

GREATER MANCHESTER DRAMA FEDERATION

Society	CHADS
Title	<i>Blithe Spirit</i>
Author	Noël Coward
Date & Time	13.12.18
Venue	CHADS

Production highlights:

- Strongly portrayed roles.
- Excellent costumes.
- Stunning staging and very good technical invention and execution.
- Appreciative audience

To think about for the future:

- Keep up the pace through to the end of the production.
- Manage without a prompt—this is a needless safety net.
- Honour the script!

THE PRODUCTION

Adjudicator writes and identifies themes, challenges and requirements, etc., and details the requirements and elements of the production in which he was particularly interested.

Noël Coward was a prolific playwright publishing more than fifty 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. They are all now very much period pieces, firmly set in the inter-war years and populated by a definite 'type'. But underneath the witty dialogue and the Art Deco glamour, Coward's best plays deal with recognisable people and familiar relationships, with an emotional depth and pathos that had been often overlooked.

Character-driven and with the potential to be very funny, *Blithe Spirit* combines farce, emotion, wit, sculpted dialogue and sheer improbability to great effect.

Comedy is difficult. Comic lines are not funny if they are not articulated properly and if the rhythms are misunderstood or ignored. Also, within lines, operative words become very important in terms of setting up jokes, creating comic situations, and supporting the funny bits. *Blithe Spirit* is lengthy and wordy, so the action and dialogue needs to clip along at pace without feeling rushed. Slow line pickups between actors can be deadly, especially when dialogue is supposed to overlap. It all needs to make sense, every word, and everyone needs to know their lines inside out.

Furthermore, the technical challenges are significant in *Blithe Spirit*, not only in set construction, decor and successful staging the trickery of the final scene, but also in spectral lighting, and ghostly costumes and make-up.

DIRECTION

Detailed study/knowledge and interpretation of the text; progressing the author's intent with creativity and sensitivity. Using theatrical dynamics to communicate with the audience. Appropriate delivery of the text using timing and rhythm. Settings with regard to focus, pace and groupings. Movement which is appropriate to the period and style of production. Creating atmosphere and mood to develop the full dramatic impact.

Director: Mike Bullimore

It doesn't matter if the theatre company is tackling a musical, a comedy, a drama or even a pantomime, when considering direction, we ask the same four questions.

- Is there a creative approach to the understanding and communication of the text to an audience?
- Is there evidence of the creation of an ensemble piece?
- Is there good command of stage groupings and the movement of the actors displays a good understanding of motivation?
- Is pacing appropriate and is the shaping of the piece confident and successful?

I will take each of these in turn.

Firstly, understanding and communication of the text. Early rehearsals must draw out situations, relationships, motivations. In *Blithe Spirit* we saw a series of characters who communicated their actions, desires, plots and sub-plots in a convincing, naturalistic way, with humour and style. Characters were well-drawn, believable, funny, empathetic. Situations were played naturally and believably. Understanding the text and developing strong characters to communicate the messages within are very often forgotten about in amateur theatre. Not here today.

Secondly, creation of an ensemble piece. *Blithe Spirit* is more an improbable comedy of manners than a farce, so the key to the humour is in development and breakdown the relations between Charles, Ruth and Elvira, with important support from Mme Arcati, Edith and the Bradmans. This was a wholly integrated cast who worked together well.

Thirdly, stage groupings and the movement. Whereas most of the groupings, exits, entrances and movements are carefully laid out in the script, having the skill to co-ordinate these is key. Although we saw one or two awkward moments—mostly when one of the characters was seated—there was an overall flow in groupings and movement which came across as entirely innate. I never once thought that a character had moved simply because the director wanted a change of focus: there was always an underlying motivation.

And fourthly, pace. Perhaps a definition is needed here. By 'pace', I mean sharp snappy physical moves and dialogue where cues are picked up promptly and overlap in a flowingly natural way. Actors must not wait for their cues but run the first few words over the previous speaker: this is especially important in a comedy. One or two of the actors needed to be quicker on cues, but, in general, dialogue and action flowed pleasingly. For comedy to work we need to understand the set-up with the inevitable scene-setting in the early scenes. These set-up scenes needed a faster pace and although

the central part of the play pushed forward at full flow and we were happily swept along (the séance scene was perfectly judged), the pace seemed to drop in the last third of the play. Perhaps it was simply the length of the play—three hours plus interval—the lateness of the hour or just some drama fatigue from your adjudicator but I do feel that some judicious cutting would have been welcome to push us to the dénouement of the final scene: the production did rather run out of steam. In general, however, Mike had a lightness of touch that allowed the play to flow freely, just as it should.

Very often in amateur theatre we see problems with projection (volume of spoken performance), emphasis (stress on particular words), pace of delivery (pauses, speed of word transactions, cross-cueing) and diction (clarity of speech). In general, these were not issues—some more detail is within the acting section. I counted two prompts (one from Charles, one from the cook). This was most unfortunate: the magic of theatre is easily derailed by a prompt or two. I would recommend not using the safety net of a prompt—nothing forces an actor to learn their script thoroughly when they know that they have no backup in the wings.

Finally, and most importantly, always honour the script. In the copy of the script provided to me, the character of the cook *does not appear!* From where did this character and her dialogue spring? Not from Coward's play, that's for certain. Also, we had a number of short tableaux between scenes three and four in act two (act three scenes one and two in the script) that I suspect came from the film version. This has snappy lighting cues, clock effects and carefully blocked moves, so considerable work had been put into it. In my view, the script of a play is sacrosanct. Playwrights sweat over every scene, and every word, and are fiercely protective of their art. Whereas cuts to the script are valid in lengthy plays (and by "cuts", I mean simply removing lines) adding to and amending the script is not only infringing copyright but is also in direct opposition to the work of the author. I might be more forgiving if the addition of the cook had served the production in some way, but it didn't. The "have they gone?" tableaux were creatively executed and funny, but their inclusion made me feel very uneasy. This was otherwise a carefully and artistically directed production.

ACTING

Characterisation which is believable shows flair, originality and understanding. Vocal technique which is appropriate to the play and is delivered with understanding and a good technique. Movement which is in character and in period and incorporating movement to deliver pace. Supporting one's fellow actor unselfishly and enhancing his performance. Using all available theatrical skills to make a noticeable contribution to the play.

Ruth – Rani Jackson

Brisk and brittle but never brusque, Rani Jackson's Ruth was convincing, every inch the concerned wife trying to restore Charles to normality. Rani's characterisation throughout was secure, especially her jealousy of Charles's relationship with Elvira and her becoming gradually unhinged before the dramatic exit into the afterlife. Movements were fluid, vocal delivery was good. One area to explore further is in expression within delivery: look to vary rise and fall within sentences—different levels of projection and pitching. More variety here would add depth to dialogue, and to add further to your formidable toolkit of skills. This was evident in the neat pointing of typical Coward lines such as "one can hardly imagine it, can one, "in what way unreliable?" and "I'm awfully sorry I was cross"—I simply think we needed more like this. Rani's exchanges with Charles were carefully crafted and wholly convincing but at times her pick up cues could have been slightly sharper. Rani's anger was genuinely delivered but her rants could

have been so much bigger – we needed to see a steely ferocity with no holding back. On the whole, this was a first-rate and accomplished performance. I think Rani had a touch of laryngitis, so well done for pushing through.

Charles – Paul Reid

Paul Reid portrayed Charles as an urbane but selfish prig—sophisticated, articulate, debonair, pompous, a little vain, and a definite cad. His delivery was sustained and natural: sharp on cues, solid on lines other than an unfortunate prompt in act two. The heated exchanges between Charles and Ruth were terrific. His cool unflappability should have yielded to incipient panic at the prospect of Elvira's reappearance, so we needed more here, and I feel there should have been rancour rather than irritation under breakfast-table interrogation. But, the routines in which Charles addresses sharp words to the wayward Elvira undoubtedly produced some moments of comedy. Paul was utterly in control and gave us a reliably solid, if not sparkling, performance.

Edith – Freya Clarke

There's always a place in great theatre for those often thankless smaller roles. Freya Clarke bumbled and bustled with good timing and a knack for physical comedy. I didn't see much of the nervousness that the character demanded—Edith knows that Arcati is a fraud, hence her required edginess could have been brought out more. Freya handled her spotlight scene towards the end very well, and was very adept throughout with the great number of props she needed to manage. Be careful though of casting a shadow onto the set whilst waiting to enter, and of being out of position before bringing on the breakfast table (before act 1, scene 3) – the table could be seen even if you couldn't!

Dr and Mrs Bradman – Mike Brown and Adele Singer

The Bradmans are very much supporting characters but are important to the plot as participants in the séance and observers of the changes in relationship between Charles and Ruth.

Mike Brown gave a very likable, suave and confident performance as Dr Bradman. We need to see that he is entirely sceptical of anything to do with the occult but goes along to help his friend Charles. In this, the relationship between them was believable and Mike deserves praise here, especially for his perfect diction and carefully observed facial expressions and body language.

Adele Singer, as Mrs Bradman, provided a nicely judged performance with a delightful delivery, very upper class, with clarity and perfect phrasing.

Both actors were secure in their lines, confident in their movements, strong in their characterisations and were never overshadowed by the lead roles. You can judge the strength of a good actor when you simply cannot tell that they are consciously acting: in this respect, both Mike and Adele gave us excellent supporting roles last night.

Elvira – Joan Taylor-Jones

At once both alluring and disconcerting, Elvira was an other-worldly, larger than life ghost with a goal. Joan Taylor-Jones' Elvira was simultaneously supercilious, languid, petulant, spirited, outgoing, wild, and carefree; in life and in death. She does love Charles, if somewhat casually, and is jealous of Ruth, and this central tension of the play was handled very well.

I worried that Joan's stylised, fruity delivery would contrast unfavourably with the more refined Condomines, but this ethereal approach reminded us that Elvira was, indeed, an "ecoplasmic manifestation". As Elvira reveals herself capable of extreme measures to steal Charles away from Ruth, we see how carefully this talented actor understood her character and was able to carefully and successfully portray a most difficult role.

Mme Arcati – Jackie Longdon

Jackie Longdon gave us a wry, spry, convincing performance of real depth; a bossy, dotty, jolly old soul much given to barks and hums as she attempts to make contact with the other side. Although Arcati is meant to be played "big", crucially Jackie never upstaged or overshadowed her fellow actors—playing this role as a pantomime dame would have been lethal. Jackie portrayed Mme Arcati from the character's point of view: not as a fake medium but as someone who takes her trade seriously. This was no scene-stealing over-the-top-for-the-sake-of-it performance, but one founded on a very clear view of who Mme Arcati was, and therefore how she should be played. In this she was utterly believable as a duly eccentric Arcati, generous to the rest of the ensemble, but extracting every laugh as it came. Jackie made a slip with "two raps for yes" but recovered quickly.

Cook – Janine Walters

Janine did what she could, with confidence, with what she was given. The accent was, however, uncertain. She took a prompt as well and this is difficult to ignore in such a small role. More experience and lots of practice will develop your talents further.

TECHNICAL

Set and props

A set which shows creativity and innovation and addresses the style of the production. Is well constructed. Props which are in period, authentic in appearance and placed strategically e.g. furniture.

The set for *Blithe Spirit* was wholly impressive in every way. It was attractive, elegant, smartly furnished and right. The attention to detail in set dressing was remarkable: recessed book shelves, a stereogram, period light switch, dado rail ... even the ornaments and pictures looked appropriate. Here was a set that could have graced the West End. The settings and furnishings enhanced the production very creatively and indicate 'place' and 'period' with great immediacy. The final scene, with flying books, falling pictures, tumbling curtains and slamming doors worked really well. Full marks to the stage and technical crew for their work. Beware of wobbly flats next to repeatedly slammed doors - the flats stage right moved alarmingly from time to time.

Props were superb: *The Times*, silver salt and pepper pots, cocktail set, coffee pot, the vinyl records, crystal ball, practical period phone. Good work, here.

Lighting and Sound

Lighting and sound effects which contribute towards the dramatic potential, etc.

The use of lighting, sound and stage effects underpinned the production very creatively to give us mood and atmosphere. With practical lamps, moonlight and flickering fire there was much more to the lighting than might be imagined. Cues were correct and well-timed. There were many good sound effects ('Always', rain, thunder, Elvira's harp flourish, the closing 'The House is Haunted'). There was also the sound of the needle lifting from the record which was timed to perfection by the actor or the technician. Either way it was impressively executed. The effects were carefully chosen and executed with great precision, especially Elvira's and Daphne's disembodied voices.

Costumes, Make-up and Hair

Costumes which are in of the period, well fitting, colour co-ordinated and enhance characterisation. Make-up, hair and wigs which are in period and appropriate to the production (including size of venue) and assist in developing the character.

Without exception, the many and varied costumes had a strong impact and communicated the attributes of the characters immediately and accurately. At no time did I see any aspect of the costumes that were out of place and many were outstanding, including Charles' tuxedo, Ruth's series of elegant dresses and ghostly outfit towards the end, Elvira's flowing dress, Edith's maid's uniform and dressing gown, and Mrs Bradman's fur stole and long gloves. Shoes are often an afterthought (if considered at all) and pleasingly, footwear matched the costumes perfectly. Hair—wigs mostly—and make-up were excellent—a shout out to the backstage team for Ruth's remarkable transformation.

OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT

An excellent understanding of the author's intent. Direction which shows skill, originality, sensitivity and creativity using all the theatrical tools of pace, focus, delivery, timing and rhythm. Talented actors creating highly effective dramatic impact. Evidence of teamwork and unselfish ensemble playing. Actors who interact and react and a production team who use all resources to create atmosphere and mood.

There are four specific areas of focus when judging overall achievement:

- Communication with the audience—there was a highly developed understanding of theatrical communication underpinned by a creative use of technology.
- Realisation and interpretation of the text—this was a sensitive and imaginative realisation and interpretation of the text, notwithstanding the needless additions.
- Dramatic impact—CHADS' expertise is obvious in the creation of an effective dramatic impact, somewhat dulled by a slightly listless last third.
- Interaction between the actors—generous, unselfish and theatrical artistry ensures positive interaction between the actors. Acting standards were high.

Blithe Spirit remains a guaranteed box office success: the theatre was full and the audience was very appreciative.

Overall, this was a confident, entertaining production—perhaps not sparking, and certainly not without fault (in particular the script changes), but with much to enjoy.

Adjudicator (print)	Andrew Wild
Adjudicator (sign)	
Date	14.12.2018