

WCT

**WESTERN
CANADA
THEATRE**

October 6 to 15, 2016
SAGEBRUSH THEATRE



BLITHE SPIRIT

by Noël Coward

STUDY GUIDE

BLITHE SPIRIT

A Study Guide

Production Personnel

Cast

Krista Colosimo	Ruth
Shannon Currie	Elvira
Steven Gartner	Charles
Kelsey Gilker	Edith
Janet Michael	Mrs. Bradman
Christopher Weddell	Dr. Bradman
Anita Wittenberg	Madame Arcati

Creative Team

Ashlie Corcoran	Director
Dana Osborne	Set and Costume Designer
Oz Weaver	Lighting Designer
Christopher Stanton	Sound Designer
Alison Deon	Dialect Coach
Isabelle Ly	Stage Manager
Christine Leroux	Apprentice Stage Manager



Photo by Stephen Wild

Behind the Scenes

Playwright: Noel Coward



Sir Noël Peirce Coward (16 December 1899 – 26 March 1973) was an English playwright, composer, director, actor and singer, known for his wit, flamboyance, and what Time magazine called "a sense of personal style, a combination of cheek and chic, pose and poise".

Coward achieved enduring success as a playwright, publishing more than 50 plays from his teens onwards. Many of his works, such as *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives*, *Design for Living*, *Present Laughter* and *Blithe Spirit*, have remained in the regular theatre repertoire. He composed hundreds of songs, in addition to well over a dozen musical theatre works (including the operetta *Bitter Sweet*), screenplays, poetry, several volumes of short stories, the novel *Pomp and Circumstance*, and a three-volume autobiography. Coward's stage and film acting and directing career spanned six decades, during which he starred in many of his own works. His plays and songs achieved new popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, and his work and style continue to influence popular culture.

By the end of the 1960s, Coward suffered from arteriosclerosis and, during the run of *Suite in Three Keys*, he struggled with bouts of memory loss. This also affected his work in *The Italian Job*, and he retired from acting immediately afterwards. Coward was knighted in 1969 and was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He received a Tony Award for lifetime achievement. In 1972, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters degree by the University of Sussex.

Coward died at his home, Firefly Estate, in Jamaica on 26 March 1973 of heart failure.

Want more information on Noel Coward? Visit this great resource: www.noelcoward.net.

Synopsis

Charles, a successful writer invites an eccentric medium, Madame Arcati, to his house as research for his book. The séance, however, proves successful and the ghost of Charles' first wife is summoned. Suddenly Charles' marriage is in jeopardy as the ghost of his first wife haunts him. While Charles tries to get rid of the ghost, the ghost is trying to get rid of his new wife, Ruth.

Characters

Charles Condomine: A successful writer researching a book called *The Unseen*. He invites Madame Arcati to his country home to conduct a séance that he will use as research.

Ruth: His wife.

Madame Arcati: A medium and author of kids' books. An eccentric, she works through the spirit of a child named Daphne.

Elvira: Charles' dead first wife. A glamorous woman who is summoned by the séance. She died of a heart attack while laughing at a radio programme.

Dr. and Mrs. Bradman: Townspeople who are invited to the séance. They are skeptical.

Edith: The Condomine's maid.



Anita Wittenburg as Madame Arcati. Photo by Stephen Wild.

Activities in the Classroom

Activity #1 - Spiritualism

Spiritualism is a belief that spirits of the dead have both the ability and the inclination to communicate with the living. The afterlife, or "spirit world", is seen by spiritualists, not as a static place, but as one in which spirits continue to evolve. In *Blithe Spirit*, Madame Arcati is a medium who channels the spirit of Charles' first dead wife.

- ✚ Did you know that our own Sagebrush Theatre has been said to be inhabiting a ghost? When you see the show, take a look in the right side of the upper house. A lone seat, Z24, is situated by itself, off to the side. This special seat is reserved for Albert, believed to be the late Arnold Mallott.

The story goes that Mallott's body was never recovered after a flood in 1939 that exposed coffins and upturned tombstones in the Sagebrush Theatre area. He was the first man hanged in Kamloops after he was tried and convicted of murder in 1886. Spooky? You be the judge. It is said that Albert has saved employees from certain accidents, messed with the lighting and sound board during performances and often talked to employees. Now that's dramatic!!

Have students do some more research on Albert, the ghost at Sagebrush theatre.

You can read many stories online, or hear them from the mouths of WCT employees. Further, have students research the most talked about ghosts in Canada. Have them compile their evidence and share it with the class. They can gather in groups and talk about their ghosts or present them to the class in a speech form.

Taking it to another level, this research could be presented as a play. Separate the class in two groups. Have each group focus on one ghost. They will have to present this to the other group trying to convince them that this ghost exists. This could include testimonials from people that have seen the ghost and their stories, encouraging students to develop and portray characters based in a certain time and environment. It may include reenactments of the characters' encounters with the ghost. And it certainly can include the history of the city or town presented in a fun manner!

- ✚ Have a discussion with your class about the most famous ghosts, whether they be in theatre, radio, books, television or movies. What makes ghosts believable? Some ideas to get them started: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Ghost*, *The Uninvited*, *The Canterville Ghost*. What are some others you can think of?

Activity #2-The Improbable Farce

This sub-genre of dramatic comedy called farce, sets itself apart from the other forms because its purpose is to make the audience laugh.

So, how does a farce ensure that the audience will laugh and leave with a lighter heart? It begins with some **low comedy**, or comedy that uses bawdy jokes, physical humor, drunkenness, and silly visuals just for the sake of getting people to laugh. These elements can be found in many plays that are not considered farcical. It's the plot, or lack thereof, that makes a true farce. The plot in a farce is likely to be improbable, and maybe even incomprehensible. In fact, it's up to the audience to accept that the physical and verbal humor runs the show, not the plot. The physical humor, which is high-energy horseplay, reinforces the exaggerated, stereotypical characters. These characters often find themselves in a mix-up of sorts, sometimes even with a mistaken identity, that results in furthering a ridiculous situation.

How does *Blithe Spirit* fall into this category? Give examples of how this play uses low comedy to entertain the audience.

Is the plot improbable? Why? And did you feel that the audience did indeed forgive the simple plot and accept the happenings in the play because of its fun nature? If not, how could they have engaged the audience more?

What are some other famous plays that would fall under the genre of farce?

Activity #3: Post-Show Discussion

1. Discuss the play with your class. What did they like, what did they find challenging? Why? Ask for specifics to generate a more intense conversation.
2. Did you relate to the either of the characters in the play? How? Did you enjoy the character of Madame Arcati? Why?
3. Discuss how the script, directors and technical crew created the "ghost". What did you notice? What techniques were used to create the illusion and was it enough? Encourage your class to research how different ghosts have been created on stage.
4. What did you think of the ending of the play? Have students discuss or write down alternative endings. How would changing the ending effect the rest of the play? How would it change your final feeling about the play?

Curriculum Connections

Drama	Historical and Aesthetic Context Exploring, Drama Forms Performance
Arts Education	Social and Cultural Context
Language Arts	Oral Language, Reading and Viewing, Speaking and Listening
Social Studies	Society and Culture