



## **Plays and Pinot: Blithe Spirit**

### **Synopsis**

Blithe Spirit is a comic play by Noël Coward. The play concerns the socialite and novelist Charles Condomine, who invites the eccentric medium and clairvoyant, Madame Arcati, to his house to conduct a séance, hoping to gather material for his next book. The scheme backfires when he is haunted by the ghost of his annoying and temperamental first wife, Elvira, after the séance. Elvira makes continual attempts to disrupt Charles's marriage to his second wife, Ruth, who cannot see or hear the ghost.

### **About the Playwright**

Noël Coward, in full Sir Noël Peirce Coward, (born December 16, 1899, Teddington, near London, England—died March 26, 1973, St. Mary, Jamaica), was an English playwright, actor, and composer best known for highly polished comedies of manners. Coward appeared professionally as an actor from the age of 12. Between acting engagements, he wrote such light comedies as *I'll Leave It to You* (1920) and *The Young Idea* (1923), but his reputation as a playwright was not established until the serious play *The Vortex* (1924), which was highly successful in London. In 1925 the first of his durable comedies, *Hay Fever*, opened in London. Coward ended the decade with his most popular musical play, *Bitter Sweet* (1929). Another of his classic comedies, *Private Lives* (1930), is often revived. It shares with *Design for Living* (1933) a worldly milieu and characters unable to live with or without one another. His patriotic pageant of British history, *Cavalcade* (1931), traced an English family from the time of the South African (Boer) War through the end of World War I. Other successes included *Tonight at Eight-thirty* (1936), a group of one-act plays performed by Coward and Gertrude Lawrence, with whom he often played. He rewrote (with help from director David Lean and two others) one of the short plays, *Still Life*, as the film *Brief Encounter* (1945). *Present Laughter* (1939) and *Blithe Spirit* (1941; film 1945; musical version, *High Spirits*, 1964) are usually listed among his better comedies. In his plays Coward caught the clipped speech and brittle disillusion of the generation that emerged from World War I. His songs and revue sketches also struck the world-weary note of his times. Coward had another style, sentimental but theatrically effective, that he used for romantic, backward-glancing musicals and for plays constructed around patriotism or some other presumably serious theme. He performed almost every function in the theatre—including producing, directing, dancing, and singing in a quavering but superbly timed and articulate baritone—and acted in, wrote, and directed motion pictures as well. Coward's *Collected Short Stories* appeared in 1962, followed by a further selection, *Bon Voyage*, in 1967. *Pomp and Circumstance* (1960) is a light novel, and *Not Yet the Dodo* (1967) is a collection of verse. His autobiography through 1931 appeared as *Present Indicative* (1937) and was extended through his wartime years in *Future Indefinite* (1954); a third volume, *Past Conditional*, was incomplete at his death. Among his more notable songs were "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," "I'll See You Again," "Some Day I'll Find You," "Poor Little Rich Girl," "Mad About the Boy," and "I Went to a Marvellous Party." Coward was knighted in 1970. He spent his last years chiefly in the Caribbean and Switzerland. One of his previously unpublished plays, *The Better Half*, last performed in 1922 and thought to have been lost, was rediscovered in 2007. That same year a collection of his letters was published as *The Letters of Noël Coward*.



## Characters

### **Charles Condomine**

In his forties, Charles is an intelligent and urbane English novelist. Charles is the husband of Ruth Condomine and deceased first wife, Elvira.

### **Ruth Condomine**

A smart looking woman in her mid-thirties, Ruth is the wife of Charles. She is a bit jealous of Charles's relationship with his first wife.

### **Dr. Bradman**

A pleasant-looking middle-aged man, Dr. Bradman is a friend of the Condomines.

### **Mrs. Bradman**

The wife of Dr. Bradman, Mrs. Bradman is middle-aged and a bit faded.

### **Madame Arcati**

A middle-aged spiritualist, Madame Arcati is a striking woman. She is not too extravagant but has a definite bias toward the barbaric.

### **Elvira**

Charles Condomine's deceased first wife, Elvira returns as a ghost with a goal. In the process, she makes Charles's and Ruth's lives very complicated.

### **Edith**

The Condomine's maid, Edith is always in a hurry.

**References:** *Britannica.com*