

THE Classic Theatre

SAN ANTONIO

presents



Private Lives

By: Noel Coward

Our student performances are funded by a generous grant from:



and **The Coates Charitable Foundation**

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The Classic Theatre mission is to build a professional theatre that inspires passionate involvement in a shared theatrical experience and to create a source of pride for our community.



AIM High intern Renelle Wilson (far right) onstage with the cast of Classic Theatre of San Antonio's award-winning production of *Scapin* by Moliere.

SYNOPSIS

"I think very few people are completely normal really, deep down in their private lives."-Amanda

Act 1

Following a brief courtship, Elyot and Sibyl are honeymooning at a hotel in Deauville, although her curiosity about his first marriage is not helping his romantic mood. In the adjoining suite, Amanda and Victor are starting their new life together, although he cannot stop thinking of the cruelty Amanda's ex-husband displayed towards her. Elyot and Amanda, following a volatile three-year-long marriage, have been divorced for the past five years, but they now discover that they are sharing a terrace while on their honeymoons with their new and younger spouses. Elyot and Amanda separately beg their new mates to leave the hotel with them immediately, but both new spouses refuse to cooperate and each storms off to dine alone. Realising they still love each other and regret having divorced, Elyot and Amanda abandon their mates and run off together to her flat in Paris.

Act 2

After dinner at the Paris flat several days later, Elyot and Amanda use their code word "Sollocks" to stop their arguments from getting out of hand. They kiss passionately, but the harmony cannot last: while Elyot and Amanda cannot live without each other, neither can they live with each other. They argue violently and try to outwit each other, just as they had done during their stormy marriage. Their ongoing argument escalates to a point of fury, as Amanda breaks a record over Elyot's head, and he retaliates by slapping her face. They seem to be trapped in a repeating cycle of love and hate as their private passions and jealousies consume them. At the height of their biggest fight, Sibyl and Victor walk in.

Act 3

The next morning, Amanda tries to sneak away early, but is surprised to find Sibyl and Victor there. As they talk, Elyot comes in, and he and Amanda start bickering again. It has been decided that neither of the new spouses will grant a divorce for a year, to give Amanda and Elyot time to confirm if this is really what they want. As tempers rise, Sibyl and Victor begin to bicker with each other, defending their respective spouses. Amanda and Elyot realize that Sibyl and Victor are as suited to each other as they are, forgive one another and sneak out, leaving the younger two together. As Elyot and Amanda tiptoe out, Victor and Sibyl have reached the point of mutual violence.

About the Playwright: Noel Coward



Noel (pronounced NOH-uhl) Pierce Coward was born on December 16, 1899. His family on his father's side was very talented musically and instilled in Noel a life-long love of music. His mother also took him to the theatre every year on his birthday, and, as he grew older, he would rush home 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, he was not a very good student academically. 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, Coward left school altogether and became a child performer.

Coward began his writing career when he was sixteen by selling songs 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.

Coward went to New York for the first time in 1921 and arrived virtually penniless; however, 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 during this time includes *Private Lives*, *Cavalcade*, *Words and Music*, *Design for Living* and *Conversation Piece*. In 1941 he wrote *Blithe Spirit*, which ran for 1,997 record-breaking 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. On January 1, 1970, Coward was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for services rendered to the arts. In the same year, he was awarded a special Tony Award 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 March 26, 1973, bringing to an end a career of more than sixty years in the theatre.

The History of the Play

Produced by C. B. Cochran, *Private Lives* premiered in August of 1930, at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh, directed by Coward and starring Coward as Elyot, Adrianne Allen as Sibyl, Gertrude Lawrence as Amanda, and Laurence Olivier as Victor. Sets and costumes were designed by Gladys Calthrop. A week after the play opened, Heinemann published the text; a week later, HMV issued recordings of scenes from the play performed by Coward and Lawrence. Coward disliked appearing in long runs, and the London run was therefore a limited three-month season. It sold out within a week and was still playing to packed houses when, despite "the gratifying knowledge that we could have run on for another six [months]," it ended in December, 1930.

The first Broadway production opened at the Times Square Theatre in January, 1931 with Coward, Lawrence and Olivier reprising their roles. Gossip columnist Walter Winchell described the production as "something to go quite silly over." The New York critics were enthusiastic about the play and Coward's performance. The production ran a total of 256 performances.

Building the set for Classic Theatre's production of *Private Lives*.



Sir Laurence Olivier and Noel Coward in a scene from the original production.

PRODUCTION TEAM, The Classic Theatre of San Antonio

CAST

ELYOT.....Wade Young

AMANDA.....Anna Gangai

SIBYL.....Christina Casella

VICTOR.....Guy Schaafs

LOUISE.....Linda Ford

<u>CREW</u>		<u>STAFF- The Classic Theatre of San Antonio</u>
Director	Tim Hedgepeth	<p>Rick Malone, Executive Director, Founding Member Diane Malone, Co-Artistic Director, Founding Member Allan Ross, Co-Artistic Director, Founding Member Christie Beckham, Director of Education Anne Gerber, Marketing Director Linda Ford, House Manager/Bookkeeper Florence Buntten, Box Office Manager</p> <p>*AIM High Intern. The AIM High program is an immersive internship program for high school and college students interested in pursuing a career in the theater.</p> <p>Applications are available at our website www.classictheatre.org</p>
Stage Manager	Meagon Roe	
Tech Director	Rick Clyde	
Set Design	Allan Ross	
Costume Design	Diane Malone	
Light Designer	Tim Francis	
Sound Designer	Rick Malone	
Prop Master	Terri Pena Ross	
Set Construction	Phillip May	
Intern	Jayne Seward*	
Photographer	Dwayne Green	

THEMES of *Private Lives*

SOCIAL CLASS

‘Social Class’ refers to distinctions between individuals or groups in society based on their income, profession and political interests. An individual’s class is usually determined by personal or household income, ownership of property, education and accomplishments, occupation or family background.

The play examines the lives and loves of a particular class at a particular historical time. The class of people that Noel Coward was writing about (one that he himself was desperate to join) had for some decades been facing extinction. Mass unemployment and economic stagnation was the reality of daily life in 1930s Britain as opposed to the world portrayed in *Private Lives*. Noel Coward himself was from a much more humble and mundane background than his stage persona Elyot Chase would suggest. He came from a lower middle-class family and in fact invented a persona for himself as a highly cultured member of the English upper-class social set. He is now remembered as the epitome of well-bred, cultivated society, despite the fact that this was plainly a fabrication, an invention; literally a fantasy.

PUBLIC LIFE vs. PRIVATE LIFE

Private Lives deals with the conventions and social rituals by which people present their public selves to the world. In the play, Amanda illustrates this theme by impulsively running off with Elyot, despite law, social taboo and the marriage vows she has just taken. In today’s world, this theme might be best illustrated by comparing the private lives of celebrities to what is known about them publicly through the media and gossip columns.



“It’s discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit.”
— Noel Coward

Norma Shearer played Amanda in the 1931 film of the play.

VOCABULARY-Private Lives

Blasé Sibyl marvels at the sunset and chides Elyot for being overly casual or blasé about its beauty.

Bathe In this instance, Elyot and Sibyl's plans to bathe do not involve a tub. By bathing, they mean swimming in the ocean.

Flagrant infidelity In her plea for divorce, Amanda used this phrase to accuse Elyot of repeatedly being unfaithful to her.

St. Moritz This trendy Swiss ski resort was the site of Amanda and Elyot's honeymoon as well as the 1928 and 1948 Winter Olympics.

Vehement One of Amanda and Elyot's greatest barriers to happiness is that they are both very emotional or vehement in their discussions.

Cad This is Victor's assessment of Elyot - a man without any of the traits of a gentleman.

Gramophone Amanda breaks the albums for this old-style record player on Elyot's head.

Pompous Amanda scolds Victor for acting snobbishly or pompously towards Elyot.

Sacrilegious Amanda says that Victor is showing great disrespect or sacrilege for their wedding vows by continuing to talk about Elyot on their honeymoon.

Boule Victor wants to play this French equivalent of Italian bocce or English lawn bowling.

Chemin de fer This French term for "railway" is also the most popular gambling card game in Europe. The present day versions are variations of Italian baccarat, which Charles VIII introduced to France in 1490.

Inveterate Amanda claims that she is a habitual or inveterate gambler.

Cochineal When Sibyl can't find her lipstick, Elyot jokingly suggests that she have the kitchen send her some of this red dye made from the scales of the cochineal insect.

Presentiments Elyot lies to Sibyl, telling her that he needs to leave the resort because he has a presentiment, or feeling, that something bad is going to happen.

Obstinate When Sibyl won't give in to his demands, Elyot uses this word to call her stubborn.



Your “*Private Lives*” shortcut!

ON THE BUS:

- Share a bit of the synopsis with your students.
- A brief discussion of audience etiquette, particularly emphasizing no cell phone use or pictures, to politely sit quietly during the performance, but laughter and applause are encouraged where appropriate. Encourage them to view the entire production with “theater eyes” (as opposed to “movie eyes” or “TV eyes”) and think about questions they may have for cast and crew during our Q&A following the show.

Reflection Questions after Performance:

Which characters change the most by the end of the play?

In the second act, Amanda and Elyot allude to the home life of their maid, Louise, suggesting that it is probably a very dismal situation. However, they don’t actually know anything about Louise (or anyone below their own class) at all.

What other devices does Coward use to illustrate the distance between the upper class and the working class?

STUDENT SURVEY:

Please encourage your students to take our brief online survey after the performance. It helps us to gather data we can use to fund more school performances in the future!



or visit www.classictheatre.org EDUCATION

DELVING DEEPER

ACTING:

Were the actors believable? How did they accomplish this? What occurred to impact their believability? Which actors were most successful and why or least successful and why. How did the actors work together as a unit or fail to relate to each other?

DIRECTING:

The director unifies a production and frequently provides an interpretation of the text. Did there seem to be a unifying idea behind the production? If so, how would you describe it? How were you able to see it embodied in the production? Did the pace of the production seem right? Did it drag or move swiftly?

SETTING:

Private Lives is set in 1930, directly between the World Wars and immediately after the American stock market crash of 1929. Throughout this time period, most popular plays and films were set among the wealthy, privileged members of “high society”. Their appeal is usually ascribed to the audience’s need for “escape” from their grim circumstances.

How do these characters compare to the rest of society of the day?
What modern TV shows or films can you think of that provide us with this sense of “escape” today?

STRUCTURE:

How many acts were there? How were the events structured into the acts?
Was the action continuous, or were different acts set in different times?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST:

Noel Coward’s *Private Lives* to *The Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare.



At left, Anna Gangai and Wade Young as Amanda and Elyot in *Private Lives*. At right, Morgan Clyde (Kate) and Roy Bumgarner (Petruchio) in Classic Theatre’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. What similarities/differences can you find in these two couples from different eras?



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

It is not always necessary to have dialogue to inform an audience of your characters intentions and feelings – this can often be achieved using physical movement, facial expression and non-verbal sounds.

Task 1: Physicalizing An Emotion

Imagine an emotion – FEAR for example. Think of how fear can take over your entire body. Now try to become a physical expression of fear. The entire class should start in a line on one side of your classroom, and work your way across to the other side of the room building the physicality of fear and using sounds (not words) to express yourself. Repeat this process using other emotions - anger, frustration, contempt, lust, confusion, desire.

Task 2: Pursuing a want

This exercise will allow you to physicalise the objectives of your characters, using only actions and not words. Place two chairs in an empty space. The two actors each sit on a chair. Each actor is given an objective to pursue, a 'want', for example:

objective

to punish (make them suffer)
to enthuse (make them excited)
to protect (make them safe)
to want forgiveness
to freeze (make them intimidated)
to blame (make them ashamed or guilty)

your action

Using only the chairs and their position relating to the other person and in the room, each actor must try to change the emotional state of the other. No words or sounds should be used. One person 'speaks' by moving their chair in relation to the other person and the space, then the second actor 'answers' by moving his/her chair. They pursue their 'want' in opposition to their partner, purely through this physical action and without using words. Their objective is to achieve their aim and to effect a change in the other person.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT:

Assume Victor and Sibyl divorce their spouses after the play ends and marry each other. Write a scene, using dialogue similar to that between Elyot and Amanda in Act One. Consider the theme "opposites attract".