

Theatre Jacksonville's **CLASSIC IN SAN MARCO**



*Private
Lives*

by Noël Coward

DIRECTED BY William E. P. Davis



SEPT. 16 - OCT. 2, 2022
PROGRAM AND STUDY GUIDE

About the Playwright

Noel Pierce Coward was born in London on December 16, 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. 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.

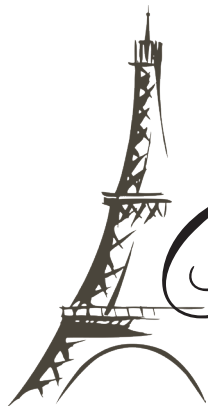
Coward went to New York for the first time in 1921 and arrived virtually penniless; however, although he may have begun the 1920s in penury, his position as the most popular playwright in the English theatre became secure during this decade. In 1924, *The Vortex*, Coward's most important serious play, 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 March 26, 1973, bringing to an end a career of more than sixty years in the theatre.



Private Lives

by Noël Coward

Directed by: **William E. P. Davis**

Cast of Characters

Sibyl Chase **Samantha Lewis**
 Elyot Chase **Christopher Watson**
 Victor Prynne **Rich Pintello**
 Amanda Prynne **Katie Johnston**
 Louise **Natalie Brown**

Time:

One weekend in August.

Act One

Terrace of a hotel in France. A summer evening.

Act Two

Scene 1: Amanda's flat in Paris. A few days later.

Scene 2: The same, next morning.

There will be one 15 minute intermission.

Private Lives is produced by special arrangement with Concord Theatricals on behalf of Samuel French, Inc.
www.concordtheatricals.com

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Technical Production Team

Director	William P. E. Davis	Stage Manager	Jordan Mohun
Set Design.....	Ben Girvin	Assistant Stage Manager.....	Natalie Brown
Set Dressing	Catherine Warren	Board Operator	Catherine Warren
Lighting Design	Triple O Productions	Set Construction	Katie Allen, Ben Girvin, Shawn LeNoble, Zach Roberge, Ron Shreve
Costume Design.....	Classic Costumes		
Graphic Design	Green Onion Creative LLC		

SPECIAL THANKS:

UNF Dept. of Music Technology, Sound Reinforcement & Music Production

Private Lives



Company Bios

NATALIE BROWN (LOUISE) is thrilled to be back for her third production at Theatre Jacksonville and for the first time onstage! After working backstage for *Slow Food* and as the Stage Manager for *Sweet Delilah Swim Club*, Natalie finally got the courage to step on stage to perform after years of being behind the scenes. She dedicates this performance to St. John's Grammar School where Jeannine Decker and family first introduced her to the wonderful French language. Natalie is very happy she kept up with the language after so many years (she took refresher courses) and is honored to perform in this production along with the amazingly talented cast and crew. Cheers on the new season!

KATIE JOHNSTON (AMANDA) is delighted to be back at Theatre Jacksonville. She was last seen here as Slightly, the lovable lost boy with a talking doll, in *Jason Wood's Peter Pan*. Other credits include Maggie, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Blue Fire Theatre) Kalonika, *Lysistrata* and Alicia, *Small Mouth Sounds* (The 5 & Dime) Belinda, *Noises Off!* and the title role in *Sylvia* (Players by the Sea,) for which she won the Pelican award for "Best Actress in a Play." Katie was also voted "Best Actress" by Folio's Best of The Beaches 2020 and "Best Comedian" by Folio's Best of Jax 2019.

SAMANTHA LEWIS (SIBYL) is excited to perform in her first production at Theatre Jacksonville. Some of her previous projects include *The Little House on the Prairie* and *The Sound of Music*. She also appeared as Beadle Bamford in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Miss Geneva Musgrave in *Dearly Beloved*, and Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. When not on the stage, Samantha enjoys reading books, watching horror movies, singing karaoke, and spoiling her three dogs, Dobby, Haiku, and Colonel Potato. She would like to thank her husband for always encouraging her to try.

RICH PINTELLO (VICTOR) is a local actor who you may recognize from previous Theatre Jacksonville productions such as *Love Quest*, *The Mousetrap*, *Peter and the Starcatcher*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and *I Hate Hamlet*. He has several film projects under his belt and currently in production. You can peruse a list of his work on IMBD at <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm9304676>.

CHRISTOPHER WATSON (ELYOT) is excited to be back on the Theatre Jacksonville stage after a long pause! He is beside himself with joy to be sharing the stage with Katie Johnston again after making folks laugh together in *Small Mouth Sounds* at the 5 & Dime, *Noises Off!* and *Rumors* at Players by The Sea, and in *Jason Woods' Christmas Wonderland*. This entire cast and crew are brilliant, and he finds himself again in awe of how much Jacksonville has in pure talent. He hopes that you see a little of yourself in Amanda and Elyot's love for each other. And, if we are being honest, a whole lot that you don't.

WILLIAM E.P. DAVIS (DIRECTOR) is a freelance director, designer, and local realtor. He is happy to be back in the saddle at Theatre Jacksonville. Previously, he helmed *Wolf Hall* and *I Hate Hamlet*. Previous projects were for Lost Nation Theatre and Johnson State College in Vermont, Central Kentucky Community Theatre, AXIS Arts in London, Stagedoor Manor in New York, The Rose Theatre and F-Troupe Collaborative in Omaha, as well as assistant directed for Theatre 503, The Royal Academy of Music, East 15 School of Acting, and The Blue Barn Theatre. Will holds his MFA in Directing from East 15 School of Acting in London, UK and his BA in Drama from the University of Washington. Will would like to thank Kacy Hope for joining him on all these adventures and for keeping him sane.

Character Descriptions

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.

Louise: A French maid.

Amanda Prynne: A beautiful second-time bride (she was formerly married to Elyot) 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."

*"I am no good at love
I betray it with little sins
For I feel the misery of the end
In the moment that it begins
And the bitterness of the last good-
bye Is the bitterness that wins."
-Noël Coward*

We go about our lives, go to work, see our friends, care for our families. We are all of us responsible and take care of the things we have to look after. We behave as we should and are polite to the people that we see. We talk rationally and discuss the news, the weather, topics of the day. We smile, nod, say "please", and "thank you".

Then we fall in love.

Something about falling in love will turn an otherwise sane human being into a wreck. It can make

a statistician go home and write poetry. It can turn a violinist into a prize fighter. It can drive a prize fighter to cry alone for a week. It makes construction workers buy flowers and causes florists to speak like, well, construction workers.

So what are we to do? We can't choose not to fall in love. That's why it's called "falling" in love. It's an act that is unintentional and uncontrollable. So we do the best we can. We accept that love turns us into the people that we want no one else to see, our true, irreverent, emotional, occasionally explosive, selves.

*As Noël Coward himself writes:
"We are none of us normal,
deep down, in our Private Lives."*

-William E.P. Davis

Play Synopsis

SPOILERS AHEAD!

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 finish 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?

Private Lives, Personal Magic

BY 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 hand-written 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.

Coward’s appraisal of the play changed over time.

CONTINUED, NEXT PAGE >

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.

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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.” ☪

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SEASON 103 ²⁰²²⁻²³

Mainstage Performances

Clue

Clue is adapted from the screenplay by Jonathan Lynn | Written by Sandy Rustin | Additional material by Hunter Foster and Eric Price | Original music composed by Michael Holland | Based on the Paramount Pictures Motion Picture based on the Hasbro board game **CLUE**

Nov. 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13*, 17, 18, 19, 20*, 2022

Based on the iconic 1985 Paramount movie which was inspired by the classic Hasbro board game, *Clue* is a hilarious farce-meets-murder mystery. The tale begins at a remote mansion, where six mysterious guests assemble for an unusual dinner party where murder and blackmail are on the menu. When their host turns up dead, they all become suspects. Led by Wadsworth – the butler, Miss Scarlett, Professor Plum, Mrs. White, Mr. Green, Mrs. Peacock and Colonel Mustard race to find the killer as the body count stacks up.

Last Train to Nibroc

By Arlene Hutton

Jan. 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22*, 26, 27, 28, 29*, 2023

May and Raleigh meet in 1940 on an eastbound train that carries the bodies of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West. Unable to enlist because of a medical condition, he wants to be a writer. She wants to be a missionary, and they discover they are from neighboring towns in Kentucky. In this boy-meets-girl romance, two young people navigate through the tough times of a country at war discovering what they have to give up to get what they really want.

Doubt

By John Patrick Shanley

March 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 19*, 23, 24, 25, 26*, 2023

In this brilliant and powerful drama about faith, ambiguity, and the price of moral conviction, Sister Aloysius, a Bronx school principal, takes matters into her own hands when she suspects the young Father Flynn of improper relations with one of the male students. Winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award.

Four Weddings and an Elvis

By Nancy Frick

April 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30*, May 4, 5, 6, 7*, 2023

Sandy, the four-times-married-three-times-divorced owner of a wedding chapel in Las Vegas, has certainly seen her fair share of matrimonies! In this hilarious and heart-warming romantic comedy, we witness four of her most memorable. Bev and Stan, who are getting married as revenge on their exes; Vanessa and Bryce, two arrogant aging stars who are tying the knot as a publicity ploy; Martin and Fiona, a gentle postal-worker and a tough ex-con who couldn't be more in love! And most touching of all is Sandy's fifth and final wedding - to the love of her life.

Pippin

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Schwartz

Book by Roger O. Hirson

June 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 18*, 22, 23, 24, 25*, 2023

Winner of four 2013 Tony Awards including Best Musical Revival, *Pippin* is the story of one young man's journey to be extraordinary. Heir to the Frankish throne, the young prince Pippin is in search of the secret to true happiness and fulfillment. He seeks it in the glories of the battlefield, the temptations of the flesh and the intrigues of political power (after disposing of his father, King Charlemagne the Great). In the end, though, Pippin finds that happiness lies not in extraordinary endeavors, but rather in the unextraordinary moments that happen every day.

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Sunday matinees* are at 2pm.**



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