

education

ROUNDABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY

Present Laughter Lecture Series

On January 16th, 2010, as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department interviewed Nicholas Martin, director of *Present Laughter*. A question & answer session with the audience followed.

Ted Sod: I have the distinct pleasure of having as our guest the director of today's production, Nicholas Martin. I'm really excited about this because I have long admired his work as a director and also he has the reputation of being one of the most generous people in show business.

Nicholas Martin: Ill-founded.

Ted Sod: Is it ok if I call you Nicky?

Nicholas Martin: Sure.

Ted Sod: Nicky, do you want to tell us a little bit about yourself? You were born in New York, yes?

Nicholas Martin: Brooklyn.

Ted Sod: And is Nicholas Martin your real name?

Nicholas Martin: No my real name is Joel Levinson. It's a really boring story or I'd tell it to you all.

Ted Sod: But you started your career as an actor?

Nicholas Martin: Yes.

Ted Sod: And when did you decide to become a director? Did you have an epiphany?

Nicholas Martin: I went to Bennington College to teach when I was in my early forties, and a great friend of mine, Sandy Dennis, said to me, "Oh, if you teach, you'll want to direct." I had resisted directing. I was determined to make it as a kind of odd-ball leading man in musical comedies, doomed from the start, I must say. When I went to Bennington, miraculously, she was right. As soon as I taught my first class, I thought, "I want to put this into action." I wanted to direct a play. And in those days, at Bennington, you could do whatever you wanted, really. So they let me direct a play and I had a good time doing it. It was Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, which I had been in. And the next year I did a play with forty people, *Camino Real* by

Tennessee Williams, and I really enjoyed myself. I thought maybe this really is what I should do because my acting was, let's say, tolerable and really be honest and say not very good. One of my great pals was and continues to be Victor Garber. My friends started coming up to see my work at Bennington and Victor said to me, "You really ought to start directing professionally." And I said, "Oh, no, no. Don't be silly. I'm enjoying this. I love teaching young people, and it's what I have to offer. I don't need professional theatre." But somehow, over the years, it became more and more important to me. And as I'm fond of saying, Victor kind of pushed me into the career of directing. So this is an important afternoon, or production, for Victor and me as friends and as collaborators.

Ted Sod: You went on to become the artistic director of the Huntington Theatre Company. How many years did you do that for?

Nicholas Martin: Eight.

Ted Sod: Was that a hard decision to make, to leave the New York community and go to Boston?

Nicholas Martin: No, I've always responded to a challenge. I thought, "Why not?" I'd been in New York a long time, my whole life, and I found it was hard after I'd been in Boston for a while because I missed New York. I missed my friends. It's very hard to leave New York for good if you're a New Yorker—no matter how maddening the city is, no matter what the weather is like, no matter what—at least it was for me. So I came back.

Ted Sod: Then you left the Huntington to become the artistic director of Williamstown.

Nicholas Martin: Yes, I don't know what I was thinking of. That was a good time too. I enjoyed it; I'm doing my last summer there. I now figure I'm just too old to do the artistic directing as well as the directing.

Ted Sod: *Present Laughter* is a play that you chose to do and you suggested Victor play Garry.

Nicholas Martin: Yes.

Ted Sod: What made you think of it?

Nicholas Martin: It's a play I've always adored. With your friends you're always tossing around ideas and like many really great actors, Victor never had a single idea about something he wants to play. I remembered the George Scott production of this with Nathan Lane and Kate Burton and Dana Ivey as one of the highlights of my theatre-going career. I knew Garry was a part that Victor would be brilliant in. Finally his television schedule cleared, and we were able to do a production of this in Boston. Todd came to see it, and here we are at the Roundabout.

Ted Sod: You did it in 2007. Has that production morphed into something new now that it's here?

Nicholas Martin: It's much better. Bears no resemblance.

Ted Sod: Let's talk a little bit about the play. When I interviewed you for the Playgoers' Guide—a wonderful interview with you and Victor, which is online at www.roundabouttheatre.org under "Education" and then "Publications"—you said you thought this was Coward's best play. Why is that?

Nicholas Martin: I think it's best-plotted. I think the characters are the most developed, every last one including the servants. I think it has more story; it has more narrative. It's not fair to say about the lighter comedies like *Blithe Spirit* and even *Private Lives*, which has a perfect first act, that they're just a series of repartee. But, by and large, given the slenderest of plots, they are. This play has real plot. This play is about something very specific, I think.

Ted Sod: Let's talk a bit about that. Coward wrote it in 1939 and started touring with it in 1942 with *This Happy Breed*. Ultimately, *Blithe Spirit* joined the repertory. Often it's said that *Present Laughter* is the most biographical.

Nicholas Martin: Oh, I don't think there's any question about it.

Ted Sod: Do you want to talk a little about that sort of bittersweet quality that lies underneath this play about aging and facing that?

Nicholas Martin: Do I have to talk to that?

Ted Sod: When I interviewed you and Victor, I really loved the fact that neither of you wanted to be just insouciant or flippant.

Nicholas Martin: If you play any of these plays, or for that matter any light comedy, as though it's all a lot of frippery, it's not going to work for anybody. There's a notion—and I think this was truer twenty or even thirty years ago—that that's an English way to do things. It's not. I think by and large you can always find the people in the situation under any comedy. In this one, it's very obvious to me. I think in that final act, when you see Garry alone—for those of you who aren't in theatre or haven't known actors well, that's a very real thing, that actors often complain because they're so put-upon, so much in demand that they never have time to themselves. And when they get it, this is certainly true of me, even ten minutes of it, they don't really know what to do with it. They hope the phone will ring. It's a kind of loneliness that Garry experiences at the end of this play when the one woman he really does love, his wife as it turns out, won't connect with him anymore. The other thing is that this is a play about family. The plot turns on it. This is an extended family. Just personally, I belong to a family like that, my own family is gone, and I have made in the theatre that kind of family, a particularly fitted nucleus. To me, it's very, very precious, the way your own family might be. I think that, really, is what the play is about, holding that together.

Ted Sod: I want to talk a little about how you put this play together. I think you told me that you cast it by calling people on the phone.

Nicholas Martin: When you're my age and you know as many good actors as I do and the parts in the play are this good, with any luck you can cast a great deal of it simply by calling people and saying, "Are you free during these dates? Do you want to do a play?" And telling them, of course, what the part is. In the world in which I travel, money is never mentioned because it's never a concern. And by that, I mean there isn't any.

Ted Sod: What type of actor did you need for this?

Nicholas Martin: I needed actors with "chops" as we say in the jazz world. I needed actors who'd been around, who could do the accents without any problem, for whom the style—if you believe in style—was second nature, and who had great big hearts. That's important to me.

Ted Sod: Nicky, I also wanted to talk to you about Coward. You're a member of the Noël Coward society and you told me you read his letters in preparation, which were published in 2007, I think, and some people say constitute probably the best biography we have of him. What do you make of Coward? He's having a renaissance of sorts: *Blithe Spirit* was produced last year. They did a version of *Brief Encounter* on stage. It seems like he's come back in fashion because in the 1950s when Osborne and Pinter were coming into focus, Coward's plays were not looked upon as being very important.

Nicholas Martin: He went through a time when the English theatre had its period of wake-up to naturalist drama, the Angry Young Men period, and he was completely out of fashion and reviled. It hurt him. That's paralleled in this country by Tennessee Williams who is an acknowledged master of his craft and went through a long period where everything was reviled and really refused. Now, in the last two years, people have recognized these great, these giant artists for the artists that they were. I think that Coward was a genius. It's so refreshing to go to the theatre and have the experience that, believe me, I hope you all had today where you can just enjoy yourselves. When you work on these plays, they are so skillfully put together, you can't imagine a contemporary playwright who does it quite to the degree that Coward does.

Ted Sod: He invented himself, based on the reading I've done. He came from genteel poverty. His mother was devoted to him.

Nicholas Martin: And he to her.

Ted Sod: And he more or less worked his way into the chicest circles. I read somewhere that Mrs. Astley Cooper was his entrée into this world because he was a poor young actor during the Edwardian Period when the class system was out of control. But he never looked back, it seems.

Nicholas Martin: But he never denied it either.

Ted Sod: I find that he's capable of writing about people who live very glamorous lives, and then there are some dramas too that are about the working class.

Nicholas Martin: Yes, particularly patriotic dramas. He served England very fervently during the war. He entertained everyone. He was rumored to be a spy—I kind of believe it; we want to. He was quite a guy.

Ted Sod: He lived an extraordinary life, something that we may all aspire to. But what I really love about him is the fact that he did so much. He was a composer, a lyricist, a director, in almost every play he wrote a part for himself. Let's talk a little bit about the music in today's play. Is it all Coward?

Nicholas Martin: Yes, it's all pulled from recordings and put in. Victor and I put in the song Victor sings in the second act. That's a Coward song, it's perfect for that moment and it's rarely used in this play. I admit, I did a sentimental curtain call as a kind of nod to Noël Coward and to the production itself.

Ted Sod: Where does that song come from?

Nicholas Martin: It could come from his album *Bittersweet* but I don't think so. I'm not sure what it's from. It's called "I'll See You Again."

Ted Sod: I want to ask you about this idea of actors behaving poorly. In this production, you understand why Garry gets angry because he's surrounded by people who don't really understand what he's going through. Do you see this as an accurate portrayal of a star or is it over the top?

Nicholas Martin: It's over the top, but I do know many actors and actresses who shall remain nameless who certainly come to mind in this regard.

Ted Sod: Let's talk about why so many wonderful actors have wanted to play this part. It's just one of those roles that you would lust after. When it was done in America the first time it was Clifton Webb, and then the master himself, Coward, played it in 1958 in repertory with *Nude with Violin*. And you alluded to George C. Scott's production, then Frank Langella. In Britain, it's been everyone.

Nicholas Martin: But in a way, for a great play, it's not revived that often because the part is so arduous, you need such energy, you need to be a certain age, and you need to have a sense of humor and a sense of power and I think a sense of the classics. All those people you mentioned had done the classics and by that I guess I mean Shakespeare and the important plays. I think that's something important to bring to it.

Ted Sod: I want to talk about the physical production too before we let people ask questions directly. This has to be one of the most stunning sets we've had. I feel like I'm in some secret compartment at Radio City Music Hall. Alexander Dodge designed this. Could you talk about Alexander?

Nicholas Martin: Alexander's another Bennington boy and so is Brooks Ashmanskas who plays Roland Maule. In all the years I taught at Bennington, there was never anybody in the

design department. Finally the man who taught design, who was a kind of mad genius, said to me, “I’ve got one! I’ve got a designer!” He was so excited about it, and it was Alexander. Somehow, even when he was in college, Alexander had something no one else did. So I put him to work and he’s been working ever since. He’s the perfect designer for this play.

Ted Sod: He also designed our set for *The Understudy*. One thing I want to bring to your attention because you may not know and Nicholas can tell me whether or not it’s true, is that I was told by Scott Ellis that it was your idea for us to do *Twelve Angry Men*.

Nicholas Martin: It was.

Ted Sod: This is why you have the reputation of being generous. So you said to Scott, “Why don’t you direct *Twelve Angry Men*?”

Nicholas Martin: And Scott’s very smart. He said to me, “If it’s so good, why don’t you direct it?” I was in Boston then, and I said I’d never be able to cast it adequately being in Boston and you can do it in New York.

Ted Sod: It turned out to be a huge hit for us.

Nicholas Martin: It was a gorgeous production. You wouldn’t do any better anywhere else.

Ted Sod: And it went on tour for two years. Also, you gave a script of *The Understudy*, which is a favorite of mine also about actors, to Scott when you received it from Theresa Rebeck. Why did you think of him for that as opposed to yourself?

Nicholas Martin: I wasn’t the only one who thought of him, but when I worked at Williamstown, I loved working with Scott. I always wanted him to do a play there regardless. He really enjoyed doing older plays, but he was starting to want to do new plays. *The Understudy* had such generosity and was so funny I thought it was right up Scott’s alley. But in all fairness, his agent also played a part in that decision.

Ted Sod: Now it’s your turn as the audience to ask some questions.

Audience Member #1: Is there a comedic timing to a Noël Coward play and did the movies of the early 1960s imitate that kind of timing?

Nicholas Martin: I think comedy should be fast. I don’t think anybody in this audience had trouble keeping up with it. I think it’s written that way and works particularly in comedies of this period. I don’t think you have to race through *Waiting for Godot*. But this play done slowly—and I’ve seen it—is deadly

Ted Sod: Is there a Coward style that requires a certain kind of timing?

Nicholas Martin: No, I believe that picking up your cues is that.

Ted Sod: Coward probably did influence all the romantic comedies that came out of high comedy because this is a high comedy. It's like *Ring Round the Moon* or some of those other works that are very difficult to do.

Nicholas Martin: Restoration plays, seventeenth or eighteenth century plays, they too are written to be talked quickly. I don't mean that you don't earn your pauses when those moments come, but, by and large, you should move it.

Audience Member #2: Other than the songs, were there any other changes that you made to the original script? Also, in Noël Coward's writing process, was there much rewriting in rehearsals based upon what the actors were doing, or did he really have it all down?

Nicholas Martin: Because the show is so autobiographical, I checked into Coward's diaries and letters. These people are very real. The secretary is identical his secretary Lorn. But I didn't find any tips or notes in the margin on this play, no. The script has certain stage directions. He put in—and this could have happened in a rehearsal as those things do and then they go into the general script—that Roland Maule shakes everybody's hand and nearly knocks them down, but I added the thing of the old lady. I wish I were more generous and didn't want to take credit. That kind of thing happens with any production. Sometimes I've done plays where the writer has written a great deal. Sometimes it's enormously helpful as in Christopher Durang, and in some cases, it isn't remotely helpful in terms of actually putting it on the stage.

Ted Sod: Did you do any judicious cutting?

Nicholas Martin: Yes.

Ted Sod: Because sometimes these plays can run forever. You might still be watching them if it's not cut.

Nicholas Martin: *Blithe Spirit*, for example.

Audience Member #3: The English don't realize that Americans understand irony. How did you manage to keep that prejudice out of it?

Nicholas Martin: It was an enormous and scrupulous cast that knows better than to send up the material. They took the material and the situation seriously. They were very carefully cast and each one of them had a feeling for these characters, but we kept a tight rein on the world of the play without ever openly sticking our tongues out and making fun of the play or each other. I should add, because it's not always the case, that this is an unusually happy company and one that truly respects each other. That's very rare.

Ted Sod: That does come from the director.

Audience Member #3: I met Coward at the Theatre Royal when he was doing *Blithe Spirit*. At that time I was fifteen or sixteen years old. I managed to get into his dressing room—don't ask me how—and he sang "Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage" because I asked his advice.

What should I do? Should I be a writer or should I go straight into the theatre because I wanted to act, which is what I did. I have to tell you, this was a joy to see.

Ted Sod: We want you to send all your friends British and American and otherwise.

Nicholas Martin: I just want you to come back.

Audience Member #4: I saw Noël Coward in this play in the late 1950s and at the beginning of the second act, you could hear him playing “I’ll See You Again.” The curtain went up, he got up from the piano and walked across the stage, and the audience was upset because they were hoping he would continue playing.

Nicholas Martin: Thank you for that. I never knew that.

Ted Sod: Coward was so circumspect about being gay, they say, because he came up as an Edwardian and in that time period, it would never even be considered to put somebody’s private life in the newspapers as we do today. Jack Wilson, who was his first lover, business partner, etc., may be a model for the character of Morris. I understand that even with all of his faults—Wilson was an alcoholic, he was stealing from Coward—Coward was devoted to him, and all his friends had to look the other way. After the successes of *Hay Fever* and *The Vortex*, he built a home and moved his mother, his father, and Wilson into the house. I just love that because today that would be fodder for so many different newspaper articles, and at that time, in the early 1920s and 30s, it was nobody’s business, as it should be. The other thing I love about the Wilson episode is that Coward had enough of the drinking and the stealing and broke it off. Then Wilson got married and Coward became the sympathetic ear for the new wife. And Wilson directed the original production of *Kiss Me Kate*. He became a director until he was done in by alcohol.

Audience Member #5: Garry was going to Africa. Was that fairly common in those days? Would Laurence Olivier have done that?

Nicholas Martin: They all did, yes. They went to Africa. They went to Africa and then to Australia as well.

Ted Sod: It’s also funny too, the idea that somebody who needs the care that Garry does is going to Africa, and Coward uses it. But certainly he would have toured South Africa, wherever people could speak English.

Audience Member #6: Does the portrait of Garry as Hamlet on the stage have a particular purpose?

Nicholas Martin: The artist, who’s a friend, chose the subject, but I like it because it’s exactly what Garry has never played. He imagined himself as Hamlet, but he never played anything like it. The first time it’s alluded to is when Roland says, “Ah yes, if only…” and my idea is that what he’s really saying is “If only you applied yourself to parts like that and not just parts with dressing gowns and funny lines and superficiality.” And I meant the portrait to be funny.

Ted Sod: It's also a constant reminder of when Garry was young. When I saw it, when he was alone, Victor did this wonderful gesture, trying to imitate the painting.

Audience Member #7: The device at the end of the characters sneaking out, Coward uses it in *Private Lives* and in *Hay Fever* and he uses it in this, do you have any insight as a director about that?

Nicholas Martin: I know what you mean—it never occurred to me. I never applied any kind of scrutiny to that. Do you have an idea, because I'll put it in.

Ted Sod: It may be something Coward did himself. When things got out of control, maybe he just snuck out of the room. Coward had, supposedly, a presentiment in Singapore that he should write a play for him and Gertrude Lawrence. That's how *Private Lives* came about. It's a brilliant idea that two divorced people would remarry and then fall back in love.

Audience Member #8: Did the actor playing Roland ever ad lib any of his actions?

Nicholas Martin: Every line is Coward's, and Brooks is quite scrupulous. He may physicalize some things that aren't in the script. He's very good at that. That character is described as a lunatic. I've known Brooks a long time and I thought he could really do lunatic.

Ted Sod: It's just remarkable what he's come up with.

Nicholas Martin: He's done a lot of musicals too and he's just a very alive and totally original young man.

Ted Sod: For those of you who saw *The Understudy*, Brooks choreographed the dance for that. All right my friends, I want to thank Mr. Nicholas Martin for joining us today. Our next lecture is for *The Glass Menagerie* on March 20th. We hope to see you soon.