

# PROSCENIUM

## **Blithe Spirit**

By Noel Coward

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Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> June to Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2011  
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

# Blithe Spirit

An Improbable Farce

By Noel Coward

Cast (in order of appearance):

Edith (a maid).....	Crystal Anthony
Ruth .....	Shirley Wootten
Charles .....	Charles Anthony
Doctor Bradman .....	David Pearson
Mrs Bradman.....	Sheila Harvey
Madame Arcati .....	Anne Gerrard
Elvira .....	Clare Wooster
Directed by .....	Michael Gerrard
Stage Manager .....	Arnold Glickman
Properties .....	Margaret Rudolph
Sound Recording .....	Charles Anthony
Costumes.....	Anne Gerrard

The action of the play passes in the living-room of  
Charles Condomine's house in Kent.

Act 1    Scene 1 Before dinner on a summer evening.  
          Scene 2 After dinner.

Act 2    Scene 1 The next morning.  
          Scene 2 Late the following afternoon.

15 Minute Interval

Scene 3 Early evening, a few days later.

Act3    Scene 1 After dinner, a few days later.  
          Scene 2 Several hours later.

# The Playwright

Born in December 1899 (hence being christened Noel) in Teddington. His father was a rather unsuccessful and often impecunious piano salesman and his mother encouraged his extremely precocious interest in performing. He first took part in amateur concerts at the age of seven and his mother enrolled young Noel in a dance academy in London. He made his first professional appearance in January 1911: he records in his autobiography –

‘One day a little advertisement appeared in the Daily Mirror ...a talented boy of attractive appearance was required by a Miss Lila Field to appear in her production of an all children fairy play, *The Goldfish*. I was a talented boy, God knows, and when washed and smarmed down a bit, passably attractive. There appeared to be no earthly reason why Miss Lila Field shouldn’t jump at me, and we both believed she would be a fool to miss such a magnificent opportunity.’

This led to a succession of acting/dancing parts in London and Liverpool over the next six years, a career which included the Lost Boy, Slightly, in *Peter Pan*. The result of this was that Noel Coward had very little actual schooling: books and the theatre provided his education. By the time he reached the age of eighteen he began to move in rather smart society circles – he was what we would now call an expert networker: ‘I determined to travel through life first class.’ And he began the assiduous cultivation of his carefully crafted image.

He began to write plays in 1918 and in 1920 starred in his own light comedy *I’ll Leave It To You* at the New Theatre. The Observer noted, ‘Mr Coward has a sense of comedy - and if he can overcome a tendency to smartness, he will produce a good play one of these days’. After other light comedies and witty cabaret numbers his first great critical and financial success was *The Vortex* in 1924, a much darker and more

serious play involving drug abuse and sexual vanity among the upper classes, but still full of his characteristic wit. Kenneth Tynan, reviewing a revival in the 1950s thought 'the dialogue not so much stilted as high-heeled'. This was followed in 1925 by *Fallen Angels* and *Hay Fever* (which The Times found 'pure comedy with no mission but to delight') and in that year he had four productions running in the West End. *Bitter Sweet*, 1929, *Private Lives*, 1930, *Cavalcade*, 1931 (the film version two years later won an Academy Award for best picture), *Design For Living*, 1932 brought him an income during this period of £50,000 a year. Throughout the thirties he continued to perform – in films, theatre and cabaret – the sheer volume of work is quite extraordinary. The last plays he wrote before the outbreak of war were *This Happy Breed* and *Present Laughter* in 1939.

In the early years of the war he began to work for British Intelligence, and had the Germans invaded he was in their Black Book, scheduled to be arrested and killed. 'I remember Rebecca West, who was one of the many who shared the honour with me, sent me a telegram – My dear, the people we should have been seen dead with!' Churchill, however, thought he would be more valuable entertaining the troops: 'Go and sing to them where the guns are firing. That's your job.' And he toured, acted and sang indefatigably. He was still writing, notable *Blithe Spirit* 1941 and the film *In Which We Serve* 1943.

He continued to write plays in the 1950s but with only moderate success: the theatre was changing and his characters and settings seemed very much part of a fading and irrelevant society. Coward always held that 'the primary purpose of a play is to entertain' and he made no attempt at modernism which he felt was boring to the audience although fascinating to the critics. However, he made his name in cabaret in the Café de Paris and Las Vegas. Kenneth Tynan describes his performance: 'To see him whole, public and private personalities conjoined, you must see him in cabaret...He padded down the celebrated stairs, halted before the microphone in black-suede-clad feet and, upraising both hands in a feature of benediction,

set about demonstrating how these things should be done. If it is possible to romp fastidiously, that is what Coward does.'

After the drought of the fifties and early sixties he experienced something of a renaissance. The *New Statesman*: 'Who would have thought the landmarks of the sixties would include the emergence of Noel Coward as the Grand Old Man of British drama?



There he was one morning flipping verbal tiddly-winks with reporters about Dad's Renaissance, the next he was with Forster, T.S. Eliot and the OMs demonstrably the greatest living English playwright.'

Certainly underneath the witty dialogue and Art Deco glamour the best plays deal with recognisable people and familiar relationships, worthy, as Coward himself pointed out, to be placed with Sheridan, Congreve and Wilde.

Noel Coward died at his home in Jamaica on 24 March 1973.

## The Play

In 1941 Coward's office and apartment in Gerald St was destroyed in the blitz. A little later he went on a holiday to Wales with a friend, Joyce Carey, who was writing a play about Keats: however, Coward wanted to discuss his ideas for a new play and Keats was forgotten – but not Shelley. In *Present Laughter* Gary Essendine remarks that there was nothing Shelley did not know about love, and now Coward invokes Shelley again with the title of his new play, *Blithe Spirit*. He felt inspired: it was two years since he had written *Present Laughter* and in his autobiography he insists he had anxieties that his gift for comic dialogue might have rusted with disuse, but he wrote it straight

through while staying at Portmeirion and only two lines of dialogue were removed before its first London production. 'I shall ever be grateful for the almost psychic gift that enabled me to write *Blithe Spirit* in five days during one of the darkest years of the war.'

On his return to London Coward gave the play to Binkie Beaumont with this confident assessment: 'It's my best, it has 'smash-hit', 'long run' written on every page. Shakespeare never wrote anything so quickly. Not even *Twelfth Night* or *Macbeth*.' In 1941, before Russia and America joined forces with the allies, Great Britain was suffering severe casualties and facing German bombing attacks at home and Coward felt that British audiences would want to view an escapist comedy such as *Blithe Spirit*. The play did provoke a small outcry at its first performance as it was seen to be possibly making fun of death at the height of the war. Graham Greene, in a revue for *The Spectator*: 'Apart from the first act it has been a weary exhibition of bad taste, a bad taste all the more evident now when sudden death is common and dissolves more marriages than the divorce courts.' However, such objections were quickly forgotten and the play went on to set British box-office records, running in the West End for 1,997 performances. It also did well on Broadway later that year.

## **Coward on the Theatre**

'You ask my advice about acting? Speak clearly, don't bump into the furniture and, if you must have motivation, think of your pay packet on Friday.'

'I will accept anything in the theatre – provided it amuses or moves me. But if it does neither, I want to go home.'

'In the first act you get the audience's attention – once you have it they will repay you in the second. Play through the laughs if you have to. It will only make the audience believe there are so many of them they missed a few.'

## To A Skylark

Hail to thee, blithe spirit,

Bird thou never wert

That from heaven, or near it,

Pourest thy full heart

In profuse strains of unpremeditated art!

Higher still and higher

From the earth thou springest

Like a cloud of fire;

The blue deep thou wingest,

And singing still dost soar, and soaring  
ever singest.

Percy Bysshe Shelley.



# **About Proscenium**

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week, at the Harrow Arts Centre for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

# **Friends Of Proscenium**

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Artistic Director : Michael Gerrard

Secretary : Izzie Cartwright

Chair : Crystal Anthony

Contact us at [www.proscenium.org.uk](http://www.proscenium.org.uk)