overwhelmed you in the same way you might be physically overwhelmed by strong feelings that you have to fight to control. I also found this exercise useful when I was

Elyot, interacting with someone being overwhelmed in this way makes it hard not to lose control yourself."

"When H was doing the exercise we closed our eyes, which made me really concentrate on the sound of the words, and she did sound like she was about to burst with emotion."

"The lines for a while become secondary to the sounds and tone."

There are several what I would call 'Substitution' exercises that can be particularly useful for student actors working in comedy of manners, replacing text names with real ones known to the actors being another example. I use these because student actors have the double difficulty of mastering both the style of comedy of manners and the underlying emotional feelings. The course I teach covers many comedy of manners theatrical exponents. This is an extract from a diary on a class on Wilde and the meeting of Gwendolen and Cecily which shows, I think, the flexibility of this type of teaching approach:

*"We rehearsed it replacing some of the words in the script for insults, so that when we reverted back to the original script again, the energy from these insults was transferred. For example, when replacing 'Miss Fairfax' for 'Miss F*ckface', the spitting disgust need for the second name can now be used in the normal script, and 'Miss Fairfax' almost becomes a swear-word in its own right. I found this exercise extremely useful, because it helped to inject the polite dialogue with zest and vigour, which may have been hard to find before, and the memory of the spiteful words behind Wilde's eloquence reinforces the rhythm and helps to bring about humour. It was then interesting to see the two versions performed one after the other, and to see the process by which the final result came about."*

Both the 'I-Love-You' exercise and the 'Bladder Desperation' exercise were used in the same class one after the other. The first was meant to help the actor playing Elyot and the second the actor playing Amanda. Of course if any of these exercises are to achieve their true potential and purpose the actor must learn to take what has been gleaned from each of them individually and then accommodate everything into the final performance. The 'carry through' aspect of these exercises can be difficult even when the text directly follows the

exercise. Frankly, I think this is where true acting talent comes in because some actors are able to take with them what they have learnt from exercises and put it into the final performance and others are not. However, even if some actors are unable to 'carry through' immediately, or indeed at all, at least they have some sense of what is needed to make the scene work and a sense that they can achieve it.

EXERCISE: 'The WHAT? Effect'

A favourite exercise of many acting coaches is 'The WHAT? Effect'. The aim of the exercise, particularly in the Coward context, is **to make the phrasing alive and spontaneous in order to create an 'in the moment' immediacy for the actor**. The exercise is very simple. One actor works with a second on a single speech and **if there is a word or perhaps short phrase that when said lacks truth or seems flat then the second simply interjects by asking the first "What?"** The actor in quick response then has to repeat whatever the word is but this time the reply if truly spontaneous should have a brightness and an immediacy it didn't have before. Well, that's the theory. Again though, as with many of these exercises, in a way it depends on the actor not acting or at least not thinking too hard. In spontaneous replies the tongue is sometimes quicker than the mind and thus is often more truthful. Here are a few extracts from some of my student actors:

"My partner stops me and asks 'What?' in places, causing me to repeat the section in a different way, with different emphasis. This was a helpful exercise as it helped me find new stresses on words that I may not have picked up on before, and to discover the right place to pitch a word. It also revealed the limitations of how it sounded right to deliver the words surrounding it. However, this game was only successful as long as the response remained an unconscious act – I found that if I thought about it too much it invariably came out sounding wrong and forced."

"In pairs, we each said our piece and the person listening could say 'What?' at any point. When that happened we had to repeat the words we had just spoken. I found it a very interesting beneficial exercise. I

began to play with the language, using different volumes and/or intonation whenever N said 'What? This exercise certainly increased my awareness of each word and its significance, too much sometimes – I certainly over-emphasised more than once – but on the whole I discovered things about my speech which I hadn't noticed before and enjoyed having the closeness of a more informal atmosphere.'

"It's a very simple principle, but for me it had some amazing results... learning how simply stressing one important word can help to add whole new depth, and comedy, to a sentence. I found it very difficult to just do it 'cold' when told, but when someone says 'What?', you naturally stress the word when you repeat it, out of reflex.

"Injects energy, more insistent. Makes it more immediate, in the moment. Gives you the feeling you are actually talking to someone. Make sure the words sound right when you put them back in the sentence."

EXERCISE: 'Fascinating Rhythm

As with 'The European Community' this exercise is also concerned with the changing rhythms and energies of a scene. However, 'Fascinating Rhythm' is far more concerned with finding the *dramatic action* in Coward's dialogue rather than simply alternating the vocal quality and pace. The main aim of this exercise is to see Coward's dialogue as more than two people who just happen to be talking or arguing but instead **to understand Coward's dialogue, be it conversation or argument, as the central dramatic action of the play.**

Before discussing the practicalities of 'Fascinating Rhythm' it is worth I think looking at the nature of dramatic action in comedy of manners and Coward's works specifically.

The comedy of manners form as found in Coward is often accused of being "plotless". If you would allow me for this discussion to sum up all the world's plots as a basic set of four, 'The Quest, 'The Odd Couple' and 'The Fish Out of Water', with 'Rites of Passage' as an underlying optional extra, then many of Coward's plays, from a story point of view,

are basically a combination of number two, 'The Odd Couple', and number three, 'The Fish Out of Water' or indeed a combination of both. *Private Lives* is 'The Odd Couple', *Hay Fever* is 'The Fish Out of Water' and *Blithe Spirit* neatly combines both narrative compositions. *Private Lives* is also a 'Rites of Passage' plot in that it cleverly turns upside down a traditional love story by having a sort of inverted marriage where divorcees on what should have been a honeymoon with new partners reunite and fall in love with each other. *Blithe Spirit* uses a Death/Resurrection 'Rites of Passage' narrative to create a black comedy and in *Hay Fever* the guests clearly fail to match up to the games demanded by the Blisses and a 'Rites of Passage' weekend ends in them making a crestfallen retreat home to normality. What seems to be missing in Coward's comedy of manners work is the plot of 'The Quest'. Of course, 'The Quest' is certainly a major element in *Song at Twilight* but then again *Song at Twilight* isn't high comedy.

The point of all this is that young actors can often only see *action* within the context of 'The Quest'. In such stories 'wanting', 'searching' and 'getting' can be clearly identified and have a precise and final objective (a very Stanislavski type approach). In such stories there are lots of events, things happen in casual sequences. As a result of all this young actors when presented with plays such as *Private Lives* or *Design for Living* often see them not only as plotless but actionless as well. One complaint I've come across repeatedly about *Private Lives*, especially Act Two, is that "nothing happens". It is therefore important for any student actor approaching Coward to understand that 'the action' of *Private Lives* is **the changing values, tensions and dynamics of the relationship between Elyot and Amanda**. Coward explores the dynamics of this relationship not so much in a traditional plot form but rather as a situation or, in a dramatic sense, as a predicament. Elyot and Amanda reunite early in the play and on the whole stay reunited for the rest of the drama, but it should be stressed the dynamics throughout this time are anything but static.

As I suggested at the very beginning of this article, conversation is a form of play. Pretty much the whole of Act Two is a rather odd game of play that seems to feed and sustain the emotional needs of the pair. It can occasionally turn self-destructive and unpleasant but the need to

push and needle each other is all part of this unique relationship, even if it appears very strange, though often funny, from the point of view of someone looking in from outside. The changing values of the relationship are to be found in the dialogue and therefore *the dialogue is the action*. The aim of the exercise 'Fascinating Rhythm' is to discover these constantly changing values as they are expressed in the exchanges of the two characters and in doing so allow the actors to understand the *dramatic structure* and shape of the scene.

First of all the text of a scene is broken up into 'units' or 'bits' differentiated by a change of mood or direction. These are sometimes called 'Ski Posts', so named for that is the moment the skier has to alter direction. For example, the scene my group explored comes early in Act Two of *Private Lives*. Amanda introduces the idea that she is "rather scared of marriage really". Elyot replies by saying that they do not always know how to "manage each other" but at least they have been successful for the past week. The group decided this was one unit. The next unit begins when Amanda suggests changing "Solomon Isaacs" to "sollocks" and ends when Elyot agrees. Following on from that there is an exchange about Elyot's dressing gown and a bit of playacting. When the scene has been broken down into say eight or ten units then each unit is given to a different pair of actors. Each pair then separate from the others and decide which single word or pair of words sums up the *value* of their line or section of the unit. Value is normally established by asking *what is at stake?* or *what it is that the character cares most or least about?* For example, given the various agreed units of dialogue, the first pairing chose "scared" and "manage" (one word each) as the pairing of words that summed up the two values in their unit. The second pair chose "sollocks"-"all right", the third "ravishing"-"kiss you". The rest of the scene with the other pairs was broken down into "pleasure"-"fools", "unnecessary"-"unfaithful", "Claire"-"Claire", "lovely"-"lovely" and "dangerous"-"not dangerous". Each pair then work together using only these words to create an exchange. To get the best results, the actor must forget the exact meaning of the word and instead concentrate on its emotional sense. The idea is not to find a way of saying the word from a performance point of view but instead

to use the word, its sound, its energy, to encompass the value that lies behind the whole exchange.

There are many ways this can be done. For example, the word could be physicalised. Here the actor says the word while at the same time going through the motion of a physical action such as floating or punching (to illustrate this, press your hand against a wall and say a word, as the word is being said the word usually takes on sound of that same physical action). The actor could also try a more specific personal movement suggested by the word. For example, “scared” could be expressed by the wrapping of one’s arms around oneself. Whatever method is used it is essential that the whole sense of what the word represents and its value in the scene are somehow expressed in the way it is said.

Once each pair of actors is happy with their word pairing exchange then the whole group is reassembled and this word-to-word traffic is put together as a whole, going from one pair to the other. When this is performed the group should then hopefully begin to understand that the action of the play is the ever-changing values, needs and desires of this complex relationship. Here are a couple of comments from student diaries.

“It showed how quickly the characters adopt different attitudes to each other and the quickness in changing actions of the scene. It did definitely highlight very quickly the shape of the scene.”

“I think that this is a very useful directorial rule, as by finding the essence of a bit it is easier to inject the rest of the words with the emotion contained in that word... What I found interesting about this was that I was able to get a definite sense of the emotion and meaning of the extract just by watching the group speak the dozen or so words used by the exercise.”

“The long and short of it is, we chose the most important words from each unit, one from Elyot and another from Amanda. These basically summed up each unit. Then we played the scene repetitively with these words, going up and down the line. The more we did it the more we physicalised the words adding all the necessary colour that whole line suggests. For example, the word ‘ravishing’ was said by S with a growly, energetic, sexy quality. We felt that we all understood

the colour of the individual units and the conflict and contrasts were very clear."

"I found it really quite surprising the amount of energy that this exercise required and just how heightened the words had to become for the exchanges to be successful."

"We got to see the dynamism within the scene. It was great finally being able to see and hear the end product of about one and a half hours of scene work; beat breaking, word breaking, back breaking work. I probably couldn't handle being in a Coward play. I commend anyone who can survive rehearsal, LET ALONE put all that work into performance."

More than any other exercise this changed the attitude of the student actors in viewing Coward as "plotless". They saw in very stark pared down terms the shape and pattern of the scene. Never again on the course did anyone say "the problem with Coward is nothing happens". The sheer number of words on the page also lost their intimidating nature as suddenly the actors could see the scene as a series of individual lines or sections, each very manageable and each organically leading to the next.

I have also found that actors find this exercise incredibly useful as way of focusing their energy and understanding the very specific developing rhythms of the scene. Act Two of *Private Lives* in performance has a habit of becoming both generalised and monotonous if focus and rhythm are not precise.

One final thought on this exercise. I confess I did have a wry smile at the observation *"I commend anyone who can survive rehearsal, LET ALONE put all that work into performance."* One aspect of working on comedy of manners with young actors is how they seriously underestimate both the skill and craft involved and the effort necessary to make high comedy work. I think this is because high comedy at its best is always made to look easy and therefore many student actors often confuse *looking easy* with actually *being easy*. How wrong they are.

COWARD'S 'BEHIND THE SCENES' DIALOGUE

VICKY: "Small talk – a lot of small talk with quite different thoughts going on behind it". SHADOW PLAY

This famous line is often said to be the essence of the Coward style and to a certain degree it is. Coward certainly uses the 'small talk' of social interaction to cover up underlying frictions and emotions. However, it is wrong to think that the talk is always 'small' in the sense that it is always just polite conversation. Sometimes the surface talk is far from inconsequential, as the exchanges we've looked at in Act Two of *Private Lives* clearly demonstrate. What does matter though is what is going on 'behind the scenes', as it were. With Coward's dialogue it is important to ask *what is it that is hidden?* and *what are the characters trying to hide?* For the actor this technique involves both masking and revealing *at the same time*. A real challenge.

The following series of exercises are all concerned essentially with creating and exploring subtext. Sub-text is not of course specific to Coward but there are certain aspects of working with his subtext that require specific Cowardesque techniques.

As a side note, I think it is worth saying that much recent drama, especially television drama, eschews subtext. I was reliably informed by one BBC insider that one of the main drama heads simply couldn't read the subtext written into a script. Writers who had carefully created scenes so that they had to be played with a subtextual understanding had them sent back for re-writes as this particular drama head couldn't understand what was going on. This anecdote merely illustrates the pervading use in popular drama of 'on-the-nose' or 'on-the-line' dialogue where nothing is left unsaid in words and what is said is delivered often in an overstated manner. There is nothing wrong with drama that is 'raw' and 'visceral', two words often found describing the new and exciting fringe plays, but not when there is *only* raw and visceral. The result is young student actors are simply not exposed to those dramas and theatrical styles that choose to use a different technique. I came up with this first exercise simply to explore the

potential of subtext and how the actor does not have to use the actual words on the page to get across the action and meaning of a scene.

EXERCISE: ‘A says to B, then B says to A, with X, Y or Z underneath.’

First the group create together their own scene of dialogue between two characters we simply call A and B. The group sit in a line and each member is asked in turn to provide a line or two of dialogue for our A and B characters until some sort of basic scene is put together. The scene needn’t necessarily flow, it could be a series of abrupt exchanges or whatever the group comes up with or decides. This is the simple scene one of my group of students came up with.

A: Hello.

B: Good afternoon.

A: I haven’t seen you in ages.

B: You’re right – but it’s been no bad thing.

A: Why’s that?

B: I’ve been away on important business.

A: Would you care to tell me about it?

B: No.

A: Marvellous – I wasn’t particularly interested anyway.

B: Well, that’s just fine.

A: Lovely day.

B: Isn’t it.

Hardly riveting stuff but it is a scene. Two actors then took the scene and acted it out without direction. It sounded like two people you might hear aimlessly talking on the top deck of a bus. Next though, two more actors acted out the scene, but this time each chose a specific context, for example the meeting of old friends. Following on from this contextual setting or situation, subtexts were added by each character. For example, the meeting of two old school acquaintances where in one version A had a crush B but never told them and in another B used to bully A and now doesn’t know how to say sorry.

As I say, this exercise is a basic introduction to the importance of subtext and seeing how subtext works and its potential dramatic

power. A key point to make here, and about the exercises in general, is the importance of getting as many suggestions and inputs direct from the students as possible, including in this exercise and all the contextual scenarios. It is my experience that they respond so much better when they know they are dealing with their own words, their own ideas and their own contributions. Here are a few comments from some student actor diaries.

"[It] was fabulous to watch as there were so many different interpretations and scenarios given to the lines. This brought to light the way in which everybody has their own agenda when they deliver a line and with each new offering a change in response becomes apparent. In this respect, it makes it easier for the text to appear to be existing in the moment and therefore gives a greater impression or reality."

"It was interesting to note that even though each character had a particular emotion underlying the text and they had one thought process to play, the actor still has to put a very different 'sense' behind each line to create a believable scene. This makes for a more interesting piece. This exercise shows how important it is to consider each line of the characters and not just the through-line thought process."

"In case 1, A and B had had a relationship in the past, A was still interested, but B was not. This seemed to me to be particularly straightforward, as the surface dialogue suggested a degree of tension. However, different examples uncovered different things about the text, and what was underneath the surface. In case 2, A had committed a crime, B knew about it, and A knew that B knew. The individual lines took on different meanings, and it became more a battle of wits. It was an interrogation. A's fifth line, for example, is an example of him/her playing mind games. Equally, A's second line, in this situation, had the underlying suggestion of 'What have you been doing?'"

"The simple meeting written by the group translated from a detective and a suspect to two lovers and one scene was almost unrecognisable from the other."

"When these lines were given different subtexts, it revealed how little the actual words can matter as they can be given a completely different meaning simply by the words that are said. The exercise worked in forcing the actor to search for new meanings in the words

and change his intentions to get his point across, and empathises the necessity for careful thought when reading comedy of manners – it cannot be taken on surface meaning alone.”

It is worth noting that Coward often starred in productions of his own plays. The worry as to whether or not an actor would get the true intent of a line is hardly a worry at all if he is both writer and actor. It is though a concern for those modern writers who can write subtext when many readers of the plays, and, it has to be said, even BBC drama heads, cannot recognise that dramatic subtext from just the printed page. In some ways the British playwright that owed a great debt to Coward, but is not often thought of in those terms, is Harold Pinter. The subtext with Pinter is more often an undercurrent of violence than repressed emotional fragility and without that subtext his plays simply wouldn't work. It is no co-incidence that when Pinter was asked to make his debut at the National Theatre as a director and told he could choose any play, he went for Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. It was, on a personal note, my first introduction to a Coward play on stage.

EXERCISE: 'My Guardian Angel'

This can be a continuation of the *A and B* dialogue or a stand-alone exercise in its own right using a selected section of dialogue or a Coward scene.

In this exercise each actor has a 'Guardian Angel' at his or her shoulder. Before each line **the Guardian Angel whispers to the actor a specific subtext to go under that line**. The group, who mustn't hear the subtext, then have to decide what they think the subtext is. Once the subtext is understood by the group, the actor and their Guardian Angel move on to the next line.

The purpose of this exercise **is to find the right balance between over and underplaying subtext**. Surprisingly student actors don't always realise how subtle they are being. They think that because they are thinking of a subtext that it will somehow automatically manifest itself in performance and be picked up or understood by the audience. However, this is often not the case. This exercise should give actors a

sense of how heavy or light they should play a given subtext. In comedy of manners there is a delicate balance between *making specific* and *making obvious*; one may elicit the desired response but the other may not. Here is one comment from a student who was working on a famous scene from *Private Lives*:

"We played with the idea of having a Guardian Angel reminding the actors of their action just before saying their contradictory line. Reminding the actors how passionately they love each other. If the passion is there then the scene is moving and sad. Eventually the subtext becomes the actor's sub-conscience and the meaning of the scene is achieved. I felt that this was a very valid exercise and works very well."

We continued with the exercise but gave it a variation. The Guardian Angels became a quiet but continuous vocal presence throughout in the scene. This worked in a similar way to the 'I-Love-You' exercise but its uninterrupted presence throughout far from being off putting seemed to inspire the young actors.

"I thought the exercise worked best when 'I want you' was repeated throughout the scene by the Guardian Angels. It didn't interrupt the scene but was more like a soundtrack to the scene. It helped the actors the most as it was a continuous reminder of the passion lying just under the surface."

"Standing behind two performers speaking a scene from Private Lives two members of the group rhythmically repeat 'I love you' and 'I want you' under the lines. This is to help inject energy and passion into the performances."

"For me, the game worked a lot better when the 'Angels' were softly and continuously saying 'I want you', as the characters were not put off and more passion can be taken from softer inflection. It had a continuing rhythm and pushed the characters forward. I love the way that Coward can put the phrase 'And it didn't look like a biscuit box, did it?' in the middle of a highly passionate scene, and then put the inevitable line 'Darling, darling, I love you so' straight afterwards. We found that it was essential that the audience didn't laugh at these two lines, as it would ruin the moment."

“The subtext was intense passion, hidden by pretence. As I was reading the text, having the reminder of ‘I love him. You want him’ all the time made it easier to believe it. The sense of intense passion was all around. Initially, it was funny and probably embarrassing for those people who were shouting, as it was so bizarre! But once everyone settled, it worked very well. When two people were reading the scene and T and J were whispering ‘I want you’ in a rhythmic pattern, it was very effective, even though I couldn’t hear the words of the text clearly. Whispering created a sense of seduction, and the steady rhythm was like a heartbeat. It was very moving.”

Another function of this exercise is to help decide which lines have no subtext and so can be played ‘straight-down-the-line’, or ‘on the line’ as I call it. The students also used this exercise when working on the first meeting of Vicky and Simon in *Shadow Play*. This comment from the student playing Simon is a reminder for all actors that subtext need not be manifested just in the voice:

“With subtext, lines can be used in many different ways as was proved with the line ‘I’m in a bank’ from Shadow Play. This was turned into a realisation of falling in love simply by adding a couple of elements like a pause before the line and an extended look or perhaps a vacant expression.”

A key aspect of this particular scene is that it is happening within the context of a dream or memory flashback. As a result Vicky sometimes steps out of herself and reveals the subtext behind a line. Hence she is openly able to comment on the action of her own exchange when she says, “Small talk – a lot of small talk with quite different thoughts going on behind it”. The acting technique therefore needs the ability to change in mid-flow from an unknowing state of mind to a knowing and reflective state of mind. This brings us back to the principle of “spinning on a sixpence”. Again this needn’t be purely vocal, as this next extract from a student diary testifies:

“I found that by physically moving my body away from him, and changing my vocal quality from the clipped formal tones of small talk, to a more wistful, dreamy quality, the distinction between the remembered conversation and Vicky’s comments on it in her head could be established.”

We had an American student in the group one year who made an interesting and telling comment about the *manners* of comedy of manners:

"Shadow Play was hard for me, because I wasn't quite relating to the 'over-politeness' social codes. I'm just not familiar with the many rules of etiquette.... It's not that Americans wouldn't understand what manners are it's just there seems to be a more strict code of manners in English culture that are recognisable. In comedy of manners it's necessary to be familiar with two worlds: the world of the play (and its manners) and the manners of the audience."

This remark raises the issue of the continuing changes in social mores. The British students had no problem with the etiquette of small talk; it is after all still part of culture in the UK today when we talk about the weather much to the amusement of Americans. However, things are changing and the mores of Coward's world are quickly disappearing; some would say they have already disappeared. I would agree that certain social codes have changed and that the etiquette of the social behaviour required for a weekend house party, the code so central to *Hay Fever*, is certainly no longer generally understood. Even in Coward's day it would have been limited to a specific social group. However, in principle at least, I think the codes of private or intimate one-to-one human behaviour are much the same now as they were in his day. That is not to say, of course, that plays requiring extinct social codes cannot be performed. It is just that for plays that require an understanding of lost social behaviour, special effort must be made to establish exactly how these codes operated.

This general problem became apparent when we worked on a scene from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* where Cecily and Gwendolen first meet and have tea. There is a breakfast scene at the end of *Private Lives* that is similar in that it depends on an understanding of table manners. I had the students improvise a scenario and then half way through sent in an actor to be their waiter. Here are a couple of extracts from student diaries:

"To begin with we looked at table manners, and what society dictates it is acceptable to talk about at the dinner table. For this, L and G performed a short improvisation, as though in a restaurant, talking

about a teenage romance. The waiter came in and they continued to talk. This was an introduction to our first text, which was The Importance of Being Ernest scene between Cecily and Gwendolen. This was a fist fight through verbal manners. They cannot physicalise, as Merriman is present throughout.”

“The practical session opened with K and G being given a scenario of both being the ex-girlfriend of ‘Peter’ and both having been invited out by him again. The aim was to keep an argument about who he really liked most going despite any interruptions.... On completion of this exercise it became clear that the way the girls behaved, openly rude and arguing in front of the waiter, had been vastly different to the way Cecily and Gwendolen have to conduct their argument which is far more subtle due to the social constraints of the time which are placed upon them, that is, MANNERS.”

In the *Private Lives* breakfast scene there is a certain amount of social etiquette that restricts the characters from being too impolite with each other (at least at first). On the whole students had no difficulty in accepting that over breakfast (or indeed any social meal) one modified one’s behaviour. However, the exchanges that follow the arrival of tea in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and, to a degree, the breakfast tray in *Private Lives*, are so far removed from modern mores that some time had to be taken in the class to explain the importance of tea in the social order of the day and the manners Coward’s generation had at breakfast. In a way I am thankful for the success of *Downton Abbey* as at least now student actors have a notable example of codified social behaviour. But it is a problem that won’t go away. Although my American student was an exception, as time goes on and social eating and table codes disappear – perhaps not necessarily a bad thing – such students are going to become the rule.

EXERCISE: ‘What’s the Question in the Question?’

This exercise continues the work on subtext. The aim of this exercise is **to find out if there is a hidden question lurking somewhere behind the line.**

The exercise operates in a similar way to ‘What I Really Think of Her’ in that before the line is delivered the actor says something with the intent to colour the line that follows. In the case of ‘What’s Underneath the Bed’ that something is the *real question* or attitude that the actor believes is behind the line he or she is working on.

For example, if the line on the page is “Well, it is raining outside” and the question asked is “Do you really want to go for a walk in this weather?” then hopefully the true attitude or intent of the statement will permeate the line when it is delivered. Alternatively, try “Do you want to see how my T-shirt clings to my chest and makes me look naked when it gets wet?” and see what new underlying attitude is established! If though the line itself is a question, for example, “Shall we walk or drive?” then the real nature of the question becomes much clearer if “Do you really want to go for a walk in this weather?” is placed before it. In all cases a *specific* underlying attitude to inclement weather is established under the line.

This exercise can be applied to any line, whether it is a statement or question. It is certainly possible in Coward that one question is really just hiding a second underneath. This is an observation made by the actor playing Elyot in the ‘Balcony Scene’ in *Private Lives*.

“The subtext here is paramount and the first time we read the scene everyone was, to a greater or lesser degree, unconvincing. Elyot’s line, ‘Are you still in love with him?’ has to convey the subtext ‘Are you still in love with me?’ We tried various ways of saying the line and finally settled on ‘anger’ as the emotion that was missing.”

Here not only was a different question required, but a specific emotion was also needed to make the line work. It is worth saying that if one exercise is not enough to make a line or scene work then it is important for me to be adaptable and add other techniques or exercises dependent on how the session progresses.

EXERCISE: ‘If Looks Could Kill’

As I say, actors too easily underestimate the potential of physical expression when playing Coward and they also sometimes overlook the

potential for facial expression as well. 'If Looks Could Kill' is a very simple exercise aimed at **revealing what one character thinks of another just in their facial demeanour**. The exercise works by **sitting two actors opposite each other and then the rest of the group throw questions at each actor and the reply has to come in facial expression and body posture alone**. As the exercise develops I have found it useful to add a third actor/character and then get the first character to achieve two differing responses to the same question as it applies to each one after the other. The extracts begin with one of my more sceptical student actors who was at the time finally coming round to see some of the benefits of these acting exercises and how they work:

"I have come to be much more open minded about all the exercises we do in this course because what you generally find is that something beneficial, however small, usually emerges. For example, the exercise in which we sat in pairs facing each other and communicated to the audience what we were thinking about the person without words was in many ways hugely unsuccessful. Members of the audience threw questions at us in order to provoke our reactions e.g. what do you think of their hair, do you think they are good in bed, do they smell? The answers to question like these would not be naturally apparent in our physical/facial expression. they were too specific whereas the answers to more general questions such as do you like him/her can be seen in the way someone is sitting or how they look at the person. When a third person was added the exercise transformed amazingly – a much better dialogue became apparent and a scenario developed. What this amusing exercise demonstrated to me was that although no detailed communication can occur between actors onstage or between the actors and the audience when they have no dialogue to work with, relationships can definitely exist and even the subtlest of physical/facial expressions can tell so much about the nature of their relationship."

"There was some discussion over the next exercise and whether it worked or not. Two people sat facing each other and had to react facially to the questions put by the rest of the class. Some of the questions were too ambiguous to provoke a response, others were very funny and these were the ones where you could tell exactly what they were thinking. One thing this showed me was the importance of facial

expression in revealing subtext, especially if you are going to have huge contradiction between subtext and the actual words."

EXERCISE: 'Down-staging'

This exercise is a natural continuation of the previous exercise 'If Looks Could Kill' only here we are working on actual text.

'Up-staging', of course, is when an actor draws attention to themselves with some action or movement up-stage when the main actor is speaking down-stage nearer the audience with the result that the audience's attention is taken from where it should be to the secondary action. As a side note, it is said that Katherine Hepburn was once constantly being up-staged in a production by a young actress. However, Miss Hepburn being Miss Hepburn warned the lady that she could up-stage her even when she wasn't on stage. She proved this by leaving a full wine-glass (to which she had added an adhesive) on the very edge of an up-stage mantel-piece, leaving the audience constantly distracted waiting for the wine glass to fall all through the young actress's big scene that followed. The up-staging by the upstart never occurred again!

'Down-staging' then is an exercise **where the actor downstage simply uses a look to express a thought before the line is actually spoken, creating a sort of visual pre-text-subtext.** What I mean by this is that we, the rest of the class, can see what the down-stage actor is thinking before they say the line but their fellow actor upstage cannot. It works in a way as a form of dramatic irony. For the purpose of this exercise the actors just need to be positioned in such a way that the face of the 'down-stager' is seen by the group but not by his or her fellow actor up-stage. The exercise aims **to remind young actors that they can act with their faces as well as with their voices.** The exercise is also especially useful in **creating and establishing a thought in the mind of the actor before a line is said that actually contradicts the following line's meaning.**

Contradictory subtext is sometimes a major problem for young actors dealing with Coward for the first time. Yes, they have probably

worked with subtext with other writers such as Pinter, but as is so often the case with Coward that which is going on underneath the line contradicts or at least is contrary to what is actually said. This requires a very specific technique not unique to Coward but certainly essential if the actor is going to learn the Coward style. Here is one comment from one student actor who uses a far more technical psychological term for what I was trying to get across: *“Steve called it ‘betraying the line’, as it uncovers something about the character that the line would never say. In real life it is called non-verbal leakage’ and includes such things as getting embarrassed uncontrollably”*.

The scene the group looked at in detail was Scene Three of *Still Life*. Albert was positioned upstage and Myrtle was downstage. Here is an extract from the diary of the actress who was playing Myrtle. Albert has just asked Myrtle if it is “all right about tonight”, a line that refers to a pre-arranged date presumably set up the previous evening:

“My personal problem was with the line ‘I’ll think about it’; Myrtle doesn’t need to ‘think’ – she knows that she is going to accept Albert’s invitation. However, the comedy is in the fact that she and the audience know this but Albert receives the ‘I’ll think about it’ as true to its word. We tried facially expressing ‘yes’ but vocally ‘no’ but this looked wrong – next I turned away from Albert and I thought about ‘last night’ and the pleasure of accepting washed over my face. I then turned back to Albert and quite straight forwardly said, ‘I’ll think about it’ to tease him.”

COWARD'S WORDS AND THE NEED TO MOVE THEM ABOUT A BIT

JUDITH trips over to the vase on the piano, gurgling with coy laughter, selects a flower, then goes to RICHARD; pursing her lips into a mock smile, she gives him the flower with a little girlish gasp at her own daring and wags her finger archly at him, and returns to her set.

Stage directions from *HAY FEVER*, ACT II

When working on Coward's dialogue it is easy to forget sometimes just how much movement Coward writes into his plays. Judith's handing of a flower to Richard in *Hay Fever* is as hard to pull off as any of her dialogue scenes. What is sometimes even more challenging though is creating movement from or out of the dialogue as Coward is not always that instructive as to where the lines should be spoken. Linked to this is the popular criticism that the plays are "too wordy". Audiences, or would be audiences, too often think that Coward is *only* about word play, indeed this is a popular criticism of all comedy of manners theatre. Actors too sometimes approach Coward from this stand-point. However, if they think that high comedy is exclusively about the words and therefore about the voice, they couldn't be more wrong. Movement is just as essential in comedy of manners. Of course, it has to be the appropriate degree of movement, perfectly executed. In the high comedy of Wilde, social constraint on too much movement during conversation creates its very own physical dynamic and often comic physicality, as can be seen in the growing starch positions of Cecily and Gwendolen as they argue over "Earnest" in the famous film version. But this sort of physicality is too often underestimated as a potential comic tool in comedy of manners theatrical performance. I remember well though in a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the West End, Patricia Routledge brought the house down as Lady Bracknell in her encounter with Mr Worthing. Rigid in body perhaps but she had a quite remarkable eye flicker that became ever more expansive. First her eyes blinked madly upon hearing the word "handbag", and then that flicker spread out to her whole head and this continued for some considerable time *before* she even opened her mouth to say "handbag".

Coward plays do not always require the same social constraint you find in nineteenth century Wilde. However, it is a shame that so many productions I see of Coward are so very static. The following exercises therefore aim to redress that balance and put movement and physical action back into the performance.

EXERCISES: Space and Physical Awareness

There are a few basic space and physical awareness exercises that are useful to make the students aware of space and movement and these I use to begin the class.

The first is 'Triangles'. Here the group stand spread out in the room and each, without giving away their choices, picks two other people in the group. The group then walks round the room. Each group member, as they are walking, has to try and keep an equal distance between themselves and the two they chose. Once they have got used to this then the 'Triangles' aspect is added as each person is told to try to keep the other two in a triangular shape in relation to them. The aim is simply to create awareness of space, movement and distance.

A second exercise is 'Pathways'. Here, each member of the class creates a different attitude in their head to, say, two or three other group members. Attitudes could include condescension, longing, distaste, affection. Ideally these feelings and ways of thinking should have some sort of attraction/repulsion or wanting/rejection dynamic. Again the idea is to create a physical awareness, but here is the added dimension of an emotional connection or disconnection.

Another exercise I play with the group is 'Bombs and Shields'. It is a variation of 'Triangles' only this time the idea is that the actor chooses someone in the room that they have to keep between them and someone else, essentially the actor thinks of themselves as the Target, the person to avoid is the Bomb and the person to be kept between them is the Shield. There are variations that can be played here too. I find it is a great exercise for student actors, especially when they are working on three character scenes with changing dynamic compensatory movements (a perfect exercise for anyone working on

Sartre's *Huis Clos*!). This is one comment from a student actor's diary on the 'Pathways' game:

"Steve asked us to choose a person and then adopt an attitude towards them e.g. love, disdain. This was most successful when the person chosen was mirrored by the other person. As an audience member you are immediately drawn to communication between people, dialogue. This was also effective when Steve asked everyone to be disdainful of J as then the focus was constantly on her pathways."

And a couple on the 'Bombs and Shields' game:

"The 'Bombs and Shields' game actually came in very handy at the end of the class when A and I directed a short scene from Coward's Blithe Spirit. The benefit of the game is that it explores the physical relationship between three people: one person is the bomb, one the target and the third is the shield. The energy is continually shifting and the rules can be altered at any stage. It is very easy and effective means of exploring relationships physically."

"Something is made clear to an audience if expressed not only through the dialogue but also through positioning of the actors on stage. If your character is scared of something (e.g. Charles in Blithe Spirit) then it is a good idea to make sure there is another character between you and the object of your fear."

'Bombs and Shields' is an exercise I had used before with students actors. A variation of the game is to give the actors a specific character motivation, for example A is the partner of B but C is trying to steal A from B. The game in this context can be a useful way of helping to 'block' the scene. It was especially constructive playing it before working on the famous 'China scene' from Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. The 'China Scene' is essentially about sexual need and sexual competitiveness. Students like this scene too because it has a very basic and base double entendre. They immediately connect with a scene that is a series of somewhat unsubtle rude gags.

EXERCISE: 'Tableaux' or the 'Blocking Game'

This exercise proved the most controversial with the student actors. We worked on various scenes, including one from *Hay Fever*. The aim of the exercise is **first, to create as much movement and action as possible from the given situation and, second, to put a focus on a particular moment of physicality**. This exercise can be fun to work on and in the right circumstances a common goal can often create a great group spirit. The exercise works directly with the text of a scene.

The group first divides the text into sections. The number of sections depends on the group size but four or five normally works out about right. The different sections are now allocated to different pairs of actors. Each pair then takes away their section and decides on an end tableau or position for their particular section of the text. The tableau or end point each pair decides upon should naturally arise out of the dialogue but nonetheless *it should be as challenging a position as possible for the next group to inherit*. Each tableau should remain unknown to the others at this stage. The idea is that as the exercise progresses each pair will 'pass the baton' on to the next pair playing the same characters. The exercise really begins to take shape when the whole group are reunited and the objective is for each pair to find a way of going from the previous pair's end tableau to their own end tableau. I find the exercise works best if the whole group make contributions to help out whichever pair is trying to get from their given or inherited point to their own previously decided upon image. The observers can see the whole picture in a way the actors in the scene cannot. A second-eye can be useful here and will inevitably bring out the would-be director of any group! I decide the initial tableau position or the point from which the first pair in the chain have to commence.

I believe the exercise can be very useful for students learning to think in terms of *focus*. By focus I simply mean where the audience should be looking to make a scene work to its fullest potential. How this basically works in practice is by asking such questions as *Where are the audience likely to be looking at any particular point?* and *Can I help them with that focus?* Or *Could perhaps a moment of stillness help the audience to shift their attention from one point to another?* 'Tableaux'

is therefore in part an exercise in *learning to throw the focus*. This can be done with a look or a turn. Normally, of course, this is part of the director's job, but I believe it is important for actors to know who should have the focus of the audience at any given moment and how one actor can give another actor/character the focus when required. The exercise should also teach actors not to be too selfish and accept that the scene is a joint effort.

The scene the students worked on was the seduction of Richard by Judith in Act Two of *Hay Fever*. Here are a few comments from student diaries.

"At times the blocking of the sections became quite extreme, almost farcical... What all our sections lent to the scene was a sense that as a whole it never stopped moving... It also showed us just how physical a comedy of manners text, which we might regard to be densely verbal, can be."

"The exercise was made creative because we were forced to use a situation. Also we noticed that we were laughing – the exercise itself was working as a piece of theatre. It also illustrated that regardless of who is speaking, the focus of a scene can be moved by movement. For example, in K's and my bit [K played Judith and the diarist played Richard] while she was walking around the sofa, I was sitting on it, but not sitting on it – sort of hovering, which made people laugh. Their attention was focused on me because I was uncomfortable, the outsider, humiliated."

"Due to the fact that this scene ran between two points there was not only now the energy in the lines but the momentum in the action."

"It was a successfully funny scene in the end. You know what is ironic? After concluding I'm a bastard for wanting to be singled out of the group [to win the game "I Have Never...", ¹] in this exercise I concluded that GROUP directing was very, very effective."

"The actions are not imposed randomly with no justification, but with thought as to character and logic; nothing completely implausible is offered. To me, comedy of manners is about artifice, but it has to look interesting as well as sound it. The exercise opened my eyes to the physicality of comedy of manners as well as the verbal aspect. It gave so

¹ See Game Three in the next section

much more potential to the scene in terms of movement than would ever have come purely from the actors themselves. You have the common sense to disregard what is wrong and you can get a really lively visually interesting scene.”

“This demonstrated, to my surprise, an unusual and effective way of blocking a scene... It meant that the stage space was used very inventively and this proved to be a simple yet effective exercise.”

“This game was very effective. It immediately gives the scene a shape. There were elements that worked and elements that didn’t but the most important thing was it immediately made the scene visual. It lifted from the page and made it into drama very quickly”.

It should be said here though that there were critical voices and here are some of those observations of this exercise:

“Positions are decided for the key moments of the scene and then the actors have to find a means of getting to them. The idea is that it creates inventive and interesting movement. However, my feeling is how genuine can an actor’s action be if governed by certain fixed points? How can the actions be spontaneous if the actor is having to create reasons for being in a certain place?”

“There were times when it seemed we were having to make intentions up for the actors in order for their ending we had already decided on to be appropriate.”

“Very quickly I voiced my concerns about this method, feeling that it limits the freedom of the actors, and causes a loss of truth in what they are doing. If a random position is chosen for the actors to end up in, the ensuing action is always going to be dictated by this. That’s not natural and the actors are forced to do something rather than freely find it for themselves. This, I believe, is not debatable.”

[‘A’ in the next two extracts is a student]

“A said that he felt this went against everything he had learnt about being an actor, that is, not finding you own intentions but having someone else’s imposed on you.”

“A thought that by imposing movement line by line without looking at inner actions we were wasting time because those actions should come naturally... Steve managed to turn A in the end by switching the game from being an actor’s tool to what it actually

obviously is, a tool for the director. By playing the Blocking Game a director gets to see every single option he has available to him. This might open up ideas that from simply reading the scene may not have been apparent. This should also help us to link what is dramatically interesting with what is theatrically right."

I think sometimes actors see the acting as the main purpose of theatre, but acting and theatre presentation are not quite the same thing. The two sides of the argument are presented here by this student:

"I firmly believe that a director should not have an end result that they are set working towards. In pushing the actors into a particular position, we are creating an end result then finding a reason to get there, where I felt that we should really move when the time feels right, and then find a suitable place to go. I think that we should not try to find a dramatic reason to place an actor's movement. It is highly synthetic, which is not what a director needs to achieve. However, having said this, I do believe that this particular experimental way of working does raise many ideas for the directors and actors to work on together, and eventually one may arrive at a fantastic suggestion. This way of working should not be taken as the way to work, but one should try to see what could be gained, and then added to the piece."

It is an interesting comment which in some ways highlights differing attitudes as to how theatre works. An actor's instinct is important to make it dramatically real but the director's eye is essential to make the visual picture theatrically effective. In this exercise I would say that the actor in the scene to some degree loses their instinct but the actors looking on from outside the scene gain the eye of the director and in so doing can learn to see and understand the contributions the director is making. This exercise suited some students but not all. Those actors with the conviction that they should only trust feelings or motivations that they themselves have found from inside themselves are unlikely to respond well to this type of exercise considering it "artificial" as one student put it. However most of the actors in my groups saw the benefits:

"Once the actors had realised that their actor's instinct was to be handed over to the 'directors', who at the same time were warming to

the challenge, the process began to work. The directors had to be the instinct of both actors and also had the benefit of seeing what it looked like. Steve had won me over and I began to enjoy being both a director and also a kind of mannequin actor."

"I find this to be very useful and it allows many more opportunities for creativity, as it forces the director and the performer to consider the dramatic reasons behind every movement across the stage, and enables them to become much more familiar and involved with the piece in question, giving them a chance to consider it from many new angles which may never have come to light before. This made me realise that comedy of manners is a great deal more physical than I first imagined. During the process, the importance of linking both what is theatrically and dramatically correct emerged. It is essential that the movements not only make sense to the actors and director, but are also visually effective in conveying what is intended to the audience. Also, as a performer, it helps to clarify my intentions throughout every step of the rehearsal process, and as a director, makes for innovative blocking that may not have occurred to me before."

"The only qualm I had with this way of working was that it was a very slow and laborious process, rather like wading through mud. There was no generalised movement anywhere and it was a very mechanical way of working. However, when we did it, we did dramatically justify what we did theatrically to the sense, and once we had established a bit of scene, it did flow a lot better."

"If the director can come into rehearsal with all these ideas of exciting movement then he is onto a winner. But how can he do this exercise in his head? He needs to be given the random ending positions by an outside party if fresh ideas are to evolve. In that respect, the actors are needed and this exercise must be done. Again, fair enough. We've just got to remember this. It creates ideas, interesting blocking – the acting comes later! Things like where the audience's focus should be addressed as well. A play is after all is for an audience and the director must decide where she or he wants them to be looking. Sounds mechanical, but necessary. Basically Steve won me over on this point that this is a director's exercise not one for actors. Enough said. At the same time the actors have to give it their all and be precise."

I see the main purpose of the exercise as one that opens up possibilities. It should function to make actors and those who see with a director's eye think visually. It aims to be visually creative. Blocking is often the least enjoyable part of the rehearsal process. Hearing "You sit there while he stands here" is hardly fun for the actor. Working at its best with the right attitude the exercise can help make the movement of a scene far more organic. It should also force the actor away from generalised actions to more specific and defined choices. Of course not all the movement explored in this exercise is likely to be kept for performance but at least the full potential of the scene is discovered. I'll leave the last word to a student whose philosophy of theatre I share and I would even dare to suggest Coward would have shared too:

"The idea of this way of working is that the rest of the class gives you your intention for moving. I can see now though how, as I can do in preliminary work on the scene, it is often the case that really the main purpose of theatre is forgotten. That being that the action is going to be watched, rather than it just being re-enactment of a piece of everyday life. For this reason, this way of blocking a piece helps there to be a focus, as the audience doesn't just end up watching a bunch of actors getting caught up with their own movements on stage, each drawing attention to themselves making it difficult for the audience to know where to look, therefore losing the focus of the piece."

Coward was being a little ironic when he said "You ask my advice about acting? Speak clearly, don't bump into the furniture and if you must have motivation, think of your pay packet on Friday." But he has a point.

COWARD'S GAME OF 'OUTSIDERS- INSIDERS' IN HAY FEVER

JACKIE: "*It's a hateful game, anyhow, and I don't want to play it again ever.*"

SOREL: "*You haven't played it at all yet.*" HAY FEVER, ACT II

Poor Jackie. If she thinks the game 'In the Manner of the Word' is bad, wait until she plays 'Getting-Engaged-to-the-Favourite-Son-Without-Even-Knowing-It'. And she will, because as Act Two progresses and couples begin to pair off for a very special game where only one half of the pair knows the rules, poor Jackie will find herself playing a very hateful game indeed.

It is the series of unpleasant 'games' played on the unsuspecting guests after the relatively harmless 'In the Manner of the Word' parlour game that is at the heart, or should I say heartlessness, of *Hay Fever*. Without understanding this context students often find this play, especially the middle act, both plotless and pointless. They say, *it's about nothing, it says nothing and worse – nothing happens!* All that does seem to happen is that the hosts and guests play a game, and a silly one to boot. To say in reply that game-playing in *Hay Fever* is how Coward develops his theme of insiders and outsiders, a theme that runs throughout his work, is hardly enough to convince a sceptical mind, especially a young actor's sceptical mind. So, in order to give student actors a real sense of Coward's theme of the 'Insider-Outsider', I find it is first worth playing a few games because it is life as a game – and often a cruel game – that gives *Hay Fever* its context.

Hay Fever is more or less split down the middle with the Insiders (the Bliss family) who know how to play 'the Game' and the Outsiders (the weekend guests) who haven't got a clue that there is even a game going on. This is the basic idea at the heart of *Hay Fever*. The audience sits back and enjoys – if that is the right word – the poor unfortunates who have foolishly accepted the invitation to be with the wrong people, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, playing the wrong sort of game.

Poor Jackie has difficulty even understanding the basic rules of 'In the Manner of the Word'. The Bliss family finds this odd because the

rules of the game are straight forward enough (they would be to them, they are theatricals). One person leaves the room and the remaining group decides on an adverb. In the play it is Sorel who goes out and the group, including all the guests, who, after some considerable deliberation, eventually decides on “winsomely”. After the word has been decided upon, the person outside comes in and proceeds to give a member of the group an action, and then he or she has to do that action “in-the-manner-of-the-word”. When Sorel re-enters the first action is given to Judith, who is asked to take a flower out of a vase and give it to Richard. She does it to perfection. Sorel then asks Myra to say goodbye in the manner of the word. From here on in it all goes horribly wrong because the guests simply don’t get it.

‘In the Manner of the Word’ is a very basic drama game. I’ve played it many times in a whole variety of classes and courses. It’s a good improvisation game for students who don’t like improvisation and the reason they like it is because they hardly realise they are improvising. The game is fast, fun and very creative. (The strangest round of the game I have ever played was when the adverb was “posthumously”. No matter what we were asked to do – dance, brush our teeth, walk a tight-rope or whatever – we all “died” first and *then* did the action!) Often the game gives rise to high-energy laughter – usually at the expense of the idiotic guesses made by the outsider. Phrases like “You’ll kick yourself if we have to tell you” or “It’s so easy – I don’t understand why you haven’t got it yet” unite the group, who are, as it were ‘in-the-know’, in spontaneous laughter, as the outsider is left isolated in growing frustration. One of the side benefits of this game is that when a drama group laugh together it helps them work together. In a way, as an outsider, by allowing yourself to be laughed at, you *are* becoming a member of the group (in play here is the ‘social bonding’ theory of laughter). It may seem to be about insiders and outsiders but at its centre ‘In the Manner of the Word’ should be more about building a good group spirit than creating divisions. To prove the point, I find if you try to bring the game to a halt before everyone has had a chance to leave the room, the people who haven’t been out often object. It quickly becomes obvious that no one in the group wants

to be left out, as it were, when it comes to playing the role of 'the Outsider'.

Well, that's how it *should* work but that's not quite how it does work in Coward's *Hay Fever*.

Coward begins Act Two with the rules of the game. This immediately creates a tension between the family who know the rules and the guests who do not. As they try to choose a word Sorel, the Bliss daughter who has left the room, shouts for them to hurry up. Her occasional calls add pressure to the guests who are still trying to work out the rules. Under stress, poor Jackie comes up with the word "Appendicitis". You can sort of see why in an odd kind of way. Perhaps there should be a word to describe an action that is done with the affliction of appendicitis but there isn't and so Jackie, to use the adverb of the Coward stage direction, is *witheringly* admonished. Worse is to come when she is asked to dance in the manner of the word. She refuses and the game is abandoned. Coward's final joke in this section is for Sorel to get the word only when Jackie unknowingly apologises for her outburst *in the manner of the word*, that is, "*winsomely*", as also stated in the stage direction *speaking winsomely*. Poor Jackie, only when she doesn't realise she is playing the game does she, as it were, play the game. This upside down world is at the heart of the comedy of *Hay Fever*. Luckily for the audience they are a safe distance from this lunatic Looking Glass domain of back to front living.

An issue that may come up at this point is class and social distinctions. More specifically, the question that might be raised is to what extent the outsiders are *class outsiders*. Certainly Jackie is not quite as well travelled as the others, which may be an indication she is not quite of their class. Richard appears more at ease in the house party situation but it is never quite clear from his job description, that of 'a diplomat', exactly which social class he belongs to. Personally I think that such questions are a bit of a red herring though I do know some Coward aficionados who see *Hay Fever* as very much class based. My own view is that Coward is really interested in creating the Blisses as their *own class* who act much the same way whether they are with the upper classes (Richard?) or the lower middle-classes (Jackie?). Theatre people like the Blisses create their own individual social strata

and this is dependent on a way of thinking and seeing the world rather than on a defined position based on birth or income. And if outsiders cannot learn to act and think in that manner then they will always remain outsiders.'

Returning now to student actors and how to approach Coward. The main problems for directors of young actors looking at *Hay Fever* are firstly getting them to grasp this complex game of insiders-outsiders and secondly making them understand why such a game is funny even though it appears so cruel. Here we are dealing with the tone of the piece rather than with any specific acting techniques. However, if actors are unaware of the overall tenor of the play then it will often lack a final unity. The aim of this section is simply to give actors an initial context before any text work is done on the play. And I find the best way to start introducing the idea of game playing, insiders and outsiders, exclusion and humiliation, is with some games.

First of all, if students are new to *Hay Fever* and unfamiliar with the game 'In the Manner of the Word' it would be useful to play it properly in the friendly, group spirited way it is at least meant to be played. This would then allow the students to be Insiders as they read and perform the opening section of Act Two. If students are already acquainted with the play then there are games you can play to introduce the idea of what it is like to be both an outsider and an insider. We played three games, one physical, the second intellectual and the third personal.

GAME ONE: 'I'm the Last Moo-Cow'

First the group is asked to spread themselves evenly throughout the room, keeping an equal distance from each other. They then have to go down on all fours and close their eyes. The group are now all 'Moo-Cows'. If, as they crawl round the room, they bump into another Moo-Cow, they must make the sound of a "Moooo!". However, before they begin to crawl round, one of the groups is made into 'Sitting Bull' by a touch on the head by the group leader. The group, still with their eyes closed, are told that the person who has been chosen to be the

' Compare Higgins in *Pygmalion* as a classless character treating everyone the same.

Sitting Bull' does NOT "Moooo!" or move and that Sitting Bull can open his or her eyes. This means that if one of the 'Moo-Cows' should bump into someone who does not "Moooo!" back when they "Moooo!", they know this person is the silent 'Sitting Bull'. As soon as any 'Moo-Cow' bumps into the silent Sitting Bull they too become a 'Bull'. They can then open their eyes and gather into a tight group. The 'Bulls' stay herded together in silence watching the poor, blind 'Moo-Cows' still crawling round. The game ends when the last 'Moo-Cow' finally finds the silent group of 'Bulls'.

The aim of this game is **to give the student the feeling of being both an insider and an outsider**. At first it is fine to be a 'Moo-Cow' because most of the group are 'Moo-Cows'. However, as the game goes on and the majority become silent 'Bulls', the remaining 'Moo-Cows' develop a real sense of looking foolish and being seen as an outsider. Although it is a physical game, students are asked after the game is played to think about what it felt like when they became a part of a group of silent and all seeing 'Bulls', when they had just been behaving like an idiot blind 'Moo-Cow' making strange noises. Students genuinely did not like being 'the last Moo-Cow crawling'. Here are a couple of comments from their diaries about playing the game.

"I was aware of feeling the need to get it over and done with and become a bull. This wasn't so much because I wanted to join the 'winning' side, rather that I didn't want to be the last to join. Oooh I'm so shallow."

"I was the last to find the 'Sitting Bull', so I was crawling around on my knees for what seemed like ages, with everyone watching me. It was very embarrassing, and actually made me feel quite insecure, as if everyone was laughing at me. The second time we did it, H was the last, and I felt really sorry for him wandering around on his own, but also very glad it wasn't me!"

"It was very funny watching everyone else, and I felt very smug. Everyone was very amused by S who was getting more and more frustrated by his inability to find the herd of bulls."

"In 'Moo-Cow' H's protests that he was not feeling humiliated were dampened by the rosy colour his face went when he crawled into a table."

The comment about feeling sorry for H who was the last ‘Moo-Cow’ raises an interesting problem in performing *Hay Fever* and it is this: what happens if the audience’s sympathy for the guests becomes so great that they stop laughing? I emphasise repeatedly to actors that comedy of manners mustn’t appear funny to the actor but what if it no longer appears funny to the audience because it begins to look too real and too cruel? One thing to help save the day here is human nature. The “*I’m glad it wasn’t me!*” comment reveals why human beings have been laughing at the misfortunes of others ever since the first caveman tripped over the tree stump. There is also the issue of the culpability of the guests in *Hay Fever*. Should they have even agreed to come for the weekend? Also, on the whole, they are the ones with the perfect manners so that they don’t actually *show* the true extent of their distress. Both of these considerations need to be thought through before deciding how *Hay Fever* should be played.

I think the big problem for directors and actors working on *Hay Fever* is not really the response of the guests but the problem of how *knowing* are the Bliss family in what they are doing? Personally, I don’t think they know or realise they are being cruel. Yes, they are more than just a little eccentric but they are also a little less than totally insane. I think what they are, to use an old-fashioned and somewhat politically incorrect term, is *barmy*. In a sense it is not just the guests that don’t realise there is a game going on, in some ways the main instigators of ‘the game’ are equally nescient. Ignorance is Bliss, if you will excuse the pun. The up-side down Bliss family world of the Looking Glass is the normal world to them but it is not the world of Alice or Myra. What then is important is that if the antics of the Bliss family ever appeared to be too calculating or intentionally cruel then I think the comedy would suffer. Hopefully all the games I am suggesting will raise these issues before the text itself is approached so that the best tone is established and understood before beginning any specific work on the action and dialogue.

For students interested in seeing *Hay Fever* in context with other comedy of manners writing I think it is useful to introduce Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. In fact both plays are more comedies of *bad manners* where ‘the guests’ try to follow the rules of

social behaviour in a world where ‘the hosts’ live by a very different code. It is interesting to compare a night in with the balm imbued Blisses with an evening at home with the devouring venom of George and Martha. Related they may be but I think the premeditated cruelty gene only runs in the Albee offspring. And this essential difference is what separates the high light comedy of *Hay Fever* with the dark depths found in the comedy of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

GAME TWO: ‘The Plane from London to New York via Edinburgh is ready to depart, but we regret to announce that the plane from London to New York via Newcastle has been cancelled.’

Each member of the group in turn says that they are travelling from London to New York via a city of their choice. The group leader decides that some intermediate destinations allow the plane to take off and others result in cancellation. It is up to each individual in the group to work out independently ‘the rule’ that allows you to fly via certain destinations but not others. The rule is very simple and it is this: if the place name has a body part in the sound of the city, for example ‘EADinburgh, ManCHESTer, LIVERpool, then the plane can ‘Depart’; if there is no body part in the name then the plane is ‘Cancelled, for example Newcastle, Leeds, Exeter. The rule of this game is easily changed to other inclusions and exclusions such as those based on the number of letters in a name or which side of the alphabet the first letter falls in, i.e., destinations A-M are accepted, those N-Z are not – or vice versa. You can also devise your own rule of inclusion and exclusion.

This game aims **to make the actors think of themselves as intellectual outsiders if they don’t get it, or, to put it more bluntly, the game aims to make them feel stupid. Also, if they do get it, the game gives the actor the opportunity to know what it is like to be an insider, or, again to put it more bluntly, smug.**

At first the whole group are all outsiders because the only one ‘in the know’ is the group leader. However, as the game progresses and more and more of the group work out the rule, the outsiders who

haven't realised what is going on often become increasingly patronised by the insiders. Here are some comments from student diaries:

"The difference in behaviour once they were part of the group 'in the know' was really noticeable. X became very relaxed, flippant and dare I say it a little smug."

"Having discovered the rule, the best word to describe me was 'smug'. I suddenly ceased from behaving like a spoilt six year old and relaxed back on my laurels and prepared myself to revel with excessive indulgence. G kept on sending me sharp glances across the circle but what did I care? I wallowed in my glory. It was quite amazing to see how others' body language changed as they got it. There is a great difference to being 'in' on the game watching others groping in the dark. For those not 'in' on the game there is an ultimate sense of frustration in not understanding and a sense of being laughed at."

"I certainly felt considerable frustration and annoyance when people began working out the link in the 'travel' game. It is all about fitting in and not being the person that everybody is looking at and laughing at."

To achieve a connection with *Hay Fever* it is worth asking the group how they felt when they got it, did they try to cover up their embarrassment when they weren't getting it, what did they feel like when those who had got it perhaps began making unkind comments about how slow they were in not getting it. Also, as soon as they had got it, were they happy to join in the mockery aimed at those who hadn't and so on. Again the point to note is that these exercises are about setting the tone with which you approach a text like *Hay Fever*.

GAME THREE: "I have never..."

Each person tells the group something they have *never* done and the rest of the group have to raise their hands if they *have* done whatever it is this person *hasn't*. The individual gains points according to the number of people who have hands raised. The goal of the game is **to win by thinking of things that you have never done but believe everyone else in the group has**. For example, I have never ridden a bike or smoked a cigarette and so I tend to score reasonably high if I play the

game in a student group. Students who have never seen *Star Wars* or eaten a Pot Noodle do equally well.

This game is the most personally revealing of the three, but it reveals more than whether or not you have ever ridden a bike or read *Waiting For Godot* – it reveals *what you are prepared to say to win the game*. The aim of the game is **to get the participants to reveal to themselves how far they are prepared to go in humiliating themselves in front of the group just to win a simple game**. It is not recommended to include very personal issues or sexual matters as part of the game. Nor is it recommended that people are challenged either as to what it is they say they have done or what it is they say they have never done. Indeed some care should be taken to assess the group and their capacity and maturity to play the game. As with the last game the point is for each individual after the game is completed to think about what they were and were not prepared to do. Here are some very truthful admissions from student diaries.

“I do know that I could have revealed things about myself that would have got me lots of points, but, like other people I think, I was simply unwilling to go that far.”

“Time to clear my conscience: I sort of, well, lied a little... I was a victim of the human tendency to not only avoid being ostracised from the rest, but to win. How sick of me.”

I’m not sure the Bliss family want to *win* because, as I have suggested, I don’t think they are knowingly playing a game that has that sort of end result. However, it is useful for the students to know how far they are prepared to go in any game-playing. What is normal is that the participants will draw a line in the sand and decide in their heads not to reveal things about themselves that would gain points. The will to win is, or perhaps not, as great as the fear of humiliation. What is also to be expected is that participants may lie if they really do want to win, which is in its own way very revealing of character (this game is very useful to play before beginning work on Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*).

After this game has been played it is useful to ask the group to think privately about what they were prepared to say and what they were not prepared to say. Get them to be candid with themselves

about whether they have been totally honest in achieving their high score and whether they were honest in claiming to have done whatever it is someone else hasn't. Also, did they try to hide what they were feeling inside as each issue came up? Was there a moment when they just wanted the game to stop? I don't encourage a group discussion then and there, but next time the group meets, perhaps then I have a brief group talk when there is some distance from the game.

In order to give this whole enterprise a *Hay Fever* context it is useful to link the circumstances of Act Two with experiences of the group playing the game. I ask, for example, whether the group think the Bliss family ever draw a line in the sand when it comes to their behaviour. I also ask, do the guests hide their true feelings and if they do not, why not? There is a strong sense in Act Three that we are watching defeated competitors lick their wounds. Was there a similar subdued sense for the losers of the game the group played? Many of these feelings can be drawn on if it is the intention to work with the text of *Hay Fever*. Even if this is not the case, these games hopefully help in establishing the play's identity and character.

We also sort of 'played' a fourth game, though 'played a trick' over a fourth game would be nearer the truth. I told the students that we were going to play a game called 'From Top to Bottom'. The idea of the game, I said, was for the group to agree a line-up from top to bottom based on their perceived acting ability or pecking order within the class. Of course I had no intention of ever playing such a game and as soon as one student said, "I don't like the idea of this game" I immediately came clean and said as much. However, I did want the students – if only for a few seconds – to feel what it was like to be truly frightened by the thought of playing a really cruel game. One student openly said that the trick I had played was "cruel". "Yes", I replied, "but you are happy to laugh at the cruelty of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? and even arguably that in *Hay Fever*, if that is your view of the play, but is that only OK because it happens to someone else?" The point was accepted. Here are a few comments on the feelings of a couple of students at this particular moment.

"My heart dropped, complete panic! What if it was decided I was the worst – I'd never return. Fortunately Steve saved me from having a coronary and quickly told us it was a trick – it worked. I was petrified."

"I suppose that I knew that Steve wouldn't go through with this but for one moment I drew my breath in and adrenaline flooded my system and induced me to say, 'I don't want to play this game anymore. I'm not playing this game'"

"These games served to help me appreciate how it feels to be 'in' or 'out' of the game and also how cruel these 'games' can be even if they do provide laughter."

Yes, it was cruel but in the context of *Hay Fever* just how real should the pain get? The actress who said, *"I don't want to play this game anymore"* did so half laughingly rather than with a screaming tantrum. Her good manners hid the true extent of what she was truly thinking and feeling. Likewise, in *Hay Fever* the guests can show their discomfort but it mustn't become too manifest. It's like the potential bitterness of the marriage in *Red Peppers*, people watching are not going to laugh if all they see is pain and sadness. In a way *Hay Fever* raises the huge question of whether or not we should laugh at the misfortunes of others. When Dame Edna Everage says that her greatest gift is to laugh at the misfortunes of others is she getting at the true heartlessness of comedy? As I say, as far as performance is concerned, I still think the actors must strike a balance between the humiliation being real and at the same time not being so painfully real that it dampens the audience's laughter. *Hay Fever* is a comedy after all. The problem remains one of tone.

I hope these games go some way towards establishing what tone can be taken when presented with *Hay Fever*, a play that is seen as one of the lightest of light comedies, yet, like the lightest of light soufflés can go horrible flat when the tiniest of ingredients puts it out of balance.

Further Suggestions, Problems and Observations

Thinking too Hard

It may seem a strange thing to say but many of these exercises require the actor not to act. The whole point is to let the exercise do the acting for the actor. But, there are of course those actors even with games and exercises who are constantly standing slightly outside of themselves thinking too hard about what they should or should not be doing. When faced with this, one option I have is to speed up the exercise to stop them thinking. Another is to try and move away from the text for a moment. For example, the exercise 'The European Community' uses foreign accents to create changing rhythms in the dialogue. If an actor keeps 'acting' I simply take the text away from them and get him or her to improvise some gibberish in that particular language/accent. The thinking time is after the game has been played. Although I suspect Coward wasn't joking when he said that the only spontaneity he liked was that which took six months to rehearse, I also doubt, from the other perspective, if he would have approved of a calculated or prepared game of Charades. When something does work spontaneously I do encourage the actor who did it to remember it, keep it and use it in performance if that is the final goal. Here are some interesting comments from students about their experience of the course and their expectations:

"I suppose I thought that by taking a practical course in an acting/dramatic style Steve would teach us all how to become great comic actors. This was of course a ridiculous expectation and I felt after today's' class that a practical option such as this is far more about discovering what makes comedy of manners funny and ways of achieving the correct effects."

"With all the exercises the difficulty comes when you, as a guinea pig, try too hard to achieve the result that you think you should achieve. You have to continually let the exercises do the work for you, and gain what you can from the experience. One point that I have noticed is that however hard you try, if you think you look stupid, become giggly and

try to 'get it over with as quickly as possible' you will not get a good result."

"As one of the few drama students with no intention to go into acting after this degree I still found this course to be an interesting insight into a type of theatre that has always captured my attention. Through learning new rehearsal and performance techniques, this particular course has really taught me to appreciate the work that goes into the style of acting that on the surface seems so effortless. It also highlighted to me that comedy of manners is not as purely verbal or cerebral as it seems at first, and that in fact the rehearsal process must be very physical."

"As Steve said, we obviously have to act, but a lot of time the idea is to not really to try and act out the exercises but instead to let the exercises do the work for us, as this is the point in them, to bring something out in us. As Maria Aitkin said in 'Acting in High Comedy' 'the effort involved may just be imperceptible: one has to acquire the cleverness, the articulacy, the febrility of the characters – and then make the whole laborious exercise seem like swimming through silk."

A Shared Vocabulary

Before working with any acting group on Coward it is useful to create a shared vocabulary with the actors in the area of vocal quality. I do this by recommending Jean Newlove's "Laban For Actors and Dancers" ². This book introduces eight basic dynamics of voice and movement: GLIDING, DABBING, FLOATING, FLICKING, WRINGING, SLASHING, PRESSING and THRUSTING, based on light/strong, direct/flexible and sustained/sudden dynamics. Many student actors will be familiar with this work on the physicality of the voice. I have always found these terms an invaluable short-hand when discussing how a line or word has been, is, or could be said.

² "Laban for Actors and Dancers" by Jean Newlove (NICK HERN 1998) page 78-85.

The Range of Comedy of Manners Writers

The course I teach is not exclusively a course in Coward but a practical series of classes on the 'Comedy of Manners' acting style. The course not only looks at Coward but also other acting styles in the comedy of manners field, such as Wilde, Orton, Pinter, Simon, Bennett, Albee, and Rattigan. Some of the exercises described have also proved useful in looking at the differing styles of these playwrights. In order to place Coward's style in context with the whole comedy of manners tradition, it may prove useful to find similar or parallel scenes in the plays of these writers to set alongside those chosen from the work of Noël Coward. Here are two observations from students on their experience and understanding of more recent comedy of manners writers:

"Until now the only comedy of manners that I have been aware of personally was Coward, Wilde and some restoration comedy. Although I was aware of Talking Heads I never really realised they were in the same genre. But when you actually consider the nature of the comedy it becomes very obvious. I suppose I have always considered comedy of manners to be a comedy of the past, when there was a very prominent high society with manners which could be parodied, mocked and ridiculed. But of course there is so much more to the genre than this. [Alan Bennett's] Talking Heads... are defined as comedy of manners pieces because they focus on individuals who are talking about themselves but in doing so reveal far more than they intend... what they say and what they try and portray themselves as conflicts strongly with who they actually are. This conflict between what people appear to be and who they are, along with the conflict between what people say and what they want to say (text versus subtext) is central. Steve talks about 'self-deception', which is another way of describing these conflicts. As the genre is so dependent on performance – it can only exist when taken from the page – it is probably stupid to try and work it out intellectually and instead makes sense to find out why it works on stage and how to make it work. Hence this course."

"We compared two scenes, the 'Handbag' scene from The Importance of Being Ernest, and the opening scene from Joe Orton's What the Butler Saw. In essence, they are the same. They both have the

same interview structure, and turn the conversation of asking questions on its head. Lady Bracknell begins with the question ‘Do you smoke?’ following with ‘minor matters’ about whether his parents are living. Dr Prentice, likewise asks Geraldine whether her parents are living first and after some time asks to know her shorthand speed. Both scenes have two distinct halves (the trivial and the serious), which, in a real scenario, would be reversed. Would it be useful in performing the Orton piece to be aware of Wilde’s play? I would prefer to know, as it allows you to get into the style of what the writer is trying to do. Orton has obviously based his scene on Wilde for a purpose, and to be aware of this would increase the humour.”

Would-be Directors

In a way, my classes could be regarded as having a directing side to them, which perhaps isn’t a bad thing. Many of the exercises and games develop naturally into specific rehearsal techniques. Some actors like being actors as opposed to actors who are made to think like a director. This comment wasn’t typical but it is fair that it should be heard:

“I think I have gained more in terms of a director than an actor through the experience of the course. I have found it fascinating to see how the various exercises and techniques we have explored have helped different people and how they have enriched different scenes. Steve told us right from the start that this is not an acting course which confused me completely – particularly considering the style is so consciously theatrical – but I think what he meant was that we would benefit more if we did not worry about producing a wonderful performance but instead focused on how the exercises can benefit a scene. Undoubtedly some people have a natural gift and intuition as to how comedy of manners should be performed but for those who don’t the course offers techniques and solutions. Having directed before I know the temptation to try and just tell an actor how you want it to be done, however, these exercises help actors connect and find the life in scenes for themselves.”

The Follow Through

The biggest concern for the students that emerged in doing the course was the problem of how to take what you had instinctively achieved, often without thinking, in a game or exercise and then transfer that same technique to text in the work and rehearsal that came after. What we have here is the problem of what I would call the follow through. I'll make three points.

First, the students might sometimes think they haven't carried through a new tone or technique but in truth a residue of what they have learnt is retained more than they may think. It may not be as good as in the exercise but their performances carry more technique than any earlier read-through. Second, I try to assure them that since they have achieved it in a game they now know they can achieve it and it is simply a matter of time and patience to rediscover that again in rehearsal proper. Knowing it can be done is at least half way to doing it. I would admit that time is always an issue but these classes are about learning a technique and putting it into practice, they are not a process as part of a full scale production. A third point is about balance. What nearly all these exercises do is give the student a level too far. To attain the right level for performance the student after the exercise usually has to take it back a couple of notches and then hopefully find the right pitch for the scene proper through a system of trial and error. Here are a few comments from my students:

"The problem of converting the success of the exercises to the scenes themselves has been present throughout the course but I am sure this is to do with the fact that we are merely touching on all the areas of comedy of manners. With more time and close direction these exercises are fantastic ways of understanding a text and an acting style that is very precise and theatrical."

"I find this a common thread with all the exercises we have experienced so far on this course, you must not try too hard or else you lose everything. The minute I try to do something I lose the essence of what I had in the exercise. Maria Aitkin talks of 'catching the comic spark from the playwright and passing it on to the audience' there must be a way of taking as much as you can from the exercise without destroying it in practice, but it is such a fragile process that I often find

myself trying too hard, or worse, ACTING, and while you do act in comedy of manners performance once you have captured this essence and are sure you are not going to lose it, acting in the exercise means you never grasp the 'spark' in the first place."

"Concentration is given to pieces in great depth, in relation to the way the text is presented, but you rarely perfect the pieces using what is learnt. There also seems to be too much to learn and perfect in the given time."

"I think everyone was quite mortified when we performed the passages without accents, trying to keep the previous energies, only to find that they weren't funny anymore. This apparently was because we'd all naturally started acting the piece, and since most of the passage is quite nasty, it just became unpleasant: we'd lost the lightness of touch and rhythmical qualities and replaced it with emotion. I think it is only because we just don't have the time to work enough on a text and fully appreciate what we are doing. It is enough that we know these exercises and games and know in what instances to apply them. It would be nice though to get our teeth into a scene."

"'You must be aware of thinking too much about style', said my kindly adviser, 'or you will become like those fastidious people who polish and polish until there is nothing left.'"

Putting it All Together

The classes cover various aspect of the theatre of comedy of manners, including patterns in the dramatic structure and subtext. Occasionally students would find these contradictory, for example exploring the words in 'Fascinating Rhythm' and exploring the words in the subtext exercises seemed to be aiming at different results. I would have to point out that yes, one is looking at shape rather than depth. And they were not contradictory not even contrary but complementary. The course would only finally make sense when all the classes could be viewed together as a whole. This was usually understood by the end but like a puzzling single piece in a jigsaw all is never quite clear until complete. One aspect of the course that was universally accepted by all my students was how much they had

underestimated the technique required and how much work it takes to get it right. Here are a few extracts:

"We then tried to get the full motivation and energy of these words by physicalising and vocalising them as much as possible. We then went up and down the lines delivering these words in sequence. In some ways it went against our work on subtext, because it purely illustrated all the energy in the dialogue. It showed how much actually happens in Coward's words because in some ways it was possible to follow what was happening as an argument."

"At times it felt odd doing something that may have made us look a little silly, but, most of the time, we realised what was meant to be found. I think the main thing that I have learnt from the course is that it takes a lot of practice and experience to gain the desired effect in performance, and that the exercises that we completed were branched to this tree. Also, the exercises that we did could be related to many pieces of text, but some worked a lot better than others. I was amazed at how much work can go into just one line, and felt that I could if needed spend a good hour looking at a very small section of text."

"Personally, the most important discoveries that I have made are firstly, that there is a need for absolute realism within the pieces, especially in Coward, and this reality can be as much of a route into the comedy of the piece as anything else and secondly that there numerous layers that make up the final product, the balance of which determines the comedy. The exercises that this course have covered have helped to build my confidence by providing comprehensive and enjoyable insights into the text from which characters and situations have been made accessible. (It's almost certainly the first partial option which I feel I would happily use the exercises from in future work.)"

"I am beginning to understand that with comedy of manners the more effortless it looks, the more effort is needed in making it appear so!"

"With this class it's not just what I'm learning that is so great, the manner in which I'm learning it is more than enjoyable. It's actually fun! (Wow. Fun college course) Class then becomes more about interaction, not instruction, learning retention, and not learning detention. Things

you remember and actually stay in your mind are ultimately the things you really have enjoyed or are passionate about. Well, for me anyway."

The spirit of the last comment is one of which I think The Master would approve for, as he said himself, "Work is much more fun than fun!"

Steve Nallon