

Noel Coward's classic comedy makes witty use of words

'Blithe Spirit' comes to The Coaster Theatre

By Patrick Webb
For EO Media Group

Actors don't usually accept roles and then leave on vacation just after rehearsals begin.

But for Karen Martin, who plays the medium, Madame Arcati, in the Coaster Theatre production of "Blithe Spirit," it helped in her preparation.

Martin was cast by director Edward James, then flew to England on a long-planned trip — taking her script to learn her dialogue.

"I was on a train, and I heard this woman talking," Martin said. "It turned out she was a professional actress, so I asked her how to say some of my lines. We ended up reading them together. It was lovely to spend a little time with her."

Martin's refined British accent can be heard in the comedy, which runs through Saturday, Oct. 28, with Friday and Saturday evening shows and a couple of Sunday matinees.

"Blithe Spirit" tells the story of a socialite writer (played by Coaster regular David Sweeney) who invites a spiritualist to stage a séance to provide material for a book on the occult.

However, she conjures up the spirit of his dead wife, Elvira (Ellen Jensen), who is determined to spoil his happiness with his second wife, Ruth (Katrina Godderz). Comedy ensues, in part because Ruth cannot see Elvira. To tell more would spoil any surprises for first-time attendees, but it must be said the comedy does have a dark side.

The director, James, is an Astoria native who returned to his hometown about 10 years ago. He had a professional acting/directing career that took him all over the country, including New York. He moved to Portland some 20 years ago and credits the box-office success of a production of "Blithe Spirit," in which he starred, with keep-



PHOTOS BY PATRICK WEBB

The exertion of the séance appears too much for collapsed medium Madame Arcati, played by Karen Martin, as Charles (David Sweeney) and his second wife, Ruth (Katrina Godderz, at left) look on. The spirit of Charles' first wife, Elvira (Ellen Jensen, center), is also present, and the comedy in the show occurs, in part, because Ruth cannot see her.

ing his Jupiter Theater troupe afloat in its first season.

The play is often staged in community theater, in part because it has three strong female roles. To prepare a fresh interpretation, James watched video of Italian and Mexican versions, which accentuate the argumentative exchanges between the characters and highlight the ghost's appearances.

An Anglophile, he hopes author Noel Coward's witty use of words will excite his cast and entertain the audience.

"Working in the language of Coward is a delight," he said. "If you can get people to come, then theater can do what theater does — and that's to open minds and make us more capable of communication."

The play fosters the art of

conversation. "There are events in the play, but what holds our interest is the joy of language, and the battle of language."

Coward created memorable scripts in which the outcome is rarely what the audience expects, spawning decades of edgy British comedy that morphed from the witty radio and TV classics of the 1960s into the Monty Python phenomenon that followed. During World War II, he went on vacation after his London home was bombed and wrote "Blithe Spirit" during an intense six-day typing session.

Creating a play about ghosts for a wartime audience was a risk, but humor offered an escape from troubled times. (Similarly, his "Private Lives" made its debut in 1930 amid the

global financial crisis.) "Blithe Spirit" ran for almost 2,000 performances, beating the record. Coward reportedly said, "disdaining archness and false modesty, I will admit that I knew it was witty, I knew it was well constructed, and I also knew that it would be a success."

It opened in London in 1941 with Margaret Rutherford as the medium, a role she would reprise in Coward's 1945 movie adaptation starring Rex Harrison. Coward himself and John Gielgud acted in other early stage productions; Clifton Webb featured in the first Broadway version. Much later, revivals featured Angela Lansbury as Madame Arcati and earned her a fifth Tony Award.

"She's the most interesting character," James said, recall-



Suave writer Charles (David Sweeney) chats amiably with his second wife, Ruth (Katrina Godderz, at right) while the interfering ghost of his first wife, Elvira (Ellen Jensen, center), does everything possible to spoil their relationship.

If you go

"Blithe Spirit," a comedy by Noel Coward

WHERE: The Coaster Theatre, Cannon Beach

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Oct. 28; 3 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 15

TICKETS: \$20 or \$25, call 503-436-1242 or log on to coastertheatre.com/box-office

BOX OFFICE: Open 1 to 5 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday; performance days, 1 p.m. to curtain time.

ing one line in which the robust woman shrugs off the physical exertion of cycling seven miles. "It's the one that everyone wants to play. She's a fake, but what happens in the show is her biggest success."

Martin, North Coast theater regular, is savoring the opportunity. "Edward says she is really a phony, but I also know that she doesn't realize that she is a phony. She is serious about what she has done — so that makes it very comic."

Sweeney, a North Coast pastor, takes the male lead of Charles, who is not all he seems.

"We find out that in both of his marriages they were not being truthful with each other," James said. "We find out he is extremely shallow, but had two beautiful women in his life. We

have all met that guy. He's 'on' all of the time, and when you are 'on' all of the time you are not reflective."

Sweeney is relishing the role. "He is sort of a 'type' from the 30s or 40s. He never really settled down," he said. "He got married, but that didn't stop other things from happening. So it's karma — comic karma."

Others appearing are Thomas and Cathy Ryan as a married couple and Evelyn Isakson as the maid.

Several cast members are making their Coaster debuts, and Martin delights in that. "Doing community theater, you make friends with people that you work with over and over, and then you welcome new people in, and they all get to be like family," she said.

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