

PRIVATE LIVES
By Noël Coward
Essendon Theatre Company
Directed by Joshua Wolter
Reviewed by Alan Dilnot - July 2, 2015

Essendon Theatre Company rose above the limitations of the stage at Bradshaw Street Community Hall: though not wide enough to contain a Steinway grand piano as called for in Acts II and III of *Private Lives*, it was made to look spacious enough to contain two sets of French windows in the balcony scene of Act I, and a broad and comfortable sitting room for the rest of the play. Décor and furnishings were nicely in the well-to-do French style of the 1930s, and the costumes were very attractive and exactly right for the period.

A word about the set-up for the audience: seating was cabaret style, with separate tables as in a club, audience members being invited to bring their own refreshments. The atmosphere was friendly and intimate. It was a very cold night, but curtaining kept out the draughts usually encountered in a community hall, and shawls from the costume cupboard were available to help some of us keep snug and warm.

Private Lives is unmistakable Coward, flirting with naughtiness and the risqué, the dialogue larded with epigrams, sarcasms and wit, mainly voiced by the leading couple, Elyot and Amanda. The play is recognisably of the '30s period too, in the characters' inability to rely on traditional morals and religious beliefs; Amanda and Elyot explicitly disclaim faith in an after-life, though they are very well able to experience heaven and hell in this life. They have no other signposts but what they have learned from bitter experience. On the one hand Amanda and Elyot can appear flippant and superficial as they hop from one powerful assertion to its opposite; and on the other they can sound like pioneer existentialists as they forge their own values by the choices that they make. Through Amanda and Elyot, Coward was speaking for and to the artistic and intellectual elite of his generation. This of course places a heavy burden on Amanda and Elyot: they are each highly individual and yet they have to be representative of their time. The attitudes of that time are in several respects different from our own, no more so than in the presentation of what we now call domestic violence. Elyot says at one stage, after hitting Amanda, that "Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs", and there is no clear indication that the playwright disagrees with him.

The central couple have to face an additional pressure, for Coward himself confessed that he had imposed great demands on them by giving them the main task of driving the play along, from original twist in the opening scene when coincidence brings them together on adjacent hotel balconies, to the final curtain when they depart as a couple, looking back on their legal but apparently as yet unconsummated spouses who are fiercely squabbling. A monumental challenge for the actors playing Amanda and Elyot is, as Coward says, the second act, where before "the rough-and-tumble at the curtain... there is exactly forty minutes of dialogue... which naturally demands from [the actors] the maximum

of resource and comedy experience" and where "there was no help from the author". Coward was perhaps entitled to be self-deprecating because in the first production he played Elyot, opposite Gertrude Lawrence as Amanda.

It must be said that Zoran Babic (Elyot Chase) and Leanne Savage (Amanda Prynne) came out of this dramatic ordeal with credit. Act II moved at a natural pace, full of interest and never dragging. There is a wide range of emotions and attitudes on show in this scene and both Zoran and Leanne moved easily from one to another, being more in love with each other than ever at one moment and hating each other the next.

The music that in the original production was meant to be sung was transferred in this production to the gramophone, but this was managed quite deftly and credibly.

Rosalin Shafik-Eid deserves praise for her spirited presentation of Louise, the French maid. She was in action only briefly but during those moments she dominated the stage, in what sounded like impeccable French.

Zoran gave a highly competent performance: clear, measured and covering a full range of tones. Likewise Leanne, with the added skill of unmistakable dancing ability. My only demur in her case was the accent she adopted: it was clear enough, but not really convincing as upper-class English.

Coward eventually came to criticise his own work in this play. He spoke of his "dastardly and conscienceless behaviour towards Sybil and Victor, the secondary characters. These, poor things, are little better than ninepins, lightly wooden, and only there at all to be repeatedly knocked down and stood up again." I think he was being unfair to himself in this regard, but in any case Kirsten Page, as Sybil, and Brendan Allan, as Victor, succeeded in developing substantial characters for themselves despite the alleged meanness of the playwright. Kirsten was by turns self-pitying, self-doubting, ingratiating, angry and tigerish. Just occasionally the accent she used made her words unclear, but her stage presence was good, and she contrasted well with Amanda. Brendan too was a good foil to Elyot, and was always convincing where firmness and even menace were required; he didn't, however, suggest that he had a vulnerable side that could be hurt. Kirsten and Brendan played their final "fight" scene with convincing energy and animation.

We saw the petty selfishness and self-absorption of the main characters, and the fragility of all their protestations, whether of love or of hate. Yet they are victims too, of themselves and of their partners. As in most of the best comedies, together with the laughter there is the sadness that comes with the thought that in the future these characters will only ever repeat themselves. Joshua Wolter's production did full justice to the deeper gloom that lurks beneath the comedy.