

SEATTLE  
REP

Noël Coward's



# BLITHE SPIRIT

Youth Guide

## Welcome to Seattle Rep!

There is an old tradition of telling ghost stories in these darkest winter days. Think of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, in which Scrooge is met by the ghosts of past, present, and future. A decade before Dickens, Ukrainian writer Nikolai Gogol published *The Night Before Christmas*, a ghost story about the devil stealing the moon and the blacksmith who must save it. Even William Shakespeare wrote in *The Winter's Tale*, "A sad tale's best for winter. I have one. Of sprites and goblins." My own family has the perennial debate: is *The Nightmare Before Christmas* a Halloween or Christmas movie?

On this cold winter's day, you are going to see *Blithe Spirit*—a ghost story written in England in 1941 during the height of World War II. In this guide you will explore the circumstances surrounding the origins of this play. What does it mean to write or produce a comedy in the middle of a war? What **tone** was helpful to folks who were processing so much death around them? How could this kind of comedy lift an audience's **mood**?

We hope that you find a brightness in this show during the bleak midwinter. Make sure you check out [seattlerep.org](http://seattlerep.org) for other opportunities for joy this winter and beyond, including Teen Nights, the Next Narrative Monologue Competition, and more Student Matinees. I hope to see you around the Theater!



**Deanna Martinez**  
Education & Community  
Programs Director

# About *Blithe Spirit*

Written by prolific English playwright Noël Coward in 1941 during World War II, *Blithe Spirit* is a witty and lighthearted story about a man whose deceased wife's spirit is accidentally summoned during a séance, leading to chaotic and humorous situations. However, the circumstances surrounding the play's creation were shaped by the serious backdrop of the war.

- **Escaping Wartime Gloom:** By 1941, the Blitz (see box at right) was well underway, and Londoners were living through daily air raids. Coward wanted to provide an escape from the horrors of the war through laughter, something light and cheerful to lift people's spirits during tough times.
- **Debating During World War II:** Despite the war, theaters in London remained open to provide

people with a sense of normalcy. *Blithe Spirit* premiered in Manchester on June 16, 1941, and soon moved to the West End in London. Audiences loved its humor and it became a huge success.

- **Risky but Popular Themes:** The play deals with death and the supernatural, which might seem controversial given the war's high casualties. But audiences appreciated Coward's playful and comedic tone, and how humor around death and relationships gave them a way to process their anxieties.
- **Enduring Success:** *Blithe Spirit* became one of Coward's most successful plays, running for 1,997 West End performances, and has since been revived many times and adapted into a film in 1945.

## Mood AND Tone

The literary terms **mood** and **tone** are closely related but serve distinct roles in a work of literature.

**Mood** refers to the emotional atmosphere or feeling that a reader experiences when engaging with a text. It's how the text makes the reader feel. For instance, a story with a foreboding mood makes the reader feel uneasy or anxious as events unfold.

### Mood is created through:

- Setting (time, place, and environment)
- Word choice (diction) and imagery
- Descriptions of weather, landscapes, or sounds
- Symbolism and sensory details

### Examples of moods:

- Joyful
- Gloomy
- Mysterious
- Peaceful
- Suspenseful

**Tone** refers to the author's or narrator's attitude toward the subject, characters, or audience. It reflects how the *writer* feels about what they are describing. For example, a humorous tone might make a serious topic feel light-hearted, while a sarcastic tone could make the writing feel biting or cynical.

### Tone is conveyed through:

- Word choice (diction) and phrasing
- Sentence structure and syntax
- Figurative language (like sarcasm or irony)
- Direct commentary or dialogue

### Examples of tones:

- Humorous
- Ironic
- Informative
- Hopeful
- Sarcastic

**How They Relate:** **Tone** comes from the **author** and is shaped by their perspective, while **mood** arises from the **reader's** reaction to the tone, setting, and narrative elements. For example, in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the tone could be described as intense and frantic (reflecting the narrator's paranoia), while the mood is tense and unsettling (creating a sense of dread for the reader).

**In summary, tone is how the author speaks to the reader or subject, and mood is how the text makes the reader feel.**

## About the Blitz

The **Blitz** was a scary time during **World War II** when **Germany** dropped tons of bombs on cities in **England**, including London, Coventry, Liverpool, Birmingham, and Manchester. (The word "Blitz" comes from *blitzkrieg*, a German word meaning "lightning," to describe how quick and powerful the attacks were.) It lasted from **September 7, 1940 to May 11, 1941**, when Germany started focusing on fighting in other parts of the world, though smaller air raids still happened later in the war. Even though the Blitz was hard, people showed bravery by helping each other and staying strong, demonstrating that life went on even in tough times.



Firefighters during the London Blitz, 1941.

## A Light Comedy about Death

Director **Allison Narver** talks about playwright Noël Coward and the legacy of producing comedies during challenging times.



**Seattle Rep:** As a director, what draws you to working with comedic stories?

**Allison Narver:** The fun thing about directing comedy is that there are rules to follow and rules to break. Comedy depends on rhythm, meter, precision, and pace—particularly with Noël Coward. His language requires both discipline and accuracy and is so fast that the actors can feel like they're playing a game of ping pong with their scene partners. Their reflexes need to be quick and they must always keep their eyes on the ball.

The rules you get to break are equally fun and can feel like taking a dare. Is it ludicrous enough to be funny, or is it just dumb? Should we go further, or should we pull back? Something that might make us laugh in rehearsal won't necessarily work on stage. It's a game of risk, which can feel scary but also thrilling.

There's a long history of comedies being produced during dark times—and to put it mildly, we're living through a really difficult one right now. But being able to laugh and find joy anyway can be a powerful force of resistance in the face of it all.

**SR:** *Blithe Spirit* has been called "one of Coward's indisputable comic masterpieces" (*The Daily Telegraph*). How do you see this play speaking to audiences today? Why this play, now?

**AN:** Brilliant writing is always relevant, but I think this will resonate with contemporary audiences because one of the themes of *Blithe Spirit* is trying to keep up appearances in the face of disruptive forces.

Noël Coward has created a world with a polished, elegant veneer populated by hyper-articulate people. Their glittering and exorbitant speech creates a shield that allows his characters to avoid the messy complications of their inner lives and their deepest feelings—not even death derails this façade! Occasionally, this veneer is pulled aside and briefly exposed by great bursts of passion, jealousy, anger, and spite. When these outbursts erupt, they are quickly and neatly tucked away so that the characters can revert to the exquisitely maintained façades that have served them well for so many years.

Similarly, in the version of ourselves we curate for our followers online, the façade we present to the world is often shiny, beautiful, and exciting, but doesn't necessarily represent the complications of our lives or our truest feelings. What is the truth about how we present our lives to the world at large? What do we show, and what do we hide?

### Go Beyond the Show

Scan here for our full interview with Allison and other resources to enhance your experience of *Blithe Spirit*, including a list of books, music, and films curated by librarians at Seattle Public Library!



# What Do You Know After the Show?

**WARM UP** In which moments of the show did you feel yourself having some sort of emotional reaction (laughter, sadness, surprise)? What was the reaction and how did the play help create that reaction within you?

## QUESTION

In *Blithe Spirit*, Noël Coward explores themes of death and the supernatural through humor and wit. How does Coward's tone toward serious topics like death influence the mood of the play? Use specific examples from the text to explain how the tone affects the audience's emotional experience.

## APPLICATION

Choose a **TONE** and **MOOD** from each of the following lists and write a script of dialogue between a person and a ghost, reflecting your choices. When read aloud, can your classmates guess the tone and mood you chose?

<b>TONE</b>	Informative/Instructive	Comedic	<b>MOOD</b>	Eerie	Tense
	Reflective	Tragic		Silly	Nostalgic
	Sarcastic			Romantic	

## REFLECTION

How does word choice impact tone and mood? How do other theatrical elements (lighting, sound, costumes, sets, props) contribute to tone and mood?

### Learning Standards

ELA – Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including tone. Analyze how a theme or central idea develops over the course of the text, including how it is shaped by **tone** and **mood**.  
THEATER – **Perceive** and **analyze** artistic work. **Interpret intent and meaning** in artistic work.  
SWBAT – Students will be able to analyze a theatrical piece for the use of mood and tone.