Three Little Old Ladies

by Elliot James

It's been said that the Nicky Lancaster's drug taking in 1924's *The Vortex* was a veiled reference to homosexuality, a rumour that Noël Coward always denied. However even his partner Graham Payn said that read that way the play makes more dramatic sense. There's Nicky's intense relationship with his Mother and his tortured, unhappy indifference to his relationship with his fiancé, Bunty. (There's also a supporting character called Pauncefort Quentin, an obvious homosexual to anyone with half a mind).

It was 1924 however and homosexuality would remain illegal for another forty-three years. No explicit reference would ever pass the theatre censor and any gossip in the press could end a career overnight. Yet ones life inevitably creeps into ones work… but we must be careful. It's often been said that *Private Lives* should be played with an all male cast, as that's *how Noël would have written it if he'd been able to.* Well, *Private Lives* was written for Gertrude Lawrence, who, by all accounts, was a woman.

There is, however, a recurring theme in much of Noël's work, that of the tension between who society expects us to be and who we really are. Which could certainly be argued as having come from a gay sensibility.

1933's *Design for Living* is more complicated as Noël ebbs closer to the truth. Otto and Leo both love Gilda but one could easily see a love between Otto and Leo too. Broadway audiences of the time must have simply seen *jolly japes* and *not* rampant bisexuality. That would be unthinkable. Noël had been explicit once, in 1926's *Semi Monde*, as gay characters come and go in a Parisian hotel. It was never published or produced.

Then there were the songs, such as *Green Carnation* in *Bitter Sweet*; a biting satire of the Aesthete's of the 1890's, such as Oscar Wilde's circle. The song *Mad About the Boy* had a final verse about a man seeking therapy over his male infatuation:

People I employ
Have the impertinence to call me Myrna Loy.
I rise above it,
Frankly love it,
'Cos I'm absolutely mad about the boy!

It was cut.

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Aged fourteen to fifteen Noël had a close friendship with the thirty-four year old Aristocratic Painter, Philip Streatfeild. Philip was a *Uranian* and had known Robbie Ross, (of Wilde's circle). He painted teenage male nudes by the lakes of Cornwall, rather like Henry Scott Tuke. Indeed in one painting it's believed that one of the boys is Noël. We must not judge events of the 1910's by the standards of the 2010's and we simply don't know the truth of what was occurring here. Certainly Noël's Mother had encouraged the friendship, for Philip would introduce Noël to all the right people, including the Aristocrats that ran the Theatres.

When Philip died of TB in 1915, he made a deathbed plea to a Mrs Astley-Cooper, asking her to let Noël continue to mix in these new circles. The other thing Philip did for Noël was to show him that homosexuality was perfectly natural, just at the age when he needed to know that. Working in the enlightened world of the Theatre helped too. Noël seems to have acknowledged and accepted his sexuality early on and simply moved forward with his life. Private, dignified and honest with himself.

There were to be affairs and endless rumours of flings with everyone from Prince George to Michael Redgrave. Some true, some not. Noël certainly had no interest in ever *telling all*. When asked in later life about his private life, and after 1967's decriminalisation of homosexuality, he would simply give a variation of:
"I have no intention of coming out, there are still three little old ladies in Worthing who harbour secret desires for me, and I've no wish to shatter their illusions."

The first of the two long-term relationships in Noël's life was Jack Wilson, a dashing American stockbroker, whom he met in 1925. Jack soon became Noël's Manager and it was rosy for a while but as the years went by Jack's alcoholism and financial mismanagement increased. He eventually married a woman, the Russian Princess, Natalia Paley, but continued to drink and died young.

Graham Payn was a much calmer figure. An attractive, younger, talented Actor and Singer. He had none of Jack's get up and go but perhaps that was a good thing. Graham was with Noël, loyal and loving, to the end. Noël's Diaries:

"I always hate Graham going away. He arrived back safely, thank God. I am never really relaxed when he is between the sea and the sky."

The writer of *Brief Encounter* certainly knew about love alright, the good and the torturous. In 1957 he fell into infatuation one last time. Performing in *Nude with Violin* on Broadway, Noël fell for a young, straight Actor called William Traylor.

26th October 1957: "I fear that Old Black Magic has reared itself up again. This is stimulating, disturbing, enjoyable, depressing, gay, tormenting, delightful, silly and sensible. – I can already see all the old hoops being prepared for me to go through."

William was himself in love with an Actress in the cast and must have become distressed. He overdosed on sleeping pills but luckily survived. Luckily too, any possible press scandal was avoided.

1st December 1957: "My humour retires baffled (but not for long, thank God), and I lie awake arguing with myself, jeering at myself and, worst of all, pitying myself. All the gallant lyrics of all the songs I have ever written rise up and mock me while I lie in the dark and listen. Passionate love has always been like a tight shoe rubbing blisters into my Achilles heel. That's enough of that."

Noël did not want any more "passionate love" at this stage in his life and happily the rest of his days were filled with work, family, friends and the calm love of Graham. It was in these remaining years however that society was finally beginning to change.

Noël had written (and published) openly gay characters in the 1950 short story, *Me and the Girls.* A dying nightclub entertainer reflects on his life and the girls he looked after over the years. But it's 1966's, *A Song at Twilight*, that really addressed the issue. A loose take on an elderly Somerset Maugham, (called Sir Hugo Latymer), a Writer is blackmailed over letters from an ancient homosexual affair. There was no great controversy, just good reviews, sell out box office and a sweet swan song for Noël. Finally the subject could be raised on the London stage. Two months earlier homosexuality had been set on the path to being decriminalised. Noel wrote in his diary:

13th February 1966: "The Homosexual Bill has passed through the House of Commons. Some of the opposition speeches were so bigoted, ignorant and silly that one can hardly believe that adult minds, particularly those adult minds concerned with our government, should be so basically idiotic. However, now all will be well apparently. Nothing will convince the bigots, but the black mailers will be discouraged and fewer haunted, terrified young men will commit suicide."

A decade before when a similar bill had failed to get passed, Noel expounded on the feelings that he had spent his life being so discreet about:

10th November 1955: "It is hard to believe in this scientific, psychiatric age when so many mysteries have been solved, even for the layman, that a group of bigoted old gentlemen should have the power to make the administration of British justice a laughing stock in the civilised world.
Emotional, uninformed prejudice can still send men to prison and ruin their lives for a crime that in the eyes of any intelligent human being isn't a crime at all. The fact that two men, well over the age of consent, should be penalised for going to bed together in private is a devastating revelation that we have learned nothing from history, literature, biology, science or psychology. To regard homosexuality as a disease or a vice is, we know, archaic and ignorant. It has always existed and always will exist."

This seems profoundly progressive for 1955.

When Noël was finally knighted in 1970, rumours were and would continue to be that it had taken so long because of his sexuality, by now an open secret. In truth he had simply upset some powerful establishment people in the early 1940's. After that a combination of a minor tax issue, some negative press and then tax exile didn't help matters. Noël's sexuality never became an issue, he wore it lightly and would rise above anyone that ever spoke against it. As Garry Essendine says in that most autobiographical of plays, *Present Laughter*:

"There's far too much nonsense talked about sex - To me the whole business is vastly over rated. I enjoy it, for what it's worth and fully intend to go on doing so for as long as anybody's interested and when the time comes and they're not I shall be perfectly content to settle down with an apple and a good book!"

He was never above a tasteful but risqué joke either. On a troop concert tour during the War, one Journalist asked:
"Are there any songs you'd like to perform that you've not?"
"I should love to perform Bea Lillie's '*There Are Fairies in the Bottom of my Garden*', but I don't dare. It might come out as '*There are Fairies in the Garden of my Bottom*', which might be unfortunate".

Noël had peace and honesty in his private life, once giving a lecture on the birds and the bees to one of his many godchildren, Daniel Massey, he said:
"I have tried everything from soup to nuts and ended up with men and that's that." Though if there were ever any women there's no evidence whatsoever. But then Noël was, if nothing else, a gentleman.