

*Blithe Spirit* by Noel Coward directed by Barbara Heath  
Kapiti Playhouse, Paraparaumu, till 28 November 2009  
Reviewed by Ewen Coleman on Tuesday 24 November 2009

Ever the patriot, Noel Coward was always trying to do his bit for England during WWII. After a number of years out of the country, he was appalled by “the sights and smells of death and destruction” when he returned to London in 1941. So incensed was he that he quickly set about to write yet another of his sure-fire winners, which *Blithe Spirit* soon became, not only because it was a light frivolous entertaining piece of theatre intended to light everyone’s spirits, but it also lightened the fears of persecution, loss and death that people were experiencing as a result of the war.

The story involves Charles Condomine, a successful author, who is happily married to his second wife Ruth. In order to collect material for his latest book he decides to invite Madam Arcati, a medium, to conduct a séance at his house one evening. So successful is she that unwittingly the ghost of his first wife Elvira materialises, demanding to have Charles back. Thus ensures a battle between Ruth and Elvira, the natural verses the supernatural for his affections with in the end dire consequences for all concerned.

While the scene setting and exposition in the opening of the play becomes a little protracted and the ending labours its point and could be easily cut, there is no denying that Coward was a master wordsmith, and must be considered one of the greatest exponents of witty pithy dialogue in the English language making the play as entertaining today as when it was first written. And in Barbara Heath’s production for Kapiti Playhouse the whole team of actors bring a confidence and assured playing to their roles that enhances Coward’s dialogue bringing out the humour with great alacrity. Pace, energy and accurate timing are essential ingredients of any Coward play, he doesn’t dwell on heavy sub-text, so a light touch is needed to bounce the play along, which this production certainly did. From the outset the rapport between Renwick Wright’s Charles, a childish charmer, and Dodo Popert’s Ruth, his long suffering wife, was well established making them appear a well to do fashionable couple and setting themselves up well for their later sparing and arguing. Vivien Bell’s ghostly Elvira is suitably ethereal and she portrays the spiteful, petulant nature of the character with great charm. The eccentricities of Madam Arcati the medium are wonderfully brought to life by Peggy McAree, from her attire to her actions and mannerisms she shows that maybe she isn’t the one to laugh at and ridicule after all. While the climax at the end lacked impact without flying objects shooting across the stage this production of a classic Noel Coward play was nevertheless a spirited and highly entertaining piece of theatre.