

Blithe Spirit is less of a ghost story and more about relationships: Director



A ghost or two are set to take over the Theatre Aurora stage this week as they raise the curtain on Noel Coward's classic play, *Blithe Spirit*? but, if you're looking for a traditional ghost story, you might instead find an enduring comedy that's more about relationships than anything else.

Blithe Spirit opens with Charles and Ruth Condomine planning a smart dinner party, extending an invitation to local eccentric and self-styled medium Madame Arcati to host a séance as an added attraction.

Well, Arcati's powers are more than she anticipated and, before long, she's conjured up the ghost of Charles's first wife, Elvira, and, needless to say, hijinks ensue. Also, given the fact Elvira is conjured back to life just as earthy and attractive as she was at the time of her death, her presence naturally complicates Charles' marriage to Ruth.

?Elvira is really there after Charles and really lays it on thick,? says director Judi Cragg with a laugh. ?You can feel sorry for Charles that this is happening, to a certain extent, but when he sits there and says to his live wife that he's enjoying having his dead wife around and how physically attractive she is, it's not the most clever thing to say to your wife!?

Blithe Spirit is the penultimate show of Theatre Aurora's 2023-2024 season and director Judi Cragg is eager to take on a classic.

?There are a lot of younger people who have never even heard of Noel Coward, which is kind of sad, but I was drawn to *Blithe Spirit* for a couple of reasons; One, Coward is just so witty and clever, and it's the pacing that is so different that sets it apart. It's very funny, but different from some of the more modern comedy we get nowadays.?

Coward, she says, wrote the play in under a week, with little more than a few line changes before it was mounted on the stage in 1941. Written during the Second World War, Coward rightly thought the world could use a laugh. Ordinarily, of course, a play that features the theme of death so prominently isn't necessarily the sturdiest foundation for a laugh-fest, but it hit the right spot ? originally running for nearly 2,000 performances.

?The death part in it is not sad, it's just something kind of matter-of-fact,? says Cragg of Elvira's demise, which happened well before the action of the play. ?The tricky bit was you're writing about death and that wasn't funny at the time ? people were losing family members [in the war] and so on ? but it's incredible Coward managed to shape this piece in such a way that people were able to laugh and it was huge. It's just funny.?

And audiences spanning generations agree. Always a popular favourite for theatre companies large and small, *Blithe Spirit* has also garnered fans through the 1945 film adaptation starring Rex Harrison and Margaret Rutherford, and even took Toronto by storm in

2015 when Angela Lansbury brought Madame Arcati to life at The Princess of Wales Theatre.

?It's one of those plays that provides an escape,? says Cragg. ?Post-COVID, it's still in our brains and I think we still need to laugh, we still need an escape, and Blithe Spirit provides that. It's funny, it's fast-paced, it's witty and nothing that is going to make you upset or cry. It's not one of those things that's going to make you think a lot or feel a lot, and I love those kinds of plays, too. It's just fun.

?[When it was first produced] The Daily Herald [called it], ?A sophisticated escape from the realities of today,' and that can relate to almost any time in our history. I hope when people come, they will laugh, they will enjoy it, and they will walk out the door saying, ?That was great.' That's what you're going to get.?

Theatre Aurora's production of Blithe Spirit, billed as a ?hauntingly hilarious tale of love, laughter and late wives? opens Thursday, February 29, running on select dates and times through March 9. For tickets and showtimes, visit theatreaurora.com or call the box office at 905-727-3669.

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