

The Importance of Happiness: Noel Coward and the Actors Orphanage

By Elliot James

In April of 1934, the most successful living playwright, Noel Coward, became the President of the Actors Orphanage and he remained in the position for twenty-two years. Only his exile from England, necessary to afford any kind of comfortable retirement after post-war income taxes, forced him to resign from the post. How did Noel come to be the President in the first place? Why did he want to? How significant was the role in his life? This is one of the few areas of his famed life that hasn't been significantly analysed in any way. All of the "Orphans", (many had at-least one parent alive), that I have spoken to have the same air of warm nostalgia when I mention Noel. Susannah Slater recalled: "*He was wonderful, he really did turn that place around and we're all very grateful to him.*" It wasn't an easy institution to take responsibility for; a constant influx of abandoned children, staff issues, discipline, fundraising, building maintenance and, as Noel always maintained was most important, the children's happiness.

The Actors Orphanage Fund had been started by Kittie Carson in 1896, donating money to send children to various Orphanages; all the while saving money in the hope that one-day they could build their own. Kittie was the wife of the Editor of The Stage newspaper, Charles Lionel Carson, and she had already founded, in 1891, the Theatrical Ladies Guild, which provided clothing to out of work Actresses. (The committee meetings included sewing bees to make some of the clothing). Kittie now tackled a perennial problem in the theatrical profession of illegitimate and unwanted children. Even if they were wanted it was often the case that a jobbing Actress, living life on tour, couldn't cope with a child. This was also a time of some social stigma, regarding a child born out of wedlock. Some kept their babies and *did* take them on the road to repertory Theatres, making them up beds in the drawers of various dingy digs up and down the country. Trying to stop them bawling in the dusty dressing rooms of ancient Theatres. It wasn't ideal or easy.

There was always a sheen of glamour to Kittie's enterprise; early supporters included George Bernard Shaw and Ellen Terry. AGM's were held at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. The Chairwoman, Mrs. Cecil Raleigh would write some 250 novels as Effie Adelaide Rowlands and later as Madame Albanesi. Some of these novels clearly based on her experiences of the fund, such as *The Charity Girl* in 1900. The first President was Sir Henry Irving, *the* leading Actor of the day. He had received his knighthood the year before, the first Actor to do so and his final acceptance into the higher echelons of society. He also acquired the patronage of Queen Alexandra, the Princess of Wales and the Princess Royal.

In 1899 Sir Henry held the first fundraiser, The Actors Cricket Match, a forebear to all future fundraisers such as the Theatrical Garden Parties and events at the

London Palladium. Sir Henry died and in 1905 Cyril Maude would take over, also a famed Actor-Manager of the era, and, finally, in 1906 they purchased 32 and 34 Moreland Road in Croydon. Their own orphanage, with a house for girls and a house for boys, and a very tall wall between the gardens so the genders would *never* cross. Segregation, even between siblings existed. (The wall was knocked down in 1911 so that *some* degree of mixing could occur). A Mr. Ansell was made Manager and the children attended local schools and even went on occasional Theatre or Music Hall trips. The same year saw the first annual Theatrical Garden Party in Regents Park. Cyril Maude and his famous friends starting the tradition of selling autographs and engaging with the public to raise funds for the coming year. Ellen Terry, Irene Vanbrugh, Pauline Chase and Gerald du Maurier were just some of the major theatrical stars on hand.

1914 saw Sir Gerald du Maurier become President, his daughter, Daphne du Maurier, a regular volunteer to teach English classes. They moved to bigger premises, (a country house dating from 1628), at Langley Hall, near Slough. It was by now home to about sixty students per year, roughly thirty girls and thirty boys. Football pitches, a tennis court and a cricket field filled the grounds. Records from 1914 to 1934 are largely missing but by all accounts Langley itself was a tough and somewhat unpleasant institution during these years. Hard discipline, strict regimes, segregation and cold baths but with the occasional theatre trip and a staging of their own pantomime each Christmas.

When Sir Gerald died in the April of 1934, Noel Coward became President and quickly asserted authority and change. It's clear from committee meeting minutes and transcripts that the Orphanages affairs had been badly handled. Noel donated five hundred pounds up front and with his loyal secretary, Lorne Lorraine, inspected the entire premises. Noel said in an interview with the Times of Ceylon in 1935: "*I am the darned President of the show, you know – a position thrust upon me after Gerald du Maurier died.*" Noel was the most famous committee member and a natural choice, but, as he was more conscientious and hands on in the role, it does seem that he both inherited the Presidency *and* felt a sense of responsibility and compassion. Noel was acutely aware all through his life that he had his Mother to thank for much of his, at-least early, success. She was the driving force and close confidant that made him work on his craft and feel secure and confidant and loved. The Orphanage children, all too obviously, lacked that.

Aged thirty-four, Noel was still very much in his hey day. He had already been on the committee for a while and was active and vocal in how things should be run, Noel would recall how a famous Actor gave an impassioned speech at one meeting in defense of a former administrators dismissal. Noel had backed the dismissal but the person in question had apparently, "*devoted thirty years to the good of the children and this was a disgrace*". Noel replied that the person in question had been paid very well *and* unfortunately handled all the funds a "*trifle whimsically*". He asked the man's defendant if he even knew were the Orphanage was or if he'd ever visited. He conceded that he didn't and that he hadn't. Next, Noel's lawyer produced documents clearly showing how the finances had been miss-managed for years and how the administration had been so lax that many

people around the table might be liable to criminal prosecution. The result of this bravura performance, (as recalled by Noel in his sadly unfinished third volume of autobiography, *Past Conditional*, circa 1965), was that he was *feverishly* elected President for an initial five years! We might assume that Noel crafted the retelling for dramatic entertainment except that documents from the time seem to validate his account.

The committee meetings over the years, Noel would hate. Often making jokes *and* including versions of them in his work. One thinks of the squabbling, egocentric and easily distracted Actors trying to hold a meeting in *Star Chamber*, the almost unused play from his *Tonight at 8:30* cycle of 1936. Or the unseen committee of Actors that run "The Wings", a retirement home for elderly Actresses, in *Waiting in the Wings*, 1960. Safely retired at this point from the committee, Noel seems to put his own philosophy down about handling committee meetings via Miss Archie, the Manager of the Wings, as she says to a colleague:

Listen, old girl – a committee's something you've got to stand up to, and, what's more, they're grateful to you for it in the long run. They don't know what they're talking about half the time anyhow. You know what Actors and Actresses are like on a committee? Always getting over enthusiastic over inessentials and going off at tangents.

In *Past Conditional* Noel said: "As President of the Actors Orphanage I incurred much criticism for cutting them (meetings) down to a minimum" and how the meetings were "baleful opportunities for these egos to puff themselves up and waste their own time and everybody else's," and "Members present welcome a chance to show off which their wives deny them at home." At-least it gave him some material. Noel of course knew Actors inside out. A strong Director (or President) was certainly what was needed, especially in light of how things had been run and how ignorant the committee had become of day-to-day life at the Orphanage.

During Noel's first months as President he would visit Langley Hall on a semi regular basis, making the children's happiness his priority. Under him, Langley became fully co-educational, cold baths were ended, food was improved, rooms were decorated, the tennis court was resurfaced and the boy's dorm was given single beds to replace the bunks. On visits he would often bring famous friends like Mary Pickford or Ivor Novello, hand out Mars Bars and play the piano.

Some deep-rooted problems did exist however and took time to resolve. A report was published in 1936, called: *Irregularities and Illegalities During The Secretarship of Mr. A.J. Austin*. It's revealed that the Headmaster, Mr. Austin, was often drunk, greatly over used corporal punishment and expected other staff members to do the same. On one occasion he tied a boys wrists to his legs at night because he *thought* he was masturbating. In short, he systematically persecuted the children. The report reads: "Mr. Austin is undoubtedly unbalanced, with a tendency to ego-mania." Sadly there had been seven years of complaints against him but the pre Coward committee were less involved, less

aware and nothing changed. Mr. Mowforth was made the new Head but Mr. Austin wasn't done yet. He persuaded the older boys to write several letters saying how awful Mr. Mowforth was *and* to trash his classroom. The new Coward led committee however, saw through this immediately.

The transcripts of a committee meeting from January 1936 are illuminating and one has to note how some exchanges of dialogue could be from one of Noel's plays. Noel recalls: "*I made a visit to the Orphanage where Mr. Austin was good and drunk when we arrived.*" He is then told that he was never *officially* made President, to which he replies: "*It doesn't point to brilliant administration.*" A Mrs. Charlot tries to explain the previous administration: "*Gerald was its Czar, and Austin its dictator.*" And then adds, "*You are President, in my heart.*" Noel: "*Your heart has nothing to do with it.*" Someone else says: "*Your name is on the stationary as President.*" It's then revealed that only half the children are from hard up theatrical backgrounds and that the other half are merely paying boarders!

Noel brought in the lawyers and had the entire organization straightened out. A Reverend Ruegg and Miss King now replaced Mr. Mowforth, creating a clean slate for all. The committee would now have more of an actual presence. Noel continued to visit and when he couldn't visit himself, his loyal, beloved secretary, Lorne Lorraine would be there, speaking with the children and asking them about school, family and what they wanted to do when they grew up. Everyone loved Lorne, a posh lady with a kind face and immaculate dress. *All* of her findings were reported straight back to Noel, she was the ultimate conduit.

In June of 1937 *The Stage* newspaper published the transcript of their AGM held on the stage of Wyndham's Theatre. It was a quick, formal meeting, noting that "*everything possible has been done to make the children happy and to see to their health*". The income and accounts were in good order and more money was being spent on staff salaries, food and accommodation. From the transcripts we glean Noel's authority and effect. At one point, in a way that only Noel could get away with, he proposes and, as President, seconds a vote to thank himself for chairing the meeting.

At Christmas he would send each child an envelope containing five shillings, (a lot of money to a child in the '30's). They had to stay at the Orphanage for Christmas day, as some had no parents or relatives to take them and they wanted to keep the orphanage *family* together. Pillow fights were allowed on Christmas morning and presents were provided for those that didn't have any. The Gymnasium was transformed as usual into the Bijou Theatre and a pantomime (*Dick Whittington, Cinderella, Robinson Crusoe*), was staged with all the children involved. Now though, A West End professional, Peter Jackson, was brought in to produce and direct and they attracted full houses from the local community. They also twice performed, (*Robinson Crusoe* in 1937 and *Cinderella* in 1938), three matinees at the Gaiety Theatre in the West End. Things really had changed.

Greater change still came in 1938 when they moved to a much grander property at Silverlands in Chertsey, Surrey. Neo Georgian in design, it was a twenty-seven

room mansion. High ceilings, a beautiful wood paneled entrance hall with a chandelier, a large dining hall with a wonderful skylight. Surrounded by fields and woodland. The children couldn't believe it and there was little trauma in the move for them and much excitement. (Silverlands had been built in 1814 as a country house by local brewer Robert Porter and in around 1820 it became the home of Vice Admiral Sir Frederick Hotham.) Noel introduced uniforms and arranged trips for the students to meet the lord mayor. The annual cricket match continued, with the children playing a team of professional Actors. (Noel always hosting rather than playing).

The Theatrical Garden Party was now held at the Battersea Pleasure Gardens, and was often opened by the Duke and Duchess of Kent. Here fair games, dances, gymnastic displays (by the children), fashion parades, make up tents and auctions would be set up to entertain the vast crowds and encourage donations. Noel, (in morning suit and top hat), would walk around, signing autographs, engaging with the children and running the auctions (along with other charismatic types over the years such as Peter Ustinov or Robert Morley). Every star had to do "a turn", such as Tommy Cooper performing his magic tricks. Stars also put their names to recipes in a book called, "*Our Favourite Dishes*", many of them never having cooked in their lives. All in the effort to make enough money to keep the Orphanage going for another year.

The years when they were rained out, always a distinct possibility during an English summer, Noel would set up shop in a tent and charge 3 shillings for people to enter and hear him sing. This proved ridiculously popular and would give him the confidence to consider Marlene Dietrich's suggestion of performing cabaret, using the same faithful pianist, Norman Hackforth. That was a few years off yet though, here we were at the end of the 1930's with War imminent. Yet for the children, their lives had greatly improved and given their life circumstances they were, mostly, happy. The younger children knowing no different but the older ones becoming gradually aware that their orphanage was a bit special.

When the War came and the world was thrown into chaos and uncertainty, Noel, despite busily and frustratingly trying to find a role in the War, very quickly started making plans for the children to be evacuated for the duration. Even with his canvassing for the war effort in America and Australia, his post as a spy in Paris, his (some of his best) writing of plays (*Blithe Spirit*), songs (*London Pride*) and soon the screenplay for *In Which We Serve*, Noel always found time to take care of people. Whether it was moving his Mother and Auntie Vida to a safer place or indeed handling the not easy task of evacuating a whole Orphanage. Evacuated Orphanages or Schools would often see the students separated and dotted all over but Noel insisted that the fifty-four students under the age of sixteen would stay together.

In September 1940 the Blitz was just beginning, fifty-seven consecutive nights of the Luftwaffe bombing, primarily, London but many other cities too. A million homes would be destroyed and 40,000 people killed. Silverlands was barely outside London and certainly in the danger zone. My Grandmother, Joan Dean, lived in East London, near the Thames, and was seven and eight during the Blitz.

She said that she never thought anything really bad would happen because her parents were in the shelter with them. One wonders how then the Orphanage children felt. Even though Silverlands was slightly west of the most intense bombing, they could certainly hear and see the carnage and during the air raids would move down to the cellars. (Eventually all the beds were simply taken down there).

Noel and (always, lest we forget), his committee, turned the nightmare into a dream. The children were told, and it was announced in the press, that they were to be evacuated to Hollywood. It was beyond belief, the stuff of movies. This also meant no rationing! An Evening Standard article, photo shoot and film footage show the children's utter joy at this magical opportunity. Behind the scenes Noel was frantically trying to get things organized and help the staff deal with copious amounts of red tape. The dreaded committee meetings were long and arduous "*by the fact that all of us, being Actors and highly articulate, talked at once*", as Noel recalled in his second autobiography, *Future Indefinite*.

A *Hollywood* committee was set up under the aegis of Dame May Whitty. There had been a long disagreement about whether to go to the *sunshine and oranges* of Hollywood or to New York where they already had a wonderful offer of accommodation from the Edwin Gould Foundation. In Los Angeles Noel had a meeting with the Ambassador there to discuss possibilities and in a letter of 6 September 1940, to Lorne, Noel said that the committee were "*Up in arms*" over his having done this. "*The fussing and fuming going on over the Orphanage was something terrible.*" Dame May Whitty was being driven mad by disagreeing members as well as good, agreed on ideas then being thwarted by the Lawyers. Cedric Hardwicke, according to Noel, was one of "*the few sensible ones*" and then adds, "*surprisingly.*" Noel stepped in as usual and put Fanny Holtzmann in charge. Her no nonsense manner cut through the bureaucracy in a flash and in the end they moved to the Edwin Gould Foundation in the Bronx, New York City and studied at local schools. (The Bronx was also where Noel would place his Mother and Aunt). One of the biggest headaches was that so many of the children had one parent alive somewhere, or even two! Therefore permission had to be sought and quickly.

The children saw it all as an incredibly exciting adventure, tinged with sorrow and fear at having no idea when they would see Silverlands or any known relatives again. Two busses to London, a train to Glasgow and the long sea voyage to Canada, followed by a train journey from Montreal to New York. The children had sailed across the Atlantic aboard the *Empress of Australia*. After some delay, due to engine trouble, they had left late. This was lucky as the original convoy they were due to join included the *City Of Benares*, which was torpedoed and rapidly sunk. The *Empress* had a protective convoy for a few days and there had been a little gunfire at one point but they had a relatively safe passage. It was only in Canada that the children were told that they were going to New York and not Hollywood, one suspects that this didn't dim their excitement *too* much.

Meanwhile Silverlands would become a training facility for Nurses and air raid shelters were fitted in the gardens. In New York the children would see a lot less of Noel as he was so busy filming *In Which We Serve* and then touring in plays and troop concerts all over the world. Not to mention countless hospital visits to wounded soldiers. To make the enterprise work, each child was sponsored by one of Noel's famous friends: Mary Pickford, David Niven, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, Cary Grant or Marlene Dietrich for example. These stars often taking the duty, or "*favour to Noel*" quite seriously. Mary Pickford sent a chatty letter and pen to her "child", Dan Taylor. Somehow Noel, (with Lorne's constant help), had made the time to persuade all of these people to perform this duty.

The Gould Foundation was, according to Noel: "*Wonderful to the children and I suspect have spoiled them forever.*" They were called "*Limey's*" a bit and some of the boys realised that short trousers beckoned the call; "*Where's the other half of your pants?*" But make no mistake life seemed suddenly miraculous. The accommodation was divided into six roomy "cottages", had a very relaxed atmosphere, a swimming pool and tennis court. They discovered Hot Dogs, Popcorn, Coca-Cola, Halloween and Thanksgiving. They attended the Christopher Columbus High School, where their English accents were mocked a little but they were accepted. They joined the Church in Pelham and the Scouts or Guides, visited Central Park and Broadway. On one memorable occasion, Charlie Chaplin visited and took them to a screening of *The Great Dictator*. For the holidays they were placed with families from the Church and the long summer breaks were spent at summer camps, some working as Councilors and making a little money.

A big event was the staging of a musical revue, *Gratefully Yours*, for friends and supporters, at Pelham High School and then for the children of the Lower East Side at the Henry Street Playhouse. The Pearl Harbor attack of December 1941 shocked America to the core and suddenly the children were to perform *Gratefully Yours* at the Imperial Theatre on West 45th Street! Gertrude Lawrence and Constance Collier, (no doubt roped in by Noel), performed the opening act. Despite the inevitable fluff and missed cue, the audience was rapturous and the proceeds went to the British/American ambulance corp and the theatre wing of the war service.

Jimmy Burke, aged nine, recalls how they suddenly had to practice air raids with their hands over their heads in the corridors. He too found America more relaxed, the school was fully co-educational, there was less punishment, better food and the classes were okay, you just had to adjust to history being taught from America's perspective!

By the War's end in 1945 many of the children were growing up and would stay in America to pursue their lives. The others returned to England and the younger ones came back to Silverlands. Noel brought Gertrude Lawrence to visit the children as they resettled. The committee by now was well and truly made up of Noel's good friends; a very young Richard Attenborough and Sheila Sim, Adrienne Allen, Joyce Carey, Clemence Dane, Lorn Lorraine of course and Stanley Holloway, to name some. In time the rather too strict Headmaster, Commander

Aggitter and his wife would be dismissed; word of bullying and perhaps too much corporal punishment, (again), was reaching Noel and the committee.

In 1946 two sisters had come to the Orphanage, Susannah, aged 7, and Judy, aged 3, (Judy Staber published an excellent book of her experiences in 2010, called *Silverlands*). The two girls had a rather successful Mother, the Actress Joan White, who had a nice home in London. She took in lodgers, including the Actress Joan Sims, but felt that as an, often touring, Actress, she couldn't care for her daughters there. Susannah and Judy remember *Silverlands* as their home and I think this is vital in understanding the importance of the Orphanage.

Young children would be dropped at the gates and left, this experience alone was damaging to the psyche. Norma Gumley would sit on the front step every visiting Sunday, waiting for a mother that would never come. Then, all too often, several years later, they would be plucked from the Orphanage just as suddenly as they had arrived, their parent now in a position to and/or wanting to support them. The intervening years though had provided some sense of home. Yes the food was basic, yes there were naughty children, yes they had to go Church every Sunday and write letters to relatives telling them how wonderful *Silverlands* was and yes, on occasion, a bad staff member would appear... but their President, Mister Coward, they knew would help, would change things. Indeed, in retrospect, he seems to have fired a heck of a lot of people.

Judy wrote that as very young children they had no idea who "*Noel Coward*" was, "*All I knew was that from time to time this nicely dressed, posh sounding man came to see us. He would come upon us outside, playing hide-and-peek in and around the air-raid shelters and would call out, 'Hello boys and girls. Having a jolly time are you?'*" Liz Eastham, (also arrived in 1946), thinks that Noel appreciated the innocent affection the children showed him *because* they didn't know that he was so famous. He hadn't, after all, been anonymous since at least 1925. Susannah recall him as, "*debonair, smelling nice, very tall, with beautiful hands, elegant, suave, immaculately dressed, funny and always very kind.*"

Many I've spoken to have some wonderful memories; Susannah, a natural performer, was often selected for special occasions; presenting the Queen with flowers in 1949. The following year filmed for a BBC feature on the Orphanage for a show called "*In Town Tonight*", saying, "*Here's a carrot for Rudolph!*" to a shaggy horse with a wagon behind it, (and Brian Johnston dressed as Father Christmas). Then in 1952 she gave flowers to Noel and Mary Martin before they performed cabaret at the Café du Paris, (in aid of the Orphanage).

Liz was taken to stay at Richard Attenborough and Sheila Sims' house in Richmond the night before the Queen's coronation and was surprised and in awe that a maid served breakfast. She also spent a summer staying in the loft at Actress, Joyce Carey's house and remembers Noel bringing them all strawberries and cream during the Wimbledon season. Her younger sister, Caroline, has memories of Noel and Marlene Dietrich taking her hands and walking her around the gardens. "*He was like a Daddy, very nice, so sweet to me.*" In 1948 Caroline, aged just five, was taken to stay at Noel's London home, for she was to join him at

a premiere the next day and had to practice her curtsy and prepare to meet the Queen Mother, (Then known simply as the Queen of course). Caroline remembers going over and over the curtsy, and then sitting in a big leather chair with Noel and a lady sat opposite, (possibly Lorne?), and then being chatted to as she was tucked into bed.

The next day was like a fairytale; little Caroline had a grand breakfast and was walked by Noel to his posh car and, sat in the back, they drove through crowds of people. There was a red carpet and much excitement. Noel leaning down, said: "*Don't forget your curtsy.*" Caroline had to hand the flowers to the Queen, say, "*with love your majesty*" and do *the curtsy*. She handed the flowers, spoke her line perfectly, went to curtsy and... fell over. One imagines much more amusement than crossness. All this time later Caroline said, "*Noel did more for me in that one weekend than my Daddy ever did.*"

When I spoke to Michael Attenborough, he recalled his parents taking him to visit the Orphanage in the 1950's and was at first embarrassed, as he was acutely aware of his family's wealth as they pulled up in a Bentley, and feared the hatred of the children. He was soon assuaged however as they were always thrilled to see his Mother and Father, and him too.

Silverlands was still an Orphanage of course and away from the glamorous episodes life was and had to be a routine of school and discipline. Corporal punishment was a part of life. A lighter punishment was the defaulters table. This is where you sat at meals if you'd been naughty and all you were given was bread and water. Not that the regular meals were *haute cuisine*, cooking for sixty children day in day out led to a fair bit of lumpy porridge or even, on occasion, tripe. Judy and Susannah both recall putting this into their knicker pockets for a later disposal.

Judy, Liz and Caroline would stay at Silverlands for eleven or twelve years but Susannah had moved to 27 Rutland Gate in 1950. This was a relatively short-lived hostel in central London for the older children to be able to take vocational classes. The committee meetings all took place here and Susannah recalls how Noel, once he knew that she could and wanted to dance, encouraged her to apply to the Royal Ballet. She didn't get in due to a weak ankle but then Noel suggested Musical Theatre and she was accepted at Arts Educational. Her career began. In time she would work at Frinton Rep, Salisbury Rep, do a television adaptation of *Toad of Toad Hall*, sing as an Overtiney on the radio and dance as a Tiller Girl. After her move to Canada and beyond, (to be with and even work with her Actress mother), Noel stayed in touch for many years, often by telegram. The Actors Orphanage never encouraged a Theatrical career by any means, almost as a point of policy, but if a child had a genuine interest *and* talent it seems that Noel was a hundred percent supportive.

Rutland Gate was run by a former child of Langley, Duncan Rider and his wife. Susannah recalls how; "*I was very privileged, we saw more of Noel and the others*" and how, "*Mrs. Rider was like a Mother to me. She was wonderful.*" The children here were largely around eighteen years of age and Susannah was barely eleven,

so she felt a little bullied by the older ones but not badly. She remembers visits from Noel and the committee vividly; *"before he arrived we'd be cleaning the stairs, polishing the metalwork."* Susannah may have been a bit wild at Silverlands, (according to her sister Judy), but here, allowed to dance and train, she got very good reports. Although she certainly had some fun with the freedom that Rutland Gate allowed.

Back at Silverlands in 1949, after Commander Aggitter had been let go a Mr. and Mrs. Savage-Bailey were installed as Heads, by all accounts very nice and kind people, but perhaps too nice. Noel writes in his Diary: *"He is obviously a kind man but, I fear, on the weak side. The children were in wild spirits and I was cheered to see they were not looking down-trodden and dismal."* He adds interestingly; *"I had a talk with Savage-Bailey about sex and told him not to get too fussed because all children had sex curiosity and too much emphasis on its sinfulness would only make it more attractive, and that as long as he kept it with-in bounds he could close an eye discreetly every now and then. I am sure this was good advice although perhaps not strictly conventional."* This does demonstrate that Noel really thought about what was going on at the Orphanage and how to handle all types of situation. Boys and girls played *Doctors and Nurses* and this was hardly cause for a severe punishment.

Unfortunately, Noel had to let the Savage-Baileys go for being too *soft*. He had written in his diary of April 14th, 1950: *"Long Orphanage meeting. Children behaving very badly, insulting everyone and stealing left and right. Went over their menus and school reports. Interviewed Mr Savage-Bailey, who stubbornly believes that sweet reason, kindness and long moral explanations is the right way to handle a lot of illiterate young hooligans of very mixed parentage. It is becoming increasingly clear that his theory is not practicable. He is a kind little man, but like so many idealists, he is a cracking fool. The dear children obviously share my opinion and run rings around him."*

So it was that a Mr. Gordon came in, far too much the antithesis of Mr. Savage-Bailey. It must have been a case of a good interview masking the true character of the man. Physical and emotional damage was, unfortunately, suffered. Mr. David Victor Gordon would beat the last child back from games, take pocket money away, make the smaller children walk up and down naked after bath time and even held Judy's foot to bonfire embers, burning it enough to leave a scar. Judy was still only seven years old and despite Susannah leaving her young sister her teddy bear, it was no compensation and she felt abandoned again, living in fear of Mr. Gordon and another bully, Miss Berry.

One night, one of the boys, Brian Terries, was approached in his bed by Mr. Gordon. Earlier that day Brian had come to the assistance of one of the smaller boys being attacked by Mr. Gordon. Also, in an earlier incident Brian had been sure to be the last one back from games so that a very young Liz or Judy would not be beaten. Now, Brian refusing late night gifts as a form of bribery, Mr. Gordon was punching him in his bed. Brian, his life becoming a living hell, punched back as hard as he could and ran outside to the Gardeners cottage, confiding everything to Mr. and Mrs. Hazell. Noel was told, Mr. Gordon was gone.

(His ally Miss Berry soon left too under a cloud of complicity). Also around this time one of the local girls schools, Stepgates, had reports of abuse. The children were immediately switched to another School.

Thankfully, many staff members were positively adored, such as the long time Matron, Matey Irving or the new General Secretary, Patrick Waddington. A RADA graduate with a large moustache and theatrical manner. his dogs, George and Malcolm, were a firm favourite with the children. (Patrick did, however, give the committee grief over their refusal to let him have time off. He had hoped to revive his "*old Colonel*" character in the odd film offer). The final Heads Alastair Angus Fraser and Miss Rennie, then David and Kirsten Slater, were *utterly* adored.

Of-course some of the *children* could be a problem. Creeping out at night, stealing, pranks... Yet we must remember that most of the children had at-least one parent alive, so the sense of abandonment could be profound and hard for a child to fathom. And with the best will in the world, a lovely staff member or a visit from Marlene Dietrich was never going to replace a parent. Susannah and Judy remember getting on the bus one day and pretending that the driver was their Father, "*ah, there you are!*" there'd say. So there were inevitably behavioral problems. Most was merely child's play; on one occasion a female staff members wig was stolen from her rooms and placed on the head of Sir Gerald Du Maurier's bust in the hall way.

A more serious issue would be bullying and Peter (Ken) Collinson was guilty of it. Many of the other children feared him, he was causing merry hell and expulsion was on the cards. Noel appeared and took Peter for a walk around the grounds. They sat on a bench and Noel, (according to his longtime secretary, Cole Lesley's excellent biography, *The Life of Noel Coward*), said: "*Now look here, nobody knows better than I what it is to be naughty, but surely always being the worst boy in the school must become boring. You are intelligent, why don't you try being the best boy for a change? Give it a trial. I have always believed in bribery; if you will try it for a month I will give you ten shillings.*" Apparently it worked, at-least for a while.

Noel stuck by Peter, he knew that he was troubled and wanted to help. He even became his Godfather and helped him get connected when he wanted to become a Film Director. Noel tried to find the reason for his behaviour, writing in his diary: "*He is being torn to pieces by his divorced parents. He is in an emotional turmoil. I promised that I would look after him and be his friend. I honestly don't think he will transgress again. Actually he practically broke my heart. I may be over-sentimental but a sensitive little boy bereft of all personal affection is to me one of the most pathetic things in the world.*" Fast-forward many years and there was Peter directing Noel in *The Italian Job*. Although it might be noted that Ken was known to be a slight bully as a Director and he never completely changed his ways at the Orphanage... but at-least someone demonstratively cared about him.

It was never easy to keep the Orphanage going, money was always an issue. Noel again was pro active. His Diary of 22nd September, 1949 reads: "*Stormy Actor's*

Orphanage meeting when I flew at everyone, myself included, and I think galvanized them into some sort of awareness of their responsibilities.” In 1950 the Theatrical Garden party wasn't making much or any real profit and so he changed the title to the *Theatre and Film Carnival* and held it over two days instead of the usual one. It was not a success, partly due to the sponsor, The Daily Mail, doing no publicity. Even in the circumstance Noel did his best, his diary records: “*Second day of the Theatre and Film Balls-up. Worked hard from 2 p.m. until 10 p.m. Signed thousands of autographs, sang hundreds of songs, handsomely supported by my dear ones.*”

Next, at the suggestion of Charles Russell and Lance Hamilton, a fundraiser show would be held at the London Palladium. *Night of a Hundred Stars*, a midnight matinee, included Noel and Marlene singing “*Land, Sea and Air*” and such stars as Danny Kaye and Errol Flynn. These shows would feature tantalizing novelty acts over the coming years, such as the rather middle aged Laurence Olivier, John Mills and John Gielgud singing “*Three Juvenile Delinquents*”, or Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster singing “*Maybe it's Because I'm a Londoner*” in slightly off Cockney accents. The older children were there to sell the programs and it was a huge success making much more money than the Garden Parties. Ten thousand pounds in that first year alone. Although it was a huge headache to organise and Noel's ever trusted ally, Richard Attenborough, was asked to produce.

Noel's cunning use of his fame is essentially what kept the orphanage going and on his visits to Silverlands he would occasionally bring a photographer. On one such occasion one of the boys, Jon Morris, was asked to put his pajamas on over his clothes, in the middle of the day, and hop into bed while Noel and Marlene Dietrich chatted with him for a *naturalistic* photograph. Jon remembered their cigarettes as well as their very similar smelling colognes.

It's possible for a naïve cynic to say that Noel was doing all this for self-publicity as a *good egg*, or even to garner a knighthood. None of the Orphans I've spoken with hold any truck with this and all evidence points to nothing but genuine motive. For twenty two years Noel raised money, (that's what the publicity was for), kept informed of policies and procedures, attended meetings, visited the children at-least a few times a year, fired those that needed firing and supported the children in all kinds of ways. From simply playing the piano and making them laugh, to being a sympathetic ear to one of the older boys coming to terms with his sexuality, to encouraging and supporting Susannah Slater's career. I asked Susannah if they saw Noel in any way as a Father Figure, she said that he was more like “*a benevolent angel.*”

As the 1950's went on Noel was reevaluating his life. More time was spent in America and he was ready to retire as President but: “*Much as I would like to resign, I cannot do so until the whole thing is properly solvent.*” He felt genuinely responsible. After 1951 the *Night of a Hundred Stars* shows would begin to solve the financial problems and then, in 1956, Noel had decided to become a tax exile. Despite his huge success, he was low on funds and post war income tax was crippling. Much was sacrificed; a drubbing in the press, he'd have to sell his London and Kent homes *and* relinquish his Presidency of the Orphanage.

Richard Attenborough (still only thirty-three) was asked to take the role and Lorne had written to him: *"You'll say you're too young to be President – Noel was only thirty four and hadn't a clue!"* Yet Richard didn't feel prestigious enough so Sir Laurence Olivier became the new President. He was, perhaps like Gerald du Maurier before, just a name though as it was to be Richard who, if anything, would be even more hands on than Noel. Noel created the role of Chairman for Richard, he knew that he was shrewd and smart and incredibly capable and caring. ("Dickie" only took the President title when Sir Lawrence died in 1989.)

Richard and Noel had a close bond, (Ever since Richard's career launch in *In Which We Serve*), and Richard promised Noel that he would stay until he *"fell off his twig"*, which he did. After Richard's death in 2014 it was decided to leave the chair empty, as he was irreplaceable. Richard had seen Noel as a Mentor and after Noel's death he would often say, *"When in doubt, do what Noel would have done."* Noel had helped Richard come to terms with his fame by showing him how to put it to good use through the Orphanage. Richard was even younger than Noel when he became *known*. He remembered auditioning for Noel at Denham Studios in 1941 and having his nerves quickly quelled by Noel's thoughtfulness to say: *"You won't know me – I'm Noel Coward. You, of course, are Richard Attenborough."* We should also note that Richard's already strong grounding in social responsibility and "giving back" came from his parents who had taken in two Jewish-German girls during the War. They taught him that we are all our brothers' keeper.

During Noel's last years, Michael Attenborough recalled the genuine affection between Noel and his Father. Richard, now a University Chancellor, and sickened by the UK's lack of honours for the Master, made sure Noel received an honorary doctorate from the University of Sussex. He also kept an eye on him, hosted the midnight matinee celebration for Noel's seventieth birthday and would forever defend him as a man. When Noel went out of fashion after the War and was accused by some of being shallow and without substance, Richard knew first hand that the opposite was true. (Later Richard, would cringe at his own brand of personal insult, that of being a "Luvvie". In truth he simply believed that the arts were vital and wore his heart on his sleeve. Who else in society does this? Politicians?) Towards the end of his long, varied life, Richard said of Noel, *"he was probably the kindest, most generous person I have ever encountered."*

Back in 1958 with dwindling numbers, (due partly to the welfare state), and roof repairs needed... Silverlands was closed. Judy remembers the sadness she felt watching the removal men emptying the building. The Actors Charitable Trust was born and donated money instead. As Richard said: *"it is hoped that we may in the future be able to subsidize some needy children in their own homes and to save families from being split up. This is surely a better way of spending money than upon roof repairs!"* The twenty-nine children left were placed back with a relative and given financial support or put into private schools or into the care of staff members Mr. and Mrs. Piller in two purchased houses in Watford. Richard gave the last students a rare treat in 1958 when they came to watch him filming

Danger Within on Chobham Common. They met the stars and had their photos taken. This was no fund-raiser, this was purely a gift to the children.

A 2000 reunion in Chertsey, arranged by Susannah Slater, reconnected many of the children. Mr. David Slater, the beloved last Headmaster, was on hand to host the occasion. Some of the children had forgiven their parents for the abandonment, some not. Then there were so many simple memories of the happy times. Going to the Pantomime at the Theatre Royal, Windsor or getting on the coach to see *Where The Rainbow Ends* in the West End, (a play, incidentally, that Noel had appeared in often as a boy, and about children longing for lost parents). Noel buying a television projector so that they could watch the Queen's coronation. Richard Attenborough and Sheila Sim taking them to Regents Park Zoo and then to their house in Richmond.

As for Noel, it's clear that the children carried him in their hearts all through their lives: "*He was the sweetest man, and really seemed to love us all*", said Liz Eastham. Judy Staber wrote that "*it was abundantly clear that he took a genuine interest in us*" and that "*we all registered with him as individuals.*" Noel's motives in the end seem pure and simple; take for example this short exchange between May and Cora in *Waiting in the Wings*, regarding the committee of Actors:

CORA: I know they get a lot of publicity out of it but even so I shouldn't think from their point of view it was worth all the effort.

MAY: It is always possible, my dear Cora, that just one or two of them might do it from sheer kindness of heart.

Noel had taken over from Gerald du Maurier in 1934, he was already extremely famous, rich and respected. Now he was questioning what else there was to life. If success was the goal then he might as well jump off a cliff, for he'd certainly hit the heights. He was maturing. Yes, the Orphanage gave him prestige and publicity but it also gave him the answer to a question that he would ask after every success; "*what now?*"

In some way the whole enterprise may also have been a way for Noel to have children in his life, (despite his many godchildren). In 1955 Noel wrote *The Importance of Happiness*, almost as a last word before he had to relinquish his Presidency. It's a short essay on the Orphanage and why it's important. It says of the children; "*None of them has a home in the accepted sense of the word and it is this that we try to give them. Somewhere safe and stable where birthdays and Christmases can be looked forward to with excitement and remembered with joy.*" After listing his duties as President he continues: "*But in my heart what I really mind about, what I have minded about since I became President in 1934, is the happiness of the children who come into the care of this charity.*"

At the reunion Lord Attenborough spoke of what The Actors Orphanage had meant to him and to Sheila and to Noel. They did what they did to demonstrate their own good fortune, to give back. Richard was clear that he inherited the attitude from Noel and was passing it on. He expressed passionately that when he was thanked for what he did for them, the children, assembled now in late

middle age and older, that it was he who should be thanking *them*; “*Love goes both ways and the love that you have shown to us, has brought us joy and reward beyond words.*”

Chronology:

- 1896: The Actors Orphanage Fund founded by Kittie Carson. Sir Henry Irving as first President.
- 1899: First fundraiser: The Actors Cricket Match. Precursor to the Theatrical Garden Parties.
- 1901: Royal patronage.
- 1905: The Actors Orphanage opens at 32 and 34 Moreland Road, Croydon.
- 1906: Cyril Maude as new President.
- 1914: Move to Langley Place, Langley, Bucks. Sir Gerald du Maurier elected President.
- 1934: Noel Coward elected President.
- 1936: Mr. Austin is replaced by Mr. Mowforth as Head, who is in turn replaced by Reverend Ruegg and a Miss King as Headmistress.
- 1938: Move to Silverlands, Chertsey.
- 1940: Evacuation to the Gould Institute, New York for the duration of the War.
- 1945: Return to Silverlands. Commander Aggitter as headmaster.
- 1949: The Savage-Bailey's as new Heads.
Richard Attenborough and Sheila Sim join the committee.
- 1950: Rutland Gate opens.
- 1951: The Savage-Bailey's replaced by David Victor Gordon and Miss Berry.
First *Night of a Hundred Stars* performed at the London Palladium.
- 1953: Patrick Waddington as Headmaster, then Alistair Angus Fraser.
- 1955: Mr. and Mrs. Slater put in charge.
- 1956: Noel Coward resigns as President, replaced by Sir Laurence Olivier.
- 1958: The Actors Orphanage closes and becomes TACT: The Actors Children's Trust. Sir Richard Attenborough as Chairman and President for fifty-eight years.
- 2016: The charity now exists as ACT and is based in Bloomsbury.

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