

RISE Explores the Ripple Effect with *Blithe Spirit*

Woonsocket is home to one of the state's coolest local venues for community theater, The RISE Playhouse. I've been to the theater to see a few traveling shows and even to audition for a local film (if you are a performer, I recommend checking out their audition schedule). This was the first show I've seen from Rhode Island Stage Ensemble proper, and I was thrilled to be invited.

RISE is entering its 30th season, and I'm interested in seeing how the rest of the year expands on this season's theme, "The Ripple Effect," showcasing productions that focus on how small actions can have enormous unintended consequences, or how one person can change the world.

This round kicks off with *Blithe Spirit*, a farcical, supernatural drama from the 1940s by British playwright Noel Coward, who was described as [having] a combination of "cheek and chic." This modern presentation is from director Eric Barbato, who previously directed *Proof* and *Doubt* with The Community Players in Pawtucket. Although Barbato is known for tackling hard-edged drama, it's no surprise to see how well he transitioned into dark comedy.

Blithe Spirit follows the evening exploits of ill-tempered author Charles Condomine as he arranges a seance to inspire characters for his new novel. Like most murder mystery farces of the time, *Blithe Spirit* takes place in one room. The characters are free to enter and exit, but the parlour is the main location. Charles and his wife, Ruth, host a dinner party that includes the skeptical Dr. and Mrs. Bradman, who are joined by psychic extraordinaire, Madame Arcati. The group is tended to by the hapless house servant, Edith. As the show unfolds, we find that the Condomines are in over their heads as their tinkering with supernatural forces may have conjured up more than literary inspiration. Charles begins to have visions of his ex-wife, Elvira, who has been dead for five years. Is he hallucinating? Did the eccentric Madame Arcati actually summon a spirit? What follows is a truly funny comedy of errors, known for its fast, funny (albeit dense) dialogue. The jokes come at a blink-and-you-miss-it pace.

The evening I attended hosted some truly remarkable performances. Michael Martins as Charles Condomine navigates the subject matter wonderfully to build an egotistical self-centered cad driven to madness. Kimberly Rau Harper as Ruth Condomine holds her own against her obnoxious husband and delivers a strong female lead, giving Charles a run for his money. Dr. and Mrs. Bradman, played by Steven Small and Rebecca Tung, respectively, cosign the Condomines' skepticism and often try to offer a voice of reason. Even as the de facto "straight men" of the play, the Bradmans supply some of the laughs, as well. The dryer aspect of this show's wit is broken up wonderfully by its two more physically funny characters — Madame Arcati, played by Erin Coughlin Tower, and Edith, played by Brittney Simard. Tower portrayed Arcati in high school 25 years ago, so this was a welcome revisiting for her. Brittney Simard, as Edith, breaks the tension of any scene with her portrayal of an awkward and seemingly witless maid. And then there is Elvira, played by Sarah Reed. Is she a ghost or a vision? Is she even really there? Elvira presents another woman to challenge Charles' ever-present masculinity. She has a plan in store for her mortal ex husband, and Reed delivers a great performance as the vengeful apparition.

Barbato (who also succeeds here as scenic designer) kept things at a brisk pace — the scenes were

engaging, the actors captivating. There were, however, long scene breaks that, I imagine, can be shortened as the run goes on and the crew becomes more familiar with set changes. The intermission ran long as the theater chose to do a raffle between acts. Another small point of contention is that, during the intermission, two crew members were talking behind me and I could hear about upcoming effects in the play. Since it was my first time seeing this particular show, that was a total spoiler alert moment. I tuned them out but, as Act Two played on, I could hear some of the calls being made in the tech booth (this could be because it's a small theater and I was in the back). Again, this chatter revealed some things for me and I felt like I was watching a play with a live commentary track. There were a few effects that may have misfired but, overall, that's the thrill of live theater and these sorts of kinks are worked out over time. I highly recommend seeing this show for yourselves, but you may want to sit up front.

Rhode Island Stage Ensemble presents Noel Coward's Blithe Spirit. June 8, 9, 15, 16 at 7:30pm, and June 10 & 17 at 2pm. For more information, go to ristage.org