

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Private Lives

Noël Coward

Coliseum Theatre, Oldham

27 January–19 February 2011

For its opening production of 2011, Oldham Coliseum has brought back Robin Herford to direct the first of two major productions we will see in Greater Manchester this year of Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (Michael Buffong will direct an all-star cast at the Royal Exchange from the end of February).

Set in Noël Coward's usual world of high class parties, hotels and cocktails, *Private Lives* is based around the unlikely coincidence of divorced couple Elyot and Amanda finding themselves in the same hotel in adjoining rooms with a shared balcony for both their honeymoons with their new, much younger spouses. The former couple rediscover their affection and their capacity for violent (literally) arguments, as well as displaying some fundamental incompatibilities with their new partners.

Opening the matching balcony scenes are James Simmons as Elyot and Maeve Larkin as Sibyl. Simmons never seems to get to grips with the real acid wit of Coward's dialogue, so the barbs in his comments are blunted and the comedy is consequently muted. The opening exchange is therefore a bit clunky and stagey, but Larkin is able to get to grips much more with the character in later scenes, her performance rising considerably above some hideous costumes.

Jackie Morrison inhabits the smooth, sophisticated but rather unstable Amanda's character rather more successfully, supported very ably by Christopher Naylor as her young and pathetic Bertie Woosterish new husband Victor. There is a very funny little cameo from Tess Alshibaya in the very last scene as French maid Louise, who constantly mutters her displeasure in French while reluctantly going about her duties.

Michael Holt has designed a set that works very smoothly in a practical sense, opening out from the twin balconies into a spacious and amply-furnished Paris flat, but a few corners seem to have been cut in the construction. There are patchy brush strokes clearly visible from the back of the theatre in the external decorations of the high class hotel and the wood grain of the exclusive Paris flat, the latter, with a clashing colour scheme, having some marble decorations that look as though they have been stuck on in sticky-backed plastic as an afterthought.

A lot of the wit in Coward's lines still shines through even where the delivery isn't perfect (although it is perfectly fine a lot of the time) but there are some moments, particularly after the interval, that are rather dull, which really shouldn't happen with this play. As always, Renny Krupinski's fight routines are exciting and frighteningly real at times, giving the performance a real lift in energy.

However while it is certainly enjoyable at times, this production just doesn't seem to be as much fun as it should be.

*Running to 19 February 2011*

Robin Strapp [reviewed](#) this production in Basingstoke

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)