



A Level

# Drama and Theatre

*Brief Encounter* (Noël Coward, adapted by Emma Rice)

## About the play and original performance conditions

- The play revolves around an extramarital affair between Laura Jesson and Alec Harvey who meet at a train station tea room.
- It explores class differences, societal expectation, freedom of expression and attitudes towards women and marriage in late 1930s Britain.
- Emma Rice's adaptation contrasts reality and fantasy moments and utilises multimedia and a creative set to create an emotive, cinematic experience.
- The play was first performed at the Cinema Haymarket in London on 2 February 2008. The design created an immersive environment using projections and live music.

## Context

It reflects life in Britain in the 1930s:

### Economics

- 1930s Britain faced depression caused by the Wall Street Crash, the aftereffects of WWI and declining industries
- Growth in newer industries in the South and Midlands deepened the North–South divide.
- Poverty led to protests (e.g. the 1936 Jarrow March) and migration to cities.

### Women's rights and marriage

- Most women worked in traditional roles and often left employment after marriage due to the 'marriage bar'.
- Divorce was costly and socially stigmatised.
- Cultural works reflected feelings of duty, entrapment and inner conflict.

### Gay rights

- Homosexuality was illegal; partial decriminalisation came only in 1967. Noël Coward kept his sexuality private, paralleling themes of secrecy in his work.

### War

- Despite appeasement, Britain prepared for war with conscription and evacuation plans.
- Imminent conflict created a sense of urgency, influencing characters to act on their feelings.

## Characters

<b>Laura</b>	A middle-class wife and mother who becomes swept up in a passionate romance. Guilt forces her to end the affair and return to her husband.
<b>Alec</b>	A doctor and the object of Laura's passion. He openly admits his love for her but leaves for Johannesburg when the affair ends.
<b>Fred</b>	Laura's unemotional husband, representing societal expectations.
<b>Myrtle</b>	The tea room manager. She comments on the action and finds second-chance love with Albert.
<b>Albert</b>	A station worker who is flirtatious and openly admires Myrtle.
<b>Beryl</b>	The young station waitress. Bubbly, positive and full of romantic ideals, she embarks on a relationship with Stanley.
<b>Stanley</b>	A young station worker enamoured with Beryl. Together they represent the innocence of young love.
<b>Bill and Johnnie</b>	Soldiers who briefly appear in the tea room, reflecting the fleeting nature of wartime romance and the demanding tendencies of men in late 1930s Britain.
<b>Mary and Hermione</b>	Laura's acquaintances. Mary's appearance at the restaurant prompts Laura's decision to end the affair. Both Mary and Hermione represent middle-class attitudes to marriage.

## Live theatre

- How have your acting, directing and design ideas been influenced by live theatre you have seen?
- How can you adapt effective ideas to this play?

## Directing

- What type of acting style will be used and how can this be developed in rehearsal?
- How will you communicate the interaction between characters to the audience through proxemics, movement and positioning, and vocal and physical skills?

## Acting

Consider these things when approaching the text as an actor:

**Acting style** – Traditionally, this play is performed using a blend of theatrical styles, as is typical of Rice and Kneehigh's work. These range from physical theatre to actor-muso.

**Relationships** – Ensure you have a clear understanding of the relationships between characters. What are each character's motivations? Do they change during the play? When, why and how? How are relationships explored differently?

### Communicating to the audience:

- **Vocal** – e.g. pitch, tone, tempo, pause, volume, emphasis.
- **Physical** – e.g. facial expression, gesture, stance, posture, gait, pace, levels.
- **Interaction** – e.g. communicating meaning through character positioning, spatial relationships, proxemics, vocal choices, physical choices. Driven by motivation and reaction.

## Design

Consider these things when approaching the text as a designer:

**Concept** – What are your aims and intentions? What are the key themes you want to communicate? What is your production style and chosen time period? All of these decisions will impact the rest of your design.

**Performance space** – The four main stage styles are: proscenium arch, thrust, traverse, in the round. Each have their own advantages and things to think about when creating ideas for set. Think about the role of the audience; should they feel immersed, or as though they are observing from a distance?

**Set and props** – How will you create locations? What large pieces of set and furniture do you need? Think about the scale, style and colour.

**Lighting** – e.g. types of lanterns, position of lights, colour, intensity.

**Sound** – e.g. live or recorded, diegetic/non-diegetic, use of music including period and style, SFX, soundscape, intensity.

**Costume** – e.g. period, style, colour, material, fit, state.

**Hair & make up** – e.g. style, colour, impact of makeup.