

WESTMINSTER ABBEY — Wednesday 28 March 1984
ADDRESS

by Sir Richard Attenborough

"When I was young", Noël once said, "I was always in a cathedral or somewhere hooting away 'O For The Wings Of A Dove'. I was always furious when I'd finished singing an anthem absolutely beautifully to find everybody in the church crouched on their knees in prayer and not applauding me."

If all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players, then Noël made his first entrance with – as always – an exquisite sense of timing. He was born just fifteen days before the start of the twentieth century into an epoch he was to epitomise for millions of people the world over and, for the next seventy-three years, adorn with his unique genius.

It is entirely fitting that his epitaph, carved in stone, which Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother is so graciously to unveil here today, is both an epigram, and a masterly piece of understatement. It reads simply, 'A Talent to Amuse'. For Noël, that most blithe of spirits, no inscription could be more appropriate. He was a playwright, an actor, a composer, lyricist, cabaret artist, author, painter, director, screenwriter, essayist, diarist, journalist, novelist, producer and impresario. In addition, of course, his was the most devastating wit of our age. Asked if there was anything he couldn't do, he replied: "I must wrack my brains about that. I can't perform on a trapeze or saw ladies in half, although I've often wanted to".

During Noël's lifetime, the world saw much to cry about, but he was never once to beat his breast and rail against fate. "I am not particularly interested in reforming the human race. Indeed, if I did there would be nothing to write about."

He opted instead for present laughter, jollying the world along. He did so with flippancy, with polish and panache and, above all, with an inimitable, unflinching sense of style.

"I happen," he said with typical immodesty and total honesty, "to have been born with a great many gifts and my biggest problem in life has been to keep them all going without sacrificing one to the others."

It was a problem he overcame magnificently with a prodigious outpouring of talent that resulted in some fifty plays, nearly three hundred songs, assorted verses and short stories, more than a dozen revues and musicals, two autobiographies and a miscellany of indignant journalism.

He began life with no great advantage or connections. "I was born in Teddington, Middlesex, an ordinary middle class boy. I didn't gnaw kippers' heads in the gutter as Gertie Lawrence quite untruthfully always insisted that she did. Nor was my first memory the crunch of carriage wheels in the drive. Because we hadn't got a drive."

The cigarette holders, the silk dressing gowns, the look of a "heavily doped Chinese illusionist" all came later and then not without a struggle.

In his early days, in the days before he called everyone darling which, in the Twenties and early Thirties had all the shock effect of a four letter word, Noël thought that to know theatrical stars by their first names was the pinnacle of achievement. But he had, at the time, few first names to his credit.

"So in bed one night I devoured minced haddock on toast with a certain distaste and dropped off to sleep in the midst of an ecstatic dream in which darling Gladys and dearest Irene were saying: We must get Noël to sing us something."

Sing us something he did, as he travelled first class through life, in that soft, staccato voice of immaculate diction which he defined as "frankly non-existent. It has considerable range, little music, no tone, but lots of meaning."

The titles of Noël's songs are part of this century's history; extraordinarily potent but never cheap; evocative, hilarious, patriotic, mocking, satirical, frankly sentimental – music and lyrics that, as we are hearing today, once lodged in the heart and on the brain refuse to go away. Who, having heard it, can expunge from their minds *A Room With a View?* or *Mad Dogs and Englishmen?* Or *Dance, Dance, Dance Little Lady*, *Someday I'll Find You*, *Don't Put Your Daughter On the Stage* *Mrs. Worthington*, *I'll Follow My Secret Heart*, *Matelot*, *London Pride*, *Poor Little Rich Girl* and *Play Orchestra Play*.

Part of his legend which, quite frankly, he did everything to enhance and little to dispel was that his songs and plays were achieved effortlessly in an absinthe-drenched haze between cocktail parties.

In fact he was a fanatical worker, a craftsman who took infinite pains. Noël the writer was as highly disciplined as Noël the actor who came to every first reading word perfect, expecting and demanding that his fellow players do the same, and, "after three weeks' rehearsal achieve complete spontaneity."

"The only way to enjoy life," he said, "is to work. Work is much more fun than fun."

Destiny's tot – as Alexander Woolcott dubbed him – started work at the age of eleven, playing Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish* at the Little Theatre. The first line he remembered uttering on the professional stage could hardly have been more apt or, indeed, more prophetic. It was, "Crumbs. How exciting!"

Master Noël Coward had found his natural habitat early and was to swim with consummate skill in the goldfish bowl of celebrity thereafter; his own age keeping pace with the century. At only twenty five in that same theatre he played, with equal excitement, the lead in his own smash hit *The Vortex*. Concurrently he experienced the heady delights of having two other plays, *Hay Fever* and *Fallen Angels*, together with his revue *On With the Dance*, also running in the West End. Success had, as he later reflected, taken him to her bosom "like a maternal boa constrictor."

He continued to take London – and New York – by storm and in the three short years between 1929 and 1931 he wrote, scored, and produced *Bitter Sweet*, *Private Lives* and *Cavalcade*. In 1941 *Blithe Spirit* broke new ground by adding a less earthly dimension to the mocking mirror he held up to society. It ran, the Blitz notwithstanding, for nearly 2,000 performances to be followed by *Present Laughter* and *This Happy Breed*.

Noël's first encounter with the cinema at the age of eighteen, was not an entirely scintillating experience – even under the direction of the legendary D. W. Griffith. "I was paid, I think, a pound a day, for which I wheeled a wheelbarrow up and down a village street in Worcestershire with Lillian Gish. It left little mark on me beyond a most unpleasant memory of getting up at five every morning and making my face bright yellow."

Grown somewhat in stature when he made his next film appearance in *The Scoundrel*, he was known throughout the Astoria Studios on Long Island as the "czar of all the rushes."

In 1939 Noël sought the advice of Winston Churchill as to how best he could help the war effort.

"Get into a warship, and see some action!" said Churchill, adding ominously, "Go and sing to them when the guns are firing – that's your job."

Noël did go and sing to them when the guns were firing, driving himself to exhaustion by entertaining troops in Australia, Asia and Africa. He also wrote, composed, produced, co-directed and acted himself into a warship, with the classic morale-boosting film *In Which We Serve* in which I had the joy of appearing. It was based on a true story, that of the sinking of HMS Kelly captained by Lord Louis Mountbatten who, over the years, became and remained one of his very closest friends.

There was a pronounced shift in Noël's post-war fortunes. The critics began to conclude that he and his plays were outdated. They were wrong, of course, as they so often were about his work. *Hay Fever* had the unique distinction during his lifetime of being revived enshrined in the Valhalla of the National Theatre repertoire and from then on Noël's plays continued to prove that his talent to amuse is one that will endure for generations to come.

"Since the war," he said in the mid-fifties, "a terrible pall of significance has fallen over the theatre." He firmly believed that a play's most important ingredients were life, death, food, sex and money.

"But not necessarily in that order."

Most playwrights go out of critical fashion sooner or later; Noël went later and returned sooner than many and, in the interim, created a whole new career in cabaret, betaking himself, after the Café de Paris and charity matinées at the London Palladium, to Las Vegas where he miraculously outshone every other performer in entertaining what he was pleased to call "Nescafe Society."

Truly, Noël was the master. No one now seems to know how exactly this title came into being, but it was so entirely apt that it became, amongst those who were fortunate enough to know him and millions who didn't, his name by right. Characteristically, when asked to explain it, Noël himself said airily, "Oh, you know – Jack of all trades, master of none."

Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. We are here today to celebrate Noël's mastery of so many talents – but not least his talent for friendship which was once described as an intuitive, penetrating sense of what friendship is and what a friend may need . . . which is to make you laugh at yourself.

I know of no man who so generously welcomed and encouraged the emergence of new talent as Noël did, and those of us who have had the privilege of singing his songs and speaking his words are forever in his debt. Neither did he forget those of our profession to whom fate had been less than kind. Apart from innumerable acts of private generosity, he worked unstintingly as President of The Actors' Orphanage for more than twenty years.

It was said of Noël that he was simply a phenomenon and one that is unlikely to occur ever again in theatre history. We are fortunate that it is our own epoch that the phenomenon so gloriously adorned.

We all have our exits as well as our entrances and Noël knew when to go and how to do it with impeccable style. On the 30th of July, 1966, having played at the Queen's Theatre to capacity audiences for his customary three months, he ended the season of *Suite in Three Keys*. On that last night, his last night as a professional actor, he made his way upstage to a door and turned to gaze out over the audience before uttering a soft curtain line to the greatest and most enduring love of his life – the theatre.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," he said.

And was gone.