

Blithe Spirit a Fun Romp Filled with Mischief and Mayhem

By Lou Fancher



Rebekah Brockman as Edith and René Augesen as Ruth Condomine in Cal Shakes production of *Blithe Spirit*, directed by Mark Rucker. Photo by Kevin Berne

Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* rolls out as a fissure-filled field of love in Director Mark Rucker's jovial, satiny production presented by Cal Shakes at Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater.

Burbling up from the cracked surfaces of marriage—with all its tensions, presumptions and heavy history—the laughs are light and linear. The direction is clear, and like a well-written television sitcom, the frothy humor is quick-witted, immediate, and largely dependent on great casting.

At nearly three hours, *Blithe Spirit* reverses its origins—Coward dashed off the work in a five-day spree before its opening in 1941—as it tells the story of Charles Condomine, a novelist, who invites a medium to conduct a séance in his home.

Hoping to amuse his guests, the staid Dr. and Mrs. Bradman, whose gender-stereotypical twittering (she), plodding (he) enthusiasm for tickling the occult is essential to the balance, Condomine aims to extract language for his next novel.

Madame Arcati, arriving with not only words from the dead, but on a bicycle and sporting a multi-hued backpack and bangles, releases the "morally untidy" ghost Elvira, Condomine's first wife, into the mix.

From that moment on it's a three-legged race, with a man and his two wives battling towards a finish no one is entirely sure they'd like to reach.

Rucker paces the action with the deftness of an Olympic sprinter. Scenes take off like rockets, or traipse at a leisurely pace, only to hit a high spot and barrel pell-mell to a bumpity, blackout conclusion.

Anthony Fusco, wearing the

mantle of a character often found in Coward's plays – the pampered, pouting male who is indulged and adored by more than one woman at a time – is completely at ease as Condomine. He doesn't attempt to push the shallowness of his character into deep places he doesn't belong, and for that reason alone, Fusco can be admired for his artistic sophistication.

René Augesen plays her role as the tightly-packaged second wife with more liberation and sensuality than some actors in other productions. Her approach is clever and perfectly tuned to Jessica Kitchens' hot, devilish portrayal of wife number one.

Kitchens nearly steals every scene as she prowls the warm-toned set, invisible to all except Condomine, and flings herself across the furniture – golden sofas, overflowing flower vases, bauble-trimmed lampshades, all gorgeously composed by set designer Annie Smart -- or flings the furniture itself, when it suits her purposes. She's saucy, sexy, self-obsessed and not for one moment anything but brilliant.

Which puts a heavy yoke on the shoulders of Dominique Lozano, whose Madame Arcati is part cheerleader, part eccentric neighbor, and paradoxically, the play's moral compass. Lozano clearly relishes her role and that conviction, essential in any actor hoping to infuse a role with honesty, is a joy to behold. From her physicality, which suggests everything from Hip-Hop's "locking" to Isadora Duncan-style dances with scarves, to her occasional, vapid, swept-into-another-realm line delivery to her indignant, regal refusal to be mocked, this is a supreme per-

formance.

Rebekah Brockman, wonderfully cast as the maid, Edith, is also notable for her physical humor. She slides (or rather, dashes) into the action with impeccable timing and perfect meek-to-mirthful posturing.

Katherine Roth's shimmering costumes are stylish, and just like the dry martinis free-flowing throughout the play, they go down smooth and soothing.

With a slick production and a cast whose skills are, indeed, aimed at a blithesome, spirited portrayal, Cal Shakes' *Blithe Spirit* brings the 72-year-old play to life.

Blithe Spirit, presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through September 2 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.



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Jessica Kitchens as Elvira Condomine and Dominique Lozano as Madame Arcati in Cal Shakes production of *Blithe Spirit*, directed by Mark Rucker. Photo by Kevin Berne