

PRESENT LAUGHTER

Noel Coward

Garry, Roland (2 men)

London, late 1940's, Famous actor and matinee idol, Garry Essendine, is visited in his home by a young aspiring playwright, Roland Maule, who has sent him a play. Roland is an earnest young man, who is obviously petrified with nerves but endeavoring to hide it by assuming an air of gruff defiance.

GARRY

Sit down. I want to talk to you about your play

ROLAND

(sits gloomily)

I expect you hated it.

GARRY

Well, to be candid, I thought it was a little uneven.

ROLAND

I thought you'd say that.

GARRY

I'm glad I'm running so true to form.

ROLAND

I mean it really isn't the sort of thing you would like, is it?

GARRY

In that case why on earth did you send it to me?

ROLAND

I just took a chance. I mean I know you only play rather trashy stuff as a rule, and I thought you just might like to have a shot at something *deeper*.

GARRY

What is there in your play that you consider so deep, Mr. Maule? Apart from the plot which is completely submerged after the first four pages.

ROLAND

Plots aren't important, it's ideas that matter. Look at Chekov.

GARRY

In addition to ideas I think we might concede Chekov a certain flimsy sense of psychology, don't you?

ROLAND

You mean my play isn't psychologically accurate?

PRESENT LAUGHTER

Noel Coward

GARRY

(gently)

It isn't very good, you know, really it isn't.

ROLAND

I think it's very good indeed.

GARRY

I understand that perfectly, but you must admit that my opinion might be the right one, based on a lifelong experience of the theatre.

ROLAND

(contemptuously)

The commercial theatre.

(pause)

GARRY

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.

ROLAND

I suppose you'll say that Shakespeare wrote for the commercial theatre and that the only point of doing anything with the drama at all is to make money! All those old arguments. What you don't realize is that the theatre of the future is the theatre of ideas.

GARRY

That may be, but at the moment I am occupied with the theatre of the present.

ROLAND

(Rises. Heatedly)

And what do you do with it? Every play you appear in is exactly the same, superficial, frivolous and without the slightest intellectual significance. You have a great following and a strong personality, and all you do is prostitute yourself every night of your life. All you do with your talent is to wear dressing-gowns and make witty remarks when you might be really helping people, making them think! Making them feel!

GARRY

There can be no two opinions about it. I am having a most discouraging morning.

ROLAND

(sits next to Garry)

If you want to live in people's memories, to go down in posterity as an important man, you'd better do something about it quickly. There isn't a moment to be lost.

PRESENT LAUGHTER

Noel Coward

GARRY

I don't give a hoot about posterity. Why should I worry about what people think of me when I'm dead as a doornail anyway? My worst defect is that I am apt to worry too much about what people think of me when I'm alive. But I'm not going to do that any more. I'm changing my methods and you're my first experiment. (*Rise*) As a rule, when insufferable young beginners have the impertinence to criticize me, I dismiss the whole thing lightly because I'm embarrassed for them and consider it night quite fair game to puncture their inflated egos too sharply. But this time, my highbrow young friend, you're going to get it in the neck. To begin with your play is not a play at all. It's a meaningless jumble of adolescent, pseudo-intellectual poppycock. It bears no relation to the theatre or to life or to anything. (*Crosses to chair center*) And you yourself wouldn't be here at all if I hadn't been bloody fool enough to pick the telephone when my secretary wasn't looking. Now that you are here, however, I would like to tell you this. If you wish to be a playwright you just leave the theatre of tomorrow to take care of itself. Go and get yourself a job as a butler in a repertory company if they'll have you. Learn from the ground up how plays are constructed and what is actable and what isn't. Then sit down and write at least twenty plays one after another, and if you can manage to get the twenty-first produced on a Sunday night performance you'll be God-damned lucky! (*Sits on pouffe.*)

ROLAND

(Rises. Hypnotized)

I'd no idea you were like this. You're wonderful!

GARRY

(flinging up his hands)

My God!

ROLAND

(Crossing to him)

I'm awfully sorry if you think I was impertinent, I'm awfully sorry if you think I was impertinent, but I'm awfully glad too because if I hadn't you wouldn't have got angry, and if you hadn't got angry I shouldn't have known what you were really like.

GARRY

You don't in the least know what I'm really like.

ROLAND

Oh yes, I do- now.

GARRY

I can't see that it matters anyway.

ROLAND

It matters to me.

GARRY

Why?

PRESENT LAUGHTER

Noel Coward

ROLAND

Do you really want to know?

GARRY

What are you talking about?

ROLAND

It's rather difficult to explain really.

GARRY

What is difficult to explain?

ROLAND

(Bends down)

What I feel about you?

(Pause)

GARRY

(Rises; crossing to Center)

Now- look here, young man.

ROLAND

(Crossing to right of him)

No, please let me speak – you see in a way I've been rather unhappy about you – for quite a long time – you've been a sort of obsession with me. I saw you in your last lay forty-seven times; one week I came every night, because I was up in town trying to pass an exam.

GARRY

Did you pass it?

ROLAND

No, I didn't.

GARRY

I'm not entirely surprised.

ROLAND

My father wants me to be a lawyer, that's what the exam was for, but actually I've been studying *psychology* a great deal because I felt somehow that I wasn't at peace with myself and gradually, bit by bit, I began to realize that *you* signified something to me.

GARRY

What sort of something?

PRESENT LAUGHTER

Noel Coward

ROLAND

I don't quite know – not yet.

GARRY

That “not yet” is one of the most sinister remarks I've ever heard. (*Crosses to door Left*)

ROLAND

Don't laugh at me, please. I'm always sick if anyone laughs at me.

GARRY

You really are the most peculiar young man.

ROLAND

I'm all right now, though I feel fine!

(*Crosses to left center*)

GARRY

I'm delighted.

ROLAND

(*crosses to Garry*)

Can I come and see you again?

GARRY

I'm afraid I'm going to Africa.

ROLAND

Would you see me if I came to Africa too?

GARRY

Oh, no – no, I think you'd be much happier in Uckfield. (*Crosses back of sofa to Center*)

ROLAND

I expect you think I'm mad, but I'm not really. I just mind deeply about certain things. But I feel much better now because I think I shall be able to sublimate you all right.

GARRY

Good! Now I'm afraid I shall have to turn you out because I'm expecting my manager and we have some business to discuss.

ROLAND

(*Crossing to Center*)

It's all right. I'm going immediately.

GARRY

(*Crossing left*)

PRESENT LAUGHTER
Noel Coward

I'll get you your script.

ROLAND

No, no – tear it up – you were quite right about it – it was only written with part of myself. I see that now. Goodbye – goodbye.

GARRY

Good bye.

ROLAND

Goodbye!

(Roland goes out front door.)