

PRIVATE LIVES
By Noël Coward



Toby Schmitz

Photo: Michael Corridore

Directed by Ralph Myers

Resources for Teachers

Belvoir presents

PRIVATE LIVES

By **NOËL COWARD**

Director **RALPH MYERS**

Set Designer **RALPH MYERS**

Costume Designer **ALICE BABIDGE**

Lighting Designer **DAMIEN COOPER**

Composer & Sound Designer **STEFAN GREFORY**

Assistant Director **KIT BROOKMAN**

Fight Director **SCOTT WITT**

Stage Manager **LUKE McGETTIGAN**

Assistant Stage Manager **MEL DYER**

Assistant Stage Manager (rehearsal) **STEPHEN MOYLAN**

With

Louise **MISH GRIGOR**

Amanda Prynne **ZAHRA NEWMAN**

Sibyl Chase **ELOISE MIGNON**

Elyot Chase **TOBY SCHMITZ**

Victor Prynne **TOBY TRUSLOVE**

Belvoir's production of Private Lives opened at Belvoir St Theatre on Wednesday 26 September 2012.



Zahra Newman, Toby Schmitz

Photo: Brett Boardman

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BELVOIR

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CHARACTERS IN PRIVATE LIVES

AMANDA PRYNNE
VICTOR PRYNNE, her husband
LOUISE, a maid
SIBYL CHASE
ELYOT CHASE, her husband

SETTING IN PRIVATE LIVES

ACT I. The Terrace of a Hotel in France. Summer evening

ACT II. Amanda's flat in Paris. A few days later. Evening.

ACT III. The same. The next morning.

Time: The Present.

SYNOPSIS

ACT 1

Elyot & Amanda used to be married to each other. Now divorced, they are honeymooning at the same French hotel with new partners Sibyl and Victor. Their rooms are right next door to each other and, of course, they meet when on their adjoining balconies to take in the air on the very first night of their honeymoons.

Elyot demands that Sibyl leaves with him to Paris immediately, asking her to trust him without any explanation but she refuses – causing a tremendous fight and tears. Meanwhile Amanda attempts to convince Victor that her sister died many years ago in this exact same spot and for that reason, he also needs to leave with her immediately for Paris. He also refuses, as well as refusing to believe her invented reason for the need for departure. She admits to Victor that Elyot is in the hotel and he refuses to think that this calls for them to leave. They get mad with each other and Victor heads downstairs to drink alone in the bar. Sibyl tells Elyot she regrets marrying him and goes to have dinner by herself.

Both furious, Elyot and Amanda bump into each other again outside on the balcony and begin to talk about how they've spent the time since they were divorced. They drink cocktails, smoke and reminisce, realising in the process that they are still desperately in love with each other, and not at all with their new partners. Amanda refuses to budge until they make a solemn promise never to argue or quarrel again – they invent a code word – Solomon Isaacs (later shortened to SOLLOCKS) which when uttered means they both have to stop talking for 2 minutes to prevent them getting into the same mess that destroyed their marriage before. They run away from the hotel together, leaving notes for the other two.

ACT 2

It's a few days later – Amanda and Elyot have been hiding out in Amanda's flat in Paris. They seem to have been spending the time enjoying talking rubbish, listening to records, love-making and remembering the past that they spent together. Occasionally they feel guilty about running away from Sibyl & Victor and wonder what will happen when they inevitably turn up. Their blissful

remembering of how much they loved each other turns toxic as the reminiscences start to remind them of each other's past lovers provoking niggling jealousy. They use the code word to prevent their squabbles becoming fights and mostly it works. Both drink brandy and Elyot keeps drinking it. Amanda puts on a record that he insists she take off, when she won't he pulls it off and she breaks it over his head. He hits her. They end up embroiled in a full scale physical fight and right in the midst of this Sybil and Victor enter unexpectedly.

ACT 3

It's early the next morning. Sybil and Victor are asleep until they are woken up by the French maid Louise. They both feel hideous and can't really process what they saw the night before. Sibyl starts crying and wants to bolt but Victor insists she stay to sort out the marital mess between them all. Amanda enters, determined to carry off the situation with an elegant remoteness. Sibyl refuses to speak to her and demands to see Elyot. Amanda goes to make the maid sort out breakfast. Elyot turns up with a suitcase, saying he's going to go to Canada. Sibyl insists he stay. Victor threatens to hit Elyot if he keeps making flippant jokes, but he insists that's his way of dealing with a strange and unique situation. Amanda returns but refuses to speak to Elyot. He and Victor almost fight but Elyot talks Victor out of it. Victor announces his intention to divorce Amanda so Elyot and she can re-marry but Elyot says he would rather marry a ravaging leopard. Sibyl offers to Elyot not to divorce him for a year. Amanda declares she would rather marry a boa constrictor as Elyot. Victor offers to Amanda that he could delay divorcing her for a year.

They all sit down to a tense breakfast, brought by the disgruntled maid. Elyot and Sibyl seem all cosy and Amanda is determined to ignore and punish Elyot. Elyot makes a joke that makes Amanda choke on her coffee. Victor berates Elyot and chides Sybil for defending him. As Victor and Sybil start to get out all their frustrations with each other, Amanda and Elyot start to make up. While the other two are absorbed in shouting at and reproaching each other, Amanda & Elyot sneak out hand in hand. Absorbed in their own passion, neither Sybil or Victor sees them go.



Zahra Newman & Toby Schmitz

photo: Brett Boardman

Ralph Myers – Director

Director's Note

When I set out to direct this play I had no idea how strong people's preconceptions were about it. We announced the season and the questions began. Would we be doing it in accents? and Would it be set in period? were the two most common. And people seem to be genuinely shocked at my reply: No; I have no intention of treating the text any differently to how we would treat any classic play worth reviving – as a text to be performed, here and now, by us, in our own voices.

It's going to be done in *Australian* accents? my questioners almost always persisted, usually in an Australian accent. Yes, I replied, if the actors have Australian accents. Otherwise, they will speak in whatever accent they happen to have.

I found these questions surprising. Performing a classic play in our own voice is hardly a radical proposition, and we don't get asked those questions about other classics we do. What is it about Coward's work that makes people assume that it is immovable in time and place?

We think of Coward and we see grand pianos and brandy and gramophone records and we think that is what the plays are about. But in fact they're not; like all great plays they're about something profound. They're about love, and about being alive, and about trying to be happy and how hard that is. Coward's genius is to wrap that up in a confection that makes you think that you're just watching a stageful of beautiful people in evening dress saying not very much in a frightfully clever way, rather quickly. He makes it fun.

That's what I love about this play and what drew me to it in the first place.

Is *Private Lives* about class? Certainly there is no escaping the fact that this is a play about a group of rich people (and their maid). But I think class is incidental to the play. Like Wilde and Chekhov (and almost every playwright until the middle of the 20th century), Coward uses the wealthy as his subject not because they're special, or any more interesting than the rest of us, but because they're idle. They don't have anything to do other than sit around and talk and drink and smoke and fight. If they had to go to work then they'd never get down to the core business of tearing each other apart.

Coward was not upper class himself of course, despite his best attempts to assimilate. Like Wilde and other great satirists of high society he was an outsider: homosexual and from a provincial middle-class family. The truth is that the aristocracy very rarely produces good artists.* Coward was aspirational. He was a child actor who, as he matured, worked very hard to transform himself into a leading man of the stage. But at a certain point in his early 20s he realised that wouldn't happen unless he created opportunities for himself, so he took up playwriting. He wrote the role of Elyot in *Private Lives* for himself, and you can tell. He gets all the best lines.

Coward was born just before Christmas in 1899, began his career on the stage at the age of 11 and worked right up to his death in 1973. He wrote this play and most of his other great works in an enormously productive period in the 1920s and 30s. In later life Coward became a sort of living version of the sort of person he began his career critiquing. He ended his life doing cabaret performances of *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* and his other songs to adoring crowds, perpetuating the myth he created of the dapper, clever, high-society wit in a terribly sharp suit. And this image is very alluring, and comforting. It reassures us that we all belong in our place. Perhaps that's why people are so surprised at our decision not to set this play in England in 1930, and why it is essential that we don't.

* That is what is so infuriating about the continual speculation about the identity of Shakespeare. The endless attempts to find an aristocratic candidate as the true author of the plays would be hilarious if they weren't so bigoted. It seems to me that the upper classes are the one place that the author of *Hamlet* wouldn't have come from.

Noël Coward – Writer



“What I adore is supreme professionalism. I’m bored by writers who can write only when it’s raining.”

Biography

Noël Peirce Coward was born in Teddington, a London suburb, in 1899. He forged a career as one of Britain’s most known theatrical and screen personalities: as playwright, actor, composer, singer and director, working until his death at his home in Jamaica in 1973. Coward attended a dance academy as a child, making his professional stage début at a young age. At 18 he made his film debut in D.W. Griffith’s *Hearts of the World*. One of his earliest plays, *I’ll Leave It to You*, was produced on the West End when Coward was just 21. He went on to write more than 50 plays, including *Private Lives*, *Hay Fever*, *The Vortex*, *Post Mortem*, *Design for Living*, *Present Laughter* and *Blithe Spirit*. He wrote the part of Elyot in *Private Lives* for himself, and the play opened in London in 1930. Gertrude Lawrence, with whom he’d been friends since the age of 14, starred opposite him in the role of Amanda. Lawrence Olivier played Victor. A Broadway production followed in 1931, as did a film adaptation. Coward was prolific: he wrote and acted in a large number of British and American films, composed hundreds of songs, wrote comic revues, musicals and operettas, poetry, volumes of short stories, the novel *Pomp and Circumstance*, and a three-volume autobiography. During World War II he ran the British propaganda office in Paris and also worked with the Secret Service. Coward was knighted in 1969, the same year he appeared in his final film, *The Italian Job*, and received a Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement.

For a timeline of Noël Coward’s life see: http://www.noelcoward.com/html/noel_coward.html

“If by any chance a playwright wishes to express a political opinion or a moral opinion or a philosophy, he must be a good enough craftsman to do it with so much spice of entertainment in it that the public get the message without being aware of it.”

— [Noël Coward, *A Talent To Amuse: A Biography Of Noël Coward*](#)

“Work is more fun than fun.”

— [Noël Coward](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO *PRIVATE LIVES*

Divorce law in 1930s England

When Noël Coward wrote *Private Lives* in 1930, English law didn't allow for divorce by mutual consent. Grounds for divorce required proof of adultery, or violence by one party. And in fact, misconduct by *both* parties could lead to the divorce being refused altogether. It was about innocence versus guilt.

If one spouse had committed adultery, they could be divorced by the other. But if both parties had been adulterous they couldn't get divorced, unless the court chose to exercise its discretion. The law strictly prohibited 'collusion' by the parties, and there was even an official – the King's Proctor – charged with seeking out any evidence of the parties working together to secure a divorce.

Many couples mutually seeking divorce would engineer their own 'adulterous' scenarios, usually involving a seaside destination, like Brighton, and a hotel. The man and a third-party, uninvolved woman would travel to a resort for the weekend, and behave as husband and wife as publicly as possible. In the morning, they would ensure they were observed by the maid in bed together when she brought in their breakfast. So when the pair returned home and the divorce case came to court, the maid would be called on to give evidence as a witness to this 'adultery'.



Eloise Mignon & Toby Truslove

photo: Brett Boardman

But it still wasn't easy. After the trial, there was a six-month waiting period until the *decree nisi* granted at the trial was made *decree absolute*, and any misconduct by the 'innocent' party during this time (or any evidence of collusion coming to light) could annul the divorce.

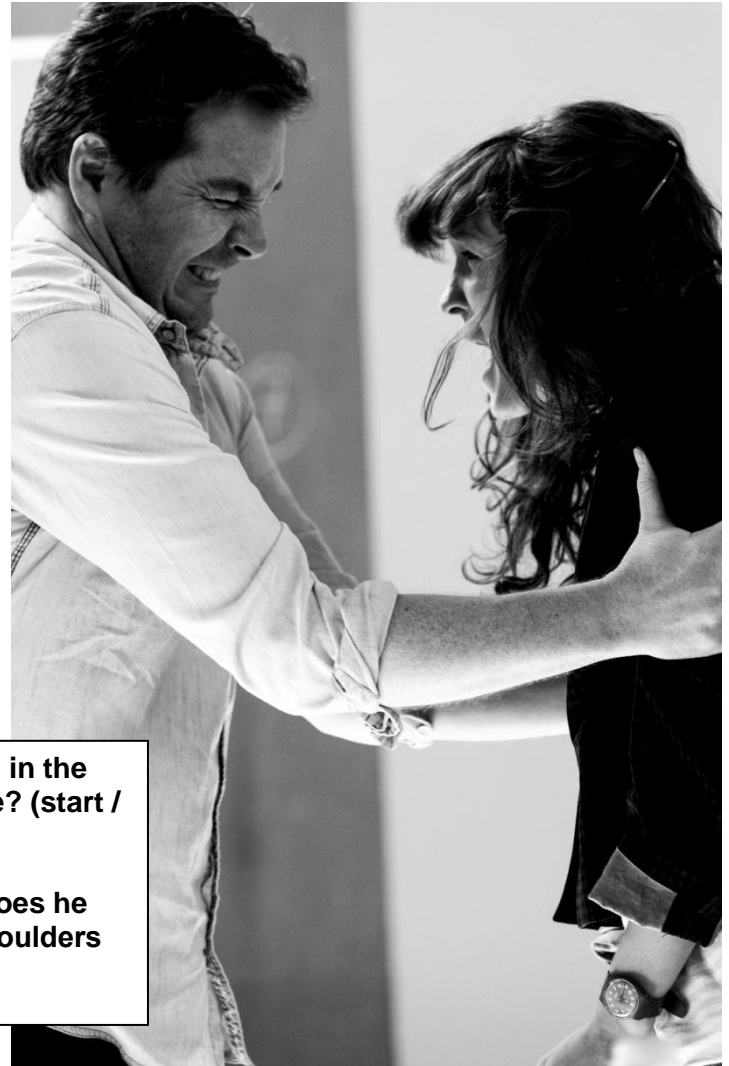
In 1937, things changed dramatically, particularly for women. *The Matrimonial Causes Act* extended the grounds on which divorce could be granted to include wilful desertion, cruelty, incurable insanity and habitual drunkenness. Even so, there was still a bar on divorce within the first three years of marriage. Then in 1938, Edith Summerskill established the Married Women's Association to promote equality in marriage. Until incredibly recently, 1969 in fact, it was still impossible for a 'guilty' spouse to divorce an 'innocent' partner. As long as the innocent spouse took care not to be caught in adultery, he or she could effectively block the other's divorce and remarriage. Where both parties had committed adultery, which wasn't an uncommon situation where a marriage had broken down, the petitioner had to give full details of her own misdemeanours and ask the court to exercise its discretion in her favour.

Sources: bbc.co.uk; lawteacher.net; Wikipedia.

Thinking about historical context: How do changes in divorce laws affect the social context in *Private Lives*? Do these historical shifts make the meaning of the play fluctuate significantly? Why or why not?

Actors at Belvoir rehearse for 5 weeks at the Belvoir Warehouse, just down the road from the theatre in a rehearsal room big enough to mark out the size of the Belvoir stage. The cast have a 'rehearsal set' of flats and substitute set items to rehearse with. They rehearse Monday to Friday from 10am till 6pm and on occasional Saturdays.

They then spend a sixth week on stage in the Upstairs theatre at Belvoir St theatre, in technical production rehearsals. As *Private Lives* is a professional theatre production all actors, director and crew are paid for the rehearsal period.



- Looking at this photo of rehearsals – when in the play do you imagine this scene takes place? (start / middle / end)
- Look closely at Toby Truslove's hands – does he look like he is gripping Eloise Mignon's shoulders very tightly? How is the actor creating the impression of force?

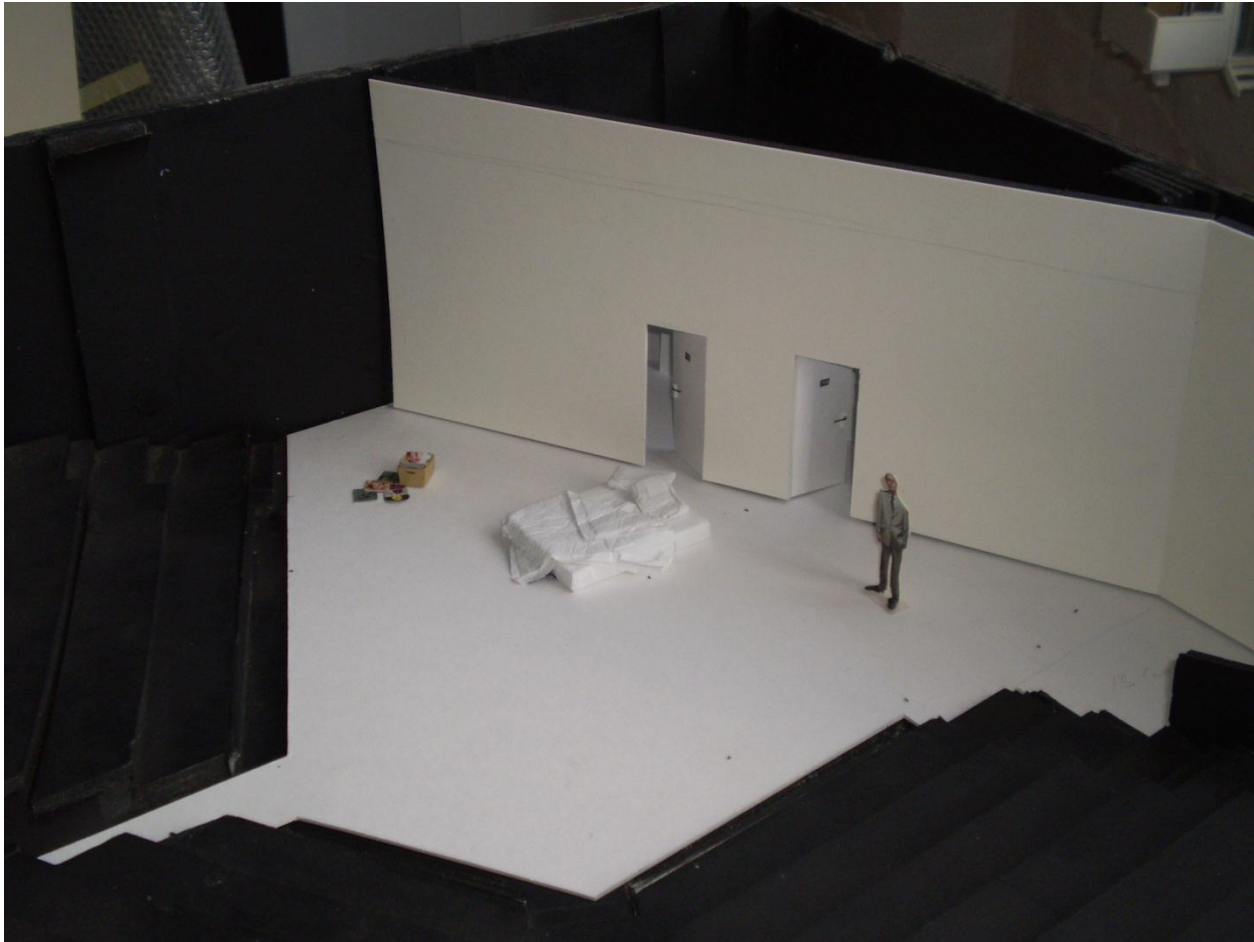
What does the positioning of actors in the space tell you about their characters in this rehearsal photo? What kind of energy is suggested by this image?

What kind of props do they have on the table? Why might it be important for actors to rehearse with real or approximate props?



Zahra Newman, Toby Truslove, Eloise Mignon & Toby Schmitz rehearse Act 3 *Private Lives*

photo: Brett Boardman



Model box for *Private Lives*: Ralph Myers

THINKING ABOUT SET DESIGN:

Private Lives was directed and designed by the same creative – Ralph Myers, Artistic Director of Belvoir. This is quite unusual and even more so than when design is carried out by a designer working with a director, means the design can serve the production and respond to the staging in specific ways. As you can see from the model box above, one of the eventual set elements was not initially factored into the design. This means that it came completely out of the rehearsal process.

Discussion questions to think through with students:

What can you imagine would be the advantages of being able to keep designing the set throughout rehearsals? Would there be any disadvantages that you can think of?

Before the play

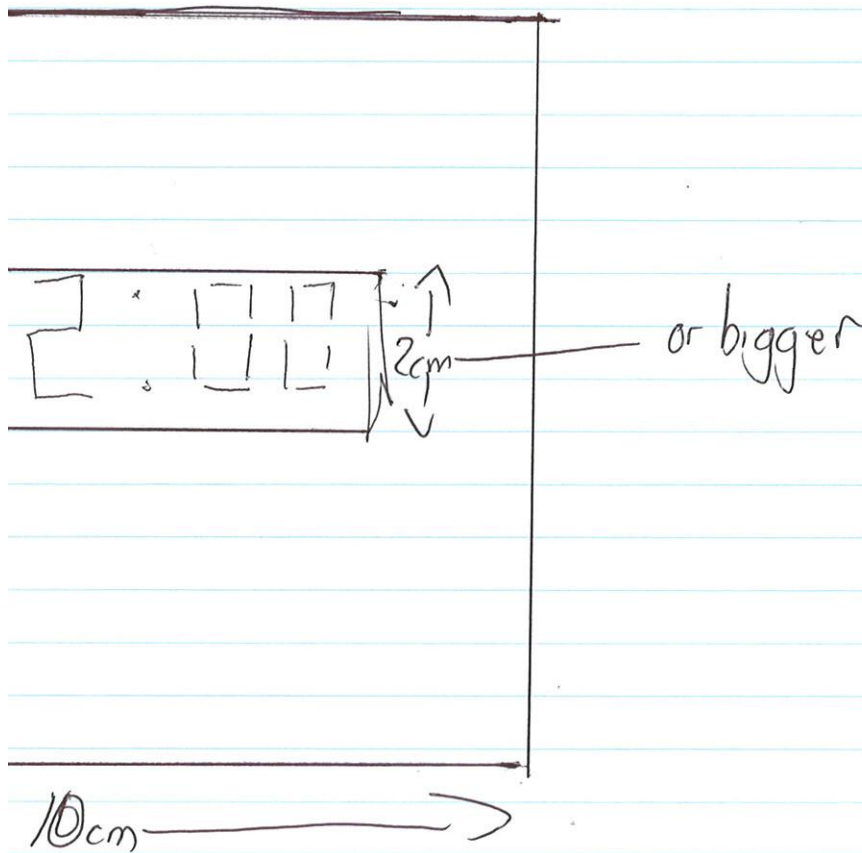
Looking at the model box above and thinking about the two different locations of Act 1 & Acts 2/3

- How can this space can be transformed to work for both places (French hotel & Paris apartment)?
- What kind of changes could be made to effect this transformation?
- Would these be done by the actors or the stage management team? Why?

After the play

- What important set element is missing from the model box above? (Clue, between two doors)
- How did this set element (a change to the initial design) operate in the performance that you saw?
- Can you imagine the production without it? Why/Why not?

PROPS IN *PRIVATE LIVES*



This sketch was done by Belvoir's production manager, Chris Mercer, to indicate what he was looking for in terms of a 'Sollocks clock'. The brief was that the digital numbers had to be large enough to be seen from onstage. The production team had attempted to make one themselves to these specifications but the clock you see onstage was found via online searching.

LED TIMER

counts down from 2 mins

black clock & red writing

Belvoir has a designated Production Coordinator whose job it is to source all the props you see onstage in *Private Lives* and in other productions.

Often different versions of props are tried out during rehearsals and either decided on or rejected on the basis of how they work in the action and whether cast and director are comfortable with them. Sometimes these are adjusted again, once in the theatre, as all the other set elements are combined.



Elyot and Amanda's Act 2 props

photo: Brett Boardman

CLASS ACTIVITY (Before seeing the play) – Read the following scene from *Private Lives* with all stage directions removed and try to work out what is happening.

Excerpt from Act 3 – *Private Lives* by Noël Coward

ELYOT: Please, Sibyl, do stay!

SIBYL: Very well, just for a little.

AMANDA: Sit down, Victor, darling. Half and half?

SIBYL: Yes, please.

AMANDA: What would one do without one's morning coffee? That's what I often ask myself.

ELYOT: Is it? And what do you always answer?

AMANDA: Victor, sugar for Sibyl. It would be absurd for me to call you anything but Sibyl, wouldn't it?

SIBYL: Of course, I shall call you Mandy.

ELYOT: Oh God! We're off again. What weather!

SIBYL: Thank you.

VICTOR: What's the time?

ELYOT: If the clock's still going after last night, it's a quarter-past ten.

AMANDA: Here, Victor dear.

VICTOR: Thanks.

BELVOIR

AMANDA: Sibyl, sugar for Victor.

ELYOT: I should like some coffee, please.

AMANDA: Brioche?

VICTOR: What?

AMANDA: Would you like a brioche?

VICTOR: No, thank you.

ELYOT: I would. And some butter, and some jam.

AMANDA: Have you ever been to Brioni?

SIBYL: No. It's in the Adriatic, isn't it?

VICTOR: The Baltic, I think.

SIBYL: I made sure it was in the Adriatic.

AMANDA: I had an aunt who went there once.

ELYOT: I once had an aunt who went to Tasmania.

VICTOR: Funny how the South of France has become so fashionable in the summer isn't it?

SIBYL: Yes, awfully funny.

ELYOT: I've been laughing about it for months.

AMANDA: Personally, I think it's a bit too hot, although of course one can lie in the water all day.

SIBYL: Yes, the bathing is really divine!

VICTOR: A friend of mine has a house right on the edge of Cape Ferrat.

SIBYL: Really?

VICTOR: Yes, right on the edge.

AMANDA: That must be marvellous!

VICTOR: Yes, he seems to like it very much.

VICTOR: Now look here - -

SIBYL: I believe -

AMANDA: Do you know, I really think I love travelling more than anything else in the world! It always gives me such a tremendous feeling of adventure. First of all, the excitement of packing, and getting your passport visa'd and everything, then the thrill of actually starting, and trundling along on trains and ships, and then the most thrilling thing of all, arriving at strange places, and seeing strange people, and eating strange foods -

ELYOT: And making strange noises afterwards.

VICTOR: That was a damned fool thing to do.

ELYOT: How did I know she was going to choke?

VICTOR: Here, drink some coffee.

AMANDA: Leave me alone. I'll be all right in a minute.

VICTOR: You waste too much time trying to be funny.

SIBYL: It's no use talking to Elyot like that; it wasn't his fault.

VICTOR: Of course it was his fault entirely, making rotten stupid jokes –

SIBYL: I thought what Elyot said was funny.

VICTOR: Well, all I can say is, you must have a very warped sense of humour.

SIBYL: That's better than having none at all.

VICTOR: I fail to see what humour there is in incessant trivial flippancy.

SIBYL: You couldn't be flippant if you tried until you were blue in the face.

VICTOR: I shouldn't dream of trying.

SIBYL: It must be very sad not to be able to see any fun in anything.

VICTOR: Fun! I should like you to tell me what fun there is in –

SIBYL: I pity you, I really do. I've been pitying you ever since we left for Paris.

VICTOR: I'm sure it's very nice of you, but quite unnecessary.

SIBYL: And I pity you more than ever now.

VICTOR: Why now particularly?

SIBYL: If you don't see why, I'm certainly not going to tell you.

VICTOR: I see no reason for you to try to pick a quarrel with me. I've tried my best to be pleasant to you, and comfort you.

SIBYL: You weren't very comforting when I lost my trunk.

VICTOR: I have little patience with people who go about losing luggage.

SIBYL: I don't go about losing luggage. It's the first time I've lost anything in my life.

VICTOR: I find that hard to believe.

SIBYL: Anyhow, if you'd tipped the porter enough, everything would have been all right. Small economies never pay; it's absolutely no use –

VICTOR: Oh, for God's sake be quiet!

SIBYL: How dare you speak to me like that!

VICTOR: Because you've been irritating me for days.

SIBYL: Oh!

VICTOR: You're one of the most completely idiotic women I've ever met.

SIBYL: And you're certainly the rudest man I've ever met!

VICTOR: Well then, we're quits, aren't we?

SIBYL: One thing, you'll get your deserts all right.

VICTOR: What do you mean by that?

SIBYL: You know perfectly well what I mean. And it'll serve you right for being weak-minded enough to allow that woman to get round you so easily.

VICTOR: What about you? Letting that unprincipled roué persuade you to take him back again!

SIBYL: He's nothing of the sort, he's just been victimized, as you were victimized.

VICTOR: Victimized! What damned nonsense!

SIBYL: It isn't damned nonsense! You're very fond of swearing and blustering and threatening, but when it comes to the point you're as weak as water. Why, a blind cat could see what you've let yourself in for. When I think of all the things you said about her, it makes me laugh, it does really; to see how completely she's got you again.

VICTOR: You can obviously speak with great authority, having had the intelligence to marry a drunkard.

SIBYL: So that's what she's been telling you. I might have known it! I expect she omitted to tell you that she drank fourteen glasses of brandy last night straight off; and that the reason their first marriage was broken up was that she used to come home at all hours of the night, screaming and hiccupping.

VICTOR: If he told you that, he's a filthy liar.

SIBYL: He isn't – he isn't!

VICTOR: And if you believe it, you're a silly scatter-brained little fool.

SIBYL: How dare you speak to me like that! How dare you! I've never been so insulted in my life! How dare you!

VICTOR: It's a tremendous relief to me to have an excuse to insult you. I've had to listen to your weeping and wailings for days. You've clacked at me, and snivelled at me until you've nearly driven me insane. I always thought you were stupid from the first, but I must say I never realized that you were a malicious little vixen as well!

SIBYL: Stop it! Stop it! You insufferable great brute!

TO THINK ABOUT:

- ❖ How important are the written stage directions in establishing the action of the play?
- ❖ What might be the benefit to actors in removing them for rehearsals?
- ❖ What is hard to understand without stage directions?
- ❖ How much of a play's meaning lies in the stage directions provided by a playwright?
- ❖ Do you think a director has the right to jettison these in the interests of creating a more original production?
- ❖ What would a production be like that followed every single stage direction?
- ❖ How do you imagine it would help in giving a production a more contemporary feel, by taking out the stage directions and working out what is happening afresh?

See Elissa Blake's article in the Sydney Morning Herald for further discussion of these ideas: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/shows-play-cat-and-mouse-with-playwrights-directions-20120703-21fd0.html>

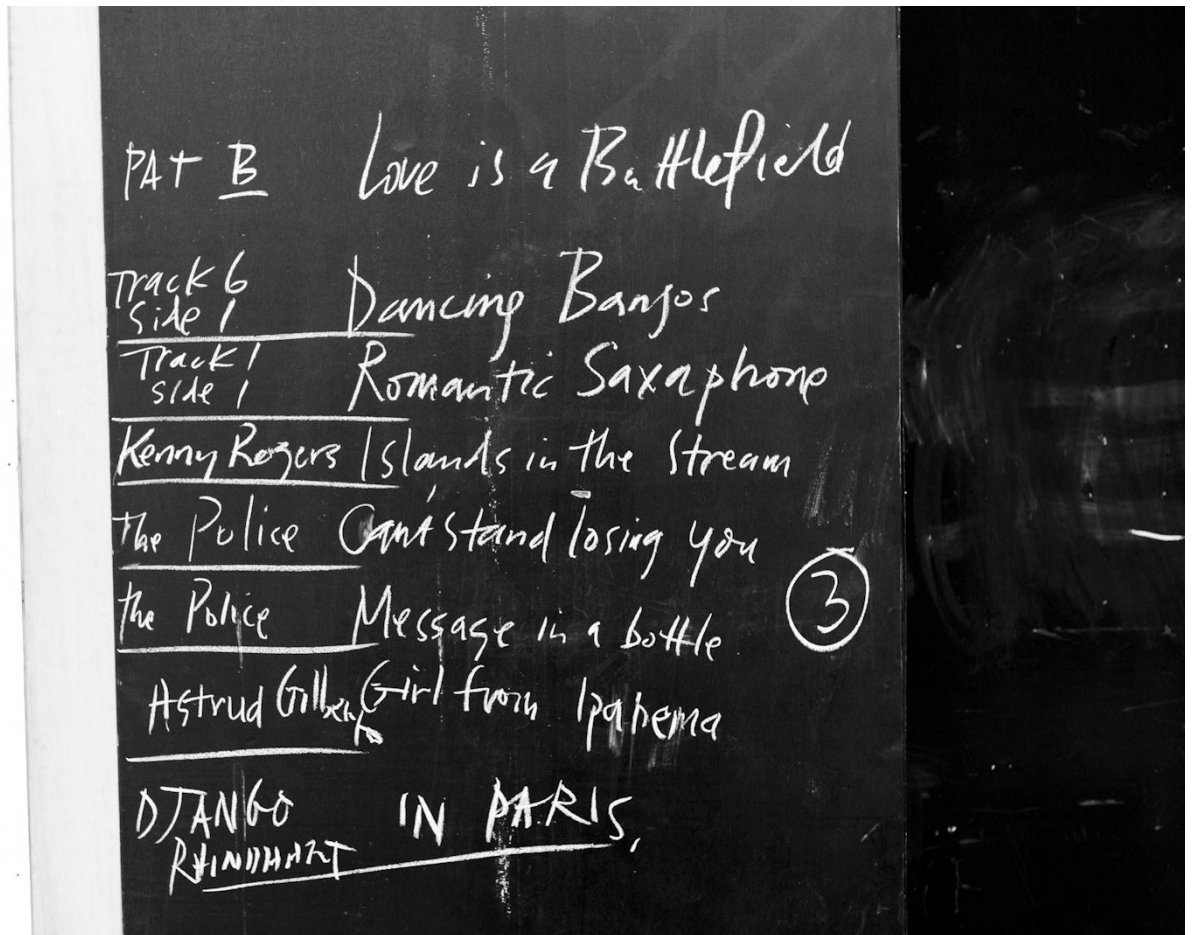


Photo: Brett Boardman

Part of the process of *Private Lives* rehearsals consisted of sitting around and listening to records from the sound designer's record collection, to work out which ones would work for the production.

Particularly crucial were the songs which were to be used in the 'Sollocks' moments – the two minute sections of silence when Elyot and Amanda are barred from speaking to each other.

See above for a shortlist of songs that were considered for use in *Private Lives* – the tracks that made it into the show had to have performance copyright requested through APRA, and a fee paid. In some instances the selection of the song is affected by the availability of a song through APRA and the copyright fee required. If this happens, the director and sound designer sometimes have to choose another song.

Songs that made it in to the performance:

***Moonlight Serenade* – Glenn Miller**

***In the Air Tonight* – Phil Collins**

***Girl From Ipanema* – instrumental**

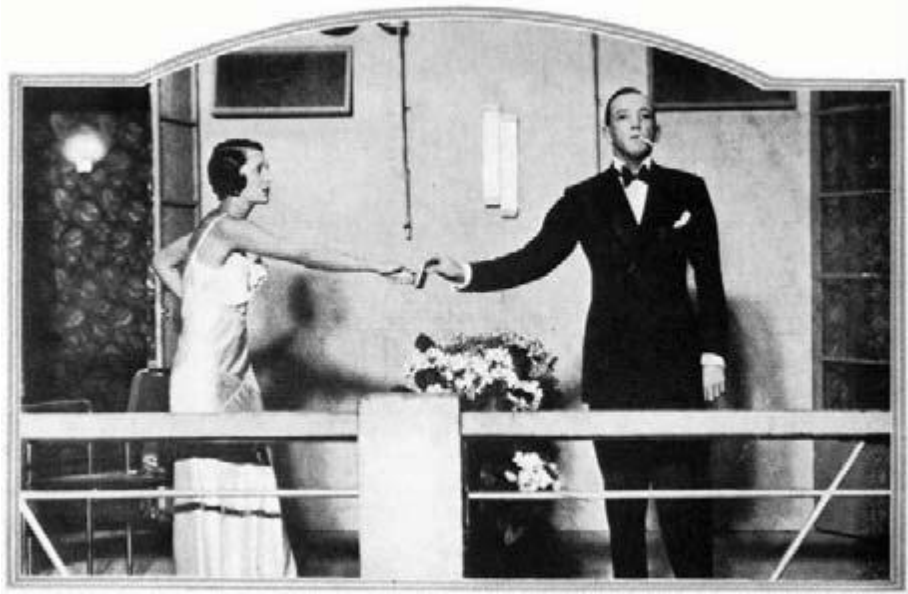
***Jeepers Creepers* – banjo instrumental by unknown group called "Dancing Banjos"**

***I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl That Married Dear Old Dad* – banjo instrumental by unknown group called "Dancing Banjos"**

***Three Little Words* – banjo instrumental by unknown group called "Dancing Banjos"**

STAGING COMEDY in *Private Lives* – considering different productions

Gertrude Lawrence and Noel Coward share a cigarette in the first act of *Private Lives* (1929 production)



Look at the photo above, of Amanda & Victor in the moment towards the end of Act 1 when both their spouses have gone downstairs and they share a cigarette. Compare the actors' physicality and the staging of the scene.

What similarities / differences can you find in the: -

- set design?
- staging?
- atmosphere of the scene (as far as you can tell)?
- costume design?

What does it look like is going on between these two characters?

Do both versions seem to capture the moment equally effectively?

If not, defend your case for one capturing the moment more effectively than another.

Zahra Newman & Toby Schmitz in Act 1: Belvoir's 2012 production of *Private Lives*

photo: Heidrun Lohr



Staging the end of Act 2 – how to capture surprise?

Look at the photos below – this scene is the end of Act 2 when Sybil & Victor turn up unexpectedly in Paris at Amanda's flat.

Compare the way both scenes have been staged – what similarities / differences can you discover?

Look at:

- facial expressions of Sybil in both scenes
- way Amanda & Victor are fighting
- Victor's physicality – what attitude does it suggest?

Consider:

- Set design & way it contributes to managing the surprise moment of discovery
- Different implications of the way Amanda & Victor are physically – which looks more violent?

Laurence Olivier and Adrienne Allen surprise Lawrence & Coward brawling at the end of Act II, *Private Lives*. 1930's production



Eloise Mignon & Toby Truslove in Act 2: Belvoir's 2012 production of *Private Lives*

photo: Heidrun Lohr



Staging onstage affection & passion

- What mood does each of these moments convey?
- How do costume choices create the impression of two people who are very comfortable with each other?
- Is the tone of both these moments serious?
- If not, how do physicality and facial expressions suggest a light hearted tone?
- What time of day or night does it seem to be?
- How well do they seem to know each other?
- What else are they doing in the scene?

Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence in *Private Lives*



Actors often describe onstage kissing as ‘technical’ – it is something they do as part of their job, and while they want to be as comfortable with the other actors as possible to make that part of the job go more smoothly, it is very clearly separate from real life – it is part of a performance and is there to convey a particular impression to the audience and impact on them, not on the actors themselves.

Difficult physical moments are often choreographed by a fight director or a physical movement specialist, or developed through improvisation & investigation in rehearsal.

Zahra Newman & Toby Schmitz in Act 1: Belvoir’s 2012 production of *Private Lives*

photo: Heidrun Lohr



VIOLENCE & the consequence of violence in *PRIVATE LIVES*

AMANDA: I've been brought up to believe that it's beyond the pale, for a man to strike a woman.
ELYOT: A very poor tradition. Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs.
AMANDA: You're an unmitigated cad, and a bully.
ELYOT: And you're an ill-mannered, bad-tempered slattern.

- ❖ Look at the lines above – are we intended to find them funny?
- ❖ Do you think audiences would have laughed at them
 - in 1930?
 - in 1980?
 - in 2012?
- What do we learn about Elyot & Amanda when their fighting goes too far at the end of Act 2?
- What impact does this have on their relationship?
- What does the playwright want us to learn about passion in love relationships, the relationship to power and the need for respect in relationships, even when arguing or when feelings are charged?

Zahra Newman & Toby Schmitz in Act 2: *Private Lives*

photo: Heidrun Lohr



Do you remember when the actor playing Amanda came out in dark sunglasses in Act 3? When she took her sunglasses off, did you notice she had a black eye? What did this choice do to your experience of the rest of the play?

Did seeing this impact on your understanding of Amanda & Elyot's relationship?

What did the director want us to understand from the way this was treated?

Zahra Newman in Act 3: *Private Lives*

photo: Heidrun Lohr



FURTHER READING: *Private Lives*

Online Resources

- YouTube clips of 1976 production of *Private Lives* featuring Alec McCowen, Penelope Keith, Polly Adams, Donald Pickering - http://youtu.be/d6XcAf7_USM
- The Noel Coward Estate - <http://www.noelcoward.co.uk>
- The Noel Coward Society - <http://www.noelcoward.net>
- The Noel Coward Foundation - <http://www.noelcoward.org>
- Video Interview with Lucy Bailey, Director of *Private Lives* - <http://uk.youtube.com/HampsteadTheatre>
- Hampstead Theatre *Private Lives* Teacher Kit
<http://www.noelcoward.org/resources/Resource%20Pack.pdf>

Belvoir's Production of *Private Lives* 2012

ARTICLES

SMH <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/in-a-class-of-its-own-20120927-26m3w.html>

The Australian <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/toby-schmitz-takes-the-lead-in-belvoirs-private-lives/story-fn9n8gph-1226460994222>

REVIEWS

Print:

AUSTRALIAN <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/stage/sexy-funny-private-lives/story-fn9d344c-1226482602008>

SMH - <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/in-a-class-of-its-own-20120927-26m3w.html>

Time Out - <http://www.au.timeout.com/sydney/theatre/events/27175/private-lives>

Limelight magazine - <http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/317668, live-review-noel-cowards-private-lives.aspx>

Brag Magazine - <http://www.thebrag.com/2012/10/08/theatre-review-private-lives/>

Online:

CRIKEY <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/curtaincall/2012/10/01/review-private-lives-belvoir-st-sydney/>

Australian Stage: <http://www.australianstage.com.au/201209285826/reviews/sydney/private-lives/-belvoir.html>

Stage Noise - <http://www.stagenoise.com/review/1866>