

SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION



On Cue

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Compiled by Kelly Young

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Kelly Young is the Education Manager for Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Kelly on kyoung@sydneytheatre.com.au

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ABOUT *ON CUE* & STC

ABOUT *ON CUE*

STC Ed has a suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season.

Each school show will be accompanied by an *On Cue* e-publication which will feature essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis and suggested learning experiences.

For more in-depth digital resources surrounding productions, please visit the STC Ed page on our website:

sydneytheatre.com.au/education

Such resources include:

- Director documentaries
- Design sketchbooks

STC acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which the Company gathers. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with whom we work and with whom we share stories.

ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Almost 40 years later, that ethos still rings true.

STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Roslyn Packer Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as its resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community halls; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program; partners with groups in metropolitan Sydney, regional centres and rural areas; and reaches beyond NSW with touring productions throughout Australia. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers.

The theatre careers of many of Australia's internationally renowned artists have been launched and fostered at STC, including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Hugo Weaving, Toni Collette, Rose Byrne, Benedict Andrews and Cate Blanchett.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies and, in recent years, the company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, by its arts funding and advisory body, and by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW.

sydneytheatre.com.au

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS



SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 9 – 12

SUBJECTS

Drama Stages 5 and 6

- Dramatic Forms and Performance
Styles: Scripted Drama, Improvisation, Playbuilding and Acting
- Elements of Production in Performance
- Theatrical Traditions and Performance Styles: Comedy, Heightened Realism

THEMES AND IDEAS

- Love and Acceptance
- Marriage and Domesticity
- Challenging Gender Stereotypes
- The Confines of Class

CAST & CREATIVES

NOËL COWARD'S **Blithe Spirit** DIRECTED BY PAIGE RATTRAY

CHARLES CONDOMINE

MATT DAY

MRS BRADMAN

NANCY DENIS

RUTH CONDOMINE

BESSIE HOLLAND

ELVIRA CONDOMINE

SHANE JENEK AKA

COURTNEY ACT

DR BRADMAN

TRACY MANN

EDITH

MEGAN WILDING

MADAME ARCATI

BRIGID ZENGENI

UNDERSTUDY

GLENN HAZELDINE

UNDERSTUDY

STEPHANIE SOMERVILLE

DIRECTOR

PAIGE RATTRAY

DESIGNER

DAVID FLEISCHER

LIGHTING DESIGNER

DAMIEN COOPER

ASSOCIATE LIGHTING DESIGNER

BEN HUGHES

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER

CLEMENCE WILLIAMS

MAGIC & ILLUSIONS CONSULTANT

ADAM MADA

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

TAIT DE LORENZO

VOICE & TEXT COACH

LEITH MCPHERSON

DESIGN ASSISTANT

JEREMY ALLEN

FIGHT & MOVEMENT DIRECTOR

NIGEL POULTON

PRODUCTION MANAGER

JOE FLETCHER

STAGE MANAGER

ELIZABETH WEBSTER

DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER

ISABELLA KERDJIK

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

BROOKE KISS

COSTUME COORDINATOR

NICOLE ARTSETOS

WIG, HAIR & MAKE UP SUPERVISOR

BENJAMIN MOIR

WIG STYLIST

LINDSAY CHAPMAN

LIGHTING SUPERVISOR

DOUG NIEBLING

SOUND SUPERVISOR

DAMIEN HERBERT

SOUND ENGINEER

SAM HARPER

STAGING SUPERVISOR

KEN FROST

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER

PRUDENCE UPTON

2 HOUR 40 MINS, INCLUDING INTERVAL

THIS PRODUCTION FIRST OPENED ON 25 MARCH 2022

AT THE DRAMA THEATRE, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

First presented by HM Tennent Ltd and John C Wilson at the Opera House, Manchester, on 16 June 1941 (the following week the company played at Leeds); subsequently presented at the Piccadilly Theatre, London on 2 July 1941, transferred to the St James's Theatre on 23 March 1942, and then to the Duchess Theatre on 6 October 1942 (1,997 performances).

BLITHE SPIRIT © NC Aventales AG 1941

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FROM THE DIRECTOR PAIGE RATTRAY

There is a stereotype that gets a lot of airtime in world of contemporary storytelling (theatre, TV, films, etc). Basically, it says that tragedies are timeless, but comedies date really quickly. I've spent a lot of my career developing new Australian work and so it was only recently that I had the chance to read *Blithe Spirit*. If you ever need to be swiftly disabused of that particular stereotype then get to know this play: there is a reason this is one of the most revived comedies in the repertoire. And, most excitingly, the deep and intrinsic humour of this piece, written by Coward in 6 days in what must have been a fever dream of witticisms and, is one that continues to reveal itself — it gets funnier and funnier the more you rehearse it and the more theatrical elements you add (to be fair, though, what comedy doesn't benefit from the addition of wigs?).

Having said all of this, my vision for this play didn't completely coalesce until Courtney came on the scene. Courtney is such a talented and versatile artist, and one of the things I most respect about her work is the way she brings different audiences together. She can win one of the UK's most popular mainstream reality TV shows with style and aplomb and all the while talk and educate in depth about the nuanced complexities of gender theory and contemporary queer life. I realised after being a fan of Courtney's for many years that her's was the approach I wanted to take with *Blithe Spirit*. I wanted to take something that everyone loves, the undeniable wit and fierceness of Coward's writing, and combine it with some of my own interests; the role of women within the politics of love and marriage, the latent queerness that pervades so much of what we consider 'polite society'.

With Courtney joining the team, the challenge became finding a group of actors and creatives that could match her fabulousity and bring their own personal glamour to the rehearsal room and, eventually, to the stage. It's my great fortune and, if I can be so bold, yours, that Matt Day, Nancy Denis, Bessie Holland, Tracy Mann, Megan Wilding, and

Brigid Zengeni were available and willing to be part of this production. Every single one of them is smart, committed, endlessly creative and, perhaps, most importantly, brain-splittingly hilarious. Everyday the rehearsal room echoes with the sound of uncontrollable laughter — what a pleasure! I've been thinking about what these amazing performers have in common, why they all mesh so well together, and I think it's because they're all such spectacular listeners.

Of course, a big personality helps when trying to make people laugh (and, don't get me wrong, this cast has personality in spades) but comedy only really works when performers properly listen to their counterparts, when they respond to offers in a genuine and authentic way. That's how you create the intricate and precisely timed ballet of delivery that this type of writing requires.

Blithe Spirit is traditionally classified as a farce and it's true that the story is overflowing with wacky antics and steadily increasing sense of delirium. But in this production, we've also been looking at a somewhat underexplored genre within the piece: melodrama. In some ways, melodrama is the flip side to farce. In both, the stakes start at 10 miles high and only continue to climb. But in melodrama, it's not just an outsized sense of hilarity that is compressed into an otherwise simple situation. It's also love and grief and fear. Cups of tea becomes issues of life or death. In the times we've been living in, this strategy of squeezing big emotions (positive and negative) into small spaces and small situations feels very apt. But what is even more important is the way both farce and melodrama deal with these big feelings. They wrench up the pressure incrementally, until the energy and emotion has nowhere to go but up, released out into the open air like steam from a kettle. Catharsis is a complicated word but, in this case, I think it's right on the money. Above and beyond anything this production is about bringing amazing actors together, bringing amazing creatives together from designers, to magicians, to makeup artists, bringing this theatre company together and, of course, bringing an audience together. It's about bringing all of us together, all our fears, stress and wackiness, and giving us a moment of release.

We've all been through a lot in the last two years and it feels so enlivening to be making big, brazen theatre - hopefully as a kind of antidote to all the darkness that's been around. This is a show that really shows off the best of STC, from props, to scenic design, to costume, to stage management, lighting, to sound and beyond. It's been the perfect vehicle to bring this whole theatre company together to create something beautiful and hilarious and to have a ridiculous amount of fun while doing it, and I love it very much for that. I hope you love it as much as I do.

SYNOPSIS

Charles and Ruth Condomine live in genteel isolation in the English countryside with the latest in a long line of long-suffering maids, Edith. Charles, a famous novelist, is working on his next triumph: a story that delves into the shadowy world of the occult.

In the interest of research and a bit of a laugh, Ruth and Charles invite the nearby village's self-described clairvoyant and medium, Madame Arcati, to conduct a séance in their tastefully appointed drawing room. The Condomines' friends

Doctor and Mrs Bradman join for an evening they all expect to be full of tacky parlour tricks, smoke and mirrors.

But, as the haunting strains of Irving Berlin's *Always* fill the house and Madame Arcati slips into an eerily convincing trance, something more vampy and sinister is unleashed: Charles' long-dead first wife Elvira. And she isn't returning to the underworld until she sorts out some unfinished business.



Courtney Act.
Photo: Prudence Upton

CHARACTER ANALYSIS



Matt Day, Courtney Act and Bessie Holland.
Photo: Prudence Upton

CHARLES CONDOMINE

Charles Condomine is a handsome, twice-married established author who lives in his beautiful country home in Kent. Charles enjoys golf, reading and martinis. Charles has enjoyed several love affairs throughout his life, mostly with women who emasculate him.

RUTH CONDOMINE

Ruth Condomine is a "smart looking woman in her middle thirties". She is practical, pragmatic and efficient. Ruth is married to Charles. This is her second marriage. By all accounts both of her marriages have been sedate and companionable. When confronted by Elvira, Ruth becomes paranoid and erratic. The actor playing Ruth, Bessie Holland, has characterised Ruth as being "at war with everything".

ELVIRA CONDOMINE

Elvira Condomine is a beautiful, cheeky and temperamental ghost who spends her time in the underworld playing cards with historical characters such as Genghis Khan. When Elvira was alive, she was willful and playful, happily having romantic affairs to help manage her marital boredom. She was married to Charles Condomine before she died of pneumonia. The actor playing Elvira, Shane Jenek AKA Courtney Act, has characterised her as a "ratbag".

CHARACTER ANALYSIS *(cont.)*



MADAME ARCATI

The character of Madame Arcati is a parody of the often eccentric upper classes of England who, immersed in wealth, are able to indulge in their often unusual interests. In Madame Arcati's case she enjoys the hobby of contacting the supernatural. She is scatty, larger than life and follows current fads including health food, exercise and dieting. Madame Arcati is, however, a truthful and kind empath. She feels things strongly and is mocked by her peers in spite of her obvious talent.

DOCTOR AND MRS BRADMAN

The characters of Dr. and Mrs. Bradman provide a contrast to the characters of Ruth, Elvira and Charles. Coward uses the Bradmans' solid, reliable attributes to heighten the class differences between the couples. Dr. Bradman, a pompous man, controls his marriage with disdain for his wife's opinion. Director Paige Rattray has cast Tracy Mann as Dr. Bradman. Mrs. Bradman is kind and dull. Neither has

anything interesting to say to each other or the Condomines. The Bradmans' dull respectability contrasts with the covert possibilities raised by the reemergence of Elvira into the Condomine household when reimagining the domestic life of the British.

EDITH

Edith, the maid, is from the British working class, seen both by her costume and the opening dialogue. Interestingly, Coward places Edith at the centre of the plot, with her role key to the development of the narrative, as she provides the conduit for Elvira's return from the afterlife. The actor playing Edith, Megan Wilding, has noted that Edith is in a "constant state of nervousness".

PRE-TEACHING *BLITHE SPIRIT*

The following activities are designed to explore the issues and concerns of *Blithe Spirit*. Before the class begins this exploration, it is important for the students to understand the theatrical forms, styles and conventions that both Coward and Rattway use to create meaning for the audience.

THEATRICAL FORMS, STYLES AND CONVENTIONS

Revise the definitions of the theatrical forms, styles and conventions of Realism, Heightened Realism, Farce, Comedy of Manners, Drag and Camp.

This could take the form of:

- "Theatrical Form, Style and Conventions Matching Race" in groups. Create a pack of cards containing the theatrical styles, techniques and conventions found in *Blithe Spirit*. Place students into groups of 3–4 and match the correct techniques and conventions to the theatrical style. To make it interesting, offer a competition style structure to this activity, with the group who finishes first and correctly are the winners.
- Watching the suggested resources below, identifying and discussing the aesthetics of Camp and Drag:
 - Instagram examples of Camp:
[@Camp.O.Rama](#)
[instagram.com/camp.o.rama/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/camp.o.rama/?hl=en)
[@citizen_ck](#)
[instagram.com/citizen_ck/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/citizen_ck/?hl=en)
 - YouTube examples of *RuPaul's Drag Race* with Courtney Act:
[youtube.com/watch?v=bSrFo5S-HRw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSrFo5S-HRw)

ESTABLISHING THE DIFFERENT CONVENTIONS OF CAMP AND DRAG

It is important that students can identify the difference between the conventions of Camp and Drag. The questions below are designed to help analyse the resources on the left.

- When we watch examples of Camp, what is the 'quotation mark' human behaviour that we can see?
- When we watch Courtney Act in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, can we identify the techniques of Drag?
- Where do Drag and Camp work together in *RuPaul's Drag Race* with Courtney Act?
- What is the impact on the audience?

Group activity:

Choose an everyday routine. Rehearse this routine and present it to the audience. In groups, put "quotation marks" around this routine. These quotation marks might be voice, gesture, physicality and facial expression. What is the impact on the audience?

"Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp". It's not a woman but a "woman"... To perceive camp...is to understand being as playing-a-role".

SUSAN SONTAG

Notes on Camp, 1966

PRE-TEACHING *BLITHE SPIRIT* (cont.)

IMAGES OF THE BACHELOR

It is important to be literate in the construction of "The Bachelor" in the 20th Century. A valuable exercise is to watch clips from the Internet that allows us to recognise Camp signification from the past. Suggestions include Noël Coward, Liberace, Elton John (prior to 1985), Peter Allen and Barry Manilow.

- Part 6 of the documentary on Noël Coward
youtube.com/watch?v=QLXLJenHWC
- Liberace discusses his home and plays the *Boogie Woogie*
youtube.com/watch?v=APqjit_19Jo
youtube.com/watch?v=q9nO9Ro_kd4
- Elton John singing *Crocodile Rock*
youtube.com/watch?v=-nEbapi0-Cc
- Peter Allen singing *Bi-Coastal*
youtube.com/watch?v=oztOoicmkP4
- Barry Manilow singing *Copacabana*
youtube.com/watch?v=CrTBRQiQKRw

Discuss the following questions:

- What are the similarities and differences between these "Bachelors"?
- Why might these men choose to represent themselves this way?
- Why might this type of masculinity be far less common today?
- How has Director Paige Rattray explored a contemporary type of "Bachelor"?



Matt Day.
Photo: Prudence Upton

THEMES & IDEAS

COWARD AND HIS CONTEXT: THE LONG WEEKEND BETWEEN THE WARS

Noël Coward was born in England in 1899. His emergence into adulthood coincided with the interwar period of the 20th Century in which the youth of Britain, including Coward, rebelliously broke with traditional societal expectations, challenging the austere outlook of World War I and the economic malaise of the post war economy.

During the interwar period, British society was characterised by economic disruption, generated by poverty and an increasingly radicalised working class, influenced by communist ideology emerging out of Russia. Additionally, returned service people were unhappy with their treatment after World War I. For the middle and upper classes, however, the interwar period brought new freedoms for women as they moved into the workforce and began to experience the professional freedoms enjoyed by men. The austerity of life during the war was replaced with parties, glamour and a refusal to settle down into the confines of domestic life. The emergence of the "Bohemian" as an artistic lifestyle for the wealthy saw Coward as the fashionable man of the moment, creating a new sense of style for young bachelors, prioritising well groomed glamour.

Whilst there were liberating changes in the lives of British youth during the interwar period, there was no change in discrimination against homosexual people. In 1885, the Labouchere Amendment to Section 11 of *Criminal Law Amendment Act* made homosexual acts of 'gross indecency' illegal, effectively widening the power of the government to control the lives of gay men and women, ensuring their invisibility and allowing overt discrimination. Most homosexual people, therefore, remained firmly in the closet for fear of their lives being destroyed. The Labouchere Amendment was in full force until 1967, when homosexual acts were decriminalised for adults over the age of 21.

Noël Coward denied his homosexuality throughout his life, preferring to label himself as a perpetual "Bachelor", a coded word that most adults of the time understood to mean that he was a homosexual. The "Bachelor" was free to define his domestic life in such a way that met his need for comfort, food and companionship on his own terms, challenging gender stereotypes in the process. Both in his

own home and on the stage, Coward's aesthetic choices challenged society based on the use of class-based glamour, camp and ornamentation. Associated with societal ideas about femininity, Coward's love of artifice, glamour and ornamentation were used in his plays to communicate to the audience a sense of queer identity. When combined with character and narrative, the ornate provided a sense of the possibilities underneath the stultifying world of heterosexual constructions of gender and sexuality.

Blithe Spirit was written in 1939, at the tail end of the interwar period. During the 1920s and 1930s, Coward had been prolific, generating his most iconic work, including *Hay Fever* and *Private Lives*. *Blithe Spirit* premiered in the West End of London in July 1941 and ran for 1,997 performances. Noël Coward directed the premiere and in 1942, he briefly played the role of Charles Condomine. *Blithe Spirit* premiered during the difficult days of World War II during the London Blitz, perhaps explaining the comedic inclusion of ghosts and a fascination with the afterlife. At any rate, *Blithe Spirit* was Coward's last big commercial success until the late 1960s, a fitting end to the riotous spirit of the interwar period.

Classroom activities:

Use YouTube clips and visual images of the world between the wars. Discuss as a class what the images tell them about the world that Coward emerged into as a young adult. Suggested resources include:

- Crash Course on Europe Between the Wars [youtube.com/watch?v=xzWL2XPBHMk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzWL2XPBHMk)
- The following link provides an interesting case study of a homosexual scandal in the 1920s, that of Lord Beauchamp. Use this as a resource to explore the difficulties faced by Noël Coward and other queer people as they moved into adulthood. [english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/lgbtq-history/walmer-castle-and-homosexuality](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/lgbtq-history/walmer-castle-and-homosexuality)

Once you've discussed the Beauchamp case, consider the following activities:

- Create freeze frames that explore the societal divide between the freedoms of heterosexuals and the hostility directed towards gay people.
- Reflect on how this type of hostility would have impacted on Noël Coward.

THEMES & IDEAS *(cont.)*

CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES

It would appear that, on first glance, the world of *Blithe Spirit* conforms to traditional gender roles established for the upper middle class in the interwar period.

Charles is a twice married, wealthy author who is by all accounts very popular with women, having had several affairs. He appears happy in his home and well cared for by his second wife, Ruth, and the maid, Edith. He exhibits traditional values in his relationships and is occasionally patronising to both Ruth and Elvira. There are also several references to Charles being "browbeaten" by his mother, wives and other lovers, reinforcing the notion that men, in the home, are managed by their women. The character of Charles is a challenge, in some respects, to heterosexual middle class respectability. Coward, famous for his love of glamour, writing and bathrobes, may have created a representation of an idealised "Bachelor" in the character of Charles.

Charles' wives also seem to represent the stereotypical functions of women in a marriage – sex and domestic management.

Ruth, Charles' second wife, fulfills the stereotypical role of the wife, managing the domestic staff and the house. Ruth's first marriage was to a much older man and she appears to be content that her marriage to Charles is not overly passionate. She is described by Charles in a sexist way as being "domineering, bossy and stubborn".

Charles' first wife, Elvira, is characterised as "earthy" – a free spirit who has taken lovers during her marriage. Charles describes Elvira as "fascinating, maddening, physically attractive, lacking in integrity" and with a "gay charm". Elvira is vindictive and willing to fight in a sly, underhanded way to ensure that she is able to keep Charles to herself for eternity.

Even though Coward relied on unflattering and sexist stereotypes of women and their vicious sense of competition where the right to retain a husband is concerned, his introduction of Elvira into the marriage of Ruth and Charles, is a provocative one in another sense. Three spouses in a marriage, under the guise of a supernatural visit, is a delicate challenge to the traditional gendered expectations within the confines of marriage and monogamy.

Charles poses this possibility to Ruth in Act II, Scene 2: "If only you'd make an effort to try and be a little more friendly to Elvira we all might have quite a jolly time".

Whilst Ruth and Elvira ultimately reject this possibility, Coward has loosened the boundaries of what might be acceptable in the home, opening up space within traditional monogamy for other ways of living one's domestic life.

Additionally, and tellingly, Charles has no children with Elvira or Ruth — unremarked upon in the play and unusual for the historical period and is, in itself, a subtle challenge to the construction of domestic life.

Classroom activities:

1. Place the class into pairs. One student becomes the sculptor and the other the clay with which to work. The sculptor, when provided with the stimulus from the teacher, will mould the clay, through verbal instruction to their partner, into an image that represents their understanding of that concept. Sculptors should be given 10 seconds to mould their sculptures. Create a mind map on the board of the images created. Once this has been completed, students could swap roles from sculptor to clay and complete the process again.
The words could include the following:
 - Woman/Man
 - Wife/Husband
 - Maid/Butler
2. Ask the students to transition between the two sculptures over the count of 10 and then transition back again. Pay attention to their facial expressions, gestures, physicality and levels.
3. At the completion of this process, facilitate a class discussion about the stereotypes that have emerged from the sculptures. Questions that could be asked include:
 - What similarities did you discover in the sculptures?
 - What differences did you discover between the sculptures?
 - What do these similarities and differences tell us about the stereotypes that exist about men and women in Coward's time? Have these changed in 2022?
4. Change the groups with the woman/wife/maid members of the previous activity together and the man/husband/

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

butler members of the previous activity together. If these groups are too large, break into groups of approximately four students.

5. Provide each group of students with symbolic props or costumes that might best represent the stereotypes that are being explored. Choose extracts of the text that best conform to the stereotypes that existed in Coward's time. Perform them using the props and costumes provided. Watch each and discuss the stereotypes presented.
6. Once performed, use the knowledge of Coward's choice of theatrical forms, styles and conventions and, inspired by Rattray's directorial choices, perform the same scene extracts in such a way that challenges gender stereotypes.
7. Discuss the following with your class:
 - What theatrical styles, techniques and conventions were used by the group to create a challenge to gender stereotypes?
 - What does the audience understand about these stereotypes now that they have watched the second performance?

Writing task (choose one task):

- A. Write a two paragraph description of two examples of a challenge to gender stereotypes performed in Director Paige Rattray's production. Students must include:
 - Four adjectives that describe the props and costumes that were used in the performance and the resultant impact on the audience.
 - Students must also include two adverbs that describe the actors choices on the stage.
- B. Write a two paragraph response to the London Theatre's review of the Apollo Theatre's 2011 production of *Blithe Spirit*. Argue against its portrayal of gender stereotypes. Include evidence from STC's production.
 - "Several commentators have expressed concerns about the apparent misogyny in this play..... Condomine bickers with both his wives and they come across as petulant to some degree".
londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/blithe-spirit-apollo-theatre-2011



Megan Wilding, Tracy Mann and Nancy Denis.
Photo: Prudence Upton

THEMES & IDEAS *(cont.)*

MARRIAGE AND DOMESTICITY

Blithe Spirit challenges the expectations of marriage and domestic life, interrogating the perceptions of what it might mean to be in the role of a middle class wife or a husband in the interwar period.

The institution of marriage and the construction of the roles of "wife" and "husband" changed dramatically during the Industrial Revolution, particularly for the newly flourishing British middle class. The rapid process of urbanisation and industrialisation meant that the middle classes experienced a fundamental shift in the way that their domestic lives were organised, with increasing numbers of men working outside the home for the first time. Men were expected to be husbands, fathers and to look outward into the world to provide for their families. Women remained within the home, with the responsibility for child rearing, running the household and shouldering the emotional labour of the family unit.

There was no acknowledgment that the family and the roles within it might be anything other than heterosexual, with marriage and family seen to be the foundation for society and its renewal. As a result, the middle class home was a welcoming space for men who conformed to these expectations. Those who did not conform found that they had to reimagine their home lives for themselves – in the face of societal hostility.

Blithe Spirit challenges the stultifying norms of the middle class home that had been calcified by years of reinforcement in British society. Coward, using his heightened aesthetic, explores the discomfort of spouses who lived within such a marriage and open up a space for a renegotiation of these expectations.

Blithe Spirit begins with a representation of a traditional upper middle class marriage. Ruth and Charles appear to be happily married – both for the second time. Ruth manages the domestic staff and the house. Charles, an author, works from home, cared for in a traditional manner by his wife and the domestic staff. The reappearance of Elvira, Charles' first wife, challenges the domestic structures based on heterosexual marriage in which monogamy is the norm, suggesting that a wider definition of domestic organisation and relationship is possible.

It is the inability to playfully entertain and enact the challenges to traditional monogamy that emerge upon Elvira's ghostly return that ultimately drives Charles away from both marriage and the stereotypical role of husband. With the death of Ruth and the banishment of Elvira, Charles has the freedom to make the ultimate rejection of domesticity and returns to 'Bachelor' life with glee.

GENDER STEREOTYPES: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN

Coward both challenges and reinforces unflattering stereotypes of women in *Blithe Spirit*. Whilst Ruth appears to conform to the stereotypical assumptions of monogamy and a disinterest in the sexual nature of the relationship between husband and wife, Elvira is presented as being open and interested in exploring this facet of her life. Elvira, in her way, challenges the definition of "woman", especially the antiquated stereotypes of women as providers of comfort and care, rather than being sexual beings in their own right.

In STC's production, Director Paige Rattray doubled down on Coward's challenge to these stereotypes of women by casting Courtney Act as a representation of a wider and more inclusive definition of "woman" and the possibilities of domestic relationships. Rattray's casting of *Blithe Spirit* continues Coward's vision of creating space and acceptance for different people in a contemporary way, especially women. Body positivity, inclusive casting and the inclusion of women in drag (for example, Tracy Mann playing Dr. Bradman) continues the societal conversation begun by Coward about creating the space for acceptance and celebration of difference for people in society.

Coward does not, however, challenge the sexist stereotype of competition between women for the affections of a man. Elvira's arrival into the Condomine marriage develops into a nasty fight to the death between the two wives. In pitting Ruth and Elvira as rivals for Charles' affections, Coward does, however, leave the audience with a sense of possibility of change for both women. As Charles leaves home at the end of the play, he encourages his deceased wives to "persevere" together as they literally and figuratively tear down the family home and by extension, the societal structures that confine us all. The possibility that working inclusively together as women to challenge structures in society that restricts them, is a hopeful premonition of what might be to come.

THEMES & IDEAS *(cont.)*

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Group activity:

1. Place the class into groups of approximately four students. Make freeze frames that represent the following words:
 - Wife
 - Husband
 - Home
 - Family
 - Domesticity
 - Love
 - Monogamy
2. Analyse the image using the following questions:
 - What is the freeze frame presenting?
 - Can we see any interesting assumptions being made by the group?
 - What are they and what ideas about marriage and domesticity are they reinforcing? Challenging?
3. Keeping in the same groups, use the quotes below from *Blithe Spirit*. Perform them using the appropriate theatrical forms, styles and techniques that Noël Coward utilises, especially Camp.

ACT II SC. 1, PG. 32

Ruth: It's no use trying to impress me with your routine amorous exploits....

Charles: The only woman in my whole life who has ever attempted to dominate me is you. You've been at it for years.

Ruth: That is completely untrue.

Charles: Oh no it isn't. You boss me and bully me and order me about. You don't even allow me to have an hallucination if I want to.

ACT II SC. 2, PG. 45

Charles: She said that you got Madame Arcati here to try and get her exorcised. Is that true?

Ruth: We discussed the possibilities.

Elvira: There's a snake in the grass for you.

Charles: You had no right to do such a thing without consulting me.

Ruth: I have every right. This situation is absolutely impossible, and you know it.

Charles: If only you'd make an effort to be a little more friendly to Elvira we might all have quite a jolly time.

ACT II SC. 2 PG 48

Elvira: I haven't seen you for seven years—it's only natural that I should want a little time alone with you—to talk over old times. I'll let you go up for a little while if you really think it is your duty.

Charles: Of course it is.

Elvira (smiling): Then I don't mind.

Charles: You're disgraceful, Elvira.

Elvira: You won't be long will you? You'll come down again very soon?

Charles: I shall probably dress for dinner while I'm upstairs. You can read *Tatler* or something.

Elvira: Darling, you don't have to dress—for me.

Charles: I always dress for dinner.

Elvira: What are you going to have? I should like to watch you eat something really delicious.

Charles: Be a good girl now—you can play the gramophone if you like.

ACT III SC. 1 PG 61

Charles: But my dear child....

Elvira: And don't call me your dear child. It's smug and supercilious.

Charles: There's no need to be rude.

ACT III SC. 1 PG 62

Charles: On looking back at our married years, Elvira, I see now, with horrid clarity, that they were nothing but a mockery.

Elvira: You invite mockery, Charles. It's something to do with your personality, I think. A certain seedy grandeur.

Charles: Once and for all, Elvira....

Elvira: You never suspected it, but I laughed at you steadily from the alter to the grave – all your ridiculous petty jealousies and your fussings and your fumings—

4. Perform the allocated extract. After each performance facilitate a discussion using the following questions:
 - What are the values held by the characters about marriage and domestic life?
 - How does Coward use theatrical forms, styles and techniques to challenge these assumptions?

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

Writing Task (choose one task)

Write a PETEAL (Point, Explain, Technique/Style, Example, Analysis Link), paragraph that answers one of the following questions:

- A. How does Noël Coward challenge traditional ideas of middle class marriage and domesticity?
- B. How does Director Paige Rattray's casting of this production of *Blithe Spirit* continue Coward's challenges to traditional ideas of marriage and domesticity?



Courtney Act.
Photo: Prudence Upton

THE CONFINES OF CLASS

The characters in *Blithe Spirit* are exaggerated in order to parody conservative beliefs about marriage and domestic relationships within the British class system. Coward has relied on traditional class structures in his script, highlighting the world of the upper middle class and its reliance on narrow-minded constructions of identity. The privilege of the Condomines is clearly established through the stage directions. They are a visual indicator of the unfolding clash of perspectives and stereotypes generated by class rigidity.

The costume design of *Blithe Spirit* supports this vision, with the characters' status and personalities visually magnified through costume, makeup and wigs, heightening the differing perspectives of the characters as a result of their class status. Director Paige Rattray and Designer David Fleischer, in moving *Blithe Spirit* to the present day, have used a pastiche of contemporary imagery that represent and parody our understanding of class privilege and its vulgarity. The combination of "Met Gala/Kardashians/Will and Grace/Drag Race meets country England" suggests that the values of the upper middle class remain both caught in the past and vulgar to witness.

The characters of Madame Arcati and Edith are at the extremes of social class and character. Madame Arcati is eccentric and flighty. Edith is stolid and efficient. Both function as a contrast to the characters of Ruth, Elvira and Charles and their class privilege.

In addition, Coward, writing in a time of societal unrest and working class agitation, offers the view that contrary to being a group of people to look down upon, the working classes have something to offer the constrained and conservative middle class. Coward offers the liberatory suggestion that love between women might be right under our (middle class) noses, should we choose to see it.

THEMES & IDEAS (cont.)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASS AND VISIBILITY

The original Madame Arcati was played by English actress Margaret Rutherford. Watch the first five minutes of *Margaret Rutherford: A Life in Film* by Rabbit and Snail.

- [youtube.com/watch?v=VJ8slHmaZi8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJ8slHmaZi8)

Identify and discuss the adjectives used by the narrator to describe Madame Arcati and Margaret Rutherford. Just like the expression "Bachelor", some of the words used to describe both the character and the actress are coded.

- What light does this information shed on the meaning of the play?

Questions to discuss:

- Why are Madame Arcati and Edith's characters coded by Coward?
- What relationship might this have to their social class? (Infer the freedoms provided to Madame Arcati because of her monied position in society. The inference can then be made that middle class snobbery leaves the working classes stereotyped as immoral results in invisibility for Edith and her feelings for Elvira).

The 2022 production has made different casting choices for Madame Arcati. Look at the production images and discuss the casting choices.

- What do these choices suggest to the audience about inclusivity and class?
- How does Director Paige Rattray and Designer David Fleischer's design concept extend the comments that Coward is making about class and the potential to be who you are?

Classroom activities:

Watch the first 60 seconds of the 1945 film of *Blithe Spirit*. Describe the Condomines' economic position after watching the clip. What are the images that tell us this?

- [youtube.com/watch?v=aRcA1Rx7wwc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRcA1Rx7wwc)

Contrast this with Designer David Fleischer's set.

Ask the class:

- What are the similarities between the 1945 images of the Condomines' home and the STC set design?
- Why might these be similar even though they are separated by 70 years?

Group activity:

1. Place the class into small groups and allocate the first two scenes of Act I randomly to each group. Find as many class-based words or phrases as possible. An example might be Charles' reference to the magazine, *Tatler*. (Act II Sc. 2, pg. 48)
2. Contribute their words and phrases to a word bank/phrase bank on the board.
3. Improvise an unseen moment between any of the characters discussing their perspective on the Condomines' marriage.
4. Students may only use the word bank as their script.
5. Perform each scene.

Class discussion:

- What does the language chosen by each group for their performance tell the audience about the impact of class on character perspectives?
- Why do you think there is so little dialogue to choose from for Edith?



FORM, STYLE & CONVENTION

HEIGHTENED REALISM

Heightened Realism is an exaggeration of the theatrical style of Realism. Realism aims to recreate the experience of real life on the stage using all available theatrical elements, including acting, the elements of production and the narrative. The ultimate aim of Realism is to create an empathetic, emotional response in the audience. Heightened Realism is the exaggeration of the conventions of Realism in order to create a more intense emotional experience for the audience. This means that the acting, elements of production and narrative are 'larger than life' so that the emotions generated in the audience are felt more keenly. In the case of *Blithe Spirit*, Heightened Realism is intended to enhance the comedy in the world of the play.

FARCE

Farce is a style of comedy that relies on exaggerated characters being placed in outrageously improbable situations. Comedy is also created through the physicality of exaggerated entrances, exits and mistaken identities.

COMEDY OF MANNERS

A Comedy of Manners satirises the values and beliefs of a particular group in society – usually those groups that enjoy a large degree of privilege. This style of comedy relies on exaggerated characters, sophisticated word play and witty verbal sparring.

DRAG AND CAMP

Drag is a performance style that has emerged out of a long and complex history of queer cultural practice, political resistance and theatre performance. It challenges gender binaries and sexual categories by making visible the values that create and sustain these binaries. Drag does this by performing challenges to accepted stereotypes of gender identity through wearing the costume, makeup, wigs, voice, dance and dialogue of different genders.

Camp is not a theatrical style but rather, a way of being in the world. It has been generated over time by queer people as a response to long periods of oppression and invisibility. Camp involves a parody of human interactions through gesture, posture, voice, movement, style, decoration, and design. It is often ironic, exaggerated and theatrical. It is always outrageously funny.



Courtney Act.
Photo: Prudence Upton

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION



SET DESIGN

In keeping with Director Paige Rattray's directorial vision, Designer David Fleischer has updated the look of the set to allow a contemporary audience to connect to the world of the play.

The traditional box set has been updated to include a heightened architectural feel, denoting the class privilege of the Condomines. This has meant that the typical English country home has undergone a renovation, keeping the bones of the historical period on view, even though the play is staged in the present. Fleischer has suggested that the fusion of the historical and contemporary contexts reflects Coward's mannered writing in the present.

The set has been inspired by the use of oak throughout, again hinting at the history of the home whilst providing a contemporary, neutral background for the vibrant costumes.

In keeping with the conventions of Farce, Fleischer has included many doorways to facilitate comedy. Additionally, the inclusion of a myriad of props including books, sculptures and wall hangings will heighten the physical comedy of the supernatural and make clear the values of each character as their lives are challenged.

SOUND AND LIGHTING DESIGN

Sound design is an important part of Director Paige Rattray's vision for *Blithe Spirit*. The soundscape, designed by Clemence Williams, supports the audiences' connection to and belief in, the supernatural. This is particularly important for establishing the truth of Madame Arcati's psychic connections to the afterlife. Referencing the exaggerated conventions of B Grade Horror Film, Williams has inverted the Camp schlock sound of these films to suggest integrity and honesty in character that is the object and ridicule for the Condomines and the Bradmans.

Damien Cooper's lighting design also walks between the conventions of the various theatrical styles and conventions of *Blithe Spirit*. Designed to support the truth of contemporary British life, Cooper allows the audience to enter the world of privilege. The design, however, departs from the reality of the set when creating the supernatural forces at work. The conventions of Camp found in B Grade Horror, such as flashing lights, are utilised to create a comic vision of Elvira's return.

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION *(cont.)*

COSTUME DESIGN

Designer David Fleischer has chosen to contrast the wooden neutrals of the country home with exaggerated, colourful costumes that reflect the status of each of the characters and the 'dress for dinner' world of the original text. As such, Fleischer has imbued contemporary costume with a 1970s feel in a nod to the history of the play. Fleischer has balanced the qualities of the play which are the exploration of the relationships between the characters and the impetus to support the comedic aspects of the script.

Both Ruth and Charles begin Act I Scene 1 in heightened costumes with cravats and Chanel, moving into exaggerated knitwear and glamorous housecoats. Charles' love of glamour is in evidence. Their costumes are increasingly heightened in shape, colour and size as the impossible situation of the play unfolds, adding visual support to the creation of comedy. Edith, the maid, wears a traditional maid's uniform in a clear indication of class division.

The Bradmans' costumes are also heightened, particularly Dr. Bradman, played by Tracy Mann. The impact of a female actor in drag draws attention to the masculine nature of Dr. Bradman's pomposity highlighting the gender stereotypes played with by Director Paige Rattray.

Fleischer has played with the inversion of class when designing the character of Madame Arcati. The comedic use of designer tracksuits, the turban of a fortune teller, sage and bicycle helmet speak to the eccentric freedoms enjoyed by the wealthy whilst allowing the audience to appreciate the humour in her unusual personality.

Coward's costuming notes explicitly state that Elvira (and later Ruth) must be dressed in grey in order to "seep into the background". Fleischer has honoured Coward's stage directions, placing Elvira in greyscale throughout the play. His designs are inspired by contemporary high fashion and runway looks to create a sense of gothic glamour. Her wigs are deliberately huge and speak to Elvira's glamorous life before death.

MAGIC AND ILLUSION DESIGN

The plot of *Blithe Spirit* rests on the reappearance of Elvira from the spirit world after having been dead for five years.

Rattray's production has utilised the skills of a magic and illusion consultant to create this aspect of the play.

The use of these techniques, some of which are a century old, work with the conventions of Camp in the initial stages of the production. The first reveal of Elvira and the comedic props Madame Arcati unpacks upon her entrance to the Condomine's home, positions the audience to see Madame Arcati as an object of ridicule.

As the narrative progresses, the truth of the supernatural becomes increasingly undeniable for the audience, working to create empathy for Madame Arcati in the face of mockery from the Condomines and the Bradmans.



Brigid Zengeni.
Photo: Prudence Upton

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