

PROSCENIUM

Waiting in the Wings

By Noel Coward

Waiting in the Wings

Wednesday 13th to Saturday 16th April 2016
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Waiting in the Wings

Noel Coward

The Cast:

Bonita Belgrave	Debbie Ellis
Cora Clarke.....	Clare Wooster
Maud Melrose	Izzie Cartwright
May Davenport.....	Linda Hampson
Almina Clare	Caroline Bronne-Shanbury
Estelle Craven	Anne Gerrard
Deidre O'Malley	Susi Thornton
Perry Lascoe.....	Duncan Sykes
Sylvia Archibald.....	Zena Wigram
Mr Osgood Meeker	Keith Bayross
Lotta Bainbridge	Evelyn Moutrie
Dora	Nicola Bielicki
Doreen	Hannah Lester
Sarita Myrtle	Angela Evans
Zelda Fenwick.....	Denise Bone
Dr Jevons	David Pearson
Alan Bennet	Mark Sutherland
Topsy Baskerville	Hannah Lester
Directed by	Janet Harrison
Stage Manager	Roger Knight
Lighting and sound design by	Paul Robinson
Lighting and sound operation.....	Paul Davis
Set design	Michael Williams, Mark Brookes
Set construction	Michael Williams, Mark Brookes Charles Anthony
Properties	Debbie de Beer
Costume	Sheila Harvey
Rehearsal prompt	Kathleen Jones

In loving memory of a much valued friend and
colleague, Colin Hickman

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the Play passes in the lounge of "The Wings", a charity home for retired actresses, in the Thames Valley, not far from Bourne End.

Time – the early 1960s

ACT I

- Scene 1 A Sunday afternoon in June
Scene 2 3 a.m. on a Monday morning, a month later

ACT II

- Scene 1 A Sunday afternoon in the following September
Scene 2 Several hours later
Scene 3 A week later

ACT III

- Scene 1 The evening of Christmas Day
Scene 2 A Sunday afternoon in the following June

Noel Coward on *Waiting in the Wings*

Sunday 13 April 1958

I have some ideas beginning to burgeon. One is a play called *The Wings* about a home for retired actresses. I really do think this has great possibilities.

Thursday 1 May 1958

Suddenly, in a wild resurgence of energy, I rushed at *Waiting in the Wings* and wrote away like mad, getting up at 6.30 every morning and fairly flogging myself. Alas, two days ago, when I had nearly finished the second act, I realized with dismay that although the characters are good and the dialogue, of course excellent, there is no play. I had started too soon and too quickly, without taking enough care to construct properly. I was horribly discouraged by this but then Coley (*Cole Lesley, Coward's secretary*) came up and we talked it over and I know I have done the right thing. I love the idea and it should and must be carried out really well.

Sunday 5 April 1959

I read through what I had written of *Waiting in the Wings* last year. I found it much better than I thought it was and so I set to work and finished it. I think I have done a good job and that it is a moving and valid play. I have worked hard

on it and taken great pains. It is too early yet for me to know whether it is really good or not and by the time it is transmuted by acting and direction it might emerge quite differently, but my hopes are high and I certainly do know that one or two of the scenes in it are the best I have written.

Tuesday 29 March 1960

Talked to Sybil Thorndike about *Wings*. She loves it and there is a strong hope she will do it. Lovely evening with Peggy [*Webster, director of the 1960 London production*] and Pamela Frankau. Peggy gave me some really constructive criticism of the play which I shall follow. It means a little rewriting and transposing and one short extra scene, but I know it will improve the play enormously.

Friday 22 April 1960

I am very proud of myself because I have reconstructed *Waiting in the Wings* really satisfactorily. It has entailed a tremendous amount of cutting and snipping and transposing, but I have actually enjoyed doing it. I have a feeling that the play has a very good chance of success because, in spite of the modern contempt for craftsmanship, it generally wins in the long run. At all events it is now a strong, well-constructed play and if the critics don't like it they can stuff it. I have the feeling that the public will, if it is directed and played as I hope it will be. Sybil is a draw and, combined with me (*as author*) and Marie Lohr (*distinguished American-born actress who played May in the 1960 production*) etc, we should get over the first hurdles.

Thursday 21 July 1960

Waiting in the Wings is coming along very well and we are definitely going to the Duke of York's (*in London's West End*) which delights me. It is an intimate cosy little theatre and dead right for the play.

Sunday 31 July 1960

I am delighted with the progress of the play. Sybil gives a really great performance and so, to my joy and relief, does Graham (*Payn, as Perry*). I've never seen him so relaxed and charming. Marie Lohr is a bit slow and singsong but began to show marked improvement after some gentle words from me. Poor Mary Clare looks wonderful but can't remember a word. The rest are excellent and Peggy has done a fine and tactful job. I have a strong feeling that the play will be a success. It will, of course, get some maddening notices but it is pretty strong in itself and with Sybil and a really fine cast it really should do well, I think.

Monday 15 August 1960 (Dublin)

The dress rehearsal on Sunday was not as bad as I feared, although the technical staff of the dear Olympic (*Theatre*) leave a great deal to be desired. The opening performance on Monday was an unqualified triumph. It was an over-sweet "gala" audience but they settled down and quite obviously loved the play and

everything to do with it. The performance was excellent and the ovation at the end tremendous. I clambered up on to the stage and made a “thank you” speech and it was all highly gratifying. The next day the local papers, all except one, came out with rave notices and everybody, not unnaturally, is very happy. On Tuesday and Wednesday we – Peggy and me – did a little snipping and tightening here and there. Marie Lohr has come up like a dream. She is still a little slow but has discarded “booming” and is playing it much more simply and movingly. Sybil is quite wonderful. I am sure some of the London critics, if not all, will be patronizing and beastly but having seen the reaction of ordinary audiences to the play, I’m sure it won’t matter what they say. The play is well-constructed and entertaining and it is superbly acted, and the public will respond accordingly.

Sunday 11 September 1960

The opening performance on Wednesday was an unqualified success. The audience was marvellous, swift in all the laughs and quiet as mice when required. At the end there was a really tremendous ovation, and when I finally emerged from the theatre there were cheering crowds on both sides of St Martin’s Lane. The next morning the notices! With the exception of *The Times* (guarded), *Telegraph* (kindly), *Chronicle* (good) and *Herald* (fair), I have never read such abuse in my life. I was accused of tastelessness, vulgarity, sentimentality, etc. To read them was like being repeatedly slashed in the face. I don’t remember such concentrated venom for many a long day...poor Sybil’s great performance, to say nothing of Marie’s and the others, was barely mentioned. Meanwhile the business looks healthy and the advance is good, but this blast of spleen has of course altered the atmosphere.

Monday 26 September 1960

Waiting in the Wings is playing to virtual capacity business and is obviously an enormous success. This, of course, pleases me more than anything.

Sunday 1 January 1961

Waiting in the Wings took a bad, a very bad, drop before Christmas, so bad indeed that I am worried. It would be awful if it were to close after only four months.

Saturday 7 January 1961

Poor *Waiting in the Wings* has not properly recovered from its pre-Christmas plunge, and is going to close on 18 February. I am deeply angry about this. So many people have loved it. However we shall have got six months out of it, which is a good deal better than nothing. But oh Lordy, Lordy, there is quite an accumulation of bitterness in my heart for those mean, ungenerous, envious, ignorant, little critics.

Source: *The Noel Coward Diaries*
(Edited by Graham Payn and Sheridan Morley)
Weidenfeld, 1982

John Lahr on Coward and *Waiting in the Wings*

“Coward’s blasts and benedictions on the [New Wave in the] theatre were consolidated most powerfully in *Waiting in the Wings*. “*It differs from other organisations of its kind*”, Coward writes in his production note, “*in that it provides only for those who have been stars or leading ladies and who, through age, lack of providence, misfortune etc have been reduced to poverty.*” Coward was well-off and still in demand; but the pathos of the actresses’ situation provided a resonant metaphor of his own fears of ageing and being put artistically out to pasture...The notion of stars being forgotten, of performers’ “magic” no longer able to protect them from the vagaries of life touched something deep in Coward...The sense of their glorious past, and their thread-bare future weighs heavily on them and on the stage action.”

“The actresses are completely out of the limelight. Once stars who epitomised momentum and possibility they are now stalled and inert, waiting for the end...Coward’s dialogue moves with affectionate accuracy among the actresses’ sense of decline and their punishing memories of stage triumphs. Once beautiful and enchanting, the loss of their spell only multiplies their impotence. The spirit in these old girls is still strong but Nature defeats them.”

“To Coward, politeness was a form of courage. In theatrical terms, Coward saw it also as good business. *Waiting in the Wings* was Coward’s tasteful answer to the nihilism, self-pity and crass excess he saw in the New Wave.”

“In the jaunty, moving finale Coward’s love of the theatre and of the generosity of theatre folk is forcefully stated. *Waiting in the Wings* is unusual in the Coward canon for the depth, directness and intensity of its feeling. At the finale, the old troupers display the resilience and hopefulness Coward associated with performing.”

Source: *Coward the Playwright*.
John Lahr. Methuen Drama, 1982

Denville Hall

Denville Hall is an historic building in Northwood, which is used as a retirement home for professional actors, actresses and other theatrical professions. Though actors have priority, the home is available to other people in the entertainment industry (including the circus), such as agents and dancers, and their spouses over the age of 70, and offers residential, nursing, convalescent, dementia and palliative care. Residents can stay on a long-term or short-term basis, and physiotherapy is provided.

Many actors and actresses, mostly British, have spent their retirement years there, including Rose Hill, Carmen Silvera, Dulcie Gray, Daphne Oxenford, John Woodnutt, Brenda Cowling, Maurice Denham, Peggy Mount, Doris Hare, Pat Coombs, Mark Kingston, Robert Harris, Arnold Ridley, Wanda Rotha, Margot Boyd, Geoffrey Toone, Eileen O'Casey (Seán O'Casey's wife and a former actress), Ronnie Stevens, Edgar Wreford, Douglas Byng and the world's longest serving understudy, Nancy Seabrooke of *The Mousetrap*.

Letter to Proscenium from Denville Hall Chair of Trustees, February 2016

Dear Mr Pearson,

Thank you so very much on behalf of all of us at Denville Hall for your generous and thoughtful donation.

Noel Coward was indeed not only aware of us but deeply involved, as President of the Actors' Charitable Trust, which until 2012 when we split off each to pursue our different remits, was the umbrella organisation that used to administer us. *Waiting in the Wings* is about Denville Hall, it is what inspired the play.

So your donation is even more special than you might have imagined, and means a lot to us.

With many thanks,

Lalla Ward

(Chairman of Trustees, Denville Hall)

The Merry Wives of Windsor

William Shakespeare

Proscenium commemorates the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare by presenting his most joyously farcical play.

Mrs Ford and Mrs Page set out to teach suspicious husbands and errant offspring a lesson whilst tricking Sir John Falstaff, who aims to seduce them for profit. Masques, mockery and mayhem reign, as the Bard of Avon flexes his comedic muscles.

Directed by Shirley Wootten

15th to 18th June 2016

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 250 615

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk