



Spirited performance

Westborough Players deliver crisp Coward

THEATER REVIEW

By Paul Kolas Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

WESTBORO — The velvety erudition of “Blithe Spirit,” Noel Coward’s eccentric and gently cynical romantic comedy, is reason enough to see Westborough Players’ adroitly executed production. Throw in some fine performances, a handsomely appointed set, Carol Myers’ sure-handed directorial guidance, and some crafty special effects at the finale, and you have a champagne glass filled to the brim with quaint and charming sophistication, as evinced by Friday night’s offering.

Set in 1940s Kent, England, “Blithe Spirit” is about the predicament novelist Charles Condomine finds himself in when a medium, Madame Arcati, is invited to his home as research fodder for a potential character in his next book. Charles doesn’t believe her abilities are genuine, but when she inadvertently conjures up the ghost of his late first wife, Elvira, his current wife, Ruth, thinks he’s either cruelly teasing her or hallucinating.

Charles is the only one who can see and hear Elvira, and when he begs her to demonstrate to Ruth that she has indeed been summoned forth in ethereal form, she playfully reciprocates by moving a vase across the room. The wordplay between Charles, Ruth and Elvira is a witty and taunting stream of covert invective and sensual mischievousness. Ruth jabs at Charles with incessant insecurity, thinking he deliberately and willfully wanted Elvira brought back because he has never gotten over her. Elvira clearly relishes the confusion, ambivalence and discord she’s causing with her presence, comforted by the fact that Charles still has feelings for her. Ideally, she’d love to have him all to herself.

It’s an amusing, convoluted dilemma with a surprising twist or two up its drawing room sleeve, and director Myers, who surely knows a thing or two about Coward’s silky brand of repartee, coaxes some indelible performances from her perceptively chosen cast.

Glenn Ickler may not be the ideal smoking jacket image of the elegant, patrician British upper class, but he wades through the melodious thickets of Coward’s sea of verbal pyrotechnics with a steady and highly sympathetic demeanor. With the notable exception of Laura Steele’s wondrously dotty and scene-stealing portraiture of the truly hilarious Madame Arcati, no one in the cast really sounds authentically British, but that is beside the point. They all reasonably approximate the antiquated sensibility, grace and manner of 1940s British regality.

Betty Kristan handles the emotionally complex and demanding role of Ruth with excellent range, uttering her lines with measured tempo and conviction. Jane Becker is exactly the sort of creature Elvira should be, coquettish, fetching and yet oddly vulnerable. She and Steele both have the gift of expressing as much with their eyes as they do with their copious dialogue.

Al Dano and Traci Fleischman are more than adequate as Dr. George and Violet Bradman, the couple invited to the Condomines for dinner and the seance with Madame Arcati, although one suspects they are still fine-tuning and fleshing out their roles. Trish Reske exhibits a Chaplinesque flair for physical comedy as the Condomine’s maid, Edith.

Also meriting praise are Marian Despres and Melanie Bliss for terrific hair and makeup contributions, Kathleen Andreoli for her exquisite costumes, and Lou Despres and his crew for their very effective lighting and sound.

