## THE THEATRE

## BRITS AND WITS

The return of "Brief Encounter" and "Yes, Prime Minister."

## BY JOHN LAHR

Tam England, and England is me," Noël Coward once said. He wasn't wrong. The self-educated son of a piano salesman, Coward wrote and performed himself into the center of the British popular imagination. Like all stars, he understood his moment and how to exploit it. Coward, at his peak, was everywhere: on the stage, the page, the radio, the phonograph. His witty persona defined the Young Idea of the nineteen-twenties: "gaiety, courage, pain concealed, amusing malice," as one of his contemporaries put it. Coward was, as he recalled, "a great . . . glamorous cookie." In more than five hundred songs, Coward mythologized pukka England ("The Stately Homes of England," "Mad Dogs and Englishmen") and English irony ("Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans"). Onstage and onscreen, he gave the nation a sensational chronicle of its immediate past, from the Boer War to the Second World War. He won an Academy Award for his portrait of the heroics of the British Navy in the 1942 film "In Which We Serve," which he directed, with David Lean, and starred in. And after the war Coward teamed up with Lean again, to transform his 1936 one-act play "Still Life" into the classic 1945 film "Brief Encounter" (starring Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard), which became a kind of romantic cultural watershed for the postwar generation. The film, about an unfulfilled love affair that plays itself out in a train-station tearoom, tapped into England's sense of release and regret, its need to return to the ordinary after the extraordinary.

The innovation of Coward's dialogue was its economy. "Small talk, a lot of small talk, with other thoughts going on behind" is how one of his characters describes it. In Emma Rice's gaudy, rambunctious stage adaptation of "Brief Encounter" (a Kneehigh Theatre production, directed by Rice, at the Roundabout's Studio 54), Coward's strategy is inverted: there's small talk, all right, but with a lot going on in front, above, and

around it. If the gritty black-and-white film was neorealistic, this "Brief Encounter" is neo-impressionistic. As the play begins, with orchestral crescendos, a British censor's certificate, projected on a screen, declares the show suitable for "the hopelessly romantic." The image announces the production's agenda: to both wink at and wallow in love's wallop. (Coward himself was more ambivalent about desire: "To me, passionate love has always been like a tight shoe rubbing blisters on my Achilles' heel," he wrote in his diary.) The extramarital passion in "Brief Encounter" is never consummated. ("Make tea, not love," as one wag put it.) In our louche age, the notion of suffering without reward and the standards that underpin such a punishing deferral of satisfaction—duty, fidelity, avoidance of sin—seem almost Chaucerian. Rice's production walks a tightrope between nostalgia and doubt, at once yearning for enchantment and seeking to disenchant.

With a tea counter set on top of a piano, and a small group of musicians lingering onstage throughout, the suburban upper-middle-class housewife Laura (Hannah Yelland) and Alec (Tristan Sturrock), the married doctor she falls for, are free to swoon, to swing Chagall-like from chandeliers, and to embrace, while behind them projections of crashing waves convey the undertow of feeling that their clipped exchanges don't. Where the film made the case for normalcy and gravity, the adaptation's brief is for idiosyncrasy and playfulness. Rice uses clever shifts of dimension to suggest the immensity of emotional elation: Alec leaps over a toy steam train pulled across the stage as he rushes to catch it; Laura waves goodbye to a huge projected image of Alec, waving back at her from the train window. These inventive stage pictures, however, also contain a sense of satiric deflation. In "Still Life," Coward discarded his usual flippancy to write in earnest; here Rice imposes her own flippancy on his seriousness. It's a



 $Mc Laughlin, Sturrock, Yelland, Atkinson, and Alessi \ ham \ it\ up\ in\ ``Brief Encounter." Photograph\ by\ Ethan\ Levitas.$ 

case of Old School versus Cool School.

Played against Alec and Laura's repressed propriety is the comic slap-andtickle of the working-class tea ladies and cheeky railway odd bods, who camp it up and comment on the proceedings in a series of interpolated Coward songs, an adhoc selection that dates from 1927 to 1961. The refined, imperious tearoom hostess, Myrtle (Annette McLaughlin), and the station attendant, Albert (Joseph Alessi), manage a sort of carnal, comic Apache dance to "So Good at Love"; Beryl, the impish waitress (well played by Dorothy Atkinson, who whizzes around the tearoom on a scooter—go figure), and the candy vender Stanley (the gangly Gabriel Ebert) get to sing "Mad About the Boy" and "Any Little Fish." It's as if Rice had fallen asleep after watching the movie and dreamed a musical—a revision that abandons the film's condescending treatment of the chirpy lower orders only to condescend to Coward himself.

Of the enduring power of Coward's story, Rice writes in her program note, "We can all own it and feel it and find something of ourselves in it." Ultimately, Rice finds too much of herself and too little of Coward. She deploys his plot and his songs, but her ironic flashiness illustrates rather than penetrates the punishing emotions of the film. At the end of the evening, on the night I saw the show, as the audience exited the theatre the band reassembled, with the rest of the hardworking cast, for a sort of knees-up, a celebration that was out of character with the original "Brief Encounter" but not with this ingratiating production. Perched above a banner invoking a line from the show—"I want to remember every minute. Always"—the actors, like us, seemed already to have forgotten it.

Brief Encounter" aside, seriousness was not Coward's ozone; even in his humor, he was no thinker. The same can't be said of Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay, the co-authors of the brilliant nineteeneighties British TV series "Yes, Minister" and "Yes, Prime Minister," which, taken together, are the smartest and funniest political-science course anyone has ever attended. Now, in a new stage version of "Yes, Prime Minister" (expertly directed by Lynn, at the Gielgud, in London), the scornful, lazy, loquacious Sir Humphrey (Henry Goodman) and the hapless, cun-

ning, vainglorious Prime Minister Jim Hacker (David Haig) return to the West End just in time to skewer Britain's Toryled coalition government and its instinct for turning a crisis into a catastrophe. With a plot that juggles all the current political deliriums—energy, the euro, the European Union, illegal immigration, global warming, the BBC, pedophilia, and more—the play bears exhilarating witness to Mark Twain's droll observation that honesty was the best policy.

The story revolves around a deal being made with the foreign secretary of the oilrich Kumranistan to run a pipeline through Europe, thus solving Britain's economic problems and insuring the P.M.'s future. On the eve of signing the deal, however, the foreign secretary asks for a sexual partner for the night; his sweet tooth turns out to be for schoolgirls. This request generates an extravaganza of hilarious pettifogging. When a willing girl is finally found, she turns out to be an illegal immigrant. "Oh, my God! What do we do? We can't ignore the facts," Hacker says in abject terror. His assistant answers, "If you can't ignore the facts, you have no business being in government." Like Nixon and Kissinger praying together at the White House, Hacker and his pols get down on their knees to ask for guidance, a moment that gives the line "the secret ambush of a specious prayer" a whole new meaning. "So my question is: which is the greater evil, O Lord? Is it really O.K. for me to authorize procuring some little scrubber for him to have sex with?" Hacker asks, adding, "I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience. Amen."

In the late eighties, after a tenure as a director at the National Theatre, Lynn left England and built a successful career in Hollywood, where he has made a series of star-driven studio comedies that rarely allow him to show the full range of his sharp intelligence. His return to the West End is something to cheer about. Lynn, who directed the best production of Joe Orton's "Loot" I've ever seen, is a dab hand at Orton's game of drawing pure water from poisoned wells. Almost every paradoxical line of this vivacious play challenges the audience to think against received opinion. To end with one piquant potshot: "We don't approve of blackmail as an instrument of government policy," Sir Humphrey sniffs. "Blackmail is criminal, Prime Minister. We use leverage." ◆