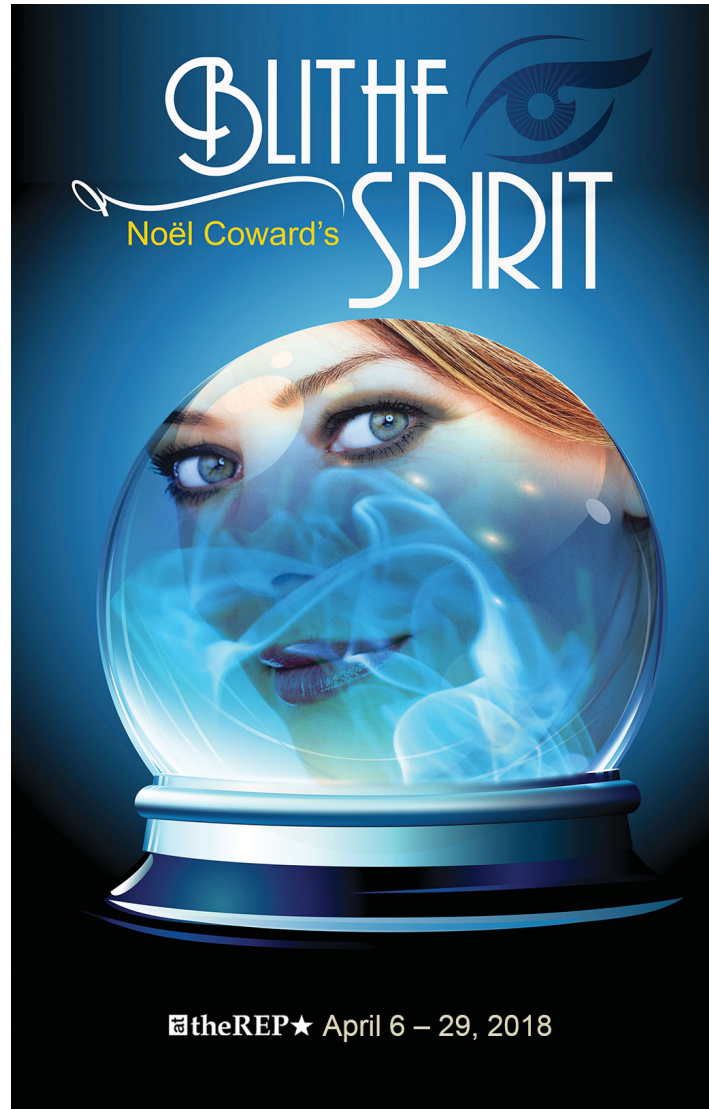


# at the REP ★



Directed by Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:**

MARGARET E. HALL  
Assistant Artistic Director  
[mhall@capitalrep.org](mailto:mhall@capitalrep.org)  
518.462.4531 x410

AARON MARQUISE  
Arts Education Manager  
[amarquise@proctors.org](mailto:amarquise@proctors.org)  
518.382.3884 x128

## Table of Contents

- 3 A Letter from our Education Department
- 4 About Us
- 5 Attending a Performance
- 6 A Brief Synopsis
- 6 The Characters
- 7 About the Play
- 8 About Noël Coward
- 9 The Production: Who's Who...
- 10 Elements of Theatre
- 12 Historical Context
  - Marriage & the Victorian Female
  - Girl Power Arrives with the 1920s
  - Fascination with Death & the Beyond
  - World War II
- 16 Literary Context
- 17 Classroom Activities
- 19 Resources Consulted
- 20 Young Playwright Contest
- 21 **Teacher Evaluation**
- 22 theREP's Mission In Action

*\*This study guide has been researched and written with the help of Dramaturgy Intern Carlos Cabrera.*

## Capital Repertory Theatre's 37th Season - 2017-2018

### ***SEX WITH STRANGERS***

by Laura Eason

SEPT 22 – OCT 15, 2017

### ***Next Act! New Play Summit 6***

OCT 20-23, 2017

### ***SHE LOVES ME***

Book by Joe Masteroff

Music by Jerry Bock

Lyrics by Sheldon Harnick

NOV 24 – DEC 24, 2016

*World Premier!*

### ***PARIS TIME***

by Steven Peterson

JAN 26 – FEB 18, 2018

*Classics On Stage*

### ***BLITHE SPIRIT***

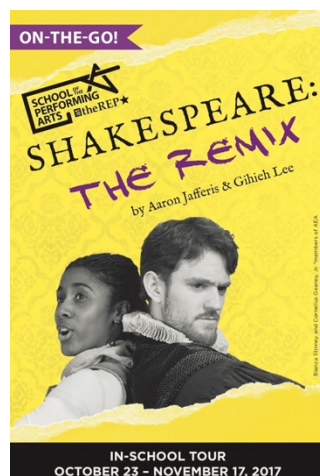
by Noël Coward

APR 6 – 29, 2018

## theREP's ***ON-THE-GO!*** IN-SCHOOL TOURS *We come to YOU!*

To book a tour, contact Aaron Marquise at  
[amarquise@proctors.org](mailto:amarquise@proctors.org) | 518-382-3884 x128

Directed by Margaret E. Hall  
**Public Performance @theREP**  
on November 4, 2017 at 11am



Adapted by Margaret E. Hall &  
Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill  
Directed by Margaret E. Hall  
**Public Performance @theREP**  
on March 10, 2018 at 11am

**Spring 2018**

Dear Educator:



Welcome to Capital Repertory Theatre!

We are thrilled that you are attending a performance of *Blithe Spirit*, one of this season's main stage productions, and hope you will find this guide to be a useful tool.

You have permission to reproduce materials within this guide for use in your classroom. It is designed to introduce the cultural and historical context of the play as well as provide resources and ideas for integrating the theatre experience with your curriculum.

Productions by theREP are likely to generate questions and opinions among your students. Our hope is that you will join us for a talkback with the cast following the performance where you and your students can share your questions and reactions with the performers.

The arts provide young imaginations with stimulation, points of reference, and intellectual resources for the mind and spirit. Our goal is to make live theatre attendance possible for all students in the Capital Region. Over 18,000 Capital Region students attended student matinees and theREP's On-the-Go! in-school tour performances last season. We hope to continue to grow and serve the needs of the Capital Region education community.

Let us know how you are using theatre in the classroom! Your success stories help us to keep the program funded. We love to receive copies of lesson plans, student work related to our performances and your letters. These are important testimonials to the value of the arts in education.

And finally, please fill **Out the Teacher Evaluation** at the back of this study guide. Completing the evaluation form will help us to continue to provide programs that serve the needs of Capital Region students.

We look forward to hearing from you!

With deepest gratitude,



**Margaret E. Hall**  
Assistant Artistic Director  
518.462.4531 x410  
mhall@capitalrep.org



**Aaron Marquise**  
Arts Education Manager  
518.382.3884 x128  
amarquise@proctors.org

# at the REP ★

---



---

## ABOUT US

---

**Capital Repertory Theatre (theREP)** is a non-profit professional producing theatre. In its 35-year history, theREP has produced more than 5,000 performances for the people of the Capital Region.

A member of LORT (League of Resident Theatres), theREP strives to bring quality work that explores the essence of the human condition through the stories of people, events, and phenomena that shape our contemporary lives. Theatre, at its best, entertains, cajoles and inspires by engaging the heart and mind through its most powerful ally – the imagination.

There are two basic types of theatre companies: producing and presenting. theREP is a producing theatre. The theatre hires a director and designers for the set, costumes, lights, and sound. The Theatre's Artistic Director and the director select appropriate actors for all the roles in the play. Then they all come to Albany, where the play is built and rehearsed.

In addition to the theatre space, theREP has a scene shop where sets are built, a costume shop where costumes are constructed and cared for, offices where the administrative staff works, a rehearsal hall where the shows are rehearsed, and housing facilities for actors. The resident staff of the theatre works with visiting artists to put the production together.

In contrast, presenting theatres host shows that have been designed, built, and rehearsed elsewhere. A theatre company at many different theatres frequently presents shows of this kind regionally, nationally or even internationally over an extended period of time. What you will see at theREP or with our On-The-Go! tours is unique to theREP where it was built. No one from anywhere else will see this production just as you see it!

# ATTENDING A PERFORMANCE

Being a member of an audience is an important job. Live theatre couldn't exist without you! That job carries with it some responsibilities. Follow these suggestions in order to have the best theatre experience possible!

## BRING WITH YOU

- ◆ ideas, imagination, an open mind, observation skills and a sense of wonder.

## LEAVE BEHIND

- ◆ cell phones, pagers, pen lights, food and drink and anything else that might distract you, the performers or other members of the audience.

## THINGS TO DO BEFORE A PERFORMANCE

- ◆ learn about the show you are going to see, arrive on time, find your seat, visit the restroom.

## DURING A PERFORMANCE

### PLEASE DO

- ◆ applaud, laugh, pay attention and notice little details, think about questions you would like to have answered by the actors after the show, stay in your seat until intermission and the end of the show.

### PLEASE DON'T

- ◆ talk, sleep, eat or drink, distract others, exit the theatre during the performance.

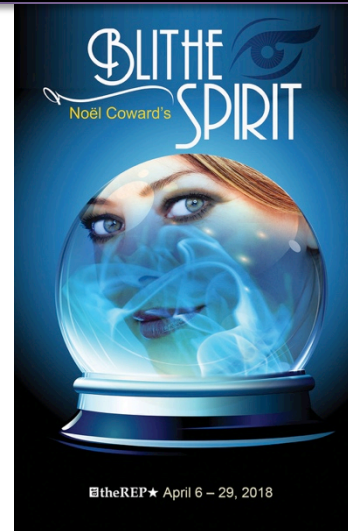
## 2017-2018 EDUCATION SEASON



**NOV 30, DEC 8 & 17**  
**10:30am**



**FEB 9**  
**10:30 am**



**APR 12 & 26**  
**10:30am**

**STUDENT MATINEES | Performance at theREP at 10:30am**

**PRICE \$12 a student**

**CHAPERONES** For every 15 students, one complimentary adult ticket is provided.

**LOCATION** 111 North Pearl Street, Albany, NY 12207

**RESERVATIONS** Call Group Sales at 518-382-3884 x139

**SCHOLARSHIPS** Visit [www.capitalrep.org](http://www.capitalrep.org) for information and applications.



# *Blithe Spirit: A Brief Synopsis*

## **Blithe Spirit: An Improbable Farce**

*Blithe Spirit* by Noël Coward centers on the unintentional haunting of novelist Charles Condomine. Charles lives in Kent, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century United Kingdom, along with his second wife Ruth and their maid Edith. Charles unwittingly opens up a can of worms while trying to collect material on the occult and the contacting of spirits for his new novel.

The Condomine's have decided to hold a dinner party, and have invited Dr. and Mrs. Bradman to witness the eccentric medium, Madame Arcati, perform a séance. The séance appears to be a complete flop to all except Charles who cuts it short after believing he has seen his first wife Elvira, back from the dead. After everyone has gone Charles' worst fear is confirmed, Elvira has been summoned. Unable to return to the afterlife Elvira wreaks havoc and torments the inhabitants of the house.

Upon realizing that Ruth cannot see her, Elvira makes it her mission to try and separate Ruth from Charles by any means necessary. It is, in fact, her main goal to bring Charles into the afterlife to be with her. However it is Ruth who is killed "by" Elvira, as she happened to be driving Charles' car when "the accident" occurred.

Shortly thereafter, Madame Arcati attempts to return Elvira to the afterlife only Ruth's spirit is summoned and manifests in the house alongside Elvira. Now Charles has not one, but two dead and angry wives running rampant. The trio soon finds that they cannot be happy together.

Charles, once again, calls upon Madame Arcati in a final and hopeless attempt to return the ladies "home." After many unsuccessful trances, Madame Arcati realizes that Edith is also a medium and has accidentally been summoning the ladies. With Edith's help Madame Arcati manages to get rid of the wives and warns Charles to go far away where the spirits will not find him. Finally, free of his wives spirits he leaves the house to them as they angrily tear it apart.

## *Blithe Spirit: Cast of Characters*

**Charles Condomine** – a novelist in his forties; he's bright, sophisticated and articulate but somewhat at the mercy of his wives, past and present. His interest in spiritualism as subject material for his novel leads him to ask Madame Arcati to his home where she can perform a séance. He is skeptical but becomes a believer when the ghost of his first wife appears.

**Ruth Condomine** – Charles's second wife. Like her husband, she is witty and sophisticated, and quite the society matron. She's a bit stuffy and predictable, and convinced her husband has lost his mind when he believes his first wife has appeared, as she can neither see nor hear this "ghost."

**Madame Arcati** – the local spiritualist and medium. Madame Arcati is quite quirky, and although she's elderly she's spry. She bicycles into the play talking to an 8-year old "contact on the other side." The Condomine's & Bradbury's soon learn that she is no fraud when she inadvertently becomes the "medium" through which Elvira is summoned. It becomes problematic when Madame Arcati cannot figure out how to return Elvira to the ghostly realm.

**Edith** – the Condomin’s maid who is always in a hurry. It turns out Edith, not Charles, has the extrasensory powers that called Elvira back from the dead, and only Edith can make Elvira return.

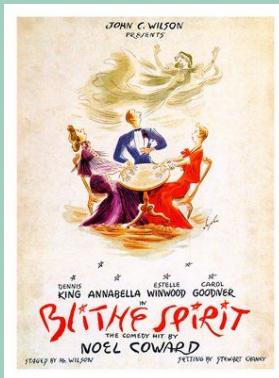
**Elvira** – the ghost of Charles’s first wife who can only be seen by Charles. In life Elvira was spirited, outgoing, wild and carefree. In death, she is no different. She does love Charles, though somewhat nonchalantly, and is jealous of Ruth. Her attempts to monopolize the attention and conversation of Charles once summoned by Madame Arcati form the central tension of the play.

**Doctor Bradman** – Friend and guest of the Condomine’s at the séance.

**Mrs. Violet Bradman** – Wife of the Doctor, friend and guest of the Condomine’s at the séance.

## About The Play

~Past show posters of 'Blithe Spirit'



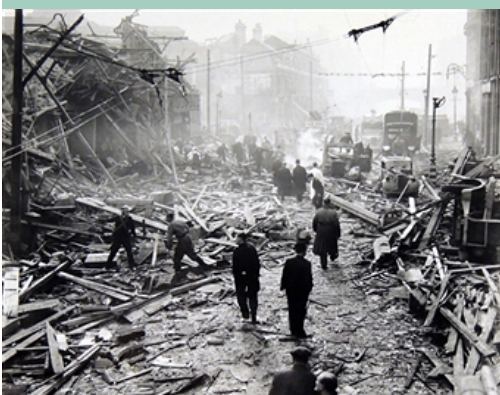
Noël Coward wrote *Blithe Spirit: An Improbable Farce* in 1941 in the span of 5 days during the German Blitz of London in World War II.

Coward retreated to Wales following the destruction of his own office and flat.

The “Improbable Farce” as it is also known premiered at the Piccadilly Theater in London in 1941 and ran for roughly 2,000 performances. It was first produced on Broadway at the Morosco Theatre in NYC on

November 5 1941. The productions received rave reviews in Britain and in America.

The play offered a comedic upbeat look at death and marriage in Victorian society. It was a way to lift the spirits of Londoners who were surrounded by war. In a time where London was surrounded by so much death (WWII on the heels of WWI) Coward was able to push the limits and make light of the tragedy that is loss.



~V2 Rocket damage during an air raid, London 1941

The contrast between the real world and the play was so stark, evidenced by Coward noting that opening night audiences “had to walk across planks laid over the rubble caused by a recent air raid to see a light comedy about death” (Phillips, Michael).



~Londoners vacating their home after the Blitz, 1940

## About the Playwright: Noël Coward



Noël Pierce Coward was a British playwright, actor, and composer known as “The Master” for his success across several mediums. Coward was a glamorous socialite in his time, a true celebrity by today’s standards although he had very humble beginnings. Born on December 16, 1899 Coward was the son of lower middle-class parents. In early 1900’s England class and social standing were very much what defined a family and from a young age Coward was aware of the social class system.

His determination to improve his own status fueled his drive to perform and later on create. He starred in his first play, *The Goldfish*, at the age of 12 at the insistence of his mother. Noël went on to act in other productions in London’s famous West End theater district as a child, which he would return to as a famous playwright many years later.

Following the military draft of World War I and an honorable discharge from it, Coward returned to the stage with *The Vortex* in 1924, his first play to receive wide spread acclaim. *The Vortex*, a play on drug addiction, vanity, and criticism of British social circles established Coward’s voice as one unafraid of tapping into the taboo. Many critics even claimed that the drug addiction was a thinly veiled metaphor for Coward’s own homosexuality, which he chose to keep private due to the conservative views of British society. The themes of sexuality and society would reappear later on in many of his greatest works.

After much success in the years that followed, Coward penned *Blithe Spirit* over a 5-day span in 1941, during the WWII German Blitz of London. The play was, at the time, seen as a way to lift the spirits of Londoners. The contrast between the real world and the world of the play was so stark that when asked about it on opening night Coward noted audience members “had to walk across planks laid over the rubble caused by a recent air raid to see a light comedy about death.”

Following a decline of public interest in the 1950’s, Coward continued to produce, write, and perform trying his hand at musicals and even cabaret. A renewed interest in his work in the 1960’s saw Coward’s return to the West End with *Suite in Three Keys* (1966), which is the story of an author struggling to conceal his homosexuality.

Sir Noël Coward was knighted in 1970, and passed away at his home in Jamaica in 1973. Today he is remembered for his signature silk dressing gowns, bold cigarette holder, his wit and talent. He is an icon of Popular Culture and English Style, and his works continue to prove poignant. He has been honored with his own memorial in Westminster Abbey’s Poet’s Corner.

### READ! Other Plays by Noël Coward

(Here are a few...)

*Private Lives*  
*Hay Fever*  
*Present Laughter*



# The Production: Who's Who...

**Directed by** Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill

## **THE ACTORS**

(in alphabetical order)

Gary Lindemann\*

Kelsey Torstveit\*

Yvonne Perry\*

Brenny Rabine\*

John Romeo\*

Eileen Schuyler\*

Elizabeth Henry

**Actor headshots coming soon...**

## **THE PRODUCTION TEAM**

**Stage Manager:** Melissa Richter\*

**Assistant Stage Manager:** Rachel Frascella

**Costume Designer:** Harold Kaplan+

**Set Designer:** Brian Prather+

**Lighting Designer:** Travis McHale+

**Sound Designer:** Jane Shaw+



*\*Denotes a member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers of the United States*



*+Denotes a member of United Scenic Artists*

# ELEMENTS OF THEATRE

**Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle's famous treatise - *The Poetics* - outlined six elements of drama that playwrights must adhere too:**

**PLOT** What is the story line? What happened before the play started? What does each character want? What do they do to achieve their goals? What do they stand to gain/lose?

**THEME** What ideas are wrestled with in this play? What questions does the play pose? Does it present an opinion?

**CHARACTER** Who are the people in the story? What are their relationships? Why do they do what they do? How does age/status/etc. affect them?

**LANGUAGE** What do the characters say? How do they say it? When do they say it?

**MUSIC** How does music – or other sounds – help to tell the story?

**SPECTACLE** What visual elements support the play? (Scenery, costumes, movement, lighting, other...)

**Other Elements:** *Conflict/Resolution, Action, Improvisation, Non-verbal communication, Staging, Humor, Realism and or other styles, Metaphor, Tone, Patter & Repetition, Emotion, Point of View...*

## ACTIVITY: Write!

Students are asked to write a short, 10-minute, play.

## ACTIVITY: Act!

Ask students to use their bodies to create different types of characters, such as: a cowboy, a ballerina, a Karate Kid, an animal (cat, dog, bird, dinosaur), etc.

Next, ask students to use their bodies and voices to create characters who are: very old, very young, very strong, very weak, very tired, very energetic, very cold or very warm.

Have their characters interact with one another.

Give them an objective to fulfill despite environmental obstacles.

*(Such as: as an old man/woman, climb a set of stadium stairs to get to your seat; it's VERY cold out and you dropped your wallet into the creek and have to go in to get it; you're VERY tired, but have to stay awake to drive home/cook dinner/give your report...etc.)*

Afterwards, discuss how the obstacles affected their characters and the pursuit of their objectives.

# THEATRE IS COMPRISED OF MULTIPLE ART FORMS!

Writing / Visual Art & Design / Music & Sound / Dance & Movement

**When a script is produced all these additional artistic forms combine! The result is, hopefully, an engaging and unified piece of theatre.**

**A Directors (or production) Concept** – in the world of life theatre, this is a unifying vision for the design elements of a stage play. It is based on careful interpretation of the script, or the act of drawing out and communicating underlying meaning from a creative work.

**Actors Interpretations** – Actors use the words provided by the playwright, the setting, costumes and props – as well as the director's concept – and knowledge of the world of the play (what might be historically, mentally, physically etc. applicable/important) to create their characters, and to live in the world of the play as it is being produced.

❖ Consider a production of *Hamlet* set in the 1920s versus a production set in the 1620s, 1820s or 2020s. What changes and what stays the same?

**The Visual World of the Play:** Scenery, Costumes, Props, Lighting and Sound all use the following elements of design to communicate information about the world of the play and its characters, to the audience.

- **Line** can have length, width, texture, direction and curve. There are 5 basic varieties: vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curved and zig-zag.
  - **Shape** is two-dimensional and encloses space. It can be geometric (i.e. squares and circles), man-made, or freeform.
  - **Form** is three-dimensional. It encloses space and fills space. It can be geometric (i.e. cubes and cylinders), man-made, or freeform.
  - **Color** has three basic properties: HUE (or the name of the color, i.e. red, blue, green), INTENSITY (or the strength of the color, i.e. bright or dull), and VALUE (or the range of lightness to darkness).
  - **Texture** refers to the “feel” of an object's surface. It can be smooth, rough, soft, scratchy, etc. Textures may be ACTUAL (able to be felt) or IMPLIED (suggested visually through an artist's technique).
  - **Space** is defined and determined by shapes and forms. Positive space is enclosed by these shapes and forms while negative space exists around them.
- ❖ Designers must also take the director's concept into account (when historically the piece is being set, where in the world it is set, etc.) when creating their designs. Again, what would change in a production of *Hamlet* set in the 1920s versus the Elizabethan Era?

**DISCUSSION:** Discuss the elements of design before attending the REP's performance. Ask students to pay special attention to how they are all used in the design. Allow students to notice the basic elements first, and then encourage them to look deeper into why these elements are used the way they are.

**WRITE!** Ask students to write answer to the following: How are the elements of theatre and the elements of design used in this production? Why are they used? How do they help to tell the story?

# Historical Context

## MARRIAGE AND THE VICTORIAN FEMALE



In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain women lived in a society that still cared about Victorian ideals. Women were expected to marry, stay home, and become an object to be possessed.

Victorian houses were even designed to separate women and men, as seen with the setting of *Blithe Spirit*. Men had smoking rooms, billiard rooms, and libraries while the women seemed only to exist in the bedroom, the dining room, or the drawing room. Coward makes light of this idea by trapping Elvira and Ruth within the home, every Victorian man's dream, but Charles Condomine's nightmare.

In the end Ruth and Elvira are reduced to invisible beings, as females of the time felt, whose protests are seen only as destructive and useless in the eyes of men, while the man "escapes" from the female(s) in his life.

### *Discussion Point:*

*Ask students to relate Victorian ideals to practices/situations in society today.*

## 'GIRL POWER' ARRIVES WITH THE ROARING TWENTIES



Many, though not all, women felt more confident and empowered as the 1920s roared on. Their new independence reflected in the changing fashions – their hair was shorter, dresses were shorter, and women started to smoke, drink and drive motorcars. The attractive, reckless, independent 'flapper' appeared on the scene, shocking society with her wild behavior.

For married women and their children, however, life was pretty much the same post-war as it was pre-war. The middle-class stay-at-home housewife still changed into her afternoon dress after lunch to receive guests, and many such households had either a live-in maid or a 'daily' to help with household duties. Pregnant women normally gave birth at home and in a middle-class home, a live-in nurse was often engaged for the two weeks prior and for a month after the birth. For the working class woman there was no such luxury as home help, and there certainly was no paternity leave for the husband!





## A FASCINATION WITH DEATH AND THE BEYOND

*“A writer’s work is his ghost and Coward took solace in the belief that his spirit would haunt the world long after his body departed it.” (5, DTC)*

**Spiritualism** A religion that holds, as its primary belief, that spirits of the dead have the ability and desire to communicate with the living.

**Séance** A meeting in which a spiritualist attempts to communicate with the spirits of the dead.



*“I may go into a slight trance, Mr. Condomine. But if I do...pay not attention.”*

**Trance** A temporary state in which a medium, with suspension of personal consciousness, is controlled by an intelligence from without and used as a means of communication, as from the dead.

**A medium**, in both modern and ancient times, is a person who communicates with spirits. So a medium is, literally, an “intermediary” between the spirit world and ours.

Mediums (which anyone can become, with proper training and practice,) believe that they can contact those spirits through séances.

Most Spiritualists believe in a God, which they refer to as Infinite Intelligence.

### Where did Spiritualism begin?



The belief in ghosts is not a new concept, however, the “modern” version of Spiritualism seen in *Blithe Spirit*, took root in 1848 in Hydesville, NY where the Fox Sisters ‘invented’ it.

It all began in the March of 1848 when teenage sisters, Kate and Margaretta “Maggie” Fox, waylaid a neighbor, eager to share an odd occurrence. They told their neighbor that they heard a series of raps on the walls and furniture, and that these sounds seemed to manifest with otherworldly intelligence. They went on to hold séances in which spirits were said to make tapping sounds – these sounds would soon called ‘spirit rappings.’

Forty years later, Maggie admitted that their ‘rappings’ were a hoax, and demonstrated how they were done. She said at night when they went to bed they would tie an apple to a string and then, when they moved the string up and down, the apple would bump on the floor. The sisters graduated from apples to manipulating their joints, knuckles and toes to make the rapping sounds.

A year after that they recanted their confession.

*The creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was perhaps one of the most famous believers of Spiritualism from the early 1900s.*

Noël Coward, on the other hand, was not a strong believer in spiritualism. He sought to remove the romantic and spiritualistic ideals around death. He wanted to emphasize that death was just death, and sought to do so through his characters Elvira and Ruth. "...even as ghosts they are material and unromantic" (Leggat, 28). Elvira wants cucumber sandwiches and Ruth is shamelessly rude in her treatment of Charles, far from what one would expect of their husband or wife were they to come back from the dead. And it is exactly this reversal of the ideas around death that fuels Coward's comedy.

### **A Renewed Interest in Spiritualism**



World War II renewed an interest in mediums and the occult for the people of Britain and the U.S. In 1941, as the London blitz raged on and the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, the war's death toll mounted immeasurably. With the weight of so much loss, people desperately wanted to ease their pain and sought out ways to do just that.

The people of Britain very much believed in the idea that death was not the end, that there was a better place their loved ones went after death. This idea of life after death, linked to religion/spiritualism,

provided many with comfort. Knowing that their loved ones 'lived' on after death helped some to heal and led others to seek out a way to 'contact' them.

***DISCUSSION QUESTION:*** *If you could communicate with a dearly departed loved one, what would you ask them and why?*

This fascination with contacting the dead led to the spread of mediums around England.

- In 1930 there were around a quarter of a million Spiritualists in the UK, including mediums.
- The majority of said mediums in Britain were women, a role that gave them a higher social status.
- Being a medium also came with drawbacks, as we see with the character of Madame Arcati. They were often treated as a joke and used purely for the amusement of others.



#### ***Discussion Point:***

***Have a conversation about the existence of ghosts and the validity of spiritualism. Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not? Have you ever seen a ghost? Have you ever tried to perform a séance, or attended one? Have you ever used a Ouija Board? Etc.***



## World War II

**The German Blitz on London** took place on September 7, 1940 when 348 German bombers (and 617 fighters) raided London. It was the first of 57 consecutive nights of bombing on London itself. The bombing, or blitzkrieg (lightning war), would continue in London and other cities until May 11, 1941 when Hitler called off the raids in order to move his bombers east in preparation for Germany's invasion of Russia.



Dec. 29, 1940 – St. Paul's Cathedral emerges from the flames during one of the most devastating raids.



Smoke rising from the fires in the London docks, following bombing on September 7, 1940

**The Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor** (a U.S. naval base) took place on December 7, 1941 when hundreds of Japanese fighter planes descended on the base. They managed to destroy/damage nearly 20 American naval vessels, including eight enormous battleships, and over 300 airplanes. More than 2,400 Americans died in the attack, including civilians, and another 1,000 were wounded. The day after the assault, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war on Japan, and the U.S. entered WWII.



U.S. Battleship sinking during the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941



USS Shaw under attack in Pearl Harbor, 12/7/1941



## Literary Context: Farce & The Importance of Form

**Farce:** In theatre, farce is a comedy that aims at entertaining the audience through situations that are highly exaggerated, extravagant, and thus improbable. They're also known for using physical comedy.

- Farce, comes from the old French word for “stuffing.”
- Farce, as a name for the style of drama, first began being used in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when actors would improvise or “stuff” silly comedic action into the plays they were performing.
- Historically, the term farce meant a literary or artistic production of little merit.
  - The silly action caused it to be considered unsophisticated, or a low form of comedy.
- Farces use absurd and highly improbable events in their plots. The situations are humorous because of their ludicrous and often ridiculous nature. Farces include:
  - Highly improbable situations
  - Stereotyped characters
  - Extravagant exaggeration of events/actions
  - Often, ‘violent’ horseplay is included
- Often the central character does not (or should not) belong in the place of the action.
- The ultimate goal of a farce is to make the audience laugh.

### Examples of farce include:

*The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde  
Charlie Chaplin or Marx Brothers Films  
And even the children’s show *Scooby Doo*

### What does it mean to be a blithe spirit?

- To be joyous, merry, or happy in disposition; glad; cheerful: Everyone loved her for her blithe spirit.
- It could also mean to act without thought or regard; to be carefree; to be heedless: a blithe indifference to anyone’s feelings.

**DISCUSSION POINT (or written assignment):** Students are to discuss how both of these meanings for a ‘blithe spirit’ present themselves within Coward’s story.

## The Importance of Form

In *Blithe Spirit* the playwright is examining (or commenting on) social anxieties of the 1940s anxieties around marriage, social status, death. Coward creates comedic situations that laugh at the British ideals surrounding all three of these ideals; and does so within the time constraints of a full-length (approx. 2 hour) stage play.

The setting for a theatrical farce is usually done in a restricted place and time, putting the plays central situation under a microscope. Characters are often stereotypes because they foster quick connections to the time period and society being examined.

Actors portraying characters in any theatrical production, but especially in a farce, must be able to deliver the lines and embody the characters in a way that creates a sense of urgency and anxiety that the audience can feel. They must be gifted in physical comedy as well as with the comedic dialogue.



# Ideas for Curriculum Integration

## VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS

### 1. DESIGN! Costume Design

*Blithe Spirit* takes place in 1940's England. The cast includes the excentric Madame Arcati, Socialites (Charles & Ruth Condomine and Dr. & Mrs. Bradman) as well as a ghost. Students are asked to research the time period and location in which the play takes place. Then they are to design a set of period appropriate costumes for the production. Both collages of found images and hand sketches should be encouraged.



~Past show posters of 'Blithe Spirit'



### 2. DESIGN! Show Poster

Students are asked to design a show poster for a production of *Blithe Spirit*. Hand drawn artwork or collages are acceptable.

Use these, and the posters on page 7 as examples; as well as the one that was designed for theREP's production.

### 3. MOVEMENT! A Characters Physical Being

At its core, drama is about characters working toward goals and overcoming obstacles. Ask students to use their bodies and voices to create characters who are: very old, very young, very strong, very weak, very tired, very energetic, very cold, very warm. Have their characters interact with one another. Give them an objective to fulfill despite environmental obstacles. Later, recap by asking how these obstacles affected their characters and the pursuit of their objectives.

### 4. GHOSTS! On Stage

Discuss, or have students write answers to the following: How can a ghost be effectively represented onstage? What special effects (costumes, lights, sound effects, movement) might be used to illuminate the ghosts presence and their actions? How might an actor portray the embodiment of a ghost on stage?

### 5. MULTIPLE ART FORMS! Any piece of theatre comprises multiple art forms.

Ask students to examine the use of writing, visual art/design, music/sound effects, character blocking, movement/dance etc. What does the script call for? (Costumes, sets, props, lights, etc.) How and why are each of the forms used in theREP's production? How do they help tell the story?

### 6. ACT!

Students are to take a monologue or a scene from the play to work on and ultimately 'perform' for the class. Students should take costumes into consideration as well as physical and vocal choices (*i.e.* what does Madame Arcati's voice sound like, is it just like yours? How does she move around? How does Elvira convey, physically, that she's not alive?). Memorized or not is up to the teacher.

Hold a classroom discussion, after all the pieces have been performed, on what it is like to act out a comedic scene? What was difficult and what was easy about it?

## **ENGLISH**

### **1. WRITE! A Review: Critical Thinking.**

Ask students to write a review of the REP's production of *Blithe Spirit*. Things to consider when writing the review:

- What was the most compelling or intriguing aspect of the production?
- How did the set, lights, costumes, sound and props add (or take away) from the production?
- What did you think of the stage movement?
  - Both the blocking (where the actors moved) and the choreography (the dancing)
- What did you think of the direction of the piece?
- What questions arose for you, about the production? Was anything confusing?
- Would you recommend this production to others?
- Can you make any connections between the play and other plays that you have seen? (What about television shows or films?)
  - Can you make any connections from the play to your own life?

### **2. WRITE! A Monologue**

Students are asked to imagine themselves as Elvira, the first wife of Charles, and currently a ghost. What might Elvira say to Ruth, Charles' second wife, knowing that Ruth cannot see or hear her.

### **3. READ! Classic Literature**

Students are encouraged to read other plays such as:

*The Importance of Being Ernest* by Oscar Wilde

*Noises Off* by Michael Frayn

*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* by Burt Shevelove

*Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Dario Fo

### **4. GHOSTS! In writing.**

Discuss some of the famous ghosts from writing:

Charles Dickens' ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*

Shakespeare's ghosts in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *Richard III*

Oscar Wilde's story turned film *The Canterville Ghost*

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

Films: *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others*

What other stories have ghosts in them (novels, plays etc.)? What devices are used to illustrate the ghostly characters presence? How are ghosts portrayed in contemporary literature, film and other media? What advantages or disadvantages does film have in comparison to plays and/or written stories?

### **3. England's Stiff Upper Lip**

*Blithe Spirit* has become somewhat of an artifact of England's 'stiff upper lip.' What does it mean to have a 'stiff upper lip?' What does it mean to have a stiff upper lip in the face of adversity? The play serves as a reminder that laughter is the best antidote to fear. Discuss instances when people have laughed in the face of fear or danger; or due to sadness? Have you ever laughed in the face of fear/danger?

#### 4. IRONY!

*Blithe Spirit* can serve as a great illustration of the comic use of irony from an age when wit rather than vulgarity was the vehicle of humor. Find examples from the play of situational irony, where actions have the opposite effect from what is expected, and dramatic irony, where things are understood by the audience, but not by the characters.

#### HISTORY

##### 1. RESEARCH AND WRITE!

Students are asked to research and report on The German Blitz of London or the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor. They are to create a Powerpoint presentation of their findings to present to the class.

##### 2. ARCHITECTURE (Art History)!

Europe is full of beautiful architecture. Students are asked to research interesting architectural structures in England. Once the student has found a structure of interest, they are to research when and how it was built, how long the construction took, who the architect is, and what style of architecture it is. Each student should create a Powerpoint presentation to present to the class.

### Resources Consulted

#### Websites:

[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

<https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-a-medium.html>

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-blitz-begins>

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/blitz.htm>

<http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/pearl-harbor>

<http://www.samuelfrench.com/p/2823/blithe-spirit>

<http://www.thedramateacher.com/farce/>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/farce>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-fox-sisters-and-the-rap-on-spiritualism-99663697/>

Denver Center Theater Company. "Blithe Spirit". *Inside Out*. March 2004.

<https://www.denvercenter.org/docs/default-source/Show-Study-Guides/all-study-guides/blithe-spirit.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

Demastes W., William. And Katherine E., Kelly. *British Playwrights, 1880-1956: A Research and Production Sourcebook*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996.

Grogan, Suzie. "'A Solace to a Tortured World'- Growing Interest in Spiritualism..". *World War I Centenary*.

<http://www1.centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/body-and-mind/a-solace-to-a-tortured-world-the-growing-interest-in-spiritualism-during-and-after-ww1/>

Leggat, Alexander. *English Stage Comedy 1490-1990: The Persistence of a Genre*. Taylor and Francis, 1998. (Form)

Phillips, Michael. "Elvira, the Mischievous Ghost, Sparkles in this 'Blithe Spirit'". *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 14, 2000. <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/nov/14/entertainment/ca-51292>

Religions- History of Modern Spiritualism" *BBC UK*. Oct. 28. 2010,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/spiritualism/history/history.shtml>

Strange W., Ronald. "Farce". *Bloomsbury Publishing*. 2017 <http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/farce-iiid-2484>

Encyclopedia Britannica. "Farce- Drama". *Britannica*. Nov. 5. 2008, <https://www.britannica.com/art/farce>

-Syracuse Stage. *Blithe Spirit* Study Guide. 2013-14

**\*\*\*This guide has been constructed for educational purposes only. theREP, which is a non-profit organization, does not make any money from it.\*\*\***





# YOUNG PLAYWRIGHT CONTEST

Deadline to submit March 23, 2018

The School of the Performing Arts at the REP seeks entries for the fourth annual Young Playwright Contest. Contest winners will see their short plays professionally produced on the REP's stage in August 2018, and will receive a series of workshops led by a professional playwright.

Submissions will be evaluated on creativity, dialogue, character development, plot structure, and the inclusion of the line "**I would have gotten away with it, too, if...**" Any scripts that are longer than 10 minutes acted out will not be considered.

## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

1. Playwrights must be at least 13 years old and no older than 19 years at the time of submission, and must reside within a 90-mile radius of Albany, NY.
2. Plays must be no longer than 10-minutes in length, acted out.
3. Plays may have no more than 7 characters.
4. Submissions must include the line: "**I would have gotten away with it, too, if...**"
5. Submit online at [school.proctors.org/young-playwright-contest](http://school.proctors.org/young-playwright-contest)





## TEACHER EVALUATION: *Blithe Spirit*

Your feedback is **vital** to the growth and continued success of the REP's educational programming. It helps us to constantly improve and attract additional underwriting. Please take a moment to fill out this form.

We encourage you to make multiple copies so that all of the teachers in your group may respond.

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

2.

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How would you rate the quality of today's performance?

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

4. Did attending the performance assist you in addressing classroom curriculum?

Very Much

Somewhat

Not At All

N/A

5. Were the on-line study materials useful in preparing students and deepening their experience?

Very Much

Somewhat

Not At All

N/A

6. Please check all that apply:

\_\_\_\_ Today's performance price was affordable for my school.

\_\_\_\_ My school required a subsidy in order to afford today's performance.

\_\_\_\_ My school would provide performances for more students, more often, if additional funds were available.

7. Any additional information / comments welcome:

The completed form may be submitted by email to [amarquise@proctors.org](mailto:amarquise@proctors.org) or by mail to: Aaron Marquise, Arts Education Manager, 432 State Street, Schenectady, NY 12305.

## theREP/Capital Repertory Theatre's Mission In Action!

Creating an authentic link to the community we serve...

**EDUCATION AND OUTREACH** are key components of theREP's mission, "to create an authentic link to the community we serve." Through a wide range of programs, theREP strives "to provide the Capital Region with theatre programming which inspires a greater understanding of the human condition" and helps "to develop future audiences by instilling the notion that theatre is a vital part of the cultural life of all vibrant cities."

### PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS

**Student Matinees (Classics on Stage)** Performances of most of the theatre's professional productions are scheduled during the school day with dramatically discounted prices for area students to allow for greater accessibility. Each season, at least one play is designated as Classics on Stage, for its direct connections with curriculum.

**On-The-Go! in-School Tour** Specially adapted professional productions designed to play to students on-site in schools. Last season, theREP's OTG program reached more than 18,000 students.

**Young Playwright Contest** Providing students, ages 13-19, with the opportunity to submit their work to be produced on the Capital Rep stage. In addition, the winning playwrights are given a mentorship – prior to the production of the play – with a professional playwright.

**Summer Stage Young Acting Company** Providing young actors the opportunity to work together, with leading professionals in the field, on a production that will take place on the Capital Rep stage. Company Members hone their acting skills while rehearsing and then performing the Young Playwright Contest-winning plays.

**Acting Intensive I & II** provide teens, ages 12-17, the opportunity to hone their acting skills by providing these week-long comprehensive workshops.

**CAST** (Cultivating Arts & Students Together) provides students with the opportunity to volunteer at the theatre and earn community service credits at the same time. Teens get an in-depth learning experience that satisfies their passion while fulfilling their needs.

**Artist In Residency Programs** theREP works in conjunction with school educators to bring highly trained teaching artists to work in extended residency within the classroom. Opportunities to embed the theatrical experience into the curriculum are available for teachers and students for every work in our 2016-17 Education Season.

**Career Development** theREP is dedicated to helping to build the next generation of theatre professionals with programs like the **Professional Apprenticeship Program** which provides year-long or summer-long paid apprenticeships, and **Internship Program** provides college students internships in many disciplines of theatre. These programs are specifically for young people beginning a career in the performing arts and arts education.

### 2017-2018 EDUCATION SPONSORS & FOUNDATIONS

CSArch Architecture | Engineering | Construction Management

The Lucille A. Herold Charitable Trust  
The McCarthy Charities  
The Michael Tuch Foundation

Cohoes Savings Foundation  
Price Chopper's Golub Foundation  
The Review Foundation  
David and Candace Weir Foundation

