



Blithe Spirit by John Knowles

“...a passionate faith that loved ones who, in reality, had been blown to pieces in the trenches had passed on to a bourne from which they could not return but which was a place of happiness and content.”

Coward’s genius in *Blithe Spirit* was to make the notion of ghosts as sentimental, reassuring figures, by creating the vindictive, mischievous Elvira, who is bent on obtaining her own satisfaction after death, at the expense of her living loved one.

Blithe Spirit premiered during the darkest days of the War. On the opening night of the play (July 2, 1941) a bomb was dropped very near to the theatre. Elegantly attired patrons picked their way through the rubble on their way to see what would be the most popular comedy of the war.

A programme note said –

“If an air raid warning be received during the performance the audience will be informed from the stage... those desiring to leave the theatre may do so but the performances will continue.”

The comedy played at the Piccadilly and St. James’s Theatres for 1,997 performances a record for a play until *The Mousetrap* arrived in town. It played at the Morosco Theatre in New York in November of that year with Clifton Webb in the main role.

There have been numerous professional revivals and the play continues to be the favoured Coward comedy for amateur companies worldwide. It has been directed in the UK, amongst others, by Harold Pinter and Tim Luscombe, and featured actors such as Simon Cadell, Joanna Lumley, Twiggy, Peggy Mount, Rula Lenska, Belinda Lang, Penelope Keith and Dora Bryan.

It has been adapted for film, television and radio. In 1945 the film version was directed by David Lean who had earlier all but directed Coward’s 1942 war effort, *In Which We Serve* and famously went on to direct Coward’s *Brief Encounter*. It had an all-star cast led by Rex Harrison and Kay Hammond with Margaret Rutherford in the defining interpretation of the spiritual medium, Madame Arcati.

In 1956 a US television adaptation by CBS featured Noël himself with Claudette Colbert and Lauren Bacall in what was universally agreed to be a rather uninspired performance. UK televised versions took place on the BBC in 1948 and on Granada 1964 and US radio version abound with Noël himself, with Margaret Leighton, Ronald Colman and Clifton Webb among the most notable participants.

It will always be a ‘house favourite’ for those who wish to escape the cares of real world and dabble with delight in the world of the supernatural. In essence it is – as with most of Coward’s plays – about life not death and the tortuous way we handle our relationships. As the Daily Mail, when talking about the likelihood of future performances said - deliberately misquoting Shelley’s ode *To A Skylark*:



*Hail to thee, Blithe Spirit
Bird thou'll never get.*

The most popular play in the Noël Coward canon is this glorious comedy about the occult written at a time when, due to government restrictions on theatre opening, his and others plays had ceased to grace the West End stage. His finances were in a far from fair state and when the 'powers that be' finally relented and theatres were allowed to open during daylight hours he realised that he had to deliver something commercial and match the wartime mood to pull in the crowds of leave-taking service personnel, and the many civilians still living in London.

The actress Joyce Carey and Noël Coward set off to the Italianate folly Portmeirion in Wales to write plays. An idea had already hatched in Noël's mind of a large French house visited by the ghosts of its past but it was here in Clough William-Ellis's fantasy village that the plot for the new play emerged and after seven days *Blithe Spirit* was all but finished.

Noël Coward was fascinated with death. One of his hobbies was watching surgeries –

“I've witnessed death many times,” he asserted. “I once had a man die in my arms.”

In *Private Lives*, his play from 1930, Coward has Elyot say to Amanda –

“Death is very laughable really, such a cunning little mystery. All done with mirrors.”

For Coward, death was a bit of a lark, something to be overcome with charm and wit.

In 1967 he wrote in *Not Yet the Dodo and Other Verses*:

*I'm here for a short visit only
And I'd rather be loved than hated
Eternity may be lonely
When my body's disintegrated
And that which is loosely termed by soul
Goes whizzing off through the infinite
By means of some vague, remote control
I'd like to think I was missed a bit.*

Ghosts pop up in other Noël Coward plays as well as *Blithe Spirit*. In *Cavalcade* and *Post Mortem* they serve the function of ensuring reverence for the dead. In *Shadow Play* (1936), ghosts of the quarrelling Gayfords appear in a dream to recall their romantic past and rekindle their threatened love.

Certainly death was on every Londoner's mind in 1941, as the blitz raged about them, for ghosts found their way into other plays of the period, as well. Critic Gareth Lloyd Evans sees in this rebirth of interest in matters spiritual a hunger for reassurance that the sacrifices of the war had not been in vain.

JOHN KNOWLES

with extracts from a study guide produced by the Pearl Theatre Company in 2000 on *Blithe Spirit*