Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespearean Festival

Private Lives
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Private Lives

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About the Playwright: Noel Coward

Noel Pierce Coward was born on 16 December 1899. His family on his father's side was very talented musically, and they helped nurture the natural virtuosity of the child, instilling in him a lifelong love of music. Also, his mother took him to the theatre every year on his birthday, and, as he grew older, he found these junkets more and more fascinating and upon returning home would rush to the piano and play by ear the songs from the production he had just seen.

He made his first public appearance, singing and accompanying himself on the piano, at a concert held at Miss Willington's School. Though obviously a very talented child, Coward's precocity did not carry over to his formal education. At best, his schooling was sporadic. He was indulged by his mother, who became the stereotypical stage mother during his early years, and it was at his mother's insistence that he began attending Miss Janet Thomas's Dancing Academy in addition to his regular school in London. Soon, Miss Thomas's school usurped the position of importance held by traditional academic fare, and Coward became a child performer.

Coward's first professional engagement, and that which launched his long career, was on 27 January 1911 in a children's play, The Goldfish. After this appearance, he was sought after for children's roles by other professional theatres. He was featured in several productions with Sir Charles Hawtrey, a light comedian, whom Coward idolized and to whom he virtually apprenticed himself until he was twenty. It was from Hawtrey that Coward learned comic acting techniques and playwriting.

At the tender age of twelve, Coward met one of the actresses who would help contribute to his overwhelming success, Gertrude Lawrence; she was then fifteen and a child performer as well. The acting team of Coward and Lawrence would become synonymous with polished, sophisticated comedy during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s.

Coward began his writing career when he was sixteen by writing songs and selling them for distribution. He turned his hand to playwriting when he was seventeen and found that he was very good at writing dialogue. By 1919, his play *I'll Leave It to You* was produced in the West End with Coward in the leading role. One of the idiosyncrasies of Coward's writing is that often he wrote “whacking good parts” for himself or for people he knew. Some of his best plays are essentially vehicles for his own talents or those of Gertrude Lawrence and later of the Lunts. *I’ll Leave It to You* met with moderate success, and Coward received great praise from critics for his play-writing abilities.

Coward went to New York for the first time in 1921 and arrived virtually penniless; however, although he may have begun the 1920s in penury, his position as the most popular playwright in the English theatre became secure during this decade. In 1924, *The Vortex*, Coward's most important serious play, was produced in London. The years from 1928 to 1934 were regarded by many as Coward's “golden years.” His string of successes include *This Year of Grace, Bitter Sweet, Private Lives, Cavalcade, Words and Music, Design for Living, and Conversation Piece*.

In 1941 he wrote the record-breaking *Blithe Spirit*, which ran for 1,997 performances in London.

After World War II, Coward fell from grace with many critics, who regarded him as being past his literary prime. However, by the late 1950s, audiences were once again in love with him. His plays, revues, and nightclub appearances were extremely successful. The critics, however, remained vitriolic, but their rancor failed to dim the enthusiasm of the
general theatre-going public, which clamored for more Coward plays.

On January 1, 1970, Coward was honored by the queen as a knight bachelor for services rendered to the arts. In the same year, he was awarded a special Tony Award by the American theatre for distinguished achievement in the theatre. In 1972, he received an honorary doctor of letters from the University of Sussex.

Coward died of a heart attack in Jamaica on 26 March 1973, bringing to an end a career of more than sixty years in the theatre.
Synopsis: *Private Lives*

In an upscale Paris hotel Elyot Chase steps out on his terrace with his new wife Sibyl. They talk about how happy they will be as a married couple (much more than he was with his previous wife, Amanda). Their conversation leads them back inside while in the honeymoon suite next door, Victor, a man a few years older than Elyot, walks out onto his terrace. He calls for his wife, Amanda, to join him outside. It quickly becomes clear that this is the same Amanda who was previously married to Elyot, and that the former couple are in neighboring suites for their honeymoons with second spouses.

A short time later, Amanda and Elyot are surprised to encounter each other while on their respective terraces. Their strained conversation is cut short, and they both return to their spouses to try and convince them to leave the hotel immediately. Both conversations end in bitter arguments, and eventually Elyot and Amanda are back outside talking and drinking cocktails on Elyot’s terrace.

After realizing they are still in love with each other and should never have divorced, they abandon their new spouses to run off together. They escape to Amanda’s apartment in Paris. After they have left, Victor and Sibyl end up meeting on their respective balconies and begin chatting.

At Amanda’s apartment the next day Elyot and Amanda are finishing their evening meal. They talk about their hasty escape from their respective honeymoons and why their relationship failed the first time. The couple is soon caught up in the same violent arguments that originally plagued their turbulent marriage. They seem to be drawn to each other simply for the thrill of the fight.

Amanda and Elyot continue arguing when, at the climax of their fight, their weary and jaded spouses, Sibyl and Victor, show up. With passions and jealousies escalating, how will these couples fare? Who ends up with whom in this amusing rollick?
Characters: Private Lives

Elyot Chase: Sibyl's rich and handsome new husband who was formerly married to Amanda. He has a quick and cutting wit that he wields throughout the play.

Sibyl Chase: An attractive, twenty-three year-old, first-time bride who feels very threatened by her new husband's first wife, Amanda.

Amanda Prynne: A beautiful second-time bride (she was formerly married to Elyot, and is now married to Victor) with a fiery temper and a tendency toward impulsive behavior.

Victor Prynne: Amanda's second husband, who is a few years older than Elyot, is very pleased to describe himself as “normal.”
Private Lives: Personal Magic
Daniel Frezza

“HAVE READ NEW PLAY STOP NOTHING WRONG THAT CAN’T BE FIXED” cabled Gertrude Lawrence to Noel Coward, who cabled back: “THE ONLY THING THAT WILL NEED TO BE FIXED IS YOUR PERFORMANCE.” That exchange sounds like dialog from Private Lives (the new play) for good reason: Coward wrote the parts of Elyot and Amanda for himself and Lawrence, and the play “in many respects mirrored the real-life relationship between Noel and Gertie: two people deeply fond of each other but constantly bickering and testing the limits of that friendship in the certain knowledge that it is unbreakable” (Barry Day, ed. The Letters of Noel Coward [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007], 182).

Coward and Lawrence first acted together in their early teens. He recalled “a vivacious child with ringlets to whom I took an instant fancy” (Noel Coward, Present Indicative [New York: Doubleday Doran & Co., 1937], 34). She remembered “a thin, unusually shy boy” who was occasionally condescending to her. “I could put up with the condescension. What I could not have endured was to have Noel ignore me” (Gertrude Lawrence, A Star Danced [New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945], 44). Their friendship developed as their careers took separate paths. A decade later, in 1923, they worked together in the revue, London Calling, which Coward co-authored. After it closed, Lawrence went to New York in André Charlot’s London Revue of 1924 and established herself as a star. She followed that with another hit, the Gershwins’ Oh Kay! Back home, Coward made equal strides. In 1924 The Vortex made him a sensation both as actor and playwright. By mid-1925 he had four shows running simultaneously in London.

Coward had long wanted to write a play for Lawrence. In the summer of 1928 he formed the idea for his operetta Bitter Sweet after hearing a recording of Strauss’s Die Fledermaus. He intended the lead for Lawrence, “but when the score was almost done, she and I both realized that her voice, although light and charming, was not strong enough to carry such a heavy singing role” (Present Indicative, 299). Maybe Lawrence realized that privately, but in her autobiography she stated that she couldn’t do Bitter Sweet because she was already engaged to do Candle-Light around the same time (the autumn of 1929). Though not a memorable play, Candle-Light was an important step because it was the first non-musical show of Lawrence’s adult career. “Never mind, darling,” Coward told her, “I’ll write another play especially for us that will be even better” (Lawrence, 183). He did; and it was as different as could be from Bitter Sweet’s romantic, sentimental look back at the late nineteenth century.

There was something almost magical about the inception of Private Lives. In December 1929, Coward was vacationing in the Far East. One evening, in Tokyo, he went to bed early, “but the moment I switched out the lights, Gertie appeared in a white Molyneux dress on a terrace in the South of France and refused to go again until four a.m., by which time Private Lives, title and all, had constructed itself” (Present Indicative, 320). (Photographs of Lawrence in the elegant white dress designed by Edward Molyneux can be seen in various Coward biographies.) A few years earlier Coward would have written the play within days of thinking of it, but he “had learned the wisdom of not welcoming a new idea too ardently.” He forced it to the back of his mind, trusting it to emerge when it was sufficiently matured. While convalescing from influenza in Shanghai several weeks later, he completed a handwritten draft in four days. A few weeks later, in Hong Kong, he revised and typed it and sent a copy to Lawrence. When she received the script with a request to keep the autumn
free, Lawrence was under contract for another show for that time. The phrase “NOTHING WRONG THAT CAN’T BE FIXED,” she claimed, referred to this contract. She wrote years later: “Noel never has entirely forgiven me for that cable, and I don’t think that he has ever really believed . . . that I was not making an adverse comment on his play” (Lawrence, 184). By May she was free of the prior commitment and Coward was back in England. Rehearsals began in June.

Of the five-week tour before Private Lives reached London, Coward wrote: “Assurance of success seemed to be emblazoned on the play from the first. . . . Gertie was brilliant. Everything she had been in my mind when I originally conceived the idea in Tokyo came to life on the stage” (Present Indicative, 338). The three-month limited London engagement opened September 24, 1930, and sold out in a week. In January 1931 Private Lives moved to Broadway and ran for 256 performances, continuing with replacements when Coward and Lawrence left the cast after three months. (Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, Theatrical Companion to Coward, 2nd ed. [London: Oberon Books, 2000], 216). Coward set a three month limit on any role he played, partly because he started to get bored at that point but also because he needed time to write.

Cowardís appraisal of the play changed over time. Initially he referred to it as “a reasonably well-constructed duologue for two experienced performers. . . . There is a well-written love scene in Act One, and a certain amount of sound sex psychology underlying the quarrel scenes in Act Two. As a complete play, it leaves a lot to be desired, principally owing to my dastardly and conscienceless behaviour towards Sibyl and Victor, the secondary characters. These, poor things, are little better than ninepins, . . . only there at all in order to be repeatedly knocked down and stood up again” (Coward, int. Play Parade [New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1933], xii-xiv). In 1942—before the play had a major revival in London or New York—he predicted “Private Lives will always be revived and will go into the history of comedy like a play by Congreve or Wilde” (Graham Payn, My Life With Noel Coward [New York: Applause, 1994], 89). According to Graham Payn, Coward’s companion and executor of his estate, Blithe Spirit, Private Lives and Hay Fever are the most often produced Coward plays. Payn added that whatever the quality of a Private Lives production “the observation of character and the quality of the writing shine through.” (Payn, 258)

Coward and Lawrence recorded excerpts from acts one and two of Private Lives shortly before the London opening. The recording, available on CD, is worth a listen. One’s initial reaction is likely to be surprise at how clipped and “thrown away” their delivery is. Repeated listening reveals the underlying emotion, particularly in the act one segment (available at youtube.com) where Amanda and Elyot strain to talk about anything other than the discovery they’ve just made: that although divorced from each other and now honeymooning with their new spouses, they are still very much in love. Decades later Coward said “the thing about the play that went unobserved at the time was that it is the lightest of light comedies, based on a serious situation which is two people who love each other too much. I wouldn’t say it’s a tragedy, but there’s a sadness below it” (Hal Burton, ed. Great Acting [New York: Bonanza Books, 1967], 169). The challenge lies in finding the right balance of lightness and sadness and the precise moments when the tone shifts.

The character of Amanda was partly based on socialite Lady Castlerosse (Payn, 53), but if anyone doubts it was based mainly on Lawrence herself, reading Gertrude Lawrence as Mrs. A, by her husband Richard Stoddard Aldrich, will reveal how accurately Coward captured the personality of his dearest friend. They weren’t romantically involved, yet their
scenes show an extraordinary degree of psychological intimacy. Coward offered one reason: “Amanda and Elyot are practically synonymous” (Present Indicative, 338). Their acting together was part of a greater private relationship in which the audience were being allowed almost vicariously to participate for an hour or two each night (Sheridan Morley, The Private Lives of Noel and Gertie [London: Oberon Books, 1999], 439). So powerful was that effect that “with Private Lives, ‘Noel and Gertie’ were to become a single entity in the public mind” (Day, 182).

Do Elyot and Amanda stay together after the play ends? If the lives of Noel and Gertie are an indicator (and reading their biographies is basic research for actors playing Elyot and Amanda), the answer is: physically no, but emotionally yes. “Always.”