

Wychwood Players
2011 Season

17/18/19 March

"Blithe Spirit"
By Noel Coward

19/20/21 May

"Time of My Life"
By Alan Ayckbourn

24/25/26 November **"Snow White and the Seven Dwarves"**
A Christmas pantomime
By John Drew

**For further information about the Wychwood Players please
do take the opportunity to visit our new website**

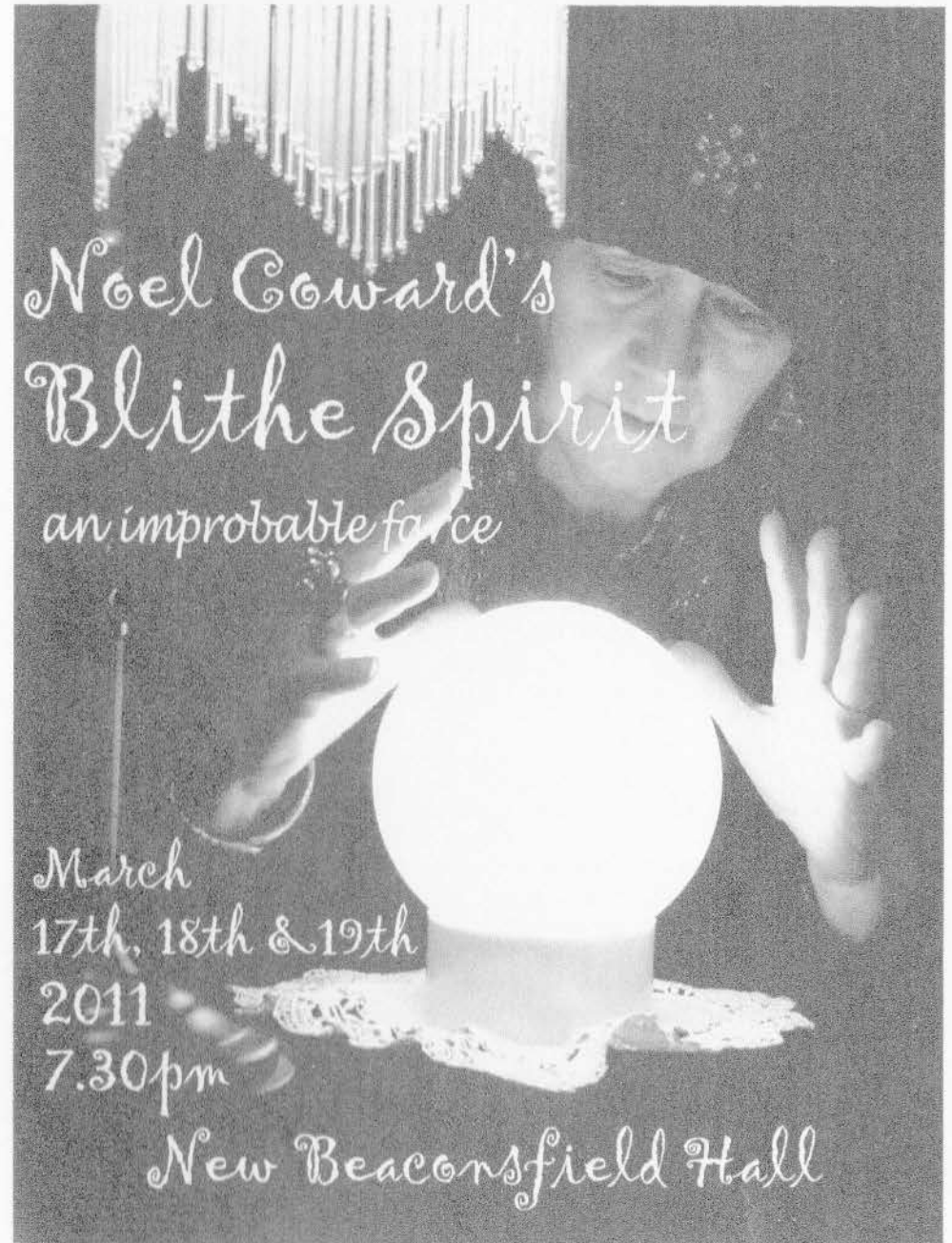
www.wychwoodplayers.com

The Director would particularly like to thank:

La Chaise Antiques, Stow-on-the-Wold
Dale Finck Fine Restorations, Luckley
Wyndhams Interiors

for kindly loaning furniture and decorative accessories
for the production.

WYCHWOOD PLAYERS
PRESENT



Noel Coward's
Blithe Spirit
an improbable farce

March
17th, 18th & 19th
2011
7.30pm

New Beaconsfield Hall

NOEL COWARD.....A PHENOMENON

Noel Coward was born in 1899, the second of three sons, in Teddington, Middlesex. Knowing what he became, I wonder what he thought of that! During his lifetime he became a successful actor, playwright, screenwriter, film star, songwriter and singer. He had many famous friends in high places from the Royal Family downwards, including politicians, military officers and Hollywood stars. He became the epitome of style, elegance, wit and breeding and exuded an air of confidence, English reserve and high camp.

His debut came in 1911 at the age of 11 as a professional actor and his writing career developed from there. In the middle years of his life writing was the dominant force in his work and his output was phenomenal. Over 60 plays were produced, many with "The Master" himself (as he became known) playing the lead character, and many more were unproduced. His most famous plays include *Hay Fever*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Present Laughter*, *Private Lives*, *Relative Values*, *Design for Living*, *The Vortex* and *Cavalcade*.

He wrote and published hundreds of songs and many screenplays. His songs include *A Room with a View*, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, *Mad About the Boy*, *I'll Follow My Secret Heart*, *I'll See You Again* and *Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage*, *Mrs Worthington*. During the Second World War, he directed a number of films to boost morale, including *This Happy Breed* and *In Which We Serve*. In the latter the central character was based on Lord Mountbatten of Burma. One of his one-act plays, *Still Life*, became the famous film *Brief Encounter* with Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard. The list of successes goes on.

His career continued after the war as a cabaret entertainer before he moved to the Caribbean, where he was once visited by the late Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, a loyal supporter of Coward. He had no time for the new wave of Angry Young Men who took over the theatre in the mid-1950s, but unlike Oscar Wilde or even Terence Rattigan, he did live to see himself vindicated. By the end of his life, his star was back in the ascendant and his plays had begun to find their now familiar place in the repertoire of British drama. He was knighted in 1970 and died in Jamaica on 26th March 1973. A memorial tablet was subsequently unveiled in Westminster Abbey by the late Queen Elizabeth; it read "A Talent to Amuse", a line from one of his own songs.

Director's Diary.....

Mid November 2010, temperature -6, we are sitting in a barn huddled around an electric fire and a fan heater reading Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. Despite the frost forming outside we are all laughing at Coward's enduring and much loved play. Written during one of the darkest years of the Second World War and now some seventy years on, his plays continue to show him as one of the most skilled of dramatic craftsmen. Along with Shakespeare, Chekhov and Wilde, Noel Coward is one of the most regularly performed playwrights on the English-speaking stage.

It is interesting to note that although Coward had no time for speculation about a life hereafter, *Blithe Spirit* is far from the only play in which he depicts ghostly goings-on. Others include *Relative Values* and *Cavalcade*. In fact a fascination with ghosts and the next life goes back for centuries – many of Shakespeare's plays contain ghosts – but there is another side to Coward's spirit world. His ghostly apparitions do not frighten; they shock, provoke and embarrass. They are a band of metaphysical skeletons that inhabit the cupboards of Coward's world. And they refuse to stay in their closets, just as, in his own life, Coward's sexuality constantly threatened to break out and destroy his public image.

December 2010, thick snow, hardly any rehearsals. A far cry from the spring of 1941 when the play was written. No skylarks singing either – the title of the play is taken from a Shelley poem "To a Skylark" ("Hail to thee, blithe Spirit/ Bird thou never wert").

Thought: in *Blithe Spirit* Elvira is a very physical thing, perhaps in many ways more so than the living Ruth. The dead wife returns as an embodiment of Charles' sensuality, yet she is the old Elvira with all her own personality still intact.

February 2011, still freezing cold, but we've relocated to Richard and Rose Hartley's breakfast room. There's a lot of drinking in the play, and someone has found a quote of Noel Coward's, suggesting that a perfect Martini should be made by "filling a glass with gin then waving it in the general direction of Italy"! The cast like the sound of that, but I've had to break it to them – no alcohol during rehearsals!

March 2011, still freezing cold, will it ever end? Fortunately we're still using the breakfast room, and trying on costumes, and getting used to props. First night beckons – sheer panic settles. But it'll be alright on the night?

NOEL COWARD'S BLITHE SPIRIT

Cast (in order of appearance)

Edith (a maid)	Rachel Hartley
Ruth Condomine	Joanna McKerlie
Charles Condomine	Mark Jessey
Dr. Bradman	Phillip Croxson
Mrs Bradman	Rose Hartley
Madame Arcati	Amanda Keighley
Elvira	Clare Brown

The action of the play passes in the living room of the Condomines' home in Kent

ACT I

Scene i	Before Dinner on a summer evening
Scene ii	After Dinner
Scene iii	The Next Morning

INTERVAL (Approx 20minutes)

ACT II

Scene i	Late the following afternoon
Scene ii	Early evening a few days later
Scene iii	After Dinner a few days later
Scene iv	Several hours later

Director	Philip Brown
Assistant to Director	John Trevers
Set construction	David Trollope Geoff Collins
Set Build Crew	David Trollope Geoff Collins Ed Reynolds Richard Hartley Edwin Wilson Martin Clarke Richard Hartley Kevin Quin Pat Bannister Mandyrae Large
Stage Manager	Frank O'Neil
Property Master	
Costume Mistress	
Wardrobe & Wigs	
Lighting Design	
& Sound	
Box Office & Ticket	
Sales	Beryl Collins Geoff Collins David Trollope Members of the Wychwood Players
Publicity & Photography	
Front of House/ Bar	

This evening's performance is dedicated to the memory of
DAVID YATES
An original member of the Wychwood Players who will be
sadly missed

A Who's Who of *Blithe Spirit*

Not surprisingly, *Blithe Spirit* has attracted a cornucopia of some of the best-known and –loved actors over the years. Its most famous incarnation probably remains the film directed by David Lean of *Lawrence of Arabia* fame in 1945. Rex Harrison was Charles, Kay Hammond Elvira, Constance Cummings Ruth and unforgettably Margaret Rutherford as Madame Arcati. For a generation Rutherford embodied Madame Arcati just as Edith Evans did with *Lady Bracknell*.

The play itself had been premiered in the West End at the Piccadilly Theatre on 21st July 1941. Rutherford and Hammond were in the cast as in the film, but on stage Cecil Parker was Charles and Fay Compton played Ruth. Since then, there have been countless revivals, both in this country and in America. Famous Charles' have included Coward himself, Denis Price, Patrick Cargill, Richard Johnson and Simon Cadell. Joyce Carey, Phyllis Calvert, Jane Asher and Joanna Riding have inhabited Ruth. Elvira has drawn the likes of Maria Aitken, Joanna Lumley and Amanda Drew. Finally who could resist Beryl Reid, Elizabeth Spriggs, Marcia Warren, Penelope Keith or Stephanie Cole as Madame Arcati?

Blithe Spirit has also been extremely popular in America. In 1987, Richard Chamberlain played Charles, followed in 2009 by Rupert Everett. That latter revival also saw Angela Lansbury as Madame Arcati, and for her performance she won a Tony award.

A new production of the play has just opened at the Apollo Theatre in London following an extensive tour of the country. The cast includes Alison Steadman as Madame Arcati, Robert Bathurst (Downton Abbey) as Charles, Hermione Norris (Spooks) as Ruth, and Ruthie Henshall as Elvira. This production has proved how difficult it is for those who act mainly in films or on television to adapt to live performances on stage, and apparently the cast has needed a lengthy tour to hone their parts and project their lines in order to obtain the appropriate audience response.

Blithe Spirit has also been seen on the television and heard on the radio. Coward directed a 1956 American TV production with himself as Charles, Lauren Bacall as Elvira and Claudette Colbert as Ruth. In 1964, Hattie Jacques played Madame Arcati for ITV, and in 1983 BBC Radio mounted a mouth-watering cast of Paul Eddington as Charles, Julia McKenzie as Ruth, Anna Massey as Elvira and Peggy Mount as Madame Arcati. Dirk Bogarde played Charles in a 1966 TV production, and, believe it or not, in 1964 the play was adapted into a musical, *High Spirits*, on Broadway with Edward Woodward as Charles and Beatrice Lillie as Madame Arcati.

WILL THE REAL MADAME ARCATI.....STAND UP

Did Noel Coward base his character Madame Arcati on "Hellish Nell", a fake medium who threatened Britain's security in its darkest war-time days? "Hellish Nell", aka Helen Duncan, a working class mother-of-six who saw an easier way of supporting her disabled husband and family during war-torn Britain. Whatever the truth about Duncan, the last woman jailed for witchcraft in Britain, one thing is certain; she was surrounded in scandal during almost the whole of her life – and also after her death in 1956.

She was born in 1897 and grew up in Callander in Scotland, where she is said to have had childhood visions of ghosts. After becoming pregnant at the age of 16 she fled to Dundee, where she met and married Henry Duncan, a First World War veteran and a committed spiritualist. Henry encouraged her to hold séances in their house – and charge sitters. After the First World War, there were many people willing to pay to speak to a lost loved one. She became a huge success, charging the equivalent of £25 for a seat.

As with other mediums in the 1930s, Duncan apparently communicated with the dead after being bound in a chair, bathed in red light and with a flow of ectoplasm, an ethereal substance, emanating from her. However, sitters who grasped this ectoplasm found it felt curiously like muslin cloth. Duncan, however, continued to be popular despite the number of times her fraud was revealed. In 1933 a row at one of her séances led to an appearance at Edinburgh Sheriffs Court. At the séance, her spirit guide Peggy appeared but the sitters realised it was Duncan, moving a piece of cloth on her knees. A tug of war ensued, Duncan lost and began swearing and threatening her hosts. The spirit proved to be a vest and she was fined £10 for affray.

In January 1944, she was charged under Section Four of the 1735 Witchcraft Act, with "attempting to bring about the appearances of the spirits of deceased persons". Duncan was made an example of, it is believed, because of an incident some years earlier. It is thought Ministry of War officials were worried she would divulge details of the approaching D-Day landings, after she revealed the sinking of a warship the Government was trying to conceal. HMS Barham was torpedoed in the Mediterranean in November 1941, and sank with the loss of more than 1000 lives. Such was the feared propaganda blow, the Government decided to keep the news quiet, even forging Christmas cards from dead sailors to their families. But a few months later, at a séance in Portsmouth, Duncan told a mother that her son had come to her, wearing a hatband with the words HMS Barham on it and saying: "My ship is sunk"