A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Relative Values
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo: Jeanne Naughton in Relative Values, 1998.
# Relative Values

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Synopsis: **Relative Values**

It is Saturday afternoon in the library of Marshwood House, East Kent, England. Crestwell, the butler; Alice, the housemaid; and Moxie, the countess of Marshwood’s personal maid, are discussing the upcoming marriage of Nigel, the earl of Marshwood, to Miranda Frayle, a thoroughly American actress. Alice is thrilled with the idea that she may actually see a famous actress. Crestwell, although concerned about the class distinctions between the intendeds, covers his concern with flippancy. Moxie seems to be taking it the hardest, at one point bursting into tears and insisting that the moment Miranda walks into the house, she will walk out.

They are soon joined by Felicity (the countess), Cynthia Hayling, John Hayling, and Peter Ingleton. They have also obviously been discussing the unequal pairing of Nigel and Miranda. After the visitors all leave, Moxie meets alone with Felicity and announces that she must leave the household immediately and permanently. She feels she can no longer stay at Marshwood because Nigel's fiancée is not only from a different class, but she is Moxie's younger sister!

Felicity wants Moxie to stay with her, but sees no easy solutions. After all, if she stays, Nigel's sister-in-law would be his mother's maid. For Moxie to be socially equal to her sister, she must be a member of the family. Thus, over Moxie's original objections, they decide to make her an heiress living with the family. It is all agreed, and Moxie hurries off to change, just as Nigel and Miranda are arriving.

The second act begins with guests arriving for that evening's dinner, including Miranda and Moxie, dressed up now and acting as a member of the aristocracy. All goes well, until Miranda begins to tell about her supposed “past.” Of course, Felicity and Moxie know that most of this story is a lie. Just as dinner is about to end, Don Lucas, Miranda’s old Hollywood flame, arrives, demanding to see Miranda. Crestwell brings her to the library, where she and Don Lucas quarrel. He wants her back, but she insists she is going to marry Nigel. Convinced at the end, Don Lucas embraces Miranda one more time before leaving—just as Felicity enters the room.

Felicity, over the objections of Miranda, invites Don to spend the night. Emotions deteriorate from there, with Nigel angry that Don is here, Miranda angry at both Don and Nigel, and Felicity reveling in the turn of events. Moxie, however, can take it no more. She reveals who she really is, castigates her sister for her lies, and announces that she is leaving in the morning.

In the third act Felicity takes over. She engineers various stories and “chance” meetings until Miranda is back in Don’s arms and leaving for good, Nigel is admittedly content with the new situation, and Moxie is going to stay on. Crestwell concludes the play by toasting “the final inglorious disintegration of the most unlikely dream that ever troubled the foolish heart of man—Social Equality.”
Characters: Relative Values

Crestwell: The butler, he has been at Marshwood for many years and although on the surface appears to believe in social equality, deep down he realizes that such is not only impossible, but probably not desirable. He is a good friend of Moxie, and together they are the force that keeps the household and its occupants running smoothly.

Alice: The housemaid, Alice is young and inexperienced and very much star-struck by Miranda Frayle and other actors.

Mrs. Dora Moxton (Moxie): A very proper household servant, Moxie has been Felicity’s personal maid and sometimes confidante for over twenty years, becoming almost another member of the family. She is content at Marshwood and would be happy to live out her life there, until Nigel announces his wedding plans and she later reveals that his fiancée, Miranda Frayle, is her younger sister.

Felicity: The countess of Marshwood, she is level-headed and firmly ensconced in the aristocratic society she grew up in. She is trying to accept the social changes that she feels are taking place around her, but ultimately doesn’t and feels that her son really is marrying beneath his class.

Lady Cynthia Hayling: Felicity’s friend and a frequent visitor to Marshwood.

The Honourable Peter Ingleton: Felicity’s nephew who is living at Marshwood.

Admiral Sir John Hayling: Lady Hayling’s husband and a retired naval officer.

Nigel: The earl of Marshwood and Felicity’s son, he is betrothed to Miranda Frayle when the play opens. He has been involved with a number of women in the past that his mother did not approve of, including Joan whom he married for a short time. He insists he is now in love with Miranda.

Miranda Frayle: An American movie star, Miranda Frayle was actually born in England; and we learn in the play is (unbeknownst to anyone around them) Moxie’s sister. She is engaged to Nigel at the beginning of the play, but in the end goes back to America with her long-time love Don Lucas.

Don Lucas: An American movie star and the long-time love interest of Miranda Frayle.
About the Playwright: Noel Coward

Noel Pierce Coward was born on 16 December 1899. His family on his father's side was very talented musically, and they helped nurture the natural virtuosity of the child, instilling in him a lifelong love of music. Also, his mother took him to the theatre every year on his birthday, and, as he grew older, he found these junkets more and more fascinating and upon returning home would rush to the piano and play by ear the songs from the production he had just seen.

He made his first public appearance, singing and accompanying himself on the piano, at a concert held at Miss Willington's School. Though obviously a very talented child, Coward's precocity did not carry over to his formal education. At best, his schooling was sporadic. He was indulged by his mother, who became the stereotypical stage mother during his early years, and it was at his mother's insistence that he began attending Miss Janet Thomas's Dancing Academy in addition to his regular school in London. Soon, Miss Thomas's school usurped the position of importance held by traditional academic fare, and Coward became a child performer.

Coward's first professional engagement, and that which launched his long career, was on 27 January 1911 in a children's play, The Goldfish. After this appearance, he was sought after for children's roles by other professional theatres. He was featured in several productions with Sir Charles Hawtrey, a light comedian, whom Coward idolized and to whom he virtually apprenticed himself until he was twenty. It was from Hawtrey that Coward learned comic acting techniques and playwriting.

At the tender age of twelve, Coward met one of the actresses who would help contribute to his overwhelming success, Gertrude Lawrence; she was then fifteen and a child performer as well. The acting team of Coward and Lawrence would become synonymous with polished, sophisticated comedy during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s.

Coward began his writing career when he was sixteen by writing songs and selling them for distribution. He turned his hand to playwriting when he was seventeen and found that he was very good at writing dialogue. By 1919, his play I'll Leave It to You was produced in the West End with Coward in the leading role. One of the idiosyncrasies of Coward's writing is that often he wrote "whacking good parts" for himself or for people he knew. Some of his best plays are essentially vehicles for his own talents or those of Gertrude Lawrence and later of the Lunts. I'll Leave It to You met with moderate success, and Coward received great praise from critics for his play-writing abilities.

Coward went to New York for the first time in 1921 and arrived virtually penniless; however, although he may have begun the 1920s in penury, his position as the most popular playwright in the English theatre became secure during this decade. In 1924, The Vortex, Coward's most important serious play, was produced in London. The years from 1928 to 1934 were regarded by many as Coward's "golden years." His string of successes include This Year of Grace, Bitter Sweet, Private Lives, Cavalcade, Words and Music, Design for Living, and Conversation Piece.

In 1941 he wrote the record-breaking Blithe Spirit, which ran for 1,997 performances in London.

After World War II, Coward fell from grace with many critics, who regarded him as being past his literary prime. However, by the late 1950s, audiences were once again in love with him. His plays, revues, and nightclub appearances were extremely successful. The critics, however, remained vitriolic, but their rancor failed to dim the enthusiasm of the general theatre-
going public, which clamored for more Coward plays.

On January 1, 1970, Coward was honored by the queen as a knight bachelor for services rendered to the arts. In the same year, he was awarded a special Tony Award by the American theatre for distinguished achievement in the theatre. In 1972, he received an honorary doctor of letters from the University of Sussex.

Coward died of a heart attack in Jamaica on 26 March 1973, bringing to an end a career of more than sixty years in the theatre.
Beneath the Froth Is Basic Truth
By Aden Ross
From Insights, 1998

Noel Coward wrote of his play Waiting in the Wings, “The work contains, beneath the froth of some of its lighter moments, basic truth” (Plays: Five, London: Methuen, 1983, p. x). The same could be said of most of his plays, and certainly of Relative Values. Using a conventional genre—comedy of manners—Coward explores quite serious socioeconomic and philosophical issues with characteristic wit and panache.

The long tradition of English comedy of manners was firmly established by Restoration playwrights like Congreve, although its antecedents appeared in Shakespeare’s festive comedy and Jonson’s comedy of humours. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the form found new life through writers like Oscar Wilde, Somerset Maugham, and Noël Coward. Comedy of manners depends heavily upon character types—notably the clever servant, the young lovers, the controlling parent, and at least one character with a social and intellectual IQ not quite up to snuff. The plots revolve predictably upon a forthcoming marriage over the objections of the older generation, and the setting usually consists of an English drawing room. If contemporary American audiences don’t live with this same furniture, at least we live with these same silly situations.

As artificial as the genre might seem, comedy of manners is a sophisticated and complex art form demanding absolute command of the dialog and perfect comic timing, the lack of which tortured Coward during rehearsals (Ibid., pp. vii-xi). Far from comprising decoration, the witty repartee conveys, camouflages, and/or substitutes for emotion. For example, when Felicity compares her son’s meeting his true love on a raft at Cap d’Antibes with the Kon Tiki expedition, he fairly shoots back, “I suppose all this laboured flippancy is merely to cover up what you really feel?” (53). In the play’s most self-referential moment, Crestwell, the butler, suggests that the family’s dilemma could be delightfully exploited by a writer like Somerset Maugham, concluding that “later playwrights would miss the more subtle nuances. Comedies of manners swiftly become obsolete when there are no longer any manners” (38). This genre also becomes obsolete to audiences unwilling to be propelled by wit alone; in the comedy of manners wit is the play’s action.

Predicated as it is upon the encoded communication patterns, the tacit assumptions and the inviolable conventions of a particular social group, comedy of manners inherently provides the most appropriate battleground for dramatizing class warfare. Relative Values portrays several hierarchies of class, each with its own set of rules. At the top of the socioeconomic scale are Felicity, Countess of Marshwood, her son Nigel, and Admiral and Lady Hayling. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the servants, Moxie and Crestwell. Moxie is so content with her position on the Great Chain of Being that she resists a higher status even when it is unexpectedly thrust upon her. Crestwell, on the other hand, spouts social revolution, although he significantly does not act on his proletarian passions. As the clever servant par excellence, he prefers to point out ironies like “the ancient and inaccurate assumption that, as we are all equal in the eyes of God, we should therefore be equally equal in the eyes of our fellow creatures” (73). With his superior intellect, Crestwell provides the correct answer to The Times crossword puzzle—John Milton’s “Lycidas,” no less!—and finds American diction and grammar almost incomprehensible. Nonetheless, Crestwell will always serve Felicity lunch, while society allows her to go to lunch with a golf instructor of Crestwell’s same birth level.

Into these subtle class hierarchies of birth and profession enter Miranda Frayle and Don Lucas. Because they are rich, movie stars, and apparently American, they stand outside the English caste system. Given these parameters, Nigel could acceptably marry Miranda; indeed, Felicity remarks, “the aristocracy, what’s left of it, owes a great deal to the theatrical profession” (19). Horrified at
such a “mixed marriage,” the servant Moxie discloses that Miranda is actually her own dupli-
citous sister. For the Earl of Marshwood to have as his sister-in-law the family’s maid of nineteen
years is unthinkable, and the plot grows murkier. Felicity tries to convince herself that “nowa-
days all social barriers are being swept away and that everybody is as good as everybody else . . .
and that any suggestion of class distinction is laughed at” (16), but no one believes her. No one,
regardless of class.

The fact that Miranda is also a movie star underscores role-playing on all levels, social
as well as professional. Nigel is as attracted to the romantic image of Miranda as any of the
play’s readers of Screen Romances or the villagers beating the estate’s bushes for an autograph.
He’s infatuated with an idea, part of which is that he can happily marry beneath himself. But
Moxie cannot play the role of an aristocrat any more than her sister can resist the ultimate role
of Countess of Marshwood. All of the lies and role-playing coalesce in the “lovers’ reunion”
between Don and Miranda, replete with grade C movie dialog and cheap emotions. All that’s
missing are the flashbulbs, as Felicity might say.

Within this kaleidoscope of role-playing, prevarication, and class distinctions, the play’s
title keeps gaining new layers of meaning. Relative values, indeed! On first hearing the title,
audiences might assume that this play depicts some kind of ethical relativism. And, at first,
“values” seem pretty shifty. Felicity and Nigel are doing their best to extend noblesse oblige to
Nigel’s fiancée; Miranda actually believes that she can give up fame for a quiet life as a count-
ess; Crestwell may soon answer the “clarion call of progress” for social equality; and Don Lucas
attempts renunciation of his true love, albeit with the worst cinematic inanities.

Moxie is the first to halt this farce: she didn’t earn the role of high-born family friend, and
everything she has accomplished in her life resulted from hard, honest work. Miranda isn’t
named “Frayle” for nothing (or “Miranda,” for that matter); she and Don revert to their genu-
ine, superficial value system of fame, money, and each other as soon as possible. At the end
of the play, Crestwell speaks for everyone, toasting Moxie “in our humble, but on the whole
honorable calling.” Significantly, he adds, “I drink to her Ladyship and his Lordship, groan-
ing beneath the weight of privilege . . . [and] to the final inglorious disintegration of the most
unlikely dream that ever troubled the foolish heart of man—Social Equality!” (113). The values
we hold—ingrained by birth, education, profession, social expectations, and the like—are not
so “relative” after all. In this play, some values cannot and should not adjust to time, place and
circumstance.

But other “relative values” pervade the play. Typically punning on his own title, Coward is
asking not only what values we share with our relatives but also what value we place upon our
relatives. The play neatly compares and contrasts several “families.” Nigel and Felicity begin at
odds and come back together, with references to an alcoholic father. Moxie and Miranda start
the play apart, come together, and again break apart, with references to their mother’s imagined
alcoholism. Miranda “kept on almost having babies--but not quite” (31), a possible reference
to abortion. And Moxie “pretends” to be like a family member, when, in fact, she’s much closer
than family.

What is of value to each of these characters, and by extension, to ourselves? Birth? Fame?
Profession? Money? Family? Work? Wit? In Relative Values, Coward explores some basic ques-
tions, elegantly served as a frothy theatrical dessert. But this play never lets us forget that, soon-
er or later, someone must wash the dishes.
Coward and His Characters

By August B. C. March

From Midsummer Magazine, 1998

To truly understand and enjoy Relative Values, one must know more of its creator: playwright Noël Coward. As Charles Morey, who is directing this year’s production at the Utah Shakespeare Festival, says, the characters of Relative Values are Noël Coward “down to their shoes”; and a number of critics over the years have pointed out the similarities between Coward's plays and the persona he so carefully perpetuated.

Of course, Coward also wrote extensively about himself: in poetry, short articles, and three autobiographies; but we can get a wider viewpoint by reading what others have said about him: critics, contemporaries, and students. So, as a place to start, assembled below are a number of quotes from various sources that say something about Coward. Obviously many people adored him and loved his plays, while others focused on his supposed shallowness.

The quotes below are not arranged in any specific order, nor are they meant to present any specific viewpoint. On the contrary, they reflect a wide variety of opinions and styles. However, as one studies Coward and his work, it soon becomes evident that, whatever one thinks, Coward's plays are, at the very least, very amusing and entertaining—and more than capable of allowing one to spend an enjoyable evening in the theatre. Perhaps that is all Coward ever wanted.

So, let’s be off, starting with some recent comments by the director of this year’s production at the Utah Shakespeare Festival.

“In Coward’s earlier comedies, it is the spirit of anarchy and a plea for unlaced high spirits in the face of stifling conformity that drive the plays. Throughout Relative Values Coward’s anarchic comedic sensibility continues to reign, but alongside the flippance there is a rueful and occasionally bitter longing for a lost order, a world of ‘manners’ in which comedies of manners are not obsolete. But Coward never takes himself seriously for very long. The very tone of his discussion of ‘relative values’ suggests that Coward’s primary concern is what it has always been—the comic undermining of the pretentious, the dull, and the moralistic by the forces of wit, intelligence, and taste. The leading characters of Relative Values are Noël Coward creations down to their shoes. Like Coward himself, they view themselves and the world about them with supreme amusement and ironic detachment.”


“Coward’s wit was all his own. His professionalism, his stagecraft and his late-discovered talent as a cabaret artist who wowed audiences in Las Vegas as effortlessly as he had sung with Marlene Dietrich in Paris bars owed everything to his upbringing, and to a mother who was determined to make a star of him. The fact that she removed little Noël from his first school when the teachers refused to tie his shoelaces speaks volumes.”


“The public image of Coward, smoking in a silk dressing gown at midday, was a fiction. Beyond the desire to make enough money to support his family, Coward was driven by the kind of passion for fame that requires boundless determination and energy. Rising early and going to bed after a performance with a comforting plate of nursery-style food, Coward focused all of his energies on writing and on making use of a widening circle of influential friends that included Rebecca West and W. Somerset Maugham.”

—Seymour, p. 7
“His ruthlessness could be bloodcurdling. When his close friend Joyce Carey threatened to become his rival with her hugely successful play Sweet Aloes, Coward, so it was said, began encouraging her to concentrate on acting rather than writing.”
—Seymour, p. 7

“According to a friend, until The Vortex, his stage hit of 1924, ‘nobody called anyone “Darling” except as a declaration of love.’ Today, everyone in show business from Hugh Grant to Zsa Zsa Gabor, as well as a substantial proportion of more general cocktail-party goers, calls everyone else ‘Dah-ling.’ Coward himself had been calling everyone ‘darling’—his mum’s lodger, the fishmonger—since his Edwardian boyhood in the London suburbs. It’s surely not insignificant that, as a writer, his greatest contribution to the language was to strip a word of its passion and intensity and make it a mere unfelt throwaway.”

“The old line that deep down he was shallow might have been written for Coward. The best of his comedies illustrate the paradox of his talent: his depth is on the surface; he’s only profound when he’s being trivial.”
—Steyn, p. 62

“Born on the eve of the new century, he personified the deliriums of the age: momentum, industry, output, fame, and enchantment.”

“Coward was in perpetual flight from his fragile life to his secure public one. His performing self was unrelenting and, finally, attenuating.”
—Lahr, p. 87

“The pace of Coward’s best comedies, which are light, streamlined, and apparently without plot, is also emblematic of his era: it captures the desperation beneath the gaiety of postwar British life.”
—Lahr, p. 87

“And now comes Noël Coward, with brilliant fireworks that flare energetically and die out inconsequentially. . . . In the solid excellences of life he pokes and pecks. He makes the most of the show of a little knowledge. His generation has been given bits of Freud to think about. Repressions, inferiorities, have moved glibly on their tongues and dangerously in their minds. Coward’s plays have about them the mental unsteadiness of half-realized truths, given a dangerously innocuous setting. But they act well, in a deftly handled way.”

“Mr. Coward knows how to make the most of flimsiness. And this gives his actors unlimited opportunities to play all sorts of variations on the musical notes of the dialogue. The printed play reveals that line for line there is in it arrant simplicity of the commonplace order. But it springs to life when the tongue rattles it. This may not be the highest order of playwriting, but it takes a genuine ability to create it. . . . Mr. Coward is skilled in the surface movement of life which he can suggest by a light exuberance of dialogue, a very excellent quality. But there is a deeper movement he has not yet realized fully in a play. He skates on the surface. He strums his piano lightly. And so does he strum upon our sympathies.”
—Moses, p. 749