



The Times

'Private Lives' on display

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THEATER REVIEW

No one could send up the British upper classes like Sir Noel Coward, and he made a successful career of it, starting with his flagship comedy, "Private Lives."

The Shakespeare '70 troupe has brought a frisky rendition of this modern classic to Kendall Hall at The College of New Jersey through Sunday. Those who have never witnessed Coward's keen wit and flawless satiric aim should not miss this deftly played spoof of love, marriage and compatibility.

Elyot Chase and former wife Amanda have been apart for five years, but the wounds haven't healed. Fate takes a hand when Elyot and new bride Sybil settle in to a swanky honeymoon suite at a French Riviera hotel, only to find that Amanda and her new husband, Victor Prynne, are in the adjoining flat. When the two exes meet, they are at first astonished, then angry, then penitent, for they realize they want to be together again. With respect for no one, they simply escape to Paris.

Once ensconced in Amanda's Paris pied a terre, love blooms -- but it is soon blasted by the old anxieties, jealousies and childish griping that marked the Chases' marriage. Will common sense overcome their bad manners, or will Victor and Sybil arrive and set things to rights?

Obviously, the plot is not complex, but the personalities are, and Coward devotes his energies to the excesses of egotism, childishness and stubborn self-interest. We get a pretty good idea of what the Chase marriage must have been like and wonder if we should duck for cover.

Director John Erath keeps the proceedings swift and the tension high. The Shakespeare '70 company of four veterans and a cute French maid, Gina Yanuzzi, carry off the mayhem with style and pace.

The feuding Chases are taken on by Dale Simon and Janet Quartarone, longtime company members and real-life spouses. They make the ridiculous arguments of the Chases so natural and spontaneous that we fully expect the china to fly.

As the bewildered Sybil, we have Elizabeth Hults, a former student intern at TCNJ, now a high school teacher, but still wedded to acting. Tom Orr, a favorite with various area companies, and known especially for his terrific baritone voice, portrays the indignant Victor. The hapless abandoned spouses react with stunned realism, as they face a difficult and embarrassing future: divorce in England, no easy challenge.

This cast demonstrates how to bring a 1930 classic to life, while also coming off as human beings. There is no exaggerated posturing, and the British accents are generic and totally comprehensible. The audience, of course, knows that love will win out -- whatever that means in this hysterical context -- but the getting there is too funny to have it happen easily.

Dale Simon's Riviera set seems full of sunshine, and his version of Amanda's apartment is simple but elegant. Shakespeare '70 also continues its practice of mentoring student interns, some in acting, some in theater arts, and with Yanuzzi, in both. As with Hults, the outcomes are well worth the effort.

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