BLITHE SPIRIT
by Noël Coward

compiled by Carlee Whalen
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by Noël Coward
Directed by Scott Palmer
May 10 - 27, 2018
The Vault Theater

CAST
Charles Condomine .............................................................. Andrew Beck*
Ruth Condomine ................................................................. Cassie Greer
Elvira Condomine ................................................................. Jessi Walters*
Madame Arcati ................................................................. Kymberli Colbourne*
Dr. Bradman ................................................................. Peter Schuyler*
Mrs. Bradman ................................................................. Jessica Geffen†
Edith, a Maid ................................................................. Arianne Jacques*

CREW/PRODUCTION TEAM
Director ................................................................. Scott Palmer
Stage Manager ........................................................ Ephriam Harnsberger
Costume Designer ........................................................ Melissa Heller
Scenic Designer ............................................................ Tyler Buswell
Lighting Designer & Technical Director ......................... Jim Ricks-White
Projection Designer ........................................................ Jeffery A. Smith
Sound Designer ............................................................ Renée Zipp^
Assistant Stage Manager ........................................ Tiffany Rousseau^
Props Master .............................................................. Grant Thackray^
Dramaturg ................................................................. Carlee Whalen^
Marketing Assistant ......................................................... Carlee Whalen^

*member of the Bag&Baggage Resident Acting Company
† Bag&Baggage Associate Artist
^Bag&Baggage Emerging Artist
Author Charles Condomine is preparing to write a new novel. As part of his research, he and his wife, Ruth, invite their friends, the Bradmans, over to participate in a seance, hosted by the eccentric local medium, Madame Arcati. After some skeptical chit-chat and lots of drinks during dinner they are ready to begin. Things seem to be going smoothly until the table suddenly begins to shake and Madame Arcati falls into a trance. Charles hears an unmistakable voice: the voice of his late first wife, Elvira.

Charles is frantic; everyone else - who can neither see nor hear Elvira - simply thinks he’s high-strung; and Ruth passes the whole evening off as an unfortunate drunken delusion. But Elvira is here to stay. As the play unfolds, we discover the darker motives of Elvira’s return visit; Ruth’s lack of composure in the face of this new - and invisible - rival; and Madame Arcati’s complete inability to dematerialize the ghost she has brought back from the dead. What will become of Charles’ neatly-ordered world now that the spirit of Elvira has returned?

Blithe Spirit was written by British playwright and actor Noël Coward in 1941, and remains one of his most popular plays. As the Daily Telegraph puts it, this is “some of Coward’s most sparkling dialogue ever… This play is about something substantial -- the way past relationships come back to haunt us -- but it’s the gossamer-like nature of the piece, its sheer levity of spirit, that makes it such an enduring achievement.”

THE PLAYWRIGHT: NOEL COWARD

Sir Noël Peirce Coward was born on December 16th, 1899, in Teddington, South London, and grew up around the stage from a very young age. In addition to his regular schooling in London, his mother enrolled him in dance lessons when he was ten years old. Coward’s mother was a very stereotypical stage mom, and soon enough dance became his primary schooling. Young Noël made his professional debut at just eleven years old, and rarely left the stage after that.

When Coward was sixteen he began writing and selling music. Soon after, he discovered he had a hand for dialogue and began working on plays. He especially had a knack for writing characters for himself and his actor friends.

In 1919, Coward starred in his own play I’ll Leave it to You, which was was met with great reviews and moderate success. He was only twenty-one at the time. Shortly afterward, Coward made his first trip to America, arriving in New York in 1921 without a penny to his name.
He spent the summer trying to learn about the American theatre culture, having no idea the theaters would be closed for the summer because of a lack of air conditioning. Coward ended up spending much of the summer with famous playwright Hartley Manners and his actress wife Laurette Taylors, who served as the inspiration for the characters in his show *Hay Fever*.

When the Second World War broke out, Coward served as a secret agent for a brief time, before returning to his writing. This began the most prolific stage of Coward’s career, as he penned hit after hit — *Blithe Spirit* being a favorite from this time period.

In the 1960s, Coward began suffering from memory lapses, and decided to retire from the stage for good. In 1970, he received a special Tony Award for distinguished achievement in the theatre. In March of 1973 while at his home in Jamaica, Coward suffered from a stroke and passed away. A memorial service held in London was attended by many of the most renowned stars of both the American and British stages. Coward is buried in Jamaica, but his legacy lives on around the world.

Coward was homosexual, living in a time and culture when acknowledgement of this reality was taboo. He refused to publicly comment on his sexual orientation during his life, but it was a widely-acknowledged reality among his friends and acquaintances, and he did encourage his longtime secretary to include these personal details in a more candid biography of him following his death. While some of Coward’s works did explore alternate sexualities, his plays generally only contain more subtle undertones that reflect his life as a gay man.

BACKGROUND: HISTORY, SPIRITUALISM, & RADCLYFFE HALL

The “spirits” in *Blithe Spirit* are not of the comforting sort; instead they bring an angry and possessive energy into the show that becomes both chaotic and hysterical. This tone can potentially be attributed to World War II, as Coward — and all of Britain — was living in the midst of bombings and the fear of death at the time that he was writing the play.

Coward’s home was destroyed in The Blitz of 1940, and he fled to Wales. He spent the month of May taking a holiday with fellow actor and playwright Joyce Carey at the Welsh seaside resort town of Port Meirion; there he began telling Carey about his new idea for a play involving ghosts, a boozy British couple, and a seance. Together they went back and forth, brainstorming the idea, and a few short hours later, they had sketched out a rough plot and characters.

Just six days later, *Blithe Spirit* was nearly a finished product.
“On Friday evening, May ninth, 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...”

- Noël Coward

Coward’s supernatural farce Blithe Spirit first premiered on London’s West End in the summer of 1941. Written largely as a distraction from the Second World War, many wondered if it was appropriate to be producing a play about ghosts when so many were being haunted by the loved ones they were losing in the war. This didn’t stop Coward; in fact, it emboldened him. By design, the characters in Blithe Spirit are superficial and crass, undercutting any sense of tragedy surrounding death. From Coward’s perspective, you can’t feel sad for anyone in the story because none of the characters are redeemable in anyway. “You can’t sympathize with any of them. If there was a heart it would be a sad story.”

Blithe Spirit was hailed as “one of [Coward’s] funniest gambadoes, completely unrelated to the world in which he is living,” providing a comical distraction against the surrounding horrors of the time. And though we no longer live under the constant threat of air raid sirens, Coward’s quite hilarious play is still enjoyed around the world today.

SPIRITUALISM

In the 1920s through the 40s there was a heightened sense of interest in the paranormal, mediums, and spiritualists. The First World War had seen the loss of many loved ones, and faced with the reality of these souls being gone forever, people gravitated towards any possible hope of being able to connect with them.

Spiritualism — a religious movement based on the belief that the spirits of the dead exist and have both the ability and inclination to communicate with the living — has a long history in America and Europe, beginning in the 1840s in the “burned-over district” of New York. In the years following the First World War, the key components of Spiritualism became particularly attractive to survivors of the war:

- The idea that the living are able to contact the dead and vice versa
- The concept that the spirit world is not a stagnant state but a place in which spirits can grow and evolve
- The belief that spirits are able to provide insight and knowledge into the world that the living otherwise would not have
In 1940s London, with bombs falling overhead, feeling as though death was not the end was a comforting sentiment.

“Spirit mediums” were important components of Spiritualism: gifted individuals who specialized in contacting and communicating with the dead (though it is also said that with studying and practice anyone can contact spirits). Spiritualism saw its heyday in the 1920s, and it lives on today in the forms of Syncretism, where individual mediums work with their own clients without any overarching hierarchy or dogma; the Spiritualist Church, which puts a much greater emphasis on “mental” mediumship, avoiding the practice of “materializing” spirits; and Psychical Research, where parapsychologists investigate claims of contact with the dead.

RADCLYFFE HALL

Another inspiration for Coward’s fierce farce was author and poet Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe-Hall, who is best known for her book *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928. The groundbreaking book was promptly banned in Britain because of its lesbian themes. Radclyffe Hall — the name she publicly went by — was very open about her struggles and sexuality in a way that Coward never felt he could be. Because of this, Coward was drawn to her, and the two writers found a kind of kinship in each other.

Hall was using a form of Spiritualism in the late 1930s to get in contact with Mabel Batten, an amateur singer and Hall’s former lover who had passed away suddenly. Hall had been having an affair with another woman named Una Troubridge at the time of Batten’s death; she and Troubridge called on a local medium to hold seances, in which they attempted to make contact with Mabel. Hall was hoping to apologize for the affair, and in turn to receive Batten’s blessing for her new relationship.

Hall told Coward about these sessions, and though they were complete opposites in terms of style, they inspired each other in their art. Hall was dark and brooding, while Coward made fun of the darker parts of humanity — including the darker realities of the life of Radclyffe Hall.
Meaningless Marriage

Writer and novelist Michael Korda writes the following in a piece on Noël Coward for The Daily Beast:

One of the many paradoxes about Coward was that while his plays, his songs, his lifestyle, and his attitude toward sex, life, and marriage, were all intended to infuriate the English middle-class, and for a time did so, he would eventually become the darling of just those people he was trying to mock.

Marriage in Blithe Spirit is relatively meaningless and disposable — partnerships of convenience or absurdity are on display, with both Charles and Ruth and Charles and Elvira, as well as Dr. and Mrs. Bradman — as Coward makes his not-so-subtle commentary on the foolishness of traditional heterosexual marriage. As a gay man operating in a world that was generally unaccepting of "divergent" sexualities, Coward took his frustration and anger out in his writing, putting in digs at the institution of marriage wherever he could.

Betrayal

Part of what enhances Coward's mockery of marriage is a healthy dose of betrayal all around. Elvira, returning from the dead, feels betrayed that Charles would marry another woman — despite the fact that she is no longer alive. Once the spectral antics start, Ruth begins to feel betrayed by Charles' attentions to Elvira — not to mention feeling betrayed by Madame Arcati for bringing Elvira back in the first place. This betrayal, in all instances, is biting, jealous, and vindictive, further highlighting the absurdity of these characters and their relationships with each other. The play culminates in a triple dose of betrayal, as Ruth and Elvira terrorize Charles, and Charles vows to leave them both for good. This betrayal, while ugly, is also a key to the play — as Coward himself said: "You can't sympathise with any of them. If there was a heart it would be a sad story."
Chaos v. Order

Before the seance — and before Elvira is materialized — the Condomines' world is in relative order. But once Madame Arcati and Elvira show up, complete chaos follows. While Ruth and Charles first try to rationalize their way around Elvira's appearance — trying desperately to re-establish some semblance of their upper-crust British sense of order — it quickly becomes a losing battle. Both the spirit world and the American sensibilities of Madame Arcati bring their own kinds of chaos onto the stage, and Charles' world will never be the same again. Watching the juxtaposition of order and chaos play out is part of the fun of Blithe Spirit.

Mortality

Death is inextricably central to the plot of Blithe Spirit. Writing during World War II, when most people throughout Europe had experienced profound death and loss, Coward sought to subvert the tragic nature of human mortality, and instead use it as a vehicle for making people laugh. From an article titled “New Coward Show Opens in London” in The New York Times on July 3, 1941:

In the midst of the war Noël 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.
OUR PRODUCTION

“What is a prominent characteristic in the Blithe Spirit characters?” asks Bag&Baggage Artistic Director Scott Palmer.

Contempt.

Noël Coward was not shy to express his opinions on tradition. He had no time for the formalities that society expected him to perform. His thoughts on conventional marriage in particular are mirrored in Blithe Spirit as Charles Condomine shows absolutely no interest in his second wife— nor his first for that matter.

Contempt takes another form in the complete lack of respect for the dead and their memory in Blithe Spirit. While characters like Madame Arcati are a parallel to the spiritualists and mediums of the time, Coward does nothing but ridicule them. And when Elvira is accidentally materialized, Charles displays absolutely no reverence or gratitude.

Coward was a dark soul, with friends just as dark — Radclyffe Hall, as previously noted, was a large inspiration for his work. But Coward also maintained a bubbly social life, and all of his friends and acquaintances adored his talented and witty aura.

Coward himself was completely unimpressed by those he spent time with; he despised their forced interactions with others, the way they dressed, and their selfish longing for emotional connection. But he put up with it all because it provided him with the most incredible fodder for his plays. Coward took the vivid personalities of his social circle and turned them into characters, openly mocking their quirks and vices as he exposed the darker side of humanity. In Blithe Spirit, Radclyffe Hall and Una Troudbridge bear the brunt of this mockery, as Coward takes the stories with which they entrusted him, and turns them into a farce.

Even though most audiences tend to shy away from the darker side of humanity, Coward has a penchant for making us laugh at every inappropriate or mean-spirited joke. His writing has such a charming veneer that as an audience, we get pulled into Coward’s twisted take on love and death, almost before we realize what has happened. Coward implicates not only his friends, but also his audiences, in their vapid foolishness, displaying — beneath everything else — a contempt for us all.

“There is a cruelty embedded in Blithe Spirit, underneath the lightning quick banter and dismissive repartee,” says Palmer. “Underneath that froth is a darkness, a bitterness, and a contempt that cannot be ignored.” As Bag&Baggage strives to provide provocative interpretations of classical texts, we embrace this cruelty, and bring you a Blithe Spirit unlike any seen before.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING ACTIVITIES

Before you see the show:

1. The characters in *Blithe Spirit* discuss the validity of ghosts and spiritualism before Madame Arcati arrives. Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not?

2. Noël Coward wrote *Blithe Spirit* in the face of the atrocities happening in England in World War II, taking the edge off of fear and death through laughter. Can you think of other instances of people laughing in the face of danger or making light of their circumstances in order to get through a difficult time? Have you ever done something like this?

3. Noël Coward took inspiration for *Blithe Spirit* — as well as most of his plays — from the lives of his friends and acquaintances. Write the outline for a fictional story based on the lives of some of the people you know. Include characters, their relationships, and five key moments of action.

4. Imagine that you were tasked with representing or creating a ghost on stage. How would you creatively accomplish this task? Draw pictures or diagrams, or give detailed descriptions.

After you see the show:

5. Knowing a bit about its history, why do you think that *Blithe Spirit* was so popular in the 1940s? After having seen it, why do you think the play is still popular today? Is there any similarity in these reasons?

6. In the 1940s there was a heightened sense of interest in the supernatural, though it was still very taboo. How might this have contributed to the success of the play? Why are people sometimes drawn to things that are seen as being less “acceptable” by society?

7. Coward subtitled *Blithe Spirit* as “an improbable farce”. Farce is defined as “a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations.” How does the play fit into this genre? Give three specific examples.

8. *Blithe Spirit* is written to be set in the “present day” in the 1940s, but Bag&Baggage’s production puts the time period in the 1980s. Why do you think this choice was made? If you had to set the show in another time period, which would you choose? Give specific reasons backing up your choice.

9. Each character in *Blithe Spirit* takes on some form of the cruelty that pervades Noël Coward’s writing. Give three specific examples from the show of moments when one character was cruel to another character. In each instance, where do you think this cruelty was coming from — why was each character being cruel?
SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

On Noël Coward:

The Official Website of Noël Coward
https://www.noelcoward.com/

“Sir Noël Coward” from Gay Influence

"Noël Coward on Acting" (interviewed by Michael MacOwan)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxQCupMdTQE

On Spiritualism:

“American Spiritualism: a historical overview” from beliefnet

“The medium is the messenger: meet the new breed of American spiritualists” from The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/nov/08/american-spiritualists-lily-dale-seance

“The History & Mystery of Spiritualism" from The Haunted Museum
http://www.prairieghosts.com/spiritualism.html

On Blithe Spirit:

"The Haunting History of Noël Coward's Blithe Spirit" from broadway.com

"Blithe Spirit: Present Magic" by Geoffrey O’Brian from The Criterion Collection
https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2221-blithe-spirit-present-magic

“Some Sort of Genius” by Susan E. Gunter from The Utah Shakespeare Festival
https://www.bard.org/study-guides/some-sort-of-genius

Books to Read:

My Life with Noël Coward by Graham Payne

The Letters of Noël Coward by Noël Coward

The Question: A Brief History and Examination of Modern Spiritualism by Edward Clodd

Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall, Kindred Spirits by Terry Castle