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NA226312D



Noël Coward

Blithe Spirit

An Improbable
Farce

Joanna Lumley
Corin Redgrave
Kika Markham
Thelma Ruby
and cast

Directed by
Sheridan Morley

1	Act 1 Scene 1	1:45
2	RUTH: "That's right Edith."	0:56
3	EDITH: "Your cigarette case, sir"	1:43
4	CHARLES: "Well to begin with..."	4:00
5	CHARLES: "That's probably the Bradmans."	0:29
6	EDITH: "Dr and Mrs Bradman."	3:43
7	MADAME ARCATI: "I've leant my bike ..."	2:56
8	RUTH: "I expect it's dreadfully ignorant of me not to know ..."	2:33
9	Act 1 Scene 2	2:55
10	RUTH: "How very wise"	2:34
11	MADAME ARCATI: "Little Tommy Tucker..."	0:59
12	MADAME ARCATI: "Will you all sit round the table ..."	3:14
13	MADAME ARCATI: "Is there anyone there?..."	3:07
14	MADAME ARCATI "Little Tommy Tucker"	1:23
15	CHARLES: "I can't bear this for another minute."	3:56
16	RUTH: "Oh dear! Oh dear!"	0:52
17	RUTH: "I suddenly felt a draught ..."	1:21
18	RUTH: "Well darling?"	3:43
19	ELVIRA: "That was one of the most enjoyable ..."	4:10
20	Act 2 Scene 1	5:09
21	CHARLES: "Once and for all Ruth, ..."	1:35
22	EDITH: "Can I clear please'm?"	2:49

23	ELVIRA: "You've absolutely ruined that border by the sundial."	3:39
24	CHARLES: "Ruth, you see that bowl of flowers on the piano?"	2:11
25	Act 2 Scene 2	2:54
26	MADAME ARCATI: "Capital, Capital ..."	7:38
27	CHARLES: "What on earth was Madame Arcati doing here?"	4:40
28	CHARLES: "Ruth ..."	2:23
29	Act 2 Scene 3	1:40
30	DR BRADMAN: "Nothing to worry about Mrs Condomine ..."	1:49
31	DR BRADMAN: "Ah Charles, how does it feel?"	1:08
32	RUTH: "You really are infuriating, Elvira."	3:39
33	CHARLES: "Look out!"	0:57
34	CHARLES: "There now."	3:44
35	Act 3 Scene 1	4:52
36	ELVIRA: "Charles!"	2:02
37	ELVIRA: "How good is she really?"	5:28
38	CHARLES: "Madame Arcati, would you please come in now?"	3:37
39	MADAME ARCATI: "Ghostly spectre ..."	3:25
40	Act 3 Scene 2	3:44
41	CHARLES: "Have you any suggestions?"	5:28
42	RUTH: "Do concentrate, Elvira, and keep still."	2:23
43	RUTH: "I believe it's going to work, ..."	3:40
44	CHARLES: "Ruth, Elvira, are you there?"	3:35

Total time: 2:10:54

Noël Coward
Blithe Spirit
An Improbable Farce

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CAST

Charles Condomine	Colin Redgrave
Ruth Condomine	Kika Markham
Elvira	Joanna Lumley
Madame Arcati	Thelma Ruby
Dr Bradman	David Timson
Mrs Bradman	Abigail Francis
Maid	Cathy Sara

Director:	Sheridan Morley
Producer:	Nicolas Soames
Recording/Editing Engineer:	Mike Etherden
Studio Manager:	Peter Novis

Noël Coward

Blithe Spirit

An Improbable Farce

Blithe Spirit is the most commercially successful, long-running and frequently revived of all Noël Coward's sixty plays, but it is the one that nearly didn't get written at all. At the outbreak of World War Two, when he and the century were at the very end of their thirties, Noël had taken a curious decision not to write anything new for the duration. Twenty months later, although already exhausted from long and arduous troop concert tours, he began to realise the pointlessness of abandoning his craft as a dramatist, and over five days during a brief Easter 'holiday' in 1941 at Portmeirion in North Wales, he constructed the 'improbable farce' that is **Blithe Spirit**. 'I shall always be grateful,' Noël later wrote, 'for the almost psychic gift that allowed me to write this script so fast. It was not meticulously constructed in advance, and only one day elapsed between its original conception and the moment I sat down to write it; six weeks later it was produced, and

it ran for nearly five years in the West End.'

For more than thirty years, **Blithe Spirit** was to remain the longest-running comedy in the history of British theatre; Noël himself directed the first cast, in which Cecil Parker played Charles alongside a then-unknown Margaret Rutherford as Arcati and Kay Hammond (who later also went into the David Lean film version with Rutherford and Rex Harrison) as Elvira. Reviews were generally ecstatic, though Graham Greene (writing in the *Spectator*) called it 'a weary exhibition of bad taste'; Noël's revenge was swift and sure – in a 1946 play called **Peace In Our Time** he suggested that, had Britain ever had to suffer a Nazi occupation in 1940, the first to collaborate would have been 'left-wing journalists and novelists'.

But **Blithe Spirit** still lies outside the mainstream of Noël's earlier stage work, in that we are not here faced (as in **Private Lives** and **Hay Fever** and **Present Laughter**) with a closed, self-regarding and

self-perpetuating group of insiders ranged and raging against the supposedly 'real' people who would nowadays be called 'civilians'. Instead, the abrupt ending of the 1930s, in which he had been the playboy of the West End world, jack of all its entertainment trades and master of most, together with the coming of the war itself, and then two years cut off from the typewriter, seem to have changed both Noël's style as a dramatist and his sense of development; there is more plot in **Blithe Spirit** than in almost any of his earlier stage comedies, and more careful development of character.

If, moreover, it should seem odd that a farce about death, featuring at least two ghosts, should have so triumphed when London was under nightly bombardment and audiences were losing their loved ones on battlefields all over the world, consider this: it is, I believe, precisely because **Blithe Spirit** makes fun of death, suggesting that you can return from it almost at will, that World War Two theatregoers all over the country found it so curiously and constantly reassuring.

After **Blithe Spirit**, all Noël Coward comedies were to exist in their own right,

without back-references to the poor little rich girls and the Mayfair or West End high society which had so characterised his earlier work for and with Gertrude Lawrence. She had in fact settled in America a year or two earlier, and was never to come home to him again. This could be one other reason why what one thinks of as the last 'Gertie' role (even though she only ever played it on radio and US army tours) was in fact written as a ghost. Noël and Gertie, who had been together as child actors since 1912, were now separated by the war, by the Atlantic and by her marriage to an American theatre manager, Richard Aldrich.

In that offstage sense, **Blithe Spirit** marks the borderline between the pre-war and the post-war Noël, and it has lived in almost constant revival ever since. Apart from the film and television versions, major revivals have included one at the National Theatre directed by Harold Pinter with Maria Aitken and Richard Johnson, and then a long-running West End revival of 1985 with the late Simon Cadell and, as Elvira, Joanna Lumley who plays the part again on this recording. Most recently, it was revived at Chichester by Twiggy and Dora Bryan.

Blithe Spirit has also been seen as a Broadway musical retitled **High Spirits**, which starred Beatrice Lillie in her farewell appearance, and had a score by Hugh Martin and Timothy Gray which Noël directed and for which he also wrote (uncredited) some of his very last lyrics.

This is the first complete recording made purely for audiotape and compact disc. For the scene changes, we have used some vintage Naxos recordings of Noël singing his own early songs.

Notes by Sheridan Morley

**The music on this recording is taken from the
NAXOS NOSTALGIA catalogue**

NOËL COWARD	A Room With a View	8.120529
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	Slovak RSO/Michael Dittrich	
NOËL COWARD	Volume 2	8.120559

Music programmed by Nicolas Soames

Cover picture: Noël Coward, courtesy of The Raymond Mander and
Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection



Corin Redgrave's theatre credits include *No Man's Land*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *De Profundis* (RNT) and *The Browning Version* for Derby Playhouse. Television credits include *Trial and Retribution 6*, *Bertie and Elizabeth* (BBC), *Forsyte Saga* (Granada), *Shackleton* (Channel 4) and *Sunday* (Box Television). Films include *Cromwell and Fairfax*, *Doctor Sleep*, *Gypsy Women* and *Enigma*.



Kika Markham has worked with Sheridan Morley in Noël Coward's *Song at Twilight* for which she was awarded an Oliver nomination for Best Supporting Actress 1999. She has also been seen in *Homebody/Kabul* by Tony Kushner.



Joanna Lumley has appeared in various stage productions including *Blithe Spirit*, *Hedda Gabler* and *Vanilla*. Her most notable television appearances are *Absolutely Fabulous*, *A Rather English Marriage*, *Cold Comfort Farm* and *The New Avengers*. Her film credits include *James and the Giant Peach*, *Sweeney Todd* and *The Cat's Meow*. She has also written four books.



Thelma Ruby has starred in many West End shows including *Cabaret*, *Kvetch* and *For Amusement Only*. She has played Golde opposite the Tevye of Topol in *Fiddler on the Roof* four times, and played Golda Meir with her husband Peter Frye for eight years in *Momma Golda*. She has performed a one-woman show *That's Entertainment* and has written her double autobiography, *Double or Nothing*, with her husband.



David Timson has performed in modern and classic plays across the country and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode* and *The Seagull*. He has been seen on TV in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*, and in the film *The Russia House*. A familiar and versatile audio and radio voice, he reads *The Middle Way*, eight other volumes of *Sherlock Holmes Adventures* and also directs *Twelfth Night*, *Henry V* and *King Richard III* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Abigail Francis trained at the Drama Centre. Her theatre credits include Gertie in *Noël and Gertie*, Emma in *Very Dark Blue*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Jennifer in *The Misanthrope*, Jessie Taite in *The Silver Tassie*, the Mother in *Here Comes A Chopper*, Leni in *Judgement Day*, Lady Fanciful in *The Provoked Wife*, Genia Hofreiter in *Open Country*, Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*, Libby in *Paradise Lost* and Annie in *Anatol*. She has also appeared in the film *The Will To Resist*.



Cathy Sara has worked for the New Shakespeare Company in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as the Stephen Joseph Theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse and in *King Lear* at the Hackney Empire. Her television appearances include *Kavanagh QC*, *Beck*, *The Detectives* and *Heartbeat*, and she has worked extensively for the BBC Radio Repertory. For Naxos AudioBooks she reads Katharine in *Henry V*.



Sheridan Morley is the drama critic of the International Herald Tribune and an award-winning broadcaster; his *Noël & Gertie* is a celebration of the private lives of Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence in their own words and music. He has been literary executor of the Coward Estate for thirty years, having written Noël's first biography, *A Talent To Amuse*, in 1969. His latest book is the authorised biography of John Gielgud, available both in paperback and audiobook formats.

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Noël Coward Blithe Spirit

An Improbable Farce

Joanna Lumley • Corin Redgrave

Kika Markham • Thelma Ruby and cast

Directed by **Sheridan Morley**

When novelist Charles Condomine invites a medium into his house in order to learn about the occult for his new book, the last thing he or his second wife dream is that the séance will bring back his first wife, Elvira, who wants Charles all to herself!

This is considered to be one of Coward's best and most unusual farces.

CAST

Charles Condomine	Corin Redgrave
Ruth Condomine	Kika Markham
Elvira	Joanna Lumley
Madame Arcati	Thelma Ruby
Dr Bradman	David Timson
Mrs Bradman	Abigail Francis
Maid	Cathy Sara

*"There is no finer recording of Noël Coward's classic piece of drama than this from Naxos. Sheridan Morley's masterful direction of the all-star cast creates just the right atmosphere for Coward's farce to be fully realised in all its glory.
A testament to the genius of Noël Coward."*

ADLIB

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www.naxosaudiobooks.com



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