Blithe Spirit
by NOËL COWARD
directed by DAVID IVERS
The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world.
Synopsis

As preparation for a new novel, writer Charles Condomine and his wife Ruth have invited their friends the Bradmans over to participate in a séance conducted by Madame Arcati, a new arrival to their village. Bracing themselves with a healthy dose of skepticism, they chat with the eccentric Madame Arcati before dinner, then get down to business later that evening. When Madame Arcati makes contact with her spiritual control Daphne, they learn that someone from the Other Side would like to communicate with Charles, and soon Charles hears a voice that no one else does. He quickly brings the evening to an end and ushers his guests out the door, only to discover that his first wife, Elvira, who died seven years ago, has materialized in his living room. But as she can only be seen by Charles, her presence causes a great deal of chaos between Charles and Ruth. After Charles is finally able to convince Ruth that Elvira has indeed returned from the dead, Ruth seeks Madame Arcati’s help in getting rid of the first Mrs. Condomine. But, alas, Madame Arcati doesn’t know how that can be achieved. The Condomine house is thrown into an uproar and becomes too-tight quarters for the carefree Elvira, controlling Ruth, and Charles, caught between the two. A series of accidents raises Ruth’s suspicions about Elvira’s intentions toward Charles, and indeed Elvira takes a decisive action that changes everything. Madame Arcati is called in once again to see if she can put all to rights.

Amy Warner, Heidi Armbruster, Sally Wingert, Quinn Mattfeld and Bob Davis. Photo by Dan Norman.
Characters and Setting

SETTING
The Condomines’ house in Kent, England, over the course of a few days.

Act I
Scene 1: 8:00 on a summer evening
Scene 2: Later that night after dinner
15-minute intermission

Act II
Scene 1: 9:30 the next morning
Scene 2: The following afternoon
Scene 3: An evening several days later
Pause

Act III
Scene 1: An evening a few more days on
Scene 2: Early the following morning

Charles Condomine, an author
Mrs. Bradman, friend of the Condomines
Ruth Condomine, his wife
Madame Arcati, a medium
Edith, their maid
Elvira, Charles’ first wife
Dr. Bradman, friend of the Condomines
Inspiration for *Blithe Spirit*

by Carla Steen  
Production Dramaturg

Shortly before Noël Coward wrote *Blithe Spirit*, during World War II, London suffered heavy bombing by the German air force, leaving parts of the city in rubble and dust, including Coward’s own apartment. Responding to this, Coward retreated with a friend to Port Meirion in Wales to write. He decided that he would write a play to provide a merry diversion for his compatriots in these gloomy days. He took an idea about ghosts he had been batting about and quickly wrote *Blithe Spirit*, barely changing a word after that.

“I fixed the paper into the machine and started: Blithe Spirit. A Light Comedy in Three Acts,” he wrote in his memoir *Future Indefinite*. “For six days I worked from eight to one each morning and from two to seven each afternoon. On Friday evening, May the 9th, the play was finished and, disdaining archness and false modesty, I will admit that I knew it was witty, I knew it was well constructed and I also knew that it would be a success.”

Given the bleak times in London, some critics grumbled that its subject was inappropriately morbid for a country at war. Coward dismissed the accusations that his play was too gloomy: “There’s no question of that, because there’s no heart in the play. You can’t sympathize with any of them. If there was a heart, it would be a sad story.” Apparently Coward’s light touch on serious matters was a welcome relief for London audiences. The show ran for almost 2,000 performances, setting a record that would not be broken for years on any London stage.

“I must say,” he wrote in 1964, “with what will seem to be a refreshing gust of modesty, that in my opinion I have never achieved the perfect play that I have always longed, and will always long, to write — but I shall ever be grateful for the almost psychic gift that enabled me to write “Blithe Spirit” in [six] days during one of the darkest years of the war.” Coward felt that what the British people needed was a distraction from the war, a celebration of British life, and a reason to continue to fight for that life. And that’s what he delivered in *Blithe Spirit*.

Amy Warner, Bob Davis and Sally Wingert. Photo by Dan Norman.
Blithe Spirit was first performed in London in 1941 and, despite the passing of time, Noël Coward’s humor feels as fresh as it did 76 years ago. Though fashion and fads have changed, this “improbable farce” by Coward lives on, much like its ghostly protagonists.

Since its premiere, Blithe Spirit has been revived countless times. After the Broadway opening in November 1941, it was performed many times in London, including productions in 1970 and 1976. There have been several Broadway revivals, such as a production in 1987 featuring Richard Chamberlain as Charles, and in 2009, featuring Angela Lansbury as Madame Arcati. The 2009 production led to a staging by the same director, Michael Blakemore, featuring Lansbury, in London in 2014 and a U.S. tour in 2014-2015. There have been numerous regional performances of Blithe Spirit, including a production at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago for its 1956-1957 season, at the Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor, NY, in 2002 and at American Players Theatre in its 2011 season. The comedy has also been performed at the Guthrie once before, in our 1997-1998 season.

Situational comedy abounds throughout the show, playing with misunderstanding between characters and differences in perception. For the most part, Blithe Spirit is a lighthearted romp but nevertheless, it hints at the woes of marriage, loss and death. “There’s no heart in the play,”

Coward’s play would not have endured so long if it was not so well written. Through his well-structured scenes and expansive vocabulary, Coward provides particularly powerful word crafting, especially in the scenes in which Charles speaks to Elvira but Ruth perceives him as talking to himself or to her. “New playwrights should study it,” Guardian writer Susannah Clapp states, “as they should the spectacular moments of spectral action in which childish magic and adult chilliness meet.” This paradoxical pairing - the childish with the adult – is arguably what makes Blithe Spirit so compelling and so entertaining. Elvira’s flirtatious commands, Ruth’s cool control and Charles’ childish charm all butt up against Madame Arcati’s profound belief and her ridiculous actions. These qualities of childishness and the impossible play into the stage magic of the show, the “theatrical slight of handing taking place in front of the audience’s eyes,” as Clapp describes it, with the theater magic created by séances and ghosts on stage. These elements create a space where we know we are being fooled but the story happening before our eyes makes us believe it is real. Theater does this all the time, but the fact that it happens against claims of Madame Arcati being a fraud and within the mystical world that commandeers Charles’ life gives it an extra ounce of command over an audience.

Coward’s skill both in language and developing character has
captivated artists and audiences for decades. Blakemore, who directed the 2009 Broadway production, said of the show:

“I’d seen Blithe Spirit as a kid in Australia and I’d sort of forgotten how well constructed it is, with a lot of surprises along the way. It’s a brilliant contrivance that puts characters in situations that are appalling for them but hilarious for us.” In what biographer John Lahr describes as a “psychic ménage-a-trois,” Coward explores the struggles of matrimony and the weight of emotional baggage all with a charming wit and flourish of the pen that has kept these plays feeling new and alive long into a new century.

To people who are inordinately amused by Noel Coward’s “Blithe Spirit” it seems incredible that any one can dislike it. And yet that is what happens at capricious comedies, especially those by Mr. Coward. While most people in the audience are roaring at the sharply worded lines and the topsy-turvy plot of a bogus ghost story, other are staring at the stage in silent boredom. ...

Although arguments about humor are futile, they are hard to avoid, for an opinion about comedy involves an element of personal pride. You who are laughing resent the presence of your neighbor who is grumbling, and he in turn feels superior to the frivolous and undiscriminating minds that surround him. You are smug. But you are also on the defensive, for you have surrendered to an emotion he has resisted. To preserve your self-respect you are compelled to regard him as stupid or boorish. But he thinks you are silly. In the case of Noel Coward plays, he may think that you snobbish, for Mr. Coward is the idol of the boulevardiers. Both of you had better let the whole thing drop. ... No, there is no explaining differences of opinion about comedy.

Mr. Coward’s new bundle of levity is a good case in point. By all the rules of logic he should be feeling morose or alarmed these days. London has been battered for two awful years. ... But even in times of desperate gravity people apparently retain their balance as human beings, and probably the need for laughter is more urgent than ever. Whatever the reason, Mr. Coward’s wit and invention have produced one of his funniest gambados, completely unrelated to the world in which he is living. ...

Almost any literal criticism of it is true. It is empty and shallow. It is absurd. It is unsubstantial. It is knocked together out of well battered materials. People who peevishly add that it would never have been put on the stage if Mr. Coward had not written it are getting closer to the truth than they imagine. For that is the essence of its genius. Mr. Coward is past master of the inconsequential. He can transform old hat into harlequinade. Out of literary style and theatre talent he can conjure the evanescent magic of a swift and spinning entertainment. And that is what “Blithe Spirit” is.”

Responses to *Blithe Spirit*

Probably sincere spiritualists will be annoyed, or even exasperated, by Noel Coward’s *Blithe Spirit* at the Piccadilly Theatre. And any man whose first wife is dead and whose companion in the stalls, or elsewhere, is his second wife, will be embarrassed to the point of a hasty departure.

Nonetheless, this is riotously witty stuff. Not having occasion for either annoyance or embarrassment, I laughed and laughed and laughed at an impudent yarn about a writer whose first wife was conjured from the grave to squabble cattily with her successor. ... If there are suggestions of bad taste, they are swamped by the delicious fun of it all.

Philip Page, review of *Blithe Spirit*, Daily Mail, July 3, 1941

In the midst of the war Noel Coward tonight presented the nearest thing to what first night audiences once enjoyed, a comedy called “Blithe Spirit.” The play dealt with a little man caught between two wives who had turned ghosts. Compared with “Cavalcade” it will do nothing toward extending Coward’s reputation as a serious playwright.

Men in uniform and, what is more of a rarity in London, men who had taken the trouble to put on black ties, together with well-dressed women, filled Piccadilly Theatre to see the opening. The feeling of the first-nighters was that Coward had done well, with a slight, diverting comedy, partly written between falling bombs.


The following is intended to be a rhymed alphabetical review of the current theatrical season. ... B’s “Blithe Spirit”: Coward looks At two quite handsome female spooks. The lesson here, when all is said: Don’t raise the queer, unruly dead.


First of all the title is genius: with spirit and blithe you already lay the ghost and shroud the death’s head. And then the whole treatment of Madame Arcati. What is genius but combining the unexpected and the self-evident — so that at the same moment you are saying both: “How surprising!” and “How true is that!” — and then turning it all on Edith. By quarter to four I was saying:

How the Hell can Noël get us out of this satisfactorily? And then you did — like that. ...

Only thing I didn’t like was the last three minutes. Hard, I call it. And a little longueur in the early part of Act II.

This play — and “London Pride” — and the Destroyer picture — all falling from one sleeve within two years, and such years. That’s telling ’em. That’s England talking.

God bless you
THORNTON

Thornton Wilder, in a letter to Noël Coward, October 10, 1942

Noël Coward was playing a two-week engagement in *Blithe Spirit* in London when he learned that his friend the Duke of Kent was killed in an airplane crash.

“It was a black and miserable day, and when I arrived at the theatre for the evening performance I was grateful to Fay Compton for warning me, just before I went on, to be on my guard against certain lines in the play which might surprise me, by their dreadful appositeness, into a betrayal of my feelings. She was right to warn me. *Blithe Spirit* certainly treats the subject of death lightly, and although I still maintain that Death in the abstract is not nearly so solemn and lachrymose as many people would have us believe, it is not always possible to treat it with the proper disdain when the personal heart is quivering with a sense of loss.”

There are various accounts of the origins of the martini. Martinez, California, claims to be the birthplace for the cocktail (or at least of the forerunner of the Martini). In 1949, a miner who’d struck it rich during the Gold Rush arrived in Martinez on his way to San Francisco. When no champagne was to be had to celebrate, the bartender made him a ‘Martinez Special.’ The miner liked the drink, and when he got to San Francisco, he educated a local bartender that the drink was made with one part of very dry Sauterne wine and three parts of Gin, stirred with ice and finished with an olive. Over the years, Martinez became Martini.

There’s also a version of the story that a bartender at the Occidental Hotel in San Francisco invented the drink for a celebratory miner, and named it after the city to which the miner was returning. Or the drink might have been named after the Italian manufacturer of vermouth, Martini and Rossi, which applied for U.S. trademark in March 1882, although the name had been used earlier under the parent company Martini and Sola. Other stories say that the cocktail was named for Martini di Arma di Taggia, a bartender at the Knickerbocker Hotel in New York City in the early 1900s.

Whatever its origins, the martini grew in popularity during Prohibition, because “bathtub gin” was one of the easiest liquors to make. After the repeal of Prohibition, with more quality gin available, martinis became drier and drier. The ratio of gin to vermouth changed over time: 2:1 became 3:1 during the 1920s; by the ’40s, the ratio was closer to 4:1. Some cocktail aficionados preferred a drink that was straight gin with a finger of vermouth run along the lip of the glass, or (like our friend Mr. Coward) no vermouth at all. Alfred Hitchcock instructed his martinis to be made with a glance at the vermouth from across the room.

VARIATIONS
A shaken martini is called a Bradford. The drink chills faster than when stirred, but shaking also increases the likelihood that the drink will be cloudy if not well strained. Shaking can also dilute the alcohol content. A 1934 edition of Harry Johnson’s Bartender’s Manual includes a recipe for Bradford à la Martini: ¾ glass of fine-shaved ice; 3 or 4 dashes of orange bitters; the peel of one lemon into mixing glass; ½ wine glass of Tom gin; ½ wine glass of vermouth. Shake well with a shaker, strain into a cocktail glass, put a medium-sized olive into it and serve.

Dry Martini
Traditionally uses more dry vermouth, however recent trends define a Dry Martini as using little or no vermouth.

Gibson
Garnish with a cocktail onion.

Perfect Martini
Use equal parts of sweet and dry vermouth.

Dirty Martini
Add a small amount of olive brine.

50-50 Martini
Use equal parts of gin and dry vermouth.

Vodka Martini
Replace gin with vodka for a nice alternative.
Noël Coward was born on December 16, 1899, in Teddington, Middlesex, England. He studied at the Royal Chapel School in London and made his acting debut at age 12 when he was invited by Charles Hawtrey, a popular comedian, to appear in a play called The Great Name. The role led to a seven-year apprenticeship with Hawtrey. Coward criticized for being immoral, Coward had a reputation for sharp wit and a suave nature and was seen as a voice for the younger generation.

In 1929, Coward starred in the Broadway production of Bitter Sweet, which he also wrote. The show was popular both in the U.K. and the U.S. and demonstrated his skill as a composer. He went on to pen a number of plays over the next decade, including Private Lives (1930), Calvacade (1931), Design for Living (1937) and Blithe Spirit (1941).

At the start of World War II, Coward felt compelled to help the war effort, and was sent to Paris as head of the bureau of propaganda. After he returned to London, Coward's studio was damaged during the Blitz. Consequently, he decided to take a brief writing holiday in Wales with actor Joyce Carey, during which time he wrote Blithe Spirit. It took him just five days. While some critics felt the play was in bad taste for the times, audiences adored it. Blithe Spirit ran for 1,997 performances in London and later toured at hospitals and munitions factories.

Coward also entertained troops on major battlefronts during World War II and later wrote about his experiences in Middle East Diary (1945). In 1942, he wrote, starred in and co-directed, with David Lean, the film In Which We Serve that told a harrowing story of survival on a British naval destroyer. Coward went on to collaborate with Lean on the film versions of his plays Blithe Spirit (1945) and Brief Encounter (1946).

Later in his career, Coward shifted his focus to working as an entertainer. His final acclaimed acting performance was in 1960 in the film Our Man in Havana. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1970 and died March 26, 1973, in Blue Harbor, Jamaica, where he had lived for several years.

Coward’s body of work includes 50 plays, 25 films, hundreds of songs including “London Pride” and “Mad Dogs and Englishmen,” a ballet, a two-volume biography (Present Indicative and Future Indefinite), two novels, several volumes of short stories, countless poems and a massive set of diaries, recordings, sketches and paintings.
Blithe Spirit falls a little more than halfway in Noël Coward’s writing career. Sheridan Morley, one of Coward’s biographers, considers Blithe Spirit the beginning of a new phase of Coward’s writing. Where he previously wrote about small, rather insular groups of characters coping with the world around them, as in Hay Fever (which the Guthrie produced in 2012) his plays beginning in the 1940s were more independent of each other and Coward’s earlier work in tone and theme.

The title of Coward’s comedy comes from the poem “To a Skylark” by Percy Bysshe Shelley, which begins “Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!” “Blithe” means happily lighthearted, casual or lacking consideration.

The Guthrie has produced Blithe Spirit once before, during the 1997-1998 season, in a production directed by Joe Dowling, which featured Sally Wingert as Ruth. In our current production, she plays Madame Arcati. The Guthrie has staged several of Coward’s other plays, including Design for Living in 1977, Private Lives in 1975, 1992 (which featured Bob Davis and Wingert) and 2007 (featuring Wingert again), and Hay Fever. In 2010, the Guthrie’s WorldStage Program presented Kneehigh Theatre’s production of Noël Coward’s Brief Encounter.
Coward Described by Those Who Knew Him

His plays, in general, do not “date.” Admittedly the idiom is personal and he often writes much as, in real life, he speaks; but that is merely to say that he writes with wit; and wit is a quality that does not date. The things that do date, in the theatre, are attitudes of mind inspired by purely contemporary factors—political opinions, for instance, or moral judgements, or messages on How To Save The World. All such paraphernalia are happily mainly absent from Coward’s work. He is interested only in humanity, its quirks and foibles, its vanities and idiocies, its prejudices and pomposities, and these things, as Congreve and Sheridan have taught us, are changeless. What is more, he expresses that interest with a verbal dexterity unmatched in our time. It is not a difficult idiom to imitate—and many have done so—but it is impossible to reproduce. In fact, it is the imitators who now sound dated, not Coward.


Coward’s, I think, is an overpublicized but underestimated talent. Not only has he been a leading entertainer in the popular field for many years, he is the author of Bitter Sweet, the best musical of [the 1920s]; its composer and producer as well. He is also author of Hay Fever, an artificial comedy which, in my view, has as good chance of immortality as any work of an author now living. It is ‘minor’ work, its pretensions are small; but as well as its author’s typical glitter and sharp satiric sting there is an ‘over and above’ of wholesome horse sense. ... In Hay Fever one catches, between the lines, a glimpse of that aspect of Noël Coward which made him a good president of the Actors’ Orphanage. Usually this position had gone to an eminent actor who
made a dignified figurehead, gave a handsome subscription and saw to it that seven or eight of his well-off friends did the same. Coward did all this; but he also visited the orphanage, made sure that the beds were clean, that the slops were emptied, the stairs swept, the meals adequate and that the orphans felt that their president really stood in loco parentis.


His triumph has been to unite two things ever dissociated in the English mind: hard work and wit. Toil is commonly the chum of serious-mindedness; and though, within Coward, a social historian and philosopher are constantly campaigning to be let out, they seldom escape into his work. ...

I have heard him accused of having enervated English comedy by making it languid and blasé. The truth, of course, is the opposite: Coward took sophistication out of the refrigerator and set it bubbling on the hob. He doses his sentences with pauses, as you dose epileptics with drugs. To be with him for any length of time is exhausting and invigorating in roughly equal proportions. He is perfectly well aware the he possesses “star quality,” which is the lodestar of his life. In his case, it might be defined as the ability to project, without effort, the outline of a unique personality, which had never existed before him in print or paint.

_Noël was always word-perfect at the first rehearsal and expected the whole company to be the same. This was all very well for him because he was usually the author too. He had terrible rows with Gladys Cooper and Edith Evans in later years because they would not learn his lines beforehand. He used to say that it wasted so much time. ... Perhaps Noël’s method suited his own plays – they are written in a very clipped, staccato style, and he nearly always played them with people like Gertrude Lawrence, an extraordinary, volatile, talented creature who invariably gave the plays a rhythm and quality of her own. She was a much greater actress than Noël was an actor, though he too was highly skilled and spoke his own words and lyrics quite brilliantly, with marvelous pace and diction._


We remember his talents, the masterliness and the variety of them, his originality, his inventiveness, the protean range of his gifts: his musicality, gift of melody, as a lyricist, playwright, actor, singer, tap-dancer. With his dazzling prowess as a light comedian, he was the most complete master of the stage in this century, and adored by his friends, and many millions of others.


Kenneth Tynan, “A Tribute to Mr. Coward,” _Curtains, New York, Atheneum, 1961_
For Further Reading and Understanding

BY NOËL COWARD

Plays
Blithe Spirit (acting edition), New York: Samuel French, 1941


Memoirs
Present Indicative, covering his life through Fall 1931
  first published in 1937; currently published by Methuen Publishing Ltd.

Future Indefinite, covering the war years, 1939-1945
  first published in 1954; currently published by Methuen Publishing Ltd., including the unfinished Past Conditional


ABOUT SPIRITUALISM

History of Spiritualism by Arthur Conan Doyle, New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926


Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars by Jenny Hazelgrove, Manchester University Press, 2000

ABOUT NOËL COWARD


