



THIS IS YOUR THEATER,
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24^{SEASON}
25

SEASON 58

NOËL COWARD'S
PRIVATE LIVES
DIRECTED BY
KJ SANCHEZ

RESOURCE & ACTIVITY GUIDE

WELCOME!

A.C.T.
EDUCATION &
COMMUNITY
PROGRAMS

American Conservatory Theater's Education & Community Programs Department is delighted to welcome you and your students into the passionate and darkly funny world of *Private Lives*, a comedy of manners where chemistry reignites, strong passions take over, and mayhem ensues. To learn more about A.C.T.'s production and to access the digital version of this guide, visit act-sf.org/whats-on/2024-25-season/private-lives.

This guide was created in August 2024 by Sierra Gonzalez and Natalie Greene, and designed by Dani Karonis. We are grateful to the Noël Coward Foundation for their support of this production and for the robust educational resources they've shared online, some of which are re-printed in this guide. Special thanks to Anelisa Armijo Montoya, as well as the talented actors, stage managers, designers and production team at A.C.T.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Prepare for the experience of seeing *Private Lives* using these materials to better understand the show's main ideas and themes.

Audience members:

While parts of this guide offer things specifically for students and teachers, there's something in here for **you too!** History, context, behind-the-scenes info, Q&A with the artists, and much, much more. When you see the **discussion questions**, consider them questions for your personal reflection, or to stimulate conversation and dialogue with others.

Teachers:

Consider your curriculum, your own perspective, and how your students might engage with this information. Situate this content in larger social and historical contexts, and customize this curriculum for your social-emotional learning goals. Choose your own adventure and adapt the activities for your students' grade level, capacity, interests, and needs.

Some parts of this guide provide instructions for activities, while others consist of written text followed by **discussion questions**. Consider assigning the text for your students to read either as homework or in class. When you reach the questions, feel free to use as many or as few as you like.

Consider whether the **discussion questions** would be most effective for your students in a pair share, small group, or full class conversation. Would they work better as personal reflection questions or writing assignments? Please scaffold and adapt as needed.

Everyone:

Please reach out to education@act-sf.org if you have any questions or support needs. We hope you enjoy the show!

CORE THEMES IN *PRIVATE LIVES*

Love & Passion	Marriage & Divorce
Conflict & Communication	Comedy & Drama
Fighting & Reconciling	Social Convention vs. Individual Desire

CONSIDER FOR STUDENTS:

Which themes are familiar to you?

What assumptions come to mind when you think about these themes?

What do these themes inspire or help you to imagine?

CONSIDER FOR EDUCATORS:

How might these themes connect to existing curriculum or classwork?

What do your students already know, understand, or believe about these themes?

How might these themes support your social-emotional learning goals?

NATIONAL ARTS STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS GUIDE

<https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>

- **Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.
 1. This guide encourages students to **generate and conceptualize artistic ideas** through the “Small Talk, Big Play” and “Love/Hate” activities, where they create and explore subtext in conversation and personal reflection.
 2. Students are asked to **organize and develop artistic ideas** through writing a scene in the style of a comedy of manners and analyzing characters’ emotions in conversations.
- **Performing/Presenting/Producing:** Realizing artistic ideas and work through interpretation and presentation.
 4. The guide includes analysis of the play’s genre and its characteristics, which asks students to **interpret artistic work for presentation**, involve interpreting and selecting artistic work for presentation.
 6. The “Small Talk, Big Play” activity and discussion questions help students **convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work** through performance and interpretation of subtle emotions in conversations.
- **Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
 7. The guide offers tools to **perceive and analyze artistic work**, such as identifying characteristics of a comedy of manners and reflecting on how subtext adds depth to dialogue.
 8. Students are encouraged to **interpret intent and meaning in artistic work** through discussions and activities, such as understanding how Coward’s work reflects societal norms and personal relationships.
- **Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.
 10. The guide helps students **synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to art** through reflective activities like “Love/Hate” and analyzing how themes in *Private Lives* connect to their own lives.
 11. By exploring the comedy of manners and how it has evolved, students **relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding**.

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ABOUT THE SHOW

SYNOPSIS

Director KJ Sanchez reimagines Noël Coward’s hysterical classic, crafting a tempestuous dance of marriage set in 1930s Argentina. Featuring steamy tango dancing and an all-Latine cast, Coward’s iconic, wry comedy takes on new life.

When a fiery divorced couple and their new spouses accidentally honeymoon in adjacent hotel rooms, old passions and strong personalities reignite, leading to explosive chemistry and chaotic mayhem. Get ready to laugh at what director Sanchez calls a “saucy, brassy, and rude” battle of equals, where fighting and making love go hand in hand.

CONTENT WARNING:

Private Lives is a comedic play examining romantic relationships, and includes adult situations, rare mild profanity, cigarette smoking and alcohol use, and references to violence.

Act 1

Time: 1932

Place: Mar Del Plata, Argentina

Argentina, in the early 20th century, was a glittering gem of wealth and allure. Picture this: “*Romantic Argentina*”, a newsreel showcasing Buenos Aires as a glamorous tourist haven, with vibrant footage from 1932.

Characters:

Elyot and Sibyl, honeymooners at a seaside hotel.

Amanda and Victor, also newlyweds in the same hotel.

SYNOPSIS:

Elyot and Sibyl are celebrating their honeymoon, but Sibyl’s incessant curiosity about Elyot’s previous marriage is casting a shadow over their romantic escape. Meanwhile, in the adjacent suite, Amanda and Victor are embarking on their own honeymoon, yet Victor is haunted by thoughts of Amanda’s previous marriage and the mistreatment she endured.

As fate would have it, Elyot and Amanda, both divorced for five years, discover that their new spouses are sharing the same hotel. Elyot and Amanda, driven by unresolved feelings and regrets, implore their new partners to leave with them. When their spouses refuse and storm off, Elyot and Amanda seize the moment and escape together to Amanda’s flat in Uruguay.

Acts 2 & 3

Place: Amanda’s flat in Montevideo, Uruguay

Montevideo, celebrated for its Art Deco splendor, provides the backdrop.

SYNOPSIS:

Several days into their retreat, Elyot and Amanda try to manage their turbulent relationship with a secret code word to curb their arguments. Their intense passion is matched only by their fierce disputes, mirroring the tumultuous nature of their past marriage. As their arguments escalate, their love-hate cycle grows more destructive.

The tension reaches its peak when Sibyl and Victor unexpectedly arrive. Amanda’s attempt to sneak out fails, and the bickering between Elyot and Amanda resumes. Meanwhile, Sibyl and Victor’s own conflict surfaces, with each defending their spouse.

In a moment of clarity, Elyot and Amanda recognize that Sibyl and Victor are as mismatched as they are. They reconcile, leave the younger couple behind, and slip away together. As Elyot and Amanda quietly depart, the quarrel between Sibyl and Victor reaches its dramatic crescendo.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Noël Coward, 1963. Horst Tappe/Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Noël Peirce Coward was born in 1899 and made his professional stage debut as Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish* at the age of 11, leading to many child actor appearances over the next few years. His breakthrough in playwriting was the controversial *The Vortex* (1924) which featured themes of drugs and adultery and made his name as both actor and playwright in the West End and on Broadway.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Coward wrote a string of successful plays, musicals and intimate revues including *Fallen Angels* (1925), *Hay Fever* (1925), *Easy Virtue* (1926), *This Year of Grace* (1928) and *Bitter Sweet* (1929). His professional partnership with childhood friend, Gertrude Lawrence started with the musical revue, *London Calling* (1923) and was followed by *Private Lives* (1931) and *Tonight at 8.30* (1936).

During World War II, he remained a successful playwright, screenwriter, and director, as well as entertaining the troops and even acting as a spy

for the Foreign Office. His plays during these years included *Blithe Spirit* (1941), which ran for 1997 performances, outlasting the War (a West End record until *The Mousetrap* overtook it), *This Happy Breed* and *Present Laughter* (both 1942). His two wartime screenplays, *In Which We Serve*, which he co-directed with the young David Lean as well as starring in, and *Brief Encounter* quickly became classics of British cinema.

However, the post-war years were more difficult. Austerity Britain—the London critics determined—was out of tune with the brittle Coward wit. In response, Coward re-invented himself as a cabaret and TV star, particularly in America, and in 1955 he played a sell-out season in Las Vegas featuring many of his most famous songs, including “Mad About the Boy,” “I’ll See You Again,” and “Mad Dogs and Englishmen.” This was followed by 3 live television specials on CBS including *Together With Music* with Mary Martin.

In the mid-1950s he settled in Jamaica and Switzerland, and enjoyed a renaissance in the early 1960s becoming the first living playwright to be performed by the National Theatre, when he directed *Hay Fever* there. Late in his career he was lauded for his roles in a number of films including *Our Man in Havana* (1959) and his role as the iconic Mr. Bridger alongside Michael Caine in *The Italian Job* (1968).

Writer, actor, director, film producer, painter, songwriter, cabaret artist as well as an author of verse, essays, autobiographies, and a novel, he was called by close friends “The Master.” His final West End appearance was *Song at Twilight* in 1966, which he wrote and starred in. He was knighted in 1970 and died peacefully in 1973 in his beloved Jamaica.

For further information on Noël Coward’s life and work, visit noelcoward.com.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Here are some discussion questions based on the article about Noël Coward:

1. **Coward's Early Career:** How did Noël Coward's early experiences as a child actor influence his later success as a playwright and performer? Can you think of any modern artists who also started young and went on to have a significant impact on their field?
2. **Impact of The Vortex:** "The Vortex" was a controversial play that dealt with themes of drugs and adultery. How do you think tackling such bold topics helped shape Coward's career? Why might challenging societal norms be important in the arts?
3. **Coward's Versatility:** Noël Coward was known for his many talents—writing, acting, directing, and even entertaining troops during World War II. How do you think being multi-talented contributed to his long and varied career? Can you think of other artists who have thrived by exploring multiple disciplines?
4. **Response to Austerity Britain:** After World War II, Coward faced challenges due to the changing cultural landscape. How did he adapt to remain relevant, and what can this teach us about resilience in the face of changing times?
5. **Legacy and Influence:** Noël Coward was knighted and is remembered as "The Master" for his contributions to theater and film. What do you think it takes for an artist to leave such a lasting legacy? How does Coward's work continue to influence modern theatre and cinema?

PRIVATE LIVES THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

Premiered in London, starring Noël Coward, Gertrude Lawrence, Adrienne Allen, and Laurence Olivier

1930



CBS Radio aired an hour-long adaptation of the play by Orson Welles, starring Welles as Elyot and Gertrude Lawrence reprising her stage role as Amanda.

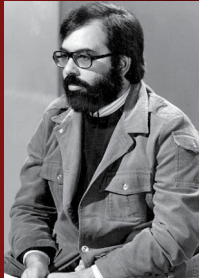
1939

Off-Broadway production directed by Charles Nelson Reilly, starring Elaine Stritch as Amanda.

1968



Paul Shenar and Miss Michael Learned are featured in Noël Coward's witty, romantic comedy, *Private Lives*, performing in repertory through April with its final presentation at 8:30 on May 2.



Francis Ford Coppola directs A.C.T.'s first production of the show, starring Deborah Sussel, Michael Learned, Paul Shenar, and Jay Doyle.

1972

BBC production starring Alec McCowen and Penelope Keith.

1976



Broadway revival starring Elizabeth Taylor as Amanda and Richard Burton as Elyot. This production also toured to Washington, DC, Chicago, and LA in the same year.

1983

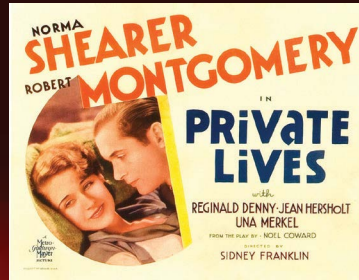
BBC Radio 4 broadcast a new adaptation of the play directed by Sally Avens, starring Helena Bonham Carter as Amanda and Bill Nighy as Elyot



2010

1931

Premiered in London, starring Noël Coward, Gertrude Lawrence, Adrienne Allen, and Laurence Olivier



First film adaptation directed by Sidney Franklin and starring Norma Shearer as Amanda and Robert Montgomery as Elyot. Coward thought it "passable"

1944

West End revival, starring John Clements and Kay Hammond

1948



Broadway revival, starring Tallulah Bankhead as Amanda. The production toured all but three states of the U.S., and grossed more than \$1.5 million.

1972

The last revival during Coward's lifetime, at London's Queen's Theatre. Directed by John Gielgud and starring Maggie Smith and Robert Stephens, the production transferred to Broadway in 1975.



2001

London revival emphasized the harshness and darker side of the play; it starred Alan Rickman and Lindsay Duncan, directed by Howard Davies at the Albery Theatre (subsequently renamed the Noël Coward Theatre)



PRIVATE LIVES THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Here are some discussion questions for *Private Life* throughout the years.

- 1. Star Power:** Noël Coward's *Private Lives* has seen many famous actors take on the roles of Amanda and Elyot. How do you think having prominent stars like Laurence Olivier, Elizabeth Taylor, and Richard Burton in these roles influenced the play's success and audience reception?
- 2. Interpretation Across Time:** Over the years, different productions of *Private Lives* have emphasized various aspects of the play, such as the darker elements in the 2001 revival. How might changing cultural contexts influence the way a play is interpreted and staged?
- 3. Adapting for Different Media:** *Private Lives* has been adapted into films, radio broadcasts, and stage revivals. What are some of the challenges and opportunities that come with adapting a play for different media formats? How might each medium bring out different elements of the story?
- 4. Revival Significance:** The play has been revived numerous times, including significant productions in 1944, 1972, and 2010. What do you think contributes to a play's lasting appeal that leads to so many revivals? How might these different eras have influenced the way the play was received by audiences?
- 5. International Appeal:** With productions ranging from London's West End to Broadway, and even a CBS Radio adaptation, *Private Lives* has had a broad international impact. What aspects of the play do you think have resonated with audiences across different cultures and time periods?

NOËL COWARD IN SAN FRANCISCO

EXCERPTS FROM ARTICLES BY BRAD ROSENSTEIN

- **Coward's San Francisco Love:**

Coward first visited San Francisco in 1926 and fell in love with the city despite being on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He viewed it as a top theater town and returned frequently.

- **Debut in the Bay Area:**

Coward's first play in the Bay Area, *The Vortex*, was produced in 1927 at the Fulton Theatre in Oakland. This followed his initial success with the play in New York. San Francisco native Marjorie Rambeau starred in the production.

- **Curran Theatre Legacy:**

The Curran Theatre, next to A.C.T., was Coward's favorite venue in San Francisco. It hosted major productions of his works, including *Bitter Sweet* (1935) and *Blithe Spirit* (1944). It was also the site of his last performances with Gertrude Lawrence in 1948 and his final North American appearances in 1958.

- **Premiere of Still Life:**

Still Life, from the *Tonight at 8:30* series, premiered at the Curran in 1937 with Mary Astor and Bramwell Fletcher. The series allowed audiences to vote for their favorite plays, though it's unclear if *Still Life* was among the top choices.

- **Revivals and Changes:**

The 1948 revival of *Tonight at 8:30*, directed by Coward, did not include *Still Life*, likely due to the film *Brief Encounter*. In 1974, A.C.T. presented a version of *Tonight at 8:30* featuring *Red Peppers*, *Family Album*, and *Shadow Play*. *Still Life* returned to Geary Street after 72 years.



Donald Cook and Tallulah Bankhead in *Private Lives*, 1948
Photographer unknown - Courtesy of The Noël Coward Archive

Discussion Questions

1. Why might a city become a favorite location for a playwright?
 - Reflect on what elements of a city, such as its theater scene or personal appeal, might attract a playwright like Noël Coward and influence their work.
2. What role do theaters play in the success of a playwright's work?
 - Consider how specific venues, like the Curran Theatre or A.C.T., might support or enhance the reputation and reach of a playwright's plays.
3. How can audience involvement in choosing performances affect a theatrical production?
 - Think about how allowing audiences to vote on or select favorite performances, as was done with Coward's *Tonight at 8:30*, might impact the success and reception of a show.
4. What motivates theaters to revive and adapt classic plays?
 - Discuss the reasons why theaters might choose to bring back or reinterpret classic works, like Coward's *Brief Encounter*, considering aspects like audience interest and cultural relevance.

WHAT IS A COMEDY OF MANNERS?

A Comedy of Manners is a genre of theater that depicts and satirizes the manners of contemporary society using witty, cerebral dialogue and clever dramatic functions. The word 'manner', by definition, implies a polite and well-bred behavior, as well as a method in which everyday duties are performed, or a way of speaking. It therefore follows that such a play is concerned with satirizing a society's manners. It does so through sophisticated use of speech and dialogue to create sharp comedy of the highest wit.

CHARACTERISTICS & MECHANICS OF A 'COMEDY OF MANNERS'

Social Context:

- Comedy is built around satirizing society of a specific time and place.
- Requires audiences/viewers/readers to have an understanding of a specific time and place. Most plays of the genre were carefully constructed to satirize the very people watching them.

Linguistic Techniques:

- Dialogue is the most prominent feature of a comedy of manners.
- Prominence placed on verbal comedy over physical comedy.
- Wit and dialogue take precedence over plot to a large extent.
- Many dialogue techniques used to keep the witty rapport and pungent commentary effective: imitation, dichotomy, irony, duologues, aphorism, symmetry.
- Dialogue is short and precise. The language depicts the values of the people in the play more than their actions.
- Sexual innuendos are used and rakish behavior is shown.

Characterisation:

- Characters consist of stock characters who conform to/challenge conventional stereotypes.
- Characters often fight with each other in situations of conflicting love triangles and intrigues.
- Often shown to be immoral and their weaknesses illuminated.
- Characters are defined by one single trait and are driven by a single emotion.
- Characters often do not develop or change throughout

Plots:

- The plots traditionally concern themselves with an illicit love affair, or similarly scandalous matter.
- The plotting is often very convenient and contrived

COMEDY OF MANNERS TIMELINE:

340-8 BC - *Ancient Greek Traditions: New Comedy*

The comedy of manners was first developed in the new comedy of the Ancient Greek playwright Menander. His style, elaborate plots, and stock characters were imitated by the Roman playwrights and satirists such as Plautus, Horace and Terence.



17th Century - *Molière & Shakespeare*

Arguably the best-known comedies of manners were those of French playwright Molière, who satirized the hypocrisy and pretension of society at the time in plays such as *The Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, *The Miser*, *The Imaginary Invalid*. Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* could also be considered the first comedy of manners in England, but the genre really flourished in England during the Restoration period.



18th Century - *Restoration Comedy*

In 1660, King Charles restores the English throne. He granted several key theatrical figures licence to produce plays and breathe life back into the theater. Restoration comedy, which was influenced by Ben Jonson's *Comedy of Humours*, made fun of affected wit and follies of the time. Other examples include John Dryden, *Marriage a la Mode* and William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*.



19th Century - *Oscar Wilde*

The genre is developed and continued through playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, who created plays of elaborate, artificial plotting and epigrammatic dialogue. Examples: *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.



20th Century - *Coward, Wodehouse, Carry On*

In the 20th century, the comedy of manners reappeared in the plays of the British dramatists Noël Coward and W. Somerset Maugham and the novels of P.G.Wodehouse, as well as various British sitcoms. The *Carry On* films are a direct descendant of the comedy of manners style.



21st Century - *Stage, TV & Film*

Comedy of manners still prevalent across many artistic platforms.

Stage: P.G Wodehouse *Jeeves and Wooster*, Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

TV: *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, *Modern Family*, *Friends*, *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, *Wizards of Waverly Place*, and *The Middle*.

Films: Richard Curtis Films, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually*

COMEDY OF MANNERS AND PRIVATE LIVES

Private Lives, alongside many of Coward's other plays, has been placed into the 'comedy of manners' genre. When reading and watching the play, it is easy to spot many of the key characteristics.

'Comic geometry' was a phrase coined by Peter Holland, which explains how Coward's use of repetition and mirroring lead us to be one step ahead of the action. For example, with the mirrored setting and dialogues in Act I, audiences know that Elyot and Amanda will end up together even before they do:

SIBYL: *Yes, but you love me differently [to Amanda]; I know that.*

ELYOT: *More wisely perhaps.*

VICTOR: *I think you love me quite differently from the way you loved Elyot.*

AMANDA: *I love you much more calmly, if that's what you mean.*

Coward was also an early practitioner of 'layering'. Playwright Harold Pinter recalled that it was when he saw *Private Lives* that he realized you could put a character on stage and have him saying one thing, while the audience knew that he was really saying something else. For instance, in the balcony scene, Elyot and Amanda appear to be discussing his world travels since they split up, but they are in reality trying to find out if the other is still in love with them. Coward himself insinuated that this was present in his method of writing in *Shadow Play*: 'Small talk, lots of small talk with other thoughts going on behind'. In a letter to Esme Wynne, he also says: 'Don't under rate your Audience so dreadfully – instead of letting your people say how and what they're feeling – let them express it more subtly – the audience will get it alright'.

With these additional elements, it can be seen that while Coward adopts the core comedy of manners techniques, he also evolves or deviates from the genre's rules in some aspects. While Coward is thought of as a 'comedy of manners' playwright, there is often an underlying depth to his plays that point towards something darker and more profound than the light-heartedness on the surface. For example, in *Private Lives* it could be argued that there is an underlying sadness in the realization that Amanda and Elyot can't live with or without each other. It is also true that the very physical nature of the comedy in Act II goes against the convention that the main comedy of the play should come through the dialogue alone.

Common misconceptions and difficulties that this genre may provoke

Comedies of manners often highlight the social customs of their time, which can make them seem old-fashioned today. For instance, the formal and exaggerated way characters speak might seem strange to modern audiences. To bridge this gap, looking at modern British TV shows like *Downton Abbey* or films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* can help, as they use similar styles of dialogue and plot.

Another challenge is that the plots in comedies of manners can be minimal and contrived, which might not resonate with today's audience who are used to more complex stories. For example, the structured settings and exaggerated situations in *Private Lives* might seem hard to believe. However, it's important to understand that these plays are meant for the stage, and their charm comes from their theatrical style rather than a realistic plot.

To make this clearer, consider comparing it to modern TV shows that kids and teens are familiar with, such as *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, *Wizards of Waverly Place*, *The Middle*, and *Modern Family*. You can also look at shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, which use humor and exaggerated situations to explore social interactions. These examples help illustrate how comedy of manners addresses societal norms and behaviors in a way that can be more relatable to today's audiences. Understanding this can help students appreciate the genre's unique appeal.



Suggested Activities & Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does *Private Lives* exemplify or deviate from the comedy of manners genre?
2. Look into what texts/plays/TV shows/movies use the techniques of this genre in a similar way and compare to *Private Lives*.
 - Examples could include: Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or more contemporary examples such as *Modern Family*, *Friends* or *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*.
3. Is *Private Lives* an intentional subversion of form? How does it depart from the conventions of the 'comedy of manners'? Does it become something deeper?
4. Imagine characters and a basic plot for a comedy of manners, and write a brief synopsis of the show. Then, write a short scene in the style.

A COMEDY OF ILL-MANNERS

Excerpts from an interview between A.C.T. Artistic Director Pam MacKinnon and *Private Lives* director KJ Sanchez

PAM: KJ Sanchez, I'm super excited to have you at A.C.T. directing Noël Coward's *Private Lives*. You've had several previous experiences both as an actor and a director with this play, right?

KJ: Yes, I've had a long relationship with this play. I think I have worked on *Romeo and Juliet* and this play more than any other plays. It's funny, that as a baby of the avant-garde, one of the plays I've spent more time with is Noël Coward's *Private Lives*. I was thinking this morning about how the lore is that he wrote it over a weekend.

PAM: Right.

KJ: I think that my assumption before I spent time with it was like, oh, this is thin, this is slapdash, here are some jokes and some rude bits and some funny bits and what's going on with the relationship between men and women in this play? But then I realized, Coward and Gertrude Lawrence, his pal of many years, performed it at theater after theater after theater, polishing it over and over. They perfected those jokes. They honed its structure.

Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence, their chemistry was so well practiced because they had known each other for so long and they wrote to each other constantly, and they were constantly throwing each other playful little digs and little jabs. That was part of their love and humor with each other. And so, this spiky, funny, witty, dry relationship was so well crafted. So when you get inside any of the characters in *Private Lives* you can feel that.

PAM: Would you define this play as a comedy of manners?

KJ: Can it be a comedy of ill-manners? It's that familiar tension between what is good for us and what feels good. "I should be with the person who treats me well and is kind and is polite to everyone...but what feels really good is to be with this jerk who says all the wrong things."

PAM: I love that, right. And hence the title. "We're on our honeymoon. We are in love. We are committed to each other and starting a new life together. Oh, but YOU are here too. How loud are my feelings for YOU?"

KJ: And each time I find something new. You've known Albee's work for so long in different iterations.

PAM: Yes, more than twelve productions of Edward's plays.

KJ: Do you see connections between *Private Lives* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

PAM: Absolutely. Both plays, one ninety years old, the other sixty, are deep, and still revelatory explorations of marriage. They create and reinforce a genre. These mountainous plays of virtuosic performance that if you do them right should level both actor and audience by the end of the night navigate to the marrow: adult commitment and love, and ironically the loneliness within these commitments. The underpinning of love needs to hold firm the surface that can be affectingly nasty and even brutal.

“We're on our honeymoon. We are in love. We are committed to each other and starting a new life together. Oh, but YOU are here too. How loud are my feelings for YOU?”

KJ: I played Sibyl in *Private Lives*, and then I also played Honey in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?. And there are so many similarities. No one's being mean because they want to be mean. We are just such lonely people. We are so desperately lacking in confidence, and love, and security that we have to either excessively perform joy or "carefree-ness" or lash out or fall apart or be brittle.

PAM: Edward Albee also constantly went back to writing about marriage. What do people do in their own homes is always just very, very meaty. These plays are voyeuristic and performative.

KJ: And both men writing about heterosexual relationships.

PAM: Right, right, exactly. Two gay men, constantly going back to the dynamic between men and women, and through the years, people have said, “Well, actually *Virginia Woolf* is really a quartet of four men.” And Edward just would always just say, no, no, no, no.

KJ: I think the same is true for *Private Lives*. There was a period, I think it was the late 80s, early 90s where productions were highlighting the coded messaging and playing Elyot as very coded and gay and Amanda being masculine and different. I’m not sure we have to be that simple.

PAM: Yep. Yep. Here’s to the messiness and complexity! So this is your fourth wrestle with *Private Lives*. And you’ve you set Act 1 in Argentina, rather than the French Riviera, and Act 2, instead of being Amanda’s Paris apartment, it’s Amanda’s apartment in Montevideo, Uruguay.

KJ: And still set in relatively the same time period of the late 1920s, early 1930s. And I chose Argentina because at that time, there were so many similarities to when Coward was writing. At that time, Argentina was one of the wealthiest countries in the world. But they were about to have their own major economic crisis and lose everything. So, there was this sense at that time of this desperate gaiety. “We don’t have any cash anymore, but we’ve traveled the world, we’ve read and we’ve seen, and we’ve danced, and we’ve laughed, and we own apartments in major metropolitan cities. We fear that there’s something absolutely terrifying around the corner, but let’s laugh at it. Let’s be gay and let’s pretend like none of it is happening.”

PAM: A dance on a precipice.

KJ: Exactly. And when Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence built this piece, they had baked in songs that they would sing in Act 2. These were Coward’s pop tunes. The audience got to see them show off some of their skills. I was attracted to bringing tango dancing in because it’s rooted in Argentina and also that push-pull of relationships in men and women and all of that, that is a perfect parallel with what Coward’s doing, but it also gives us a chance to just feature the talents of our cast.

PAM: Can you talk a little bit more about what you want to further explore with tango at A.C.T. in your *Private Lives*?

KJ: Tango is a dance that’s improvised, but improvised off of a lot of rules. There’s always an if/then with every step. If I do this one thing with my foot, it triggers six moves. And that’s how the text works: one character says something that triggers a beat changes, and a sequence of responses. In order to make the quick shifts in direction, the actors need to be internally on tilt at all times, so that you can move left, right, forward, and backward. You can never get back on your heels because you can’t anticipate where you’re going to go until that cue is given, and then you immediately go. For both tango and text, the audience can’t know where the two dancers are going to go next. So, what we’re witnessing is as close to real presence as we can get. [Tango instructor] Lisette [Pirelle] is choreographing the moves, but to be performed and felt as if there’s total improvisation, so that the dance is as alive as the lines are. We know that Hugo’s always going to say the same

line in the same place, but how it’s delivered is still very much alive.

PAM: How about music in the show?

KJ: The music is relatively true to the time and genre. The first act’s music is closest to the late 20’s, early 30’s. Then in the second act, as discussions more advanced approaches to living than was the norms of the time, the music sneaks into later decades. And there are

also theatrical moments when the music and lights can represent the character’s internal energies, and in those moments, the music is contemporary. Because I also want to connect the character’s struggles with our feelings today. There’s the diegetic music, which is period, that’s coming out of the record player that they dance to. But then when there’s a fight or then when there’s an emotional flip, we see and feel and internal energy. And our amazing sound designer, Jake Rodriguez, is that perfect designer because he so seamlessly can float from diegetic to theatrical, based on the emotional landscape of the moment.

PAM: Yeah, definitely another active dramaturg. Okay. Thank you, KJ.

KJ: Oh my God, that was so fun. What a good primer to get me ready to start rehearsal soon.



Pam MacKinnon and KJ Sanchez in 2007

“SMALL TALK, BIG PLAY” ACTIVITY

Objective:

This game helps young people understand the basics of comedy of manners by engaging them in playful conversations that reveal underlying tensions or emotions. The goal is to show how small talk can be more than just polite conversation, but a way to mask or reveal deeper feelings—one of the key elements in comedy of manners.

Materials Needed:

- **A list of simple conversation starters**, such as: How was your day?, What did you have for breakfast?, What’s your least favorite dessert?, Do you enjoy the outdoors?, What’s your favorite way to spend a weekend?, What do you like to do for fun?, What is your favorite hobby?, What kind of music do you like?, Do you have a favorite book or TV show?, How do you usually start your day?
- **Index cards with secret emotions or motives**, such as: You’re angry but trying to hide it, You’re bored but pretending to be interested, You’re excited but trying to stay calm, You’re nervous but trying to appear confident, You’re curious but pretending not to care, You’re disappointed but trying to stay positive, You’re scared but putting on a brave face, You’re surprised but trying to act like you knew it all along, You’re embarrassed but trying to laugh it off.

Setup:

1. Split students into pairs.
2. Each pair draws an index card that gives them an emotion or motive they must secretly portray during their conversation.
3. Provide a conversation starter to each pair.

How to Play:

1. Each pair begins their conversation using the starter provided.
2. As they talk, they must subtly incorporate the secret emotion or motive from their card into the conversation.
3. The challenge is to keep the conversation polite and engaging while letting the underlying emotion or motive occasionally peek through.

Options for Structure:

- **Full-class activity:** A pair of students performs their conversation in front of the class, who watches and tries to guess the secret emotion or motive.
- **Groups of four:** Two students perform the conversation while two watch and try to guess.
- **Our recommendation:** Facilitate the activity once or twice in the full class variation, so everyone understands the game. Then break the students into groups of four for everyone to participate simultaneously. Afterwards, bring everyone back together for a full class debrief.

“SMALL TALK, BIG PLAY” ACTIVITY

CONTINUED

Rules:

- The conversation should remain civil and polite on the surface, even if the underlying emotion is strong.
 - It might be helpful to have students portray adults in the 1930’s, or at least “emphasize the need for formality and politeness in the conversation.
- Players should aim to be subtle with their emotions or motives, making them apparent but not overt.
- At any point, the observing players (or a teacher) can call “Pause!” and the audience guesses the hidden emotions or motives. When someone guesses the emotion or motive correctly, ask what gave it away? What specifically was the “tell”?

Debrief:

After the game, discuss how the underlying emotions changed the way the conversation felt. How did the players manage to keep the conversation polite while expressing something deeper? This reflection helps kids see the layers of meaning in the dialogue, a key aspect of comedy of manners.

Variation & Challenge:

To add a twist, introduce a Social Rule card that players must follow during their conversation. For instance, players might be required to always compliment the other person, add a gesture to emphasize their communication, add “hmhmm” to the end of every sentence, mimic the other person’s gestures or speech, be a contrarian to whatever the other person says, avoid direct eye contact, make odd noises while communicating, or blink a lot while talking. This approach adds another layer to the conversation and emphasizes the rules of etiquette typical in comedy of manners.

This game not only teaches young people about the subtext and polite surface of comedy of manners but also allows them to explore how conversation can be a form of playful interaction.



"LOVE/HATE" ACTIVITY

Objective: This activity encourages students to explore the themes of the show and the intense relationship between Elyot and Amanda by reflecting on their own lives. It can be used either before or after seeing the show.

Materials Needed: Writing materials (paper & pens/pencils, or tablet/device)

STEP 1. Select one quote to reflect on.

STEP 2: Activate one or more writing prompts. Write for a set amount of time.

STEP 3: Go back and re-read what you wrote. Underline 3 phrases that are most interesting, dynamic or thought-provoking.

STEP 4: Pick one phrase that you're willing to share with a partner or a group.

STEP 5: Discuss your phrases, why you selected them, and any takeaways from the activity.

"It breaks every known rule of how a play should behave. Elyot and Amanda can't live with each other and they can't live without each other, which is the case before the play begins. The focus is certainly on behavior rather than plot. It makes you consider the nature of love, in all its various forms. It's certainly never boring." – Maria Aitken on Private Lives and playing Amanda (Duchess Theatre, 1980)

"It was shocking then and it is shocking now. Coward wrote characters who were equally likable and unlikeable. In good writing, people say the unsayable." – Actors Anna Chancellor and Toby Stephens discuss playing Amanda and Elyot (Chichester Festival Theatre, 2012)

Theme Writing Prompts:

- 1. Love and Passion:** What is something you are passionate about but also find challenging? Perhaps something difficult to live with and difficult to live without? How do you manage the intensity of those emotions?
- 2. Marriage and Divorce:** What is so great about love, and what is so difficult about it? How do you feel about the distance between these two states?
- 3. Conflict and Communication:** How do conflicting feelings influence communication? How do you handle situations where your feelings about someone or something are mixed? Can you recall a time when this led to miscommunication or tension?
- 4. Jealousy and Trust:** Can you think of examples when someone says one thing but means another? How does this impact trust in relationships? Can you think of a time when jealousy influenced your trust in someone? How did you communicate or conceal those feelings?
- 5. Fighting and Reconciling:** How do you navigate the process of fighting and making up? What does this reveal about your feelings towards the other person? What does this reveal about you?
- 6. Social Convention vs. Individual Desire:** Have you ever felt pressured to act a certain way because of societal expectations? How did this conflict with your personal desires?

OPTIONAL ADDITIONS:

- **Class Discussion:** Ask the pairs or groups to choose one idea, highlight or example to share with the class. This can lead to a broader discussion about one or more of the themes above.
- **Pre-Show:** Have students consider what questions and curiosities they have about the play's plot and characters. Discuss any excitement or nervousness about meeting these characters.
- **Post-Show:** Encourage students to connect their personal responses and reflections to characters and moments from the show. Did students like or dislike particular characters or specific moments? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A.C.T. wishes to express our gratitude to [The Noël Coward Foundation](#) for their generous support of this production, and for sharing an incredible array of resources on their website. Some highlights for students and teachers include:

- [Learn more about Noël Coward](#)
 - [Study his plays](#), including a fantastic study guide for *Private Lives*
 - [Learn about past productions of *Private Lives*](#)
 - [See historic footage of different actors in this play](#)
 - [Read what different artists have to say about this play](#)
-

Noël Coward was also a composer!

He wrote three hundred songs. Coward's verbal wit flourished in his song writing, and his comic timing excelled in his vocal delivery. His music has been covered many times over by artists like Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Paul McCartney, Sting, Elton John, Robbie Williams, Pet Shop Boys, and others. His lyrics are loved for their witty and effective use of complex rhyming schemes, where internal rhymes and rhythms are used to create incisive, mental pictures of the absurdity of the human condition in both likely and unlikely scenarios.

Hear his music on [this Spotify playlist](#)

Sneak peek into the rehearsal room!

Our production of *Private Lives* features tango dancing. Check out this 30-second video of the actors learning to tango, while Director KJ Sanchez and Tango Instructor Lisette Pinelli craft this aspect of the show.



[Step inside the rehearsal room for *Private Lives*](#)

The disputed history of TANGO

The origin of tango is debated. While it is widely thought to have originated in Argentina, Uruguay makes a strong claim to being the original site of its development. Read both [from the Argentine perspective](#) and from the [Uruguayan perspective](#).

[Video of Argentine Tango in the 1930's \(2 min. 10 sec.\)](#)



COMING TO THE THEATER

PRIOR TO YOUR VISIT

- Read the A.C.T. [“Rules of Play”](#) to learn more about how we hope you arrive, engage and enjoy the show!
- If your students would benefit from additional information about **theater etiquette**, consider discussing some of the points made by [Blake Theater](#).
- [Double check A.C.T.’s COVID-19 updates](#).
 - If you are feeling unwell, please stay home. If you or a member of your party is experiencing symptoms similar to those of COVID-19 or have had known exposure to someone with COVID-19, please stay home.
- [Learn about ACCESSIBILITY at A.C.T.](#)



WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU ARRIVE AT THE THEATER

- Front of House Staff including security personnel, ushers, and house managers are trained to assist guests and ensure that safety measures are followed. If you feel uncomfortable or perceive a risk at any time, please speak with one of these team members.
- Hand sanitizer stations are available throughout the theater.
- During the show, please stay in your seat unless using the restroom.

STUDENT MATINEE PERFORMANCE

- **No cell phone use during the performance.** No photo, no video.
- Students are welcome to bring water bottles, refill and use them in the theater. **We will be selling non-alcoholic drinks and light refreshments in Fred’s downstairs, at affordable prices for students and teachers!** Food and glassware are not permitted in the auditorium. Beverages in lidded cups, cans and single serve bottles may be enjoyed at your seat!
- To ensure a positive experience for all in the audience, we kindly request **chaperones monitor noise and phone use when your group is in the theater**. Likewise, we hope you **let the students enjoy and experience the show on their own terms!**
 - Laughter is welcome, and verbally responding to the show in a respectful way is welcome. We want the students to know this is their theater, and express themselves as they enjoy the show. **Theater is alive and precious in that aliveness.**
 - That said, disrespectful engagement is a bummer for many, and we ask you to help monitor for that. **We hope everyone can enjoy the show.** Encourage students to be present and mindful, and enjoy coming together to experience live theater.
- There will be a talkback after the show. Your students will have the opportunity to ask the performers questions! **Please consider staying in the theater for the additional ~15-20 minute engagement opportunity.** Invite your students to consider their curiosities in advance, and encourage them to participate in the Q&A.

AFTER THE SHOW

- Revisit parts of this guide that you didn't use before, including readings, videos & links, as well as activities and discussion prompts.
- Questions for *Private Lives* reflection, writing or discussion:
 - Why do *Private Lives* again, and why do it now? Did you feel the play connected with things happening in the world today? Or things that resonated with you? Why or why not?
 - How do the characters' decisions and attitudes towards love and marriage reflect the societal norms of the time, and in what ways might these dynamics resonate or clash with contemporary views on relationships?
 - Which parts of *Private Lives* feel timeless to you, and why do you think people from both the past and today can relate to those moments?
 - What did you think of the ending of the play? Were you satisfied by what happened to the relationships between the characters? Why or why not? If you could write an alternate ending, what would it be?
- Use a "SEE - THINK - WONDER" discussion model:
 - What did you **see** in the show? What are some memorable moments, and why?
 - What did you **think** during the show? What were your favorite moments, and why?
 - What do you **wonder** about the show? What are you still curious about?
 - If you could learn more about any of the characters, relationships or events, what would you want to know?
 - If you could learn more about any of the artists involved in the production, what would you want to know?
- Creative responses:
 - Create something to send to the actors, director, creative team members and production staff of *Private Lives*. This could be a letter expressing opinions and asking questions, or it could be a creative response to the show (a poem, a song, a dance, a drawing or a collage).
 - Email it to education@act-sf.org and we will pass it along!

THANK YOU FOR COMING TO A.C.T.

