

Noel Coward comedy excites KCAT audiences

By Bob Evans

Comedy fans that long for a crafty, well-written, well-acted comedy with no cliffs to plunge into a deeper meaning finally rejoice with Kansas City Actors Theatre's newest production, Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" now playing on City Stage inside Union Station.



Brian Paulette/KCAT

The comedy, set in the early 1940s takes a poke at fortune-telling, seance, and psychic phenomena when a couple (Coleman Crenshaw and Cinnamon Schultz) invite another couple (Matt Rapport and Cheryl Weaver) to dinner and entertainment of the

evening involves a local, well-known psychic (Jan Rogge) who performs seances with the help of her mischief young medium.

To the amazement of all—including the resident psychic, the host's deceased wife (Vanessa Severo) materializes, but her presence is only seen and heard by him—well, mostly—until the spirit decides to make situations interesting for the husband and his current wife. The play develops into a farcical story of the current and deceased wives battling for the husband's affections.

Brian Paulette/KCAT



The play presents a fun situation reminiscent of other “ghostly” movies of the B/W era, like *Topper*, which became a 1950s TV sitcom. Fun comes from the staging of the movement, lines aimed at the unseen spirit but heard by others in the room who cannot see or hear her. Along with the confusion of the lines, Coward's spirited and witty dialogue just add a level of class and dignity to the show as he pokes fun and the upper-crust British.

“Widely considered a theatrical masterpiece, and certainly Coward's spookiest story, in ‘*Blithe Spirit*’ successful novelist Charles Condomine hires a psychic as research for his new book and ends up encountering the unexpected – the ghost of his first wife! Now he must balance his new (and very much alive) wife with an increasingly incensed ghost in a witty comedy of manners,” a KCAT spokesman said. “This smart and supernatural comedy is filled with rich characters, as well as

a few spirited and theatrical surprises.”

Brian Paulette/KCAT



To say too much more will give away too much of the comedy and ruin the experience for future viewers, but suffice it to say all elements of this production set comedic standards with this seldom produced piece. Of course to the audience, the outstanding cast delivers the right tone for “Blithe Spirit.” Severo and Schultz square off the tug-of-war develops between the real and spiritual worlds. Crenshaw delivers a comedic interpretation that just screams Cary Grant or David Niven (who actually starred in the movie classic). Suave, sophisticated, aloof, mostly disengaged until the twist of fate engulfs him in the love triangle, Crenshaw shows a new level of comedic timing, facial expression, and physical movement. Rogge, as the psychic just makes the audience focus on her as she stands as the fulcrum between reality and the spiritual world.

Brian Paulette/KCAT



The movement in this piece demands precision as Elvira moves

throughout the set close but not touching others. The sight gags are fun to watch. The dialogue is sharp and bitingly funny. The accents sound authentic. The set is amazing throughout the final fade-out. The sound design just leads the audience into the era and sets the tone for the show as it unfolds. Costumes just look like English upper-crust would wear in the 40s. The props and set decoration show attention to detail.



Brian Paulette/KCAT

It seems many theatres end their season with their biggest show so as to build for the finale, but with “Blithe Spirit,” KCAT serves notice that the bar has been raised for any forthcoming KC Metro shows. Doug Weaver placed this play in the hands of the most outstanding cast and allowed them to embolden each character. The cast brings flavor, color, and nuance to each part. All technical aspects demand attention from start to fade out. An old play looks shiny and fresh with this effort by Weaver, the cast and crew.

Brian Paulette/KCAT



The production will be directed by Doug Weaver and will star Cinnamon Schultz, Coleman Crenshaw, Vanessa Severo, Jan Rogge, Matt Rapport, Cheryl Weaver, and Margaret Shelby. The production team includes Kelli Harrod (Scenic Designer), Bill Christie (Properties Designer), Sarah M. Oliver (Costume Designer), Kylor Greene (Lighting Designer), Shelbi Arndt (Co-Lighting Designer), Jonathan Robertson (Sound Designer), Matthew Schorr (Co-Sound Designer), Alex Murphy (Stage Manager), and Kyle Dyck (Technical Director).

“Blithe Spirit” continues on City Stage in Union Station. Tickets and more information can be found on the KCAT website.

Tags: “Blithe Spirit”, KCAT, Union Station, Kansas City Theatre, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment