



Private Lives

Noël Coward

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Private Lives is one of the most sophisticated, entertaining plays ever written. Elyot and Amanda, once married and now honeymooning with new spouses at the same hotel, meet by chance, reignite the old spark and impulsively elope. After days of being reunited, they again find their fiery romance alternating between passions of love and anger. Their aggrieved spouses appear and a roundelay of affiliations ensues as the women first stick together, then apart, and new partnerships are formed.

Private Lives Details

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From Reader Review Private Lives for online ebook

Doug says

<https://lyceum.org.uk/whats-on/productions/private-lives>...

Sara says

when i go deeper in reading the old american plays , i make sure that the most romantic comedy movies come from them , at least the general plot .
it's a good play , but it's awful characters ! , all this screaming and jealousy and rage and child acting ..
Horrible !
that is not love at all .. no one can hold life with all this pressure !
but it's a good play .

Gwen says

Meant to be seen, not read

Private Lives was my surprise favorite of the 2013–2014 season. I had no idea what it was about, had never seen a Noel Coward play, and didn't quite understand the humor of the time, but since it was included in the season ticket, I went, with zero expectations.

And I loved it. Feisty, witty, tempestuous, full of surreal banter, and a plot that was wholly implausible but FUN.

Now that I've read the text, this is definitely one for which success depends on the strength of the actors and the stage direction. The text, as written, feels...flat. Seeing the play before reading it made me realize what an excellent job the actors did with the text to make it alive and sparkling. I enjoyed reading the text so much more for having seen the play!

Maria says

“I think very few people are completely normal really, deep down in their private lives. It all depends on a combination of circumstances. If all the various cosmic thingummies fuse at the same moment, and the right spark is struck, there's no knowing what one mightn't do.”

I had quite a lot of fun with Nöel Coward's *Private Lives*. It's clever, entertaining, charming... and incredibly vulnerable. It's fantastic how these rather eccentric characters seem to be *everything* at the same time. And love, *oh love...* instead of having hate as its opposition, it chooses it as its partner in crime. There's no space for indifference.

Elyot: "It doesn't suit women to be promiscuous."

Amanda: "It doesn't suit men for women to be promiscuous."

Michelle says

I got the audio book because I had read about how witty and sophisticated the play was but I was less than impressed with what I heard. The actors did a fine job but I was not moved by the play itself. Elyot and Amanada seemed to act more like teenagers than mature adults, in love with each other one minute and then pledging lifelong loyalty to someone else the next minute. I was also disquieted by the hysterical scene when they started attacking each other, some people might think that kind of situation is passionate and romantic but I consider it toxic and exhausting and I am glad I am not the maid who has to clean up after them. I did not enjoy this one as much as *Blithe Spirit* but do acknowledge that there were many funny lines.

Lloyd says

I had seen a filmed production and had listened to a recorded radio performance. Now I've read it. Suffice to say it's delightful in any format.

Daniel says

Witty, but aged poorly—particularly the domestic violence. Firecracker premise, though.

Christine says

Read this + *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* back-to-back and you'll never fall innocently in love again.

Marius van Blerck says

Some of the funniest dialogue this side of "Alice in Wonderland".

Tess says

I'm gonna rent Anna Chancellor's stage version tomorrow

Ivonne Rovira says

After *Blithe Spirit*, *Private Lives* is Noël Coward's most famous play, which packed the house in its 1930 West End run, 1931 Broadway run, and many subsequent revivals, several of which won Tony and Olivier awards. The 1931 film adaptation was a great hit. And I don't get any of this.

I found *Private Lives* pretty lackluster — despite being so frequently produced: contrived, overblown, and lacking much witty dialogue or message. It doesn't hold a candle to the less frequently staged but more thought-provoking *Design for Living*.

Sketchbook says

"Extraordinary how potent cheap music is." Now, kiss me, you poor darling.

Though "Blithe Spirit" is surely Coward's best play, "Private Lives" is his most famous, most romantic -- and most produced. NYT Times critic Clive Barnes called it "a little masterpiece." First seen in 1930, co-starring Coward & Gert Lawrence, the critics here and in London were thoroughly engaged, but always cautioned that it was pretty flimsy. Like a good wine it has aged well and today it's a modern classic.

In a nutshell, Amanda and Elyot -- divorced for 5 years -- have finally remarried and now, on their respective honeymoons at a posh French resort, find themselves in the same hotel, sharing a balcony. They hate each other because they love each other. Pandemonium results. Love, in all its nasty, sticky splendor, remains potent.

With his usual modesty, Coward said that he wrote it in four days, giving himself and Gertie fat roles. Knowing audiences eagerly await the Amanda-Elyot brawl with flying pillows and lamps at the end of Act 2, but after Act 1 nothing really "happens." Which shows the genius of Coward : No other playwright can find something antic and also very real in dazzling nothingness. His nothingness, with its saucy flippancy, is Something *else*.

Amanda-Elyot and their new spouses are in their late 20s and early 30s -- as were Coward-Gertie when the play bowed. They repped giddy, spoiled, heartless Bright Young Things. (For the 2d husband, Coward cast a brutally handsome young actor -- Laurence Olivier). Oddly, the play is performed today by the middle-aged, except in colleges. I'm thinking of Elizabeth Taylor-Richard Burton, 1983, and a disastrous 2002 production w Lindsay Duncan-Alan Rickman, almost senior citizens (this misconceived venture, which I saw, was dir without laughs and moved so slowly that the riotous Act 1 groaned for an hour).

After its 30s debut, "Private Lives" was mothballed until 1948 when Tallulah Bankhead, adding monkey gland extract, made it an explosive Broadway hit. She graced the cover of TIME. The play ran a season in NYC, competing w *Kiss Me Kate*, *South Pacific* and *Death of a Salesman*, and 2 years on the road. Cued by Tallu's success it has since been revived 6 times on Bwy.

Back in 1930 one critic pondered if audiences, years hence, would be baffled by the popularity of this "flimsy trifle." Audiences, where Coward is concerned, are ahead of the critics. Simply, his plays do not "date" because he is not grabbing headlines -- social and political issues; there's no "message." (Who today revives Maxwell Anderson, Robert Sherwood, Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, Lillian Hellman, among

Americans?)

Coward is concerned with *character, human behaviour*, with our quirks and vanities, jealousies and idiocies, and our vulnerabilities. He realized as did the comic masters of manners - Congreve and Sheridan - that these fancies are changeless, especially when topped with verbal lunacy.

Felix says

Another Noel Coward light comedy full of flippant, blaisé, young characters engaged in a rondeau of sexual attraction, witty repartees and a coquettish disdain for social conventions. One of the play's characters, Elyot, at one time seems to express Coward's credo:

"You mustn't be serious, my dear one; it's just what they want. [...] All the futile moralists who try to make life unbearable. Laugh at them. Be flippant. Laugh at everything, all their sacred shibboleths. Flippancy brings out the acid in there [sic!] damned sweetness and light."

That's all very well, I'm all for a deconstruction of Matthew Arnold's Victorian pathos of culture as "sweetness and light". And I do enjoy a nihilistic don't-take-life-nor-death-too-serious stance. Unfortunately Coward's characters lack the bite for a real fight. We never get to see any of those moralists, so there is no worthy enemy for Elyot in sight and he certainly never has to suffer for his views. It's an easy pose for him, since he never has to fear any repercussions, being obviously wealthy enough that he neither has to work nor worry about any of the necessities of life beyond cocktails and dinners. To me at least, Coward's 'critique' rings hollow and conceited at best.

Bettie? says

Betties Books

Steven Godin says

Private Lives, regarded as Coward's most pristine play, is a fine example of his art which although elegantly simple works so well. This piece seems to exist in a kind of stylised limbo, lacking consequence or context. And yet it also hints at something darker in its close-knit characters and their interior lives, and that of its creator's, both concealing and revealing at the same time. There are four characters (two couples), that being Sibyl & Elyot Chase and Amanda & Victor Prynne, unknown to the Chases, the Prynnes are honeymooning at the same hotel, which causes problems to flare up as there is a past love between two of them.

Sibyl loves married life, she is as much in love with the idea of being a bride as she is with her husband, Elyot, and perhaps more so. On the first night of their honeymoon, Sibyl had gone into raptures over Elyot, but she did not forget, or let him forget, that she knew he had loved his first wife Amanda madly. When Amanda and Elyot see each other again, each wants to move out of the hotel before their respective mates knows about the presence of the other couple. Sibyl and Victor, however, who are not accustomed to making abrupt changes without reason, refuse to leave. Amanda and Elyot thereupon decides that they are not culpable when they talk together again and recall their happy times together. Both try for a time to avoid the issue uppermost in their hearts and minds, but at last Elyot breaks off the polite conversation to say that he his love for Amanda still remains.

Scenes 2 & 3 were my favourites, when it switches to Amanda's Parisian apartment, which plays host to conflict and bickering, where the use of dialogue was quite superb. It's a dazzlingly constructed piece of drama, exquisite, funny and tender, and showcases Coward as one of Britain's great playwrights. Would love to see on stage.

Samir Rawas Sarayji says

What an awesome play! I couldn't put it down and when I had to, I picked it up again at the first opportunity. The dialogue is so well interwoven between the characters and it propels the story forward from start to finish. This is why I like reading plays. The ending caught me off guard and made it all the sweeter.

Raya ??? says

"Love is no use unless it's wise, and kind, and undramatic. Something steady and sweet, to smooth out your nerves when you're tired. Something tremendously cosy; and unflurried by scenes and jealousies. That's what I want, what I've always wanted really."

Trevor says

I went to see this on Friday with a dear friend of mine. We sat watching the MTC production. I had never read the play before or seen it, so I was expecting a romantic comedy as light as a feather and just as ticklish. But then Amanda says that Elyot used to hit her, and not just once, but frequently. And then in act two he hits her again...

Now, both me and the woman I was watching the play with were more than a little taken aback by this. In fact, like the music that had been updated to stuff from the 1970s, we thought this theme might just have been added so as to better suit the tastes of a more 'modern' audience. But I've check and all this is in the original play.

Ok, the main bits of the story. Two couples are on their honeymoon. The husband of one had been married to the wife of the other five years previously, but after a really tempestuous marriage, based mostly on jealousy, they had separated. It is utterly clear to everyone from the beginning of this play that they are both still in love with each other and have 'settled' for their new partners. They do not know it, but they have organised for their honeymoons to be spent in the same hotel in adjoining rooms – This is the world of a romantic

comedy, you can't get worked up over such things. Worse things happen at sea and all that.

They meet up again, declare each other's undying love to the other and then run off to Paris with each other. But their delight at being back together again is short lived – they have collectively stuffed up three marriages now in relatively quick succession, so things are a wee bit stressful at least now and again. They try to work out strategies for avoiding their tempers destroying each other, but this doesn't really work either, and so he hits her again which brings them to the end of their relationship yet again.

The other two arrive, obviously somewhat pissed off, and so talk of divorce is pretty well the main topic of conversation. But then it isn't all that clear who should get divorced or if they should bother, given it seems clear Amanda and Elyot now hate each other yet again. There is a longish part of the third act where it isn't at all clear who is going to end up with whom. And this is really surprisingly uncomfortable. In any other comedy you would be willing and wanting and needing Amanda and Elyot to end up together. But he spends a lot of his time hitting her. Victor might well be a boring little tit, but sometimes you can have just too much excitement in your life. You know, who wants to end up in a Punch and Judy show?

After the play was over we were talking about the whole domestic violence theme. You know, when Amanda says Elyot hit her numerous times and in numerous places, Victor calls him a cad. I really don't think that this aspect of the play would have been any more comfortable to watch in 1930 than it was in 2014. The fact domestic violence wasn't spoken about back then surely would have made that topic in the play feel like a red hot poker.

This is a really savage look at male / female relationships. It would hardly make you want to run off and get married. In fact, it would make you want to run in exactly the opposite direction. It also basically says that all relationships are doomed to end in either loathing or worse. So, as a 'romantic comedy' this is hardly a little ray of sunshine. All the same, it really was quite funny in parts and I've come away thinking about it much more than I expected I might.

J says

Considered his masterpiece, I would rank this one just below *Present Laughter* which I find far more entertaining. This one focuses on two mixed up couples, a pair of husbands and wives. Only one husband and one wife from opposite couples has been married already -- to each other. Antics ensue and they're a load of fun.

Robert Stewart says

This really is an awful play. The wit is purely of the derisive variety, but nothing as sharp as Dorothy Parker came up with on one of her off days.

There are four characters, two are "smart", as in "smart set", sophisticated, etc. Two are meant to be the lesser-mortals they each hooked up with after splitting up themselves. The lesser beings must be made into simpletons, just so we are sure to realize how smart the other two are. When the smart pair are left alone, the dialog is dull, and even they seem bored. They need the other two to display their wit, or what passes for it.

I'm sure Noël Coward was great fun at parties. But if there weren't legions of people telling us how terribly witty he was, no one would be reading this play.
