

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

BLITHE SPIRIT



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Blithe Spirit

Noel Coward (1899-1973)

Premiere: Morosco Theatre,

New York, 1941

Arena Stage, Washington DC, 1996

Jill Savege Scharff

Dazzling dialogue, sparkling wit and high spirits abound in this improbable farce. *Blithe Spirit* has been said to be about the way that men and women amuse each other and get on each other's nerves as they skirmish to win the battle for control of the marriage. But to me it is mainly about the male view of the female. Urbane Charles Condomine "is at the mercy of a party-girl first wife, a nannyish second wife, a dotty mystic and a daffy housemaid" (Lloyd Rose, *Washington Post*, 1996). His friend Doctor Bradman,

whose own wife is a silly nonentity, has little to say in the supporting male role, and not much support to offer. The play gives us a view of women as domineering, crazy, seductive, irresponsible, bossy and irrelevant to the man who is the center of the action.

The introduction of a psychic to direct a séance that leads to the materialization of a former spouse is a mesmerizing convention for addressing the unconscious. The action of the play gives rise to witty reflections on the way we deal with our ambivalence, our perceptions, and our memories. Charles and Ruth Condomine are discussing their former marriages, apparently with humor and tolerance, while awaiting the arrival of their dinner guests, Dr. and Mrs. Bradman and Madame Arcati, a psychic who will conduct a séance for the entertainment and erudition of the skeptical couples. To their astonishment, the provocative spirit of Charles's dearly departed spouse, Elvira, appears to haunt them long after the séance is abandoned. Now the hag-ridden husband doesn't stand a ghost of a chance with either of his wives. Their jealousy and Ruth's murder lead to further losses which reveal Charles's surrender in relation to his wives, an attitude that stems from his submissive relationship to his mother. All in all, a sardonic tale of undying love.

Take the character of Madame Arcati, the psychic whose paranormal gifts exceed their promise on this occasion. A jolly-hockey-sticks kind of

person who loves exercise and strong drink, she seems an unlikely sort to be into paranormal influence. This perception of her supports the idea that she may be a hoax. Compared to the two mainstream, bourgeois married couples, she is, however a singularly unconventional person who proves herself capable of trances – at first a seemingly extraordinary gift, but then found to be held in common with someone as unlikely as the ungainly maid.

Sophisticated, educated couples from the literary Condomines to the scientific Bradman's scoff at the paranormal, as weird, fake and low class. They assume that the only reason for their being vulnerable to its influence must be that Charles Condomine has been harboring a preoccupation about his first wife. Ultimately it is proved that the source of influence was in fact the paranormal susceptibility of the maid. But that does not explain why the subject chosen to materialize was the first Mrs. Condomine, Elvira. And why might the maid have done this? Could the maid have been angry at her employer, the first Mrs. Condomine, Elvira, for controlling her and therefore wanted to stir up trouble to get back at her? But we saw no evidence of her rage as she tried to comply with directions. So we have to return to the first explanation and elaborate upon it. Charles Condomine was longing for the mischievous companionship of his first wife at a time when his second wife was rather brittle, humorless, and preoccupied with things about the house being just perfect for her guests.

Ruth said that she was not worried about her husband's memory of his physically attractive first wife, Elvira, but he seemed to like to tease Ruth about it. Was he right that she was secretly jealous and threatened or was he trying to evoke strong feelings in her when really it was his own longing that he wanted to disavow and attribute to her?

Coward uses the paranormal as a theatrical convention to explore the effects of lingering love attachment on marriage. Paranormality gives the playwright a literal way of dramatizing the unconscious in general and looking at the interlocking unconscious internal object relationships of a couple. He also draws our attention to the problems of remarriage. Any ambivalence that remains about the first marriage will enter the arena of the second marriage and ill-feeling will land on the current spouse despite efforts to dump it on the former spouse. In couples with children, this troubled aspect of the former relationship may be brought to the second marriage by one of the children who has identified with that aspect of the parent's relationship. In this play, we hear nothing of any children of either couple, unless you consider the maid as being in the role of the child, and an unsatisfactory child certainly. Both couples seem out of touch with their own child-like selves as they strive for a veneer of civility for social approbation.

Ruth Condomine is portrayed as a rather proper person, beautiful in an elegant, understated way, well-mannered, always civil, sometimes icily so. A

woman who already seems to be made of something other than flesh and blood, she looks like a mannequin, behaves impeccably, and controls her environment. In the production I saw (Arena Stage Washington DC, May 1996) Ruth carries an affected accent that is clipped and distorted like a person who is trying to jump up a social class and sound like the Queen. In contrast, Elvira is beautiful in a voluptuous way, impulsive, outrageously noticeable, and naughty. Her speech betrays a hint of midlands accent which is regarded as inferior to the perfect standard accent that is used for Condomine himself. The two women represent powerful female influence with twin aspects of control and seductiveness, domineering to the man. Charles is helplessly entangled in his passion for Elvira, unable to return the world of rationality represented by Ruth, and so remains caught between his two images of the female figure, both of which ensnare him. We learn that he was hag-ridden by his mother until the age of 25. I imagine his mother to have been more like Ruth on the surface. I think of Charles as a son who required the powerful attraction of a woman like Elvira to pull him away from his mother. With an exciting woman like Elvira he could hope to re-find within her the lost libidinal object from his oedipal years. When Elvira died, he lost that object for the second time and chose to re-find a different aspect of his mother the second time in Ruth, so as not to lose again.

In the course of the play Charles defuses the power of both women by setting them off against each other, until their mutual jealousy leads to their

death and separation. Charles declares his independence at last, and we get a sense of how hag-ridden he has felt. For a moment we think that he is free, but again we learn that significant attachments persist. Now his wives join each other in the spirit world where they will combine to torture him forever. He will never be free of them.

Most psychoanalysts would attribute this attachment to bad objects to the paranormal, but to the persistence of experience in the form of psychic structure. All our relationships fit into a scheme that resides inside us as a template, an expectation of how our loved ones will perceive us and treat us. We and they will find aspects of themselves in us, and we will find aspects of ourselves in them, and together we will enact current relationships that reflect past scenarios. The healthier we are, the more hope there is that new relationships will have the potential for not simply reflecting old experiences, but for modifying it. With Elvira, Charles Condomine must have hoped to recreate an image of his mother that was warm and exciting, but Elvira remained a one-dimensional character and seemed not to have matured in the seven years of marriage. She retained a defense of having affairs as an alternative to having her seductive agreeable demeanor be disrupted by confrontation and anger at Charles for his ignoring or patronizing behavior. The patronizing behavior of which both women complained is Charles's defense against realizing how infantile he feels because of being so totally dependent on these women to run his life. The inept maid is a simple woman.

All that is plain, boring, unglamorous, unsophisticated, and verbally uninteresting is projected into her. This characterization of an uneducated woman is full of snobbery and prejudice. The others laugh at her and try to cure her faults. Surely they do this to aggrandize themselves and to distance themselves from human failing. Yet her ordinariness is a point of entry to play for some of us who cannot identify with her employers.

For all his sophistication, Coward himself came from a humble family, not of the servant class, but the lower middle class living in genteel poverty and moving frequently – from Teddington, to Sutton, to Barrersea, to the country. At each location, there would be house-guests – his mother’s mother, her mentally retarded sister, her maid Emma, and lodgers, two of whom dressed for dinner and enjoyed musical soirees after the meal. Perhaps they brought a glimpse of the influence of theatre on daily life.

Noel’s mother Violet was the moving force in the development of his artistic career, while his more retiring father, Arthur provided the musical inheritance. Arthur was an adequate pianist for the purposes of demonstrating the performance of the pianos that he sold but had no talent for composition. Coward’s uncle was an organist like his father before him, and all the members of his father’s family were musical and sang in the church choir where his parents met. When Noel received instruction in confirmation class, mainly to please his mother, one of the instructors made a

pass at him, which he rebuffed, and he was definitely not one for religion after that. In any case sacred music was not his *métier*: When he sang, he wanted to enjoy applause.

Noel began as a child actor at the age of eight. As a teenager he learned theatrecraft by apprenticing himself to Charles Hawtrey whom he virtually shadowed. During this time, his schooling was somewhat neglected, but no doubt the two-pound-a week pay that he earned helped pay the bills for his family and keep him in books. He was already friends with two other child stars, Gertrude Lawrence and Esmée Wynne who put up with him because of his charm and talent, became collaborators, and remained lifelong friends.

The playwright got his name, Noel, because he was born on 16 December, just in time for Christmas 1899. His mother hovered over him in his infant years, anxiously trying to protect him because she had lost her firstborn son at the age of six, one and a half years before Noel's birth. This let up somewhat after brother Eric was born, but Noel continued to be the object of his mother's intense preoccupation. Noel was unimpressed with his brother's "bright red and singularly unattractive appearance". Perhaps Noel wished that Eric had not been born, an idea that came to me when I read that Noel was known for playing tricks in which he rigged up prams holding babies to run back into their mothers. He was also known for shoplifting to make ends meet. He was self-centered and precociously gifted. His mother

doted on him, recognized his theatrical talent, and fostered his artistic ambitions. For all his confidence, he was anxious about losing his mother to accidental death. He had a dreadful temper that he exercised to get his own way. As an adult, he always felt that he was right and refused to allow a single word of his script to be changed deliberately or carelessly, and frequently refused permission for screen adaptations.

Blithe Spirit opened in London in 1941 with Cecil Parker, Fay Compton (Ruth), Margaret Rutherford (Madame Arcati), and Kay Hammond (Elvira). Noel Coward himself took over from Cecil Parker the role of Charles Condomine for a two week period and also took *Blithe Spirit* with two of his other plays on a tour of the provinces. Then it was produced on Broadway where it won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for 1942. But Coward refused offers from Hollywood for some time. Finally he gave permission for David Lean to make a film *Blithe Spirit* starring Rex Harrison, Constance Cummings, Kay Hammond and Margaret Rutherford. But he flatly refused its serialization as a radio soap opera with Janet Gaynor in the lead. His telegram read:

“IN NO CIRCUMSTANCES WHATEVER STOP SUGGEST THEY GET SHAW’S
PERMISSION TO USE SAINT JOAN.”

During the two weeks when he took over the role of Condomine, Coward was devastated to learn of the accidental death of his friend and

neighbor, the Duke of Kent. Grieving, he found it difficult to act in his amusing play that treated death so lightly, and yet the tone of the play must have made it palatable to his wartime audience. *Blithe Spirit* ran for almost two thousand performances, a record broken only by *Chu Chin Chow* and *The Mousetrap*. In the production I saw (Arena Stage, Washington, DC, May, 1996) I loved the reversal of color used in the set design. The super elegant country house is alarmingly tilted and yet characters are supremely unaware of the disorder inherent in their normal space. The text calls for the living world to have normal color and for the spirits to waft through it in grey like traditional ghosts. Instead, the everyday world is a subdued, smoky grey-blue with correct fifties evening attire while the spirits in contrast kick up their heels daringly in siren red and electric blue haute couture. These colors speak to me of the power of the lost objects overshadow the current everyday objects in our inner worlds.

Of course *Blithe Spirit* is a farce, based on an improbable premise, reserve and high camp hilariously intertwined. Lots of action and slapstick make us roll with laughter. But the play packs its punch as it portrays the hidden tragedy of losing loved ones, finding current relationships eroded by ambivalence over current and earlier attachments, feeling unable to control our loved ones' feelings for us, and being helpless to ensure their continuing presence against the threat of infidelity and mortality. The entry to the spirit world conveys the possibility of life after death, which must have been as

reassuring as it was entertaining to the public in Britain at the end of the war.

Coward was a stylist not a conceptual playwright. As an actor who wrote, he knew what would sound good and have dramatic impact. As the son of the middle class, he had an objective view of the upper middle classes and used his theatrical gifts both to comment on their habits and speech and to join their more elite society. He wrote comedies of manners that explored – often without the use of a plot – the sight and sound of human interaction as his characters maintained their pretenses of charm and control and their defenses against the purposelessness of their servant-supported lives. He gave them charming, witty, dialogue that reflects and yet transcends the mundane quality of their preoccupations and the sterility of his characters' existence. He explores the surface of superficial people but he does so in an enduringly entertaining way that reveals a depth of understanding of social defenses. We are drawn by humor to learn about ourselves quite painlessly and to laugh at ourselves without ever realizing that we have to change. Coward's plays are a triumph of scintillating style over substance, of frivolity over fear. As John Lahr commented, "Frivolity acknowledges the futility of life while adding flavor to it."

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