

## Insight

### Even Downton's O'Brien Would Smile

In jewelry-making, metallic foil is sometimes affixed to the back of a gemstone to make it shine more brightly. In theatre, a foil is a secondary character that acts very differently from the main character and thus enhances the main character by contrast. Noël Coward wrote a brilliant foil in *Fallen Angels* in the character of Saunders, here magnificently played by Mary-Pat Green.

The main plot of *Fallen Angels* centers on best friends and neighbors Julia Sterroll and Jane Banbury, who are bored in their respective marriages and are all atwitter over the impending arrival of a former lover. Julia and Jane are grounded in 1920s morality (*Fallen Angels* debuted in 1925), when upper-class women were expected to marry early and feel completely fulfilled by domestic routines that consisted of little more than hosting teas and catering to their husbands. When Julia and Jane contemplate stepping out, they dissolve into giggles, petty arguments and flighty, schoolgirl silliness that thwarts their instinct to give voice to that which Coward calls, the “bestly, unworthy thing in both of us waiting to spring.”

Saunders, by contrast, is a rock of self-assurance whose feet are firmly planted in a history and an identity that feels almost masculine in comparison to Julia and Jane. In the very first scene, for example, Saunders not only holds her own in conversation with Julia's husband, Fred, but she reveals herself to be an expert about golf. Later, we find out she has perfect pitch, speaks fluent French, served in the Red Cross, worked as a barmaid and knows how to cure a hangover – a sharp contrast to Julia and Jane who can't sing well or speak French, have never worked a day in their lives, and, well, you'll just have to wait and see how they handle their liquor.

*Fallen Angels* is known for its laugh-out-loud comedy, its parody of manners, and its truly poignant yet hysterical portrayal of female friendship. It's easy to overlook Saunders and the importance of her character amidst Coward's brilliant writing. But like Rose in *Upstairs, Downstairs* and Mrs. Hughes, Mrs. Patmore and O'Brien in *Downton Abbey*, servant-class characters literally and figuratively serve their masters by giving us an important counterpoint to the often trivial whims of the British upper class.

Saunders serves another role for contemporary audiences, which is to make Coward's plot more palatable. Without Saunders, we might have little patience for Julia and Jane whose problems might seem rather inconsequential in light of more sobering issues facing many women today. Saunders is also just plain funny – a likeable character who isn't afraid to be herself. So, don't be blinded by the brilliance of *Fallen Angels'* leading ladies or you'll miss one of the show's real gems.

Lauren Simon  
Artistic Associate & Literary Manager

