



Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Lives

Noël Coward , Philip Hoare (Introduction)

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Lives

Noël Coward , Philip Hoare (Introduction)

Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Lives Noël Coward , Philip Hoare (Introduction)

Filled with languid aristocrats trading witticisms as they wait for martinis, this collection of three Noel Coward plays encapsulates the qualities that made him one of the most popular playwrights of the 1930s and '40s and one of the great personalities of the century.

In *Blithe Spirit*, Charles Condomine receives a visit from his first wife, Elvira. Unfortunately, Elvira is now a ghost and Charles has, understandably, moved on and married Ruth.

The bohemian protagonists of *Hay Fever* wreak emotional havoc on a house full of weekend visitors.

In *Private Lives*, a recently divorced couple find themselves in adjoining hotel rooms while on honeymoon with their new spouses.

Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Lives Details

Date : Published January 26th 1999 by Vintage (first published 1965)

ISBN : 9780679781790

Author : Noël Coward , Philip Hoare (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 254 pages

Genre : Plays, Drama, Theatre, Fiction, Classics

 [Download Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Lives ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Live ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Lives Noël Coward , Philip Hoare (Introduction)

From Reader Review Three Plays: Blithe Spirit / Hay Fever / Private Lives for online ebook

Pace Lockwood-davis says

I'm a big fan of Noel Coward and this is a perfect read. Three excellent pieces.

Charlie McLarnon says

The three plays in this collection shared similar themes, with the plots of each centering around the flimsy romances and general carelessness of the rich. Unlike many books intended to be humorous, these plays managed to deliver genuinely funny material. This is the result of terse, witty dialogue, which Coward does not interrupt with unnecessary description or stage direction. Of the three, I would most recommend Hay Fever, although Private Lives and Blithe Spirit are also both worth reading.

Ensiform says

This volume included a humorous intro by Edward Albee.

"Blithe Spirit." I hadn't read any Coward before, and had a notion his work would be laugh-out-loud funny, like Wodehouse's, but I found this play, although extremely literate and witty, wasn't as risible as that. It concerns a man whose first wife, after a seance, reappears to plague him and his second wife. Then the latter dies, too, remanifests, and his life becomes somewhat exasperating. A jolly good plot and all, but I can't help feeling that it could have been more exuberant, if, say, it had detailed the catfighting of the two dead women, or spent more time on them deciding after death that they were pals and that Charles, the hero, was the cad. And the ending was too sudden and – a glaring omission – totally unexplained. An enjoyable, witty play, and one with clever innuendo, but I don't see its "classic" reputation, as it seems so flawed.

"Hay Fever." This one was, I thought, funnier than the first, but perhaps less witty. It concerned a very bohemian, theatrical and artsy family that bordered on the dysfunctional without actually ever going beyond mere theatrics, instantly forgetting all strife moments after it begins. The family's guests for the weekend are all horrified. It was funny, but it all lead up to a reaction – such as the guests plotting a kind of revenge on the family that used them as theatrical foils – that never came. I suppose in 1925 the personas of the family were novel enough to carry the play. Also flawed, but also comic and fun.

"Private Lives." About a divorced couple who both remarry and happen to meet again on their simultaneous honeymoons, and then run off together. They fight horribly, and seem to cause their respective second spouses to quarrel just as horribly, and seem to find it amusing. Rather an unpleasant little work, but mildly amusing in parts.

Mark says

These plays are still enjoyable with lines like “Time is the reef upon which all our frail mystic ships are wrecked,” and “it’s discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit” and “I love to see things as they are first, and then pretend they’re what they’re not.” What fun, Darling.

Paul Frandano says

So...I bought this only for Private Lives, because I knew I'd be going to a well-reviewed DC production, and, if possible, I like to read a play before I see it - an acquired preference from classical theater and opera.

And speaking of acquired, Coward's that kind of taste, isn't he? Particularly 70-90 years after he wrote these confections? Well, it's a taste - for dry, bantering, cleverly corrosive wit - I acquired long ago, before Coward, and so I found Private Lives HOWLINGLY funny on the page and on the stage. I sat up late last Saturday to read this, and I feared I'd wake up the house with my whoops and guffaws. Coward cracks wise about every third line, and it's just so...so...so...black tie-wing collar-patent leather pumps-English. (I wanted to say Wildean, but that would be Irish, wouldn't it?) This is what Elizabethan comedy's superabundance of clever clever clever words words words evolves into in London's West End between the Wars. So demmed smart (as in "smart set" smart, not smart as "intelligent" - although it's that, too, in trumps). And so trippingly like what every bright Oxbridgean wants to sound like at the cocktail party.

Of course, the story is ridiculous. But with a neatly balanced three acts, which takes reader or theatergoer up a clever hill and down a similar, similarly bright, hill for a somewhat predictable conclusion, handsomely wrought, at a pace, even on the page, that's racehorse brisk.

In the theater, the play literally crackles, throws off sparks, shimmers like shook foil. There we sit - we're Victor and Sybil, wholly conventional, in our conventional little lives, supermarket-rack best-sellers on our night tables, with our comfy jobs, and comfortable incomes - watching these upper-crust Wildings toss the conventional order, between sips of bubbly, as it suits their whims, with an insouciant noblesse oblige and without a care concerning who or whom they may run over by accident.

Delightful. Delicious.

I'm now a new Noel Coward fan and look forward to exploring his plays, prose, music, and interesting life. (Mad "coincidence": I was laid up sick as a dog in the same Shanghai hotel in which, also sick as a dog, Coward wrote Private Lives in 1930. Right: no real coincidence, okay, okay, but I felt a little more grounded in his world, in a memory of my looking out the window on similar Shanghai streets and the Huangpu River: the Cathay was an elegant venue, the brightest light on the Shanghai bund, in 1930. Fifty-some years later, the carpets were threadbare, the brass tarnished, the water somewhat rusty, but it still had a perceptible, albeit faded, Art Deco elegance. And fabulous "puffs of cream" from the ancient pastry chef of the famous restaurant...perhaps descendants of the same puffs Coward might have enjoyed in 1930 after recovering from his ailment...)

Derrick says

Blithe Spirit- 5 stars

Hay Fever- 4 stars

Private Lives- 3 stars

Blithe Spirit, I really loved. It was a play involving ghosts and seances and the supernatural. And I just feel like it's more difficult and impressive to right something supernatural meant for the stage. I also liked the characters and their normally unlikable traits.

Hay Fever- There were a lot of characters with normal names that kept kind of switching partners without much hullabaloo, so it was kind of hard distinguishing characters from each other besides the four main characters. But that was also part of the point of the play, that the family the play is centered around are all crazy and confusing. So it worked with the play, but when just reading the play rather than seeing it, it got hard to follow sometimes.

Private Lives was good, but a strong way to end for me, as I really liked the ones that came before it. The characters were unlikable, and unlike in Blithe Spirit, it wasn't funny unlikable characteristics, but just annoying. And the ending of the play was surprising, but made no sense to me.

Mark McTague says

Witty, surprising, and thoroughly entertaining trio of plays from a master of marital comedy. If couples didn't talk like that, they should. Well recommended.

Lisa says

After a month of slogging through Dostoyevky's magnum opus, the Brothers Karamazov, it was refreshing to turn my attention from tragedy to comedy, from morals to manners. As Coward writes in Private Lives..."Let's be superficial and pity the poor philosophers." Amen. My son Henry introduced me to Coward by recruiting me to play two female characters in Blithe Spirit while he was practicing his lines as Charles, and it was the most fun I ever had helping out with homework. If I'd had the big bucks, I'd have jetted us off to New York to watch Rupert Everett play Charles on Broadway. Of the other two plays, Hay Fever is maybe a little too messy, but Private Lives is, for all its cynicism, a compelling story of enduring love.

Nut Meg says

This was a marvelous little confection. I fell in love with Coward several years ago when I was introduced to "Private Lives," via the 1931 film, and it's a passion that has yet to fade. Coward writes delightful comedies full of wit and cosmopolitan dilettantes behaving badly, much in the spirit of Oscar Wilde but without the attempts to moralize that dogged so much of his work. Coward has no social commentary to make, other than to set a spotlight on the Typhoid Mary's of the world. All three plays focus on individuals so self-absorbed and disconnected from reality that they leave a trail of misery in their wake as they bowl over every sensible person who dares get in their way. It's gleefully wicked fun to see such terrible, charming people blithely destroying the sanity of everyone who comes in contact with them, only to walk away totally unscathed themselves. I can't recommend this collection highly enough or provide anything besides unqualified praise.

Abby M says

Only read PRIVATE LIVES from this.

Adam says

Another collection so each play will be reviewed seperately.

Blithe Spirit (****): Very funny play showing off Cowards wit on every page with a great story and intriguing characters. The theme of love is dealt with very nicely and realistically as Charles has to deal with the ghost of his previous wife, Elvira, while living with his current wife Ruth and the differences in his marriages to them.

Hay Fever(***): Personally this was the weakest play out of the three. The characters got a bit bland and the storyline slowly became predictable. However it still had some funny moments and would be interesting to see onstage.

Private Lives (****): This is Cowards most well known play and it's easy to see why, the characters of Amanda and Eliot are great together and with their new partners, Victor and Sybil respectively and the humour is well written. There are several poignant moments which contrast with some of the more dramatic/comedic scenes nicely

Brian says

“Three Plays” is an excellent collection of three works by that most sardonic of wits, Noel Coward. There are a few too many typos in this edition to suit me, but that it is a minor quibble.

I have written something about each of the 3 pieces below, separated by a quote from each play.

For those who like verbal dexterity, witty dialogue, and a play that you must pay attention to in order to appreciate, then Mr. Coward is your man. Enjoy!

“I shall always love the memory of you.”

Noel Coward was one of the drollest writers the stage has ever produced. His ability to write smart, extremely verbal and witty characters is almost as fun to read as it is to witness in performance.

“Blithe Spirit” is one of Coward’s more famous pieces, and the premise is clever and intriguing. In brief, a successful writer has a séance in his home in order to observe a Madame for research for his latest novel. The séance results in his dead wife (Elvira) returning from the grave, and only he can see her. This causes problems with the current (very much alive) wife Ruth.

This play is a comedy, and the dialogue is fast and furious. I could not help but observe as I read it, and saw it in performance in an excellent production at the Stratford Festival, that the arguments between the character of Ruth and her husband are some of the best moments in the piece. Their conversations are quick, biting, comical and sometimes so subtly mean spirited that it is a delight to read. The whole play is well paced and fun, but Coward really excels in the moments when just two characters share the stage and for whatever reason they are not happy with each other.

A personal favorite for me is the character of Ruth, who in the hands of a weak actress becomes shrill and one note. But if you pay attention she is not written that way, and some of the text’s best moments belong to her.

Noel Coward is a throwback to a time we imagine was more witty and urbane. It probably wasn't, but it is fun to imagine it was so.

“Her sense of the theater is always fatal.”

“Hay Fever” is just a funny funny play. It has the witty banter and intelligent characters that one expects in a text from Noel Coward, but it is really a farce, with physical elements, and characters who are so self-involved that they could become parodies in the hands of a lesser writer, or in the case of bad actors. The play follows a weekend at the country home of the Bliss family, each member of which has invited a weekend guest. And with that we are off to the races. The Bliss family are people who really can't see past the end of their own noses and the havoc they wreck on others is either cruel, or the result of a complete lack of self-awareness. It is probably a mixture of both.

I saw a top notch professional performance of this piece at the Stratford Festival in Ontario Canada, and the audience was laughing from beginning to end. It is also fun to read, but I read it after seeing it performed, so perhaps that enhanced my reading of it?

The final line of this piece is one of the most appropriate and ironic closing lines I have ever read in a play. A perfect closing.

I have read three Noel Coward plays, and this one kept my attention the most as I was reading. Many people don't know “Hay Fever” well. If you are one of those people you should change that.

“I think very few people are completely normal, really deep down in their private lives.”

I read “Private Lives” as the last of three plays that I read in a row by Noel Coward, and I have to say of the three it was my last favorite. Still quite good, but a little darker than the other two I had just read. A little more aged and perhaps too rooted in its original time.

I not sure why, but this piece is not as engaging as Coward's “Blithe Spirit” and “Hay Fever”. I have never seen “Private Lives” in a professional performance, and I have seen excellent productions of the other two, so that might be a factor.

In this text, we meet Amanda and Elyot, a divorced couple who run into each other on their honeymoons for their respective second marriages. What should be a comic farcical gem, turns instead into a dark comedy where two people who really should not be together, and are cruel to each other (and always will be by every indication) get together again. It just left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Private Lives” is a good play, seeing it in performance it could be funnier than it reads, but just reading it left me cold.

Felix says

Hay Fever:

As with the other plays in this collection, it's fun to read if you like very light comedy, but for my taste it's too much lacking in any kind of critical import. Its humour is a bit out-of-date and it is relying heavily on the upper class social conventions of the 1920s what with all the summer residence airs, cocktails and jeunesse blasé smugness. Most of it I find annoying rather than funny.

Private Lives:

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." (p. 226-227)

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 are no worthy enemies 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.

Faye* says

reread: 4 stars

I usually don't read plays but I just adore Noël Coward's witty and clever writing. I'm glad I finally reread this.

~~~~~  
1st read: 5 stars

---

## Sketchbook says

Blithe Spirit is Coward's best play and one of the all-time best comedies; opening in 1941, it ran 2 years on Bwy and 4 years in London. (A daft Medium conjures up the hero's dead wife). Private Lives (1930) is a classic, or "charade," as Coward says, of 2 young married couples who become entangled by their own passions and immature temperaments. I want to focus on Hay Fever, a perfect screwballer about a confusion of guests at a houseparty. It isn't easy to write a play about Nothing, but Coward does precisely that with this soufflé that rises to a tasty top.

Amateurs may find it a lark to produce, but, Coward warned, it's probably his most difficult to perform -- it has no plot and little action. So it requires superb technique by every cast member. Hay Fever (1925) is a vehicle for comic acting as Bohemian crackpotters - retired actress Mum, romantic novelist Dado and their two impudent teens - are blithering hosts to unsuspecting weekenders. Blissful nonsense inspired by socials at the NY home of actress Laurette Taylor and youthful weekend houseparties at the country estate of Mrs Astley Cooper.

What dates in the theatre? Moral judgments, political opinions, and social messages. Coward does not date because he records the vanities and quirks and follies and pomposities of people, and people - as Congreve & Sheridan have shown - do not change.

It may sound easy, and obvious, to effect, but after a few hundred years only a few have found it possible to do. As one critic said, it's not a difficult idiom to imitate, but

just try to pull it off.

---