

British Theatre Guide

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Blithe Spirit

Noël Coward
Derby Playhouse
(2003)

Ghosts, death and the supernatural is the theme of the autumn/winter season at Derby Playhouse - and considering the theatre board considered closure earlier this year because of huge financial problems, the decision to stage popular drama to get people through the doors seems justified.

The first themed season at Derby earlier this year attracted 9,000 new theatregoers and that success is likely to be repeated if the rest of the programme is as good as *Blithe Spirit*.

There's nothing experimental nor out of the ordinary about the forthcoming programme, only productions virtually guaranteed to put bums on seats. *Blithe Spirit* should do that, not only due to its popularity but also because it's a slick, well-produced and solidly acted piece.

Derby Playhouse last staged *Blithe Spirit* 11 years ago, five months after Mark Clements had been appointed artistic director. The theatre is putting it on again a year on from the appointment of Karen Hebden as chief executive and co-artistic leader.

It's the second play she has directed; the first was *Educating Rita* earlier this year. She has opted almost entirely for experienced actors who work together well to give the performance a well-rounded feel.

Blithe Spirit, written by Coward in only five days, tells how author Charles Condomine invites a local medium, Madame Arcati, to his house to conduct an after-dinner seance so that he can do research for his latest book.

Somehow, though, the spirit of his first wife Elvira is called up. Only Charles can see or hear her, leading to some clever banter as his second wife Ruth believes she is the subject of his rantings.

When Coward was asked for his advice about acting, he said: "Speak clearly and don't bump into the furniture." All seven actors do that and more besides to make the production a success.

Right from the start you get the feeling you're in for something slightly different. Jenni Maitland as Edith the maid awkwardly sticks her leg into the lounge and precariously tries to negotiate the steps while her arms are occupied with a tray of glasses. Her dodgy footwork, which contrasts with her racing around when she's sure where she is going, is a joy to behold.

David Leonard is the assured, upper-class man of the house until he gets it in the neck from both his wives; Liz Izen (Ruth) makes the most of her role as the happy wife who becomes jealous and distraught at the re-appearance of Elvira and Maxine Fone is the flighty, spritely spirit who realises she still has a hold on her husband.

Anny Tobin is marvellous as Madame Arcati, striking a happy medium between being dotty but not too eccentric. She throws in the occasional high-pitched word, has an outrageous laugh and when

she's told she has unexpectedly conjured up Elvira's spirit she does a charming jig of delight.

There are good supporting performances from Robin Bowerman and Lynette McMorrough as Dr and Mrs Bradman.

Andy Miller's stimulating art deco set works well, especially at the end when the action calls for all sorts of trickery; and Nicholas Immaculate's costumes live up to his name.

There were certainly plenty of blithe spirits both on and off the stage at the end.

"Blithe Spirit" runs until October 4th

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)