Noël Coward’s PRIVATE LIVES

P.L.A.Y. (Performance = Literature + Art + You)
Student Matinee Series
2016-2017 Season

Written by Noël Coward
Directed by Mark Cuddy
Dear Educators,

From the very first page, Noël Coward lets us know that there is more going on in *Private Lives* than it might seem. The title hints at what we keep hidden, and the decisions that we make about what we share with the world (our public lives, so to speak) and what to keep to ourselves. And, just as importantly, what each of those decisions will cost us on a personal level. It is a negotiation that the characters in the play, especially Amanda and Elyot, contend with on a regular basis, as they decide when to let their true feelings show and when to obscure them with a show of bravado, bluster, or flippancy. It is a place where we’ve all found ourselves from time to time, as we play out the scenarios of what might happen if we let down our guards and discard the layers of protection that we’ve cultivated for so long.

Coward takes us a little deeper than just acknowledging the constant dance with our privacy. The full title of the play is *Private Lives: An Intimate Comedy in Three Acts*. Intimate is a loaded word. On the one hand, perhaps it is a nod to the fact that this is a small cast that must work closely together. What Coward is really getting at, though, is the wellspring of vulnerability that lies just beneath the surface in any relationship, and the courage that it takes to make your peace with that level of openness and trust. There is such volatility between Amanda and Elyot that the temptation to dismiss what exists between them must seem like the safer option, more often than not. Again, we’ve all been down that road, too, where we are much more inclined to sidestep and avoid than to confront the thing in front of us and stare it down.

Your students, of course, understand this as well. They decide on a daily basis what to share with us all and what to keep for themselves, and who the select few in which they’ll confide are. It is a delicate line to walk and one that they, like all of us, will continue to redefine.

Thank you for choosing to bring your students to *Private Lives*. We hope that they have a fantastic experience.

Eric Evans

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AMANDA: “It’s heavenly being up so high. I found this flat three years ago, quite by merest chance.”
Themes for Discovery: Gender, Love, and Class

Gender Expectations

By the early 1930s, many of the societal expectations for men and women were being reexamined, and it is a conversation that continues today. Consider, for example, Elyot’s contention that an active dating life is the province of men as it “doesn’t suit” women to enjoy one as well. His outlook was indicative of much of the population’s thinking at the time. The line between how men and women should behave in terms of romantic roles, social behavior (such as drinking alcohol and fighting), and physical appearance were also sharply drawn, with both genders expected to adhere to the societal dictates. While Elyot, Amanda, Victor, and Sibyl all negotiate their own unique path through these conventions, they would also have been familiar with these restrictions and – to varying degrees – used them as a basis for their own considerations of the opposite sex. How might these expectations have influenced these characters? How have the expectations changed since the 1930s? Which ones are still present?

Conventional vs. Modern Love

The political and cultural changes occurring at the time of Private Lives had a significant impact on long-held beliefs about love, romance, and relationships. “This was,” notes author and historian Roderick Philips, “the time when the influence and cohesion of the church was declining; when the sexual revolution was beginning; when the number of married women in the work force outside the home was on the increase; when fertility was declining sharply, thus freeing wives for activities other than child-rearing; and when the powerful ideology of individualism and the pursuit of personal happiness was becoming increasingly widespread.” How might these influences shape a person’s ideas about love? How might they have shaped the expectations of a romantic partner for the characters in Private Lives? How relevant are they in relationships today?

Class Distinctions

Most discussions about the differences between social classes typically refer to distinctions based on income, profession, political interests, ownership of property, education, or family background. During the 1930s, England recognized a deeply-ingrained system of separation between the upper, middle, and lower class. The upper class to which the Private Lives characters belong allowed them – through wealth, status, and connections – to define how they themselves acted, as well as interacted, with those members of the other classes. Consider, for instance, Amanda and Elyot’s conversation regarding the home life of Amanda’s maid, Louise. Although they know very little about her, they assume that because she is a member of the lower class she must have a dismal life and that her family “knocks her about dreadfully, makes her eat the most disgusting foods, and pulls her fringe.” What class distinctions still exist today? How do they define our interactions with one another?

Character Explorations: Elyot, Amanda, Victor, and Sibyl

“It’s a sign of a man who loves a woman, not his work.” writes Noël Coward biographer Clive Owen, is about “two irresponsible people determined to live on life’s surface with minimum inconvenience and romantic liability, but who – perhaps to their credit – feel deeply for each other.” Living life with “minimum inconvenience and romantic liability,” however, is not easily done, especially when the two people in question (Elyot and Amanda) are five-years divorced from one another, and yet they work hard to project an image of toughness as they repeatedly deny her still-present feelings for Elyot. Victor and Sibyl, to whom Coward has expressed his sympathy for creating them simply to “be repeatedly knocked down and stood up again,” seem initially to fit the playwright’s description. Coward, though, allows us glimpses of Victor and Sibyl’s personalities as well. Victor, who announces his pride in being considered “normal,” is the picture of gentlemanliness, continually attempting to assuage Amanda’s frequent changes in temperament while and time again professing his affection for her. Sibyl also works to offer Elyot what she hopes is a less eventful marriage, telling him that she “should think [he] needed a little quiet womanliness after Amanda,” despite her youth and what appears to be an uncertainty of what it means to be married to a man like Elyot. How might Elyot and Amanda’s relationship change if they were less concerned with own desires? What do you think we might learn about Victor and Sibyl if they were given the opportunity to show more of themselves?

VICTOR: “If I start giving into you as early as this, our lives will be unbearable.”
Private Lives: A Comedy of Manners

*Private Lives* is often referred to as a “comedy of manners,” a storytelling style popularized in the early part of the twentieth-century and employed to critique the ideals and manners of members of the upper class, where appearances often carried a high level of importance. The characters found in a comedy of manners typically hide their flaws, motivations, and intentions behind an elaborate system of behaviors, such as an overt sense of aloofness or a lack of willingness to address serious issues, and a sometimes elusive and fast-paced style of language. The plot of this type of story usually revolves around the intrigues of lust, greed, and cynicism of its upper class characters, often rewarding rather than punishing them for their bad behavior. *Private Lives* fits securely in this mold as we witness Elyot and Amanda repeatedly indulge their whims with seemingly no awareness of the chaos that ensues as a result of their actions, or the personal damage done to those around them. By focusing on characters with no apparent concerns beyond serving their own needs, *Private Lives* offered its audience an escape from their very real Great Depression-related financial worries.

A key component of a comedy of manners is the ability of its cast to physicalize the text, and communicate a character’s moods, needs, or motivations through body language, movements, and gestures, in addition to – or sometimes in place of – verbal language. Australian actor Leon Ford, who played the role of Elyot in a Melbourne Theatre Company production of *Private Lives*, notes that there is a level of physicalizing that needs to be mastered in order to work on a Coward play. Contemporary actors, emphasizes Ford, “use our hands a lot more than when the play was written. You have to be careful not to use your hands to reinforce what you are saying. So much is taking place with the voice that you have to know what and what not to do with your body. You have to keep it to an absolute minimum until it matters. Then it becomes a volcanic pattern of behavior.”

Another major element of a comedy of manners is the ability of its cast to choreograph its specifics are the heated confrontations between Elyot and Amanda. A cornerstone of their relationship is each one’s ability to endear themselves to the other while almost simultaneously antagonizing one another to greater and greater levels of agitation. This annoyance and irritation eventually manifests itself in physical displays of frustration and anger, including bouts of violence. While it may have been commonplace in the 1930s, when *Private Lives* was written, for women in “romantic” stories to be treated roughly, it is difficult not to apply our modern views regarding a male’s handling of a female, even with the understanding that at the time of the play, domestic abuse towards women was tacitly accepted, if not openly approved. As a result, decisions must be made by the director, cast, and fight choreographer (whose job it is to help stage the violence in a way that helps to tell the story while also keeping the actors safe) about how best to approach these scenes. How hard, for example, does Amanda strike Elyot in the course of their fight? How much strength does Elyot use in retaliation? How intense is their ensuing struggle? The violence can be choreographed (or “stylized”) in such a way that it appears humorous and ridiculous (by using very broad movements and reactions, for example) or genuinely frightening (such as utilizing smaller, quicker actions coupled with cries of pain). How these actions are staged, of course, is dictated by the kind of story the director and his or her actors are trying to tell. Does a comedic, slapstick-like version of Amanda and Elyot’s fight serve the story, or should their interaction, instead, feel more realistic and make us wonder about something deeper in their relationship?

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AMANDA: “Once I broke four gramophone records over his head. It was very satisfying.”
**Private Lives: The “Delightful New Comedy”**

**Writing Private Lives**

In 1929, Noël was visiting Tokyo; he went to bed early, and as soon as he turned off the light, *Private Lives* came to him. He wrote “the moment I switched out the lights, Gertie (actress Gertrude Lawrence) appeared in a white Molyneux dress on a terrace in the South of France and refused to go again until four AM, by which time *Private Lives*, title and all, had constructed itself.” When he came down with a fever in Shanghai, he used the time to write the play, saying: “I lay sweating gloomily in my bedroom in the Cathay Hotel for several days. The ensuing convalescence, however, was productive, for I utilized it writing *Private Lives*. The idea by now seemed ripe enough to have a shot at it, so I started it, propped up in bed with a writing-block and an Eversharp pencil, and completed it, roughly, in four days.”

As soon as he finished writing, he cabled Gertrude Lawrence, his dear childhood friend, who he wanted to play Amanda. “Have written delightful new comedy [stop] good part for you [stop] wonderful one for me [stop] keep yourself free for autumn production.” She cabled back: “Have read new play [stop] nothing wrong that can't be fixed [stop] Gertie.” And he replied, “The only thing that will need to be fixed is your performance [stop] Noël.” When she received the script with a request to keep the autumn free for a production, Lawrence was under contract for another show. “Nothing wrong that can't be fixed,” she claimed, referred to this contract. She wrote years later: “Noël 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.”

**Production History**

In Edinburgh, *Private Lives* opened on August 18, 1930 at the King's Theatre, touring and ending at the Phoenix Theatre in London (playing a total of 101 performances). In New York City, the play opened on Broadway on January 27, 1931, and played for 256 performances. Coward and Lawrence left the cast after three months. Coward had previously set a 3-month limit on any role he played, partly so he wouldn’t grow bored of the piece, and partly so he could have time to write. MGM acquired the film rights and had a feature adaptation in cinemas by the end of 1931. The 1944 revival at the Apollo Theatre in London ran for 716 performances (after a 14-week provincial tour). In 2001, a revival of *Private Lives* received rave reviews when it played for 5 months at the Albery Theatre in London, and a further 5 months at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on Broadway.

**Coward on Private Lives**

In his first autobiography, Coward wrote: “As a complete play, it leaves a lot to be desired, principally owing to my dastardly and conscienceless behavior towards Sibyl and Victor, the secondary characters. Apart from this, *Private Lives*, from the playwright's point of view, may or may not be considered interesting, but at any rate, from the point of view of technical acting, it is very interesting indeed. To begin with, there is no further plot and no further action after Act I, with the exception of the rough-and-tumble fight at the curtain of Act II. Before this, there is exactly forty minutes of dialogue between the leading protagonists, Amanda and Elyot, which naturally demands from them the maximum of resource and comedy experience, as every night, according to the degree of responsiveness from the audience, the attack and tempo of the performance must inevitably vary.”

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.”

ELYOT: “I think I love you more than ever before. Isn’t it ridiculous?”
ELYOT: “Let’s be superficial and pity the poor philosophers. Let’s blow trumpets and squeakers, and enjoy the party as much as we can.”

The characters in *Private Lives* appear to enjoy inexhaustible bank accounts, constant travel, and fine clothing while indulging in the most expensive tastes – Elyot and Amanda, for example, are able to recognize the Duke of Westminster’s yacht on sight, so familiar are they with the trappings of extreme wealth. And yet, the play takes place in 1930, only a year into what came to be known as the Great Depression, a decade-long financial crisis with international ramifications. It is in this contradiction, says writer Philip Hoare, where the play derives much of its power. “That sense of conflict and paradox,” writes Hoare, “belies the apparent sheen of Coward’s play. The deluxe world he depicts is an alternative reality, a fantastical entertainment, and an antidote to the financial realities of the audience who saw it.”

In the research packet for *Private Lives*, dramaturg Jenni Werner notes the social and economic instability occurring in the world at the time of the play. In the United States, writes Werner, “on October 24, 1929 (which came to be known as Black Thursday) stock prices plummeted heavily and resulted in people attempting to sell stocks for remarkably low prices. By the following Tuesday, stocks completely collapsed and banks began to call in loans. An estimated $30 billion in stock values ‘disappeared’ by mid-November, resulting in despair felt around the world.” Historians note that the Depression broke out at a time when much of Europe had yet to recover from the effects of the First World War – and would not until the after the Great Depression.

In addition to the lingering financial effects of a major war, Europe during the 1930s witnessed a marked increase in political instability, most notably in the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany – by September of that year, it would become the second largest political power in Germany and exhibit a growing influence throughout the continent.

*Private Lives* finds part of its resonance, claims Philip Hoare, in acknowledging the rising chaos of the world and speaking to “the hangover of a new decade, as the 1920s tipped into an uncertain future. These characters live in between two terrible wars, bookended by economic collapse, disaster, totalitarian politics, and global threats. Little wonder that they live for the day.”

**Divorce in the 1930s: “Dashing and Desirable”**

Early in *Private Lives*, we learn that Elyot and Amanda have each embarked on a second marriage, as they have been divorced from one another for five years. Their divorce would have been part of a societal movement that saw a dramatic increase in divorces in the years following the First World War. Prior to the 1920s, though, divorces were still relatively rare and usually only obtainable by those wealthy enough to afford their legal expenses and able to prove instances of abuse or infidelity, the only two reasons for which a divorce was generally granted.

Historians have offered a number of theories for the dramatic rise in post-World War I divorces. One theory centers on the increase in marriages immediately before and during the war years, and their atypically short courtships, resulting in spouses who didn’t know each other well and might not have been suited for one another. In addition, author and historian Roderick Philips claims, “to some extent the increased use of divorce in the 1920s might have been spurred by the familiarity with divorce that the postwar boom engendered; divorce must have lost some of its mystery and even some of its taboo qualities at this time.” In the 1920s, author Frederick Lewis Allen advanced this consideration as well, noting that “there was often about the divorced person just enough of an air of unconventionality, just enough of a touch of scarlet, to be considered rather dashing and desirable.”

This more accepting view of divorce can been seen in the reactions of Victor and Sibyl, Amanda and Elyot’s respective new spouses, when they discover that their partners have run off together to France. When all four characters reunite at Amanda’s Paris flat, there is little discussion about any other solution to the situation aside from divorce. It has become so accepted that no other option seems to be considered.
Noël Coward: “The First Brit Pop Star”

“Noël Coward virtually invented the concept of Englishness for the 20th century. An astounding polymath – dramatist, actor, writer, composer, lyricist, painter, and wit - he was defined by his Englishness as much as he defined it. He was indeed the first Brit pop star, the first ambassador of ‘cool Britannia.’” – Steve Crook, IMDB

Noël Pierce Coward was born on December 16, 1899; the proximity to Christmas gave him his name. His father, Arthur, was a rather unsuccessful traveling salesman for a piano company, while his mother, Violet, ran a boarding house. Arthur and Violet’s marriage does not seem to have been terribly happy, leading Noël to state: “They were married and lived happily ever after’ is an assertion that I have always viewed with distrust. Even as a child, admittedly a theatrical child from whose eyes the scales of illusion had fallen at an early age, I remember wondering cynically what happened after Cinderella had tried on the shoe and married her Prince Charming.”

Due to his parents’ financial troubles and the family's frequent moves, Coward did not attend the same school for any length of time (and he skipped an awful lot, like other poor English children). His formal education ended entirely when he was eleven years old. At the age of ten, Coward began performing, and in 1913 he was cast in a production of Hannele where he met the teenage Gertrude Lawrence, for whom he wrote the character of Amanda in Private Lives. The acting team of Coward and Lawrence became synonymous with polished, sophisticated comedy during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. 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 were essentially vehicles for his own talents or those of Gertrude Lawrence.

Because of a history of consumptive lung, Coward was declared unfit for active service during the war and was assigned to the Artists’ Rifles. Knowing that his mother depended on him, and hating the boredom of his assignments, he made it a priority to get out of the service. While marching he fell, hit his head, and began to claim violent headaches. He was eventually discharged and given a pension of seven shillings and sixpence for six months. He returned to London to continue acting and writing. When he made a trip to New York in 1921, however, Coward didn’t have enough money for the return fare and so he stayed in NYC for some time. It left quite an impact on him: “In the twenties and thirties, whenever I was about to do a new production in England, I always used to go to New York for a fortnight and go to see every single play because the tempo and the wonderful speed and vitality of the theatre was far superior to the English then.”

From there he was engaged to write the revue London Calling and his fame took off: “He swept to fame on the eve of his twenty-fifth birthday in 1924 and dominated the West End and Broadway until the end of the Second World War,” said Clive Owen in the 1992 biography Noël Coward. “He had a Rolls Royce by the time he was thirty. He had been tipped for a knighthood by the time he was thirty-two. And he saw his first biography by the time he was thirty-three.” His debonair looks and stylishly groomed appearance made him the quintessential icon of ‘the Bright Young Things’ that inhabited the world of The Ivy, The Savoy, and The Ritz. Coward’s annual income in 1929 was £50,000 (more than £2,000,000 in 2007 values). He also thrived during the Great Depression, writing a succession of popular hits, including Private Lives.

According to a variety of scholarly sources compiled in a Wikipedia article, “With the outbreak of the Second World War, Coward abandoned the theatre and sought official war work. His task was to use his celebrity to influence American public and political opinion in favor of helping Britain. He was frustrated by British press criticism of his foreign travel while his countrymen suffered at home, but he was unable to reveal that he was acting on behalf of the Secret Service. Churchill's view was that Coward would do more for
In a life of 73 years, Coward wrote nearly 50 plays, over 400 songs and lyrics, books of verse, sketches, satire and short stories, and a single novel – and he performed as an actor and singer, and one of the most successful cabaret artists to ever appear in Las Vegas. His most well-known plays include *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives*, *Blithe Spirit*, and *Bitter Sweet*.

Although the theatrical and political world had changed considerably through the century for which he stood as an English icon, Noël himself changed very little. As a homosexual, it is widely speculated that Coward suffered a great deal, feeling forever an outsider and – at times – a profound lack of fulfillment. This sense of thwarted desire and quiet despair permeates his work. Coward died at his home, Firefly Estate in Jamaica, on March 26, 1973 of heart failure. Thanked by Coward’s partner, Graham Payn, for attending Coward’s funeral, the Queen Mother replied, “I came because he was my friend.”

Others on Coward:

“He was a master because he bravely and brilliantly made use of the sentimental as well as the comic, and because – under that clipped decision – there was tenderness, particularly towards the unimportant, the bit parts and the failures.” – Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman

“He was a cynic and a patriot, naive yet a wit, a rebel who became conformity’s champion, a relentless self-disciplinarian synonymous with frivolity, a homosexual masquerading in his plays as an unscrupulous womanizer, and an embodiment of sophistication born in the suburbs.” – Clive Owen

“A Coward play develops as a photograph is developed: an initial impression is clarified and fixed.” – Milton Levin

Coward, on himself:

“One’s real inside self is a private place and should always stay like that. I have taken a lot of trouble with my public face.”

“I’m sick of the assumption that plays are ‘important’ only if they deal with some extremely urgent current problem. Problems? We live with them all day, every day, all our lives. Do we have to have them in the theatre too? I was brought up in the belief that the theatre is primarily a place of entertainment. The audience wants to laugh or cry or be amused. Swift entertainment – not strange allegories.”

“You ask my advice about acting? Speak clearly, don’t bump into the furniture, and if you must have motivation, think of your pay packet on Friday.”

“Work hard, do the best you can, don’t ever lose faith in yourself, and take no notice of what other people say about you.”

“The theatre should be treated with respect. The theatre is a wonderful place, a house of strange enchantment, a temple of illusion. What it most emphatically is not and never will be is a scruffy, ill-lit, fumed-oak drill hall serving as a temporary soap box for political propaganda.”

“I’m an enormously talented man, and there’s no use pretending that I’m not. I can’t sing, but I know how to, which is quite different.”

On theatre critics: “I have always been very fond of them. I think it is so frightfully clever of them to go night after night to the theatre and know so little about it.”

Asked why he would not “come out” in his final years and announce his sexuality: “Because there are still three old ladies in Brighton who don’t know.”

AMANDA: “How long will it last, this ludicrous, overbearing love of ours?”
“Some of the shoes worn in Private Lives are vintage shoes (from our stock), and others are modern construction reproductions of vintage styles. When we use vintage shoes, most of them have to be rubbered (which consists of gluing or hammering dance rubber to the bottom of a leather or wooden soled shoe) before they can be worn onstage, so they’ll make less noise and have better grip. Others need to be polished, have scuff marks removed, or be painted to complement an outfit.

Sibyl’s travelling purse and hat and Amanda’s travelling hat for Act III are all accessories that were made in-house from vintage patterns. Each custom-made hat or purse requires a good amount of detailed hand-sewing and takes around 10 hours of labor to complete; sometimes longer if the pattern needs to be made from scratch or if significant alternations are necessary. Amanda’s hat, for example, went through 3 or 4 revisions to get just the right look for the actor’s face shape. Additionally, all 3 actresses in Private Lives wear wigs, so we need to take that into consideration as we craft hats and clothing. For Sibyl’s purse, Costume Designer Gregory Gale found the 70-year-old pattern and I copied it (so the original tissue paper pattern wouldn’t be damaged in construction), and then made the purse according to the original instructions. The inner lining is flannelette and the exterior is a black wool crepe that matches the hat she wears, which was also constructed here at Geva from a customized 1930s-era pattern. When working with vintage patterns, you have to pay close attention to language.

Often, the meaning of a word or a term used to describe a particular fabric changes over the decades, so you need to investigate to make sure that the modern flannelette fabric that you’re planning to use is actually the same flannelette fabric referenced by the original pattern nearly a century ago.

I also spent a good deal of time matching a light grayish/mint green dye job for Amanda’s robe, which is made from 4 embroidered silk piano shawls with a fringe border that cost $185 each. Due to a garment’s manufacturing process, there are often inconsistencies in fabric that can cause material to take dye differently from one article of clothing to the next. Even if they are the same item, there’s a risk for uneven dying from shawl to shawl (or from the left corner of a shawl to the right corner of the very same shawl!). Dying expensive material is a bit of a scary process because you need to be as exacting as possible, and you can’t undo it.

Regarding jewelry for Private Lives, the 1930s was a very precise and decadent period, and matching sets were popular. While we’re able to pull some of the jewelry pieces Amanda and Sibyl wear from our stock, most will be purchased so we can get that coordinated look the designer specified.” – Jessica Pautler, Costume Craftsperson

The Glamorous Life: A Visual Feast

Reasearch images used as design inspiration, compiled by Costume Designer Gregory Gale, of 1930s-era men’s shoes and accessories (top right), women’s hairstyles (mid left), and women’s shoes and accessories (bottom right)

AMANDA: “Of course she’s very pretty, I suppose, in rather a shallow way.”
VICTOR: “You look wonderful. Like a beautiful advertisement for something.”

Costume renderings by Costume Designer Gregory Gale for Sibyl (left) and Amanda (above). The design of Amanda’s evening gown (pictured mid left) was inspired by a pattern from 1935.

Costume renderings by Costume Designer Gregory Gale for Elyot (above), and Victor (right).

Scenic renderings for Act I at top, and Acts II and III at bottom, designed by Nick Dorr.
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