

A comedy for hard times

By David Emory

"If an air raid warning be received during the performance the audience will be informed from the stage...those desiring to leave the theatre may do so but the performance will continue."

So ran the playbill for the first London production of Noel Coward's comedy, "Blithe Spirit." No joke. The year was 1941, and the threat of air raids all too serious, for Hitler's Blitz was in full swing. Londoners needed a break.

What Coward gave them was risky: a light farce that was also kind of dark, dealing flippantly with ghosts for an audience that might have preferred to escape thoughts of death altogether. But it was a hit, and the London production ran for 1,997 performances. Not bad, for a script the playwright had dashed off in just a week.

The Silverton production of "Blithe Spirit" will be running for only four more performances by the time this review comes out. You'd better scramble to see this show, because it's a good one. Mollie-Mook Fiddler, in her second summer as head of A Theatre Group, has coached a talented young cast to deliver the brisk, witty patter of Coward's script very well. It's a nice break, if you need one.

The comedy's plot moves quickly from rational to ridiculous after British mystery writer Charles Condomine arranges a séance with a local medium, Madame Arcati. Neither Charles nor his second wife Ruth has any faith in the supernatural. He's just collecting séance jargon for a story involving a murderous medium.

To Charles's dismay, Madame Arcati accidentally raises the spirit of his late and very different first wife, Elvira. From that point events whirl out of his control, because Elvira has plans for him.

Drama student Sinjin Jones plays a smug and flippant Charles whose comfortable shallowness makes it all the more fun to see him ambushed by Elvira. Like many Noel Coward characters, and like Coward himself, Charles excels in drinking and verbal fencing. With ghosts, Charles suddenly finds himself far out of his depth, and he employs every ounce of wit in a vain effort to regain control of the situation.

A Theatre Group veteran



David Emory/Special to the *Silverton Standard & the Miner*

From left, Sinjin Jones plays Charles Condomine, Carol Bloom as Madame Arcati, Amber Moffett as Charles' wife Ruth, and Matthew Casey and Erin Powers play Dr. and Mrs. Bradman in A Theatre Group's production of "Blithe Spirit."



Amber Moffett matches Jones well as Charles's wife Ruth. Both actors delight in the deft timing and the verbal and emotional agility that the script requires. Some of the play's funniest moments come from the conversational tangles that ensue because Ruth can't see or hear Elvira, while Charles and the audience can. Jones and Moffett play these tangles perfectly.

First wife Elvira is the guilty party in all this confusion, and drama student Marianna Chavez plays her with a seductive, calculating, feline effectiveness. But Chavez manages also to project Elvira's vulnerability and uncertainty, as even Elvira finds herself out of her depth.

Carol Bloom brings great talent and experience to the juiciest role in the play. As Madame Arcati the medium, she combines brisk professionalism with some loopy mumbo-jumbo that would seem to be its opposite. Bloom makes sense of the mix. The

result is a highly appealing character, impeccably eccentric, at once dignified and scattered.

Matthew Casey and Erin Powers play Dr. and Mrs. Bradman, friends whom Charles has invited to the séance. A confirmed skeptic, the doctor takes it all as a bit of fun, while his more open-minded wife is both fascinated and amused. Like Jones and Moffett, Casey and Powers make themselves credible conspirators in the exploitation of Madame Arcati, the plan that backfires so ridiculously on Charles.

Whitney Simon is convincing as Edith, the Condomines' new maid. Young and nervously eager, Edith seems to be nothing but raw, undirected energy, and the Condomines have trouble restraining her enthusiasm as she springs to her duties. Yet there is more to Edith than they think, and that emerges at the end of the play.

Noel Coward once called the theater "a house of strange enchantment, a temple of illusion." He got that right. While Silverton productions are often threatened by a shortage of time and money, somehow they work the magic just in time, so that the audience is unaware how much is held together with band-aids and bailing twine and chewing gum. That goes for this production too. The show is fun. See it while you can.

The final performances of "Blithe Spirit" will run through Saturday, July 10, at 7:30 each night in the Grand Imperial Hotel Theatre.