



CAPE COD TIMES

Entertainment

'Blithe Spirit' all-around tour de force in Orleans

By Shannon Goheen / Contributing writer

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ORLEANS — Conjuring spirits can be a dangerous thing, especially if the spirit you conjure is your late wife who has it in for your current wife.

This is the mess that Charles Condomine creates for himself when he invites a local psychic to conduct a séance for him, his wife and another couple. A nonbeliever in the occult, he supposes he'll get some good material for his latest novel about a crazy medium. What he actually gets is whole lot of trouble.

Elements Theatre Company's "Blithe Spirit" by Noël Coward is a tour de force, not only in the skill of the acting but also the set and the costuming. The huge, carefully constructed and expertly appointed set of the Condomine drawing room is a visual treat and nicely accommodates the action. The set designers (all seven of them) and the set builders (25 listed in the program) have good reason to feel proud of their creation.

Playwright Noël Coward wrote this much-loved play in 1941 while bombs were falling on London and people feared a Nazi invasion. Using death as the central theme, he sought to write a play that would lighten people's heavy hearts and help them forget about the realities of their war-torn lives. In six days, he wrote this play that opened six weeks later to great success.

It's easy to see why Coward is one of the most popular playwrights of our time. Not only is the subject matter a delight, but the way he presents it is brilliant. The director, Joanna Weir Ouston, states in her notes that "the characters adhere to strong social forms and are masters of the polite riposte which is both funny and cutting, and at times hilariously absurd." I suspect we can largely credit

Ouston, a voice and text coach at the Oxford School of Drama for the excellent British diction. This is the only time I've understood every word in a play with British accents and haven't been distracted by it.

Madame Arcati, played to the hilt by Sr. Danielle Dwyer, is a show-stealer. The character, in contrast to the socialites who hire her, feels contemporary and real. She tells it like it is, expresses herself freely and is fun to watch. Dwyer brings Madame Arcati hilariously to life, particularly when she prepares herself for the séance. She spins and dances erratically, parts of her body twitch oddly and she makes rodent sounds and motions. Her black, pointy-toed, lace-up shoes with visible nylon stockings halfway up her calves add to her appeal.

Sarah Hale's Edith is always running, not walking, and tries with charming results to please her employers. The audience laughs every time she steps on stage.

Zachary Clark as Charles Condomine is appropriately handsome in his role of high society writer who is both lucky and unlucky at love. When his first wife, Elvira, dead seven years, comes back to woo him and to drive his wife, Ruth (Sr. Phoenix Catlin) to distraction, Clark is spot-on as he descends from being on top of the world into a realm of disbelief and impending lunacy. He alone can see and hear his wife's ghost, so each time he reacts badly to her, his living wife thinks she's the target.

Sr. Phoenix Catlin as Ruth is great as the second Mrs. Condomine, who manages to keep it together in spite of finding herself playing second fiddle to her husband's dead wife. Her high-society mannerisms are precise and she's dressed impeccably, undergoing five costume changes. Hats off to the 13-member costume team who hand-sewed her clothing.

Dr. and Mrs. Bradman (Brad Lussier and Sr. Diana Shannon) are a welcome contrast to the anxiety-ridden Condomines. Shannon exudes charm and warmth, while Lussier's calm stability lends comfort in the midst of chaos.

The ghost of Charles' dead wife, Elvira (Stephanie Haig) is an ethereal delight. Haig floats around the stage in ghostly white robes while being naughty, fetching and flirty in turns. She's both funny and spellbinding as she makes a mess of things in her efforts to keep Charles forever.

Elements Theatre Company does a terrific job with “Blithe Spirit,” and conjures up a healthy dose of joy and laughter in Coward’s light look at the tricky interface of life and death.



Entertainment & Life

Theater Review: Elements' 'Blithe Spirit'

By **Deb Boucher Stetson**

Posted Jul 27, 2018 at 3:01 AM

Noel Coward would have been delighted to attend the production of his play, “Blithe Spirit” at Elements Theatre in Orleans. In fact, we’re not so sure he didn’t. After all, the classic play explores the mysteries of the afterlife, to hilarious end.

Coward wrote “Blithe Spirit” in 1941 with the goal of giving people something light and amusing to take their minds off of the war. That he managed to do just that with a play centered around death is testament to his talent and skill as a playwright. Audiences loved it, and are still loving it 77 years later.

The play opens with Charles Condomine, an aristocratic author, and his wife, Ruth, awaiting dinner guests. Charles has invited a psychic in order to glean material for his next book—even though he is a skeptic, a fact he has kept from his guest of honor, Madame Arcati.

Before the guests arrive, Charles and Ruth wind up discussing his late wife, Elvira, who died seven years earlier. Zachary Clark is beautifully cast as Charles, who was clearly crazy about his first wife, nonchalant as he tries to be about her with Ruth.

Clark brings nuance to the character, and we can’t help liking him. In contrast, Ruth is somewhat hard-edged, but Phoenix Catlin likewise walks a fine line in giving her character just the right amount of humanity.

Joining the Condomines in their dinner party cum séance are Dr. George Bradman — nicely portrayed by Brad Lussier — and his wife, Violet — played by Diana Shannon, who likewise does an excellent job with her character. Violet is girlishly excited at the prospect of meeting the mysterious Madame Arcati, who is known to ride her bicycle everywhere.

From her purple-turbaned entrance on, Sister Danielle Dwyer is absolutely hilarious as Madame Arcati, a colorful, somewhat kooky but sincere devotee of the dark arts.

Dwyer, the artistic director of Elements Theatre Company and a veteran actor, pulls out all the punches, from trilling laughter and priceless facial expressions to physical comedy at its best.

Amused as Charles is initially by Madam Arcati's whacky séance, she has the last laugh, as she has apparently managed to attract a spirit from the proverbial other side — and that sprit is none other than Charles' late wife, the lovely Elvira.

Stephanie Haig is delightful as the ethereal yet impish Elvira, who is clearly happy to be back on the earthly plane with Charles — and would like nothing better than to have him all to herself. Only Charles can see her and hear her, making for high comedy when other characters are in the room.

Sarah Hale is a scene-stealer as the hapless Edith, the Condomines' eager to please but clearly inexperienced maid, who plays a larger role than she knows in the drama.

The cast is fantastic and the acting superb, but the play, beautifully directed by Joanna Weir Ousten, also benefits from a gorgeous set that looks so real you want to walk into the room and take a seat, and other technical aspects that show minute attention to detail. Kudos to Faith Riccio and Brad Lussier for special effects, which play a significant role here, especially at the climax.

Another nice touch in keeping with Elements Theatre Company's unflagging professionalism is a biographical display about Noel Coward in the lobby. The program also devotes two and a half pages to Coward, who was born into poverty days before Christmas in 1899, launched his acting career at 11 and made his name as a playwright with 1924's "The Vortex."

In her director's note, Ousten recounts that Coward wrote of the 1941 debut of "Blithe Spirit" that the audience "had to walk over planks laid over rubble caused by a recent air raid" to see the play.

Thankfully, no such hardship exists with this stellar production, but if it did, it would have been worth it. A true tribute to the playwright, this show is beautifully staged — and great fun.

If You Go

What: 'Blithe Spirit' Where: Elements Theatre Company, 45 Anchor Drive, Orleans When: Through July 29 Tickets: Call 508-255-3999, elementstheatre.org

Chatham

Dark Sky.

34°

and rising

Flurries

Wind: 15 mph (NW)

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Review: A Lively And Funny 'Blithe Spirit' At Elements

25 July 2018

By: Hadley Whalen

📌 Topics: Local Theater



Stephanie Haig, Phoenix Catlin and Zachary Clark in "Blithe Spirit" at Elementary Theater Company. HANS OLSEN PHOTO

Elements Theater Company is doing what it does best in Noël Coward's "Blithe Spirit," with spot-on accents, perfect diction and impeccable attention to historical detail. Written during World War II, the comedy of manners was an effort by the playwright to provide a lighter perspective on death by borrowing elements from the supernatural and romantic comedy.

The play opens on wealthy couple Ruth and Charles Condomine lounging in their opulent sitting room, engaged in witty banter about their previous marriages, the subject of Charles' first wife, Elvira, coming up frequently. The Condomines have invited the mysterious local medium, Madame Arcati, and another couple over for a dinner party. With neither couple believing in the occult, both expect Arcati to be the entertainment for the evening.

The dinner guests include Dr. and Mrs. Bradman, played by Brad Lussier and Sr. Diana Shannon, respectively. Shannon portrays Mrs. Bradman's giddy excitement about the occult, while Lussier plays up the doctor's skeptical nature.

Sr. Danielle Dwyer plays the quirky Madame Arcati, who insists on riding her bicycle everywhere, even at night. When her supernatural abilities are questioned, Arcati proclaims that she has been a "professional" for many years, declaring, much to the bewilderment of the other characters, that she had "her first trance when she was four, and her first ectoplasmic manifestation when she was five-and-a-half."

Dwyer captures the medium's idiosyncratic nature and is hilarious at many points, most notably while carrying out a seance in which she flails about the stage as though moved by an unseen supernatural force, making strange gestures and noises along with amusing facial expressions.

The lighthearted evening takes an unexpected turn as Charles accidentally summons the ghost of his first wife, a situation highly complicated by the fact that only he can see or hear her, and that she enjoys playing tricks on the other members of the household.

Zachary Clark masterfully presents Charles' turbulent emotional state as he attempts to cope with the reappearance of Elvira and is highly emotive through the character's more manic phases, as he struggles to explain to Ruth what is happening while she naturally believes her husband is going mad.

As the no-nonsense Ruth, Sr. Phoenix Catlin challenges her husband's "didactic" views on women, while simultaneously conveying her insecurities when compared to Elvira. She comically expresses her increasing frustrations with the antics of Elvira, who enjoys tormenting Charles' new wife.

Stephanie Haig is the spirit of Elvira, appearing ghostly in pale makeup and a diaphanous white dress. She portrays both the flirtatious side of Elvira, as she attempts to win Charles over once again, and her cunning nature.

The bumbling and bewildered maid Edith, played by Sarah Hale, adds another level of physical comedy to the show as she has a tendency to run about the house, often crashing into furniture or dropping trays, much to the amusement of the audience.

The talented cast of seven maintains subtle yet flawless British accents throughout the performance, the main characters easily portraying the pretentious and affected airs of the elite.

The authentic costumes add another layer to the period piece, as most characters appear in several elegant outfits befitting of the formal drawing room.

The immersive set completes the piece, including an entire foyer that can be seen through the living room doorway, a baby grand piano, and a crystal chandelier which hangs as a centerpiece in the middle of the stage. In addition, the room holds many hidden surprises, which the spirits avail themselves of in the hilarious and lively grand finale.

Elements' two-and-a-half-hour "Blithe Spirit" is a noteworthy tribute to Noël Coward's highbrow British humor.

Details:

"Blithe Spirit"

At Elements Theater Company, Paraclete House at the Community of Jesus

Through July 29

Information and reservations: 508-240-2400

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