

THEATER REVIEW | BLITHE SPIRIT

Witty seance proves largely satisfying

By Margaret Quamme
FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A Noel Coward play is hard to ruin. Sturdily built and filled with comedy, each one delights even when performances are weak.

But Coward's wittily heightened dialogue is equally hard to perform with the effervescence it deserves and especially to bring out its poignant undertones.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's production of *Blithe Spirit*, directed by Doreen Dunn, doesn't sparkle as brightly as it might, but it's a fully competent and diverting interpretation. The momentum builds slowly, but by the second of its three acts, the play is steadily amusing.

As *Blithe Spirit* opens, middle-aged novelist Charles Condomine is researching psychic phenomena for a work in progress. He and his second wife, Ruth, invite some friends, Dr. and Mrs. Bradman, for a seance with local bicycle-riding psychic Madame Arcati. The seance is more successful than they expected, and Charles' alluring and mischievous first wife, Elvira, materializes from "the other side" to haunt Charles and upset the lives of all.

David Beukema captures Charles' petulant bewilderment, while Mandy Bruno is sympathetic in the demanding role of

Ruth, the least antic character and the butt of many jokes. Hillary Miller's Elvira, who preens and glides about the stage in pursuit of Charles and in mockery of Ruth, is less sensually suggestive than girlishly self-involved. If the triangle has a flaw, it's that while the characters are well-realized, the connections between them seem weak.

Guest Equity actress Peggy Cosgrave goes blissfully over the top in her portrayal of Madame Arcati, whose alternation of ladi-da airs and Cockney earthiness bewilders her fellow seancers, and whose strange gyrations as she arranges to meet the spirits delight the audience. Her comic portrayal is so powerful, in fact, that it overwhelms what ought to be the center of the play, the richly ambivalent relationship among Charles, Elvira and Ruth.

In smaller roles, Geneva Hyman is giddy as Mrs. Bradman, while Lucas Adams gives Dr. Bradman an amused gravity. Molly Camp gives a nicely modulated and ticklishly funny performance as the timorous and marginally competent maid, Edith.

All of the actors handle British accents and the demanding dialogue with assurance.

Dan Gray's set design of the Condomines' living room, in

Blithe Spirit, Otterbein Summer Theatre's production of Noel Coward's play. Directed by Doreen Dunn.

CharlesDavid Beukema
RuthMandy Bruno
ElviraHillary Miller
Madame ArcatiPeggy Cosgrave
EdithMolly Camp

High-spirited!

Being performed at 8 tonight, 2 p.m. Sunday and 8 p.m. July 9-12 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$16. Call 614-823-1109.

which all the action takes place, is appropriately substantial and includes a piano and some floral-themed furniture, as well as some frequently used martini shakers and whiskey decanters.

Marcia Hain's sly costumes include graceful but buttoned-down dresses for Ruth, wild jewelry and purple-and-green combinations for Madame Arcati and a subtly ghostly dress for Elvira, whose pale makeup is set off by well-tousled, curly black hair.

Rob Johnson's lighting suits the frequent entrances and exits of spirits. David Romich's sound design relies oddly on what sounds like an air conditioner firing up to signal Elvira's entrance, a noise that also temporarily overcomes the actors' voices.

Though not as richly nuanced or consistently hilarious as it might be, this production is a satisfying treat for a summer evening.