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TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE
4	ABOUT THE PLAY Summary Character Breakdown Historical + Social Context
8	WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE
9	CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES If you have 15 minutes... If you have 30 minutes... If you have an hour...
12	QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2024-2025 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some or all of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory for students to enjoy the production, opportunities to connect art to personal life can deepen understanding and appreciation.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students with a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, can be tied into your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time.

Pages marked with a ★ can be photocopied and distributed to students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

ABOUT THE PLAY

SUMMARY.

Charles Condomine, a novelist, and his wife, Ruth, have invited their friends Dr. and Mrs. Bradman for drinks and dinner with a local clairvoyant, Madame Arcati. Charles is writing a novel about a homicidal spiritualist and wants to observe the behaviour of Madame Arcati during an after-dinner séance. The Bradmans arrive, and the four friends discuss Madame Arcati, sure that she will be a harmless fraud. They are interrupted when Madame Arcati arrives. Dinner is served, and then the séance begins. Much to the surprise of the two couples, there are supernatural manifestations—the table trembles, Madame Arcati falls into a trance, and Charles hears the voice of Elvira, his first wife, who died several years ago. Frightened, he wakes Madame Arcati from her trance, and the party breaks up.

As Charles shows the Bradmans out, the ghost of Elvira appears. Only Charles can see and hear her, and he and Ruth quarrel about her presence. The cross-conversation between Charles and Ruth and Charles and Elvira is exasperating to Ruth, who, believing Charles drunk, goes off to bed in a huff.

The next morning at breakfast, Ruth is cold to Charles and insists that he had too much to drink the night before. When he insists that it was a hallucination, Ruth attributes it to indigestion. The bickering continues until Elvira enters. When Charles sees her, a miscommunication begins (typical of a farce), with Ruth unable to see or hear Elvira and feeling certain that Charles's unpleasant remarks are meant for her. Ruth becomes convinced her husband is mad and tries to soothe him and go for a doctor. Charles, frantic to be believed, enlists Elvira's help, and she moves a bowl of flowers around the room to prove her existence. Ruth becomes hysterical, believing she is being deluded, going insane, or is actually in the presence of a ghost.

SETTING

The Condomines' house in Kent, England, over the course of a few days

ACT I

Scene 1. 8:00pm on a summer evening

Scene 2. Later that night after dinner

ACT II

Scene 1. 9:30am the next morning

Scene 2. The following afternoon

Scene 3. An evening several days later

ACT III

Scene 1. An evening a few more days on

Scene 2. Early the following morning

Later Ruth visits with Madame Arcati again—alone this time—and is shocked and angered that Madame Arcati is unable to get rid of Elvira and believes that Charles subconsciously wanted Elvira back. When Ruth is rude to her, the spiritualist gets offended and leaves. Elvira and Charles enter, and Elvira seems delighted that she will be a permanent guest. Ruth swears to rid herself of the ghost.

Suspense builds as both Edith, the maid, and Charles begin having accidents—Edith due to axle grease on the stairs and Charles on a ladder that appears to have been sawed in half. Ruth insists, and Charles is convinced, that Elvira is trying to kill Charles in order to have him for herself again. Ruth leaves in the car, which Elvira had booby-trapped for Charles, and is killed in the ensuing “accident.” The act ends with Elvira frantically trying to escape Ruth’s ghost, invisible to Charles.

Charles calls Madame Arcati, who goes into a trance trying to rid the Condomine home of Elvira. It doesn’t quite work, though, and the ghost of Ruth now appears, plainly visible, alongside Elvira. After trying all sorts of supernatural tricks, Madame Arcati cannot get rid of the ghosts until she realizes that it was not Charles who called up Elvira and Ruth, it was Edith. The maid, when discovered, is apologetic. When Madame Arcati hypnotizes her, the ghosts finally vanish. Madame Arcati exits, suggesting that Charles travel for a while.

The curtain falls with Charles alone onstage. Or is he?

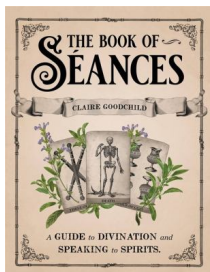
STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge.

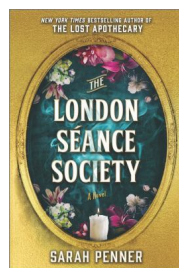
- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say “Whoosh!” and students quickly return to their ‘places’ in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

WANT MORE STORIES LIKE THIS?

originally compiled by Seattle Rep & the Seattle Public Library



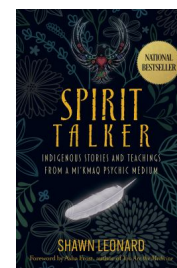
The Book of Séances: A Guide to Divination and Speaking to Spirits (2022)



The London Séance Society (2023)



I'll Be Waiting: A Novel (2024)



Spirit Talker: Indigenous Stories and Teachings From a Mi'kmaq Psychic Medium (2023)



Hazardous Spirits: A Novel (2023)

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



RUTH CONDOMINE

Charles's wife; witty & sophisticated; convinced that Charles has lost his mind



CHARLES CONDOMINE

sophisticated & debonair; at the mercy of his wives, past and present



ELVIRA

the ghost of Charles's first wife that only Charles can see or hear

DR. BRADMAN

a friend of the Condomines; skeptical of the occult



VIOLET BRADMAN

simple & naïve; excited about being in the presence of a medium

EDITH

the Condomines' maid

MADAME ARCATI

eccentric & boisterous; local spiritualist and medium

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE GHOST OF ELVIRA FROM *BLITHE SPIRIT*



Guthrie Theatre
photo by Dan Norman



Sydney Theatre Company
photo by Prudence Upton



Blithe Spirit, 1945 film



Lehigh University's Department of Theatre
photo by Don'Terrius Amari' Walker

HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT NOEL COWARD

- 1 Coward was a child performer, launching his professional career in a play called “The Goldfish.”
- 2 His mother took him to the theatre for his birthday each year, and, upon returning home, would rush to the piano and play by ear the songs from the show he’d just seen.
- 3 Coward began his theatre career at 16 by writing and selling songs, followed by the publishing of his first play at age 20.
- 4 *Blithe Spirit* was first seen in 1941 and ran for a record-breaking 1,997 performances in London.
- 5 Noel Coward was knighted by the queen in 1970.

A NOTE ON THE PLAY. *Blithe Spirit* was written in just six days as a response to the London Blitz during the second World War. People were sending young people to war, and Coward wanted to bring levity and write a feel-good play in response.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPIRITUALISM

Spiritualism is the belief that humans can communicate with the spirits of the dead. Its peak popularity was from the nineteenth century to the 1930s, originating in America. Spiritualism offered comfort to the living and consolation that their beloved family members were still with them and able to be reached,

Spiritualism centered around a *medium*, usually female, who acts as a go-between between the living and the dead. They were typically “sensitive women” who were in touch with the next world, and while in a trance, they could pass along messages from the other side. Some could also produce physical phenomena (like lights, unearthly music, levitation of objects, etc.) that were said to be the work of the spirits.

Many women were followers of this faith as well as leaders of it. Because the majority of mediums were female, and they were in the rare position of communicating meaningful messages to large groups of people, Spiritualism was deeply intertwined with social justice movements from abolitionism to children’s rights to feminism. Ann Braude, author of *Radical Spirits*, said that “while not all feminists were Spiritualists, all Spiritualists advocated women’s rights.”

“AN IMPROBABLE FARCE IN THREE ACTS”

What is a farce? A genre of theatre that uses highly exaggerated situations, stereotyped characters, and slapstick, physical comedy

What will you see in a farce? Mistaken identity, satire of social norms, clever rebellion, comedic surprises, & the unexpected, and rapid-fire dialogue and action

Where can you find other farces?



WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



An open mind.

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatrical magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

Assigned seats.

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

Live actors.

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

A break from reality.

Theatre-makers ask the audience to "suspend their disbelief." If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

Questions.

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

Disconnection.

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

PREPARING Q'S FOR A Q + A

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 8) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't _____ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favorite...



THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:

The Playwright writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story—decides what the characters say and, often, gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

The Director creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

The Actors use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

The Designers imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

The Stage Manager assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

TED Talk: Science & the Paranormal

This TEDx Talk by Carrie Poppy brings to light the question of the “truth” of paranormal activity. This short video will give your students a concrete perspective to help them form and articulate their own thoughts on the paranormal.

Focus Question. What do you believe when it comes to ghosts?

Objective. Students will be able to learn from an expert in their field and respond with their own perspective.

Procedure.

- 1 Ask students to consider their views on the paranormal (ghosts, spirits, and other afterlife phenomena).
- 2 Share [this TEDx Vienna Talk](#) (12:49) by investigator Carrie Poppy “A scientific approach to the paranormal.” *
- 3 After watching the video, prompt students to turn and talk to reflect on *how Poppy’s insights alter their own views of the supernatural?*

* **NOTE:** The speaker uses an expletive at the 10:18 mark. Please use your discretion.

IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

Design-a-Ghost

Designing a physical representation of the supernatural, as in the ghost of Elvira in Blithe Spirit, is an open canvas. This activity will challenge students to use their imaginations to envision how a ghost might appear to the living.

Focus Question. How do we represent the supernatural in a physical world?

Objective. Students will be able to draw a physical representation of a no-longer-living being.

Procedure.

- 1 Prompt students to think of a being (human or animal, real or fictional) who is no longer of this world. Consider: relatives or ancestors, pets, political or famous figures, characters from novels, video games, or movies.
- 2 Provide students with blank paper (or a digital platform, if that is accessible) and coloured pencils, pens, markers, etc. A [human figure template](#) is available, for those who may request it.
- 3 As students prepare their visual representation, encourage them to consider the following factors:
 - Size
 - Shape
 - Colour
 - How similar are they to their living form?
 - What is their demeanor?
 - Are they vocal or non-vocal?
- 4 Give students time to bring their vision to life on paper (or the screen).
- 5 If time, allow them to share and introduce their ghost to one another.

IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

Alberta Ghost Stories

Blithe Spirit brings to the forefront conversations about ghosts, hauntings, and the supernatural. This activity invites students to research some local tales of the less-than-dead and plan how they might share their findings.

Focus Question. How do you present research in an engaging way?

Objective. Students will be able to conduct internet research and determine the best way to present their findings.

Procedure.

- 1 Prepare to use computers, tablets, or students' personal cell phones for this activity.
 - 2 Divide students into research teams.
 - 3 Provide each team with the [vetted resource list](#).
 - 4 Each team should learn about a variety of Alberta ghost stories and choose one to dig into more deeply. They should be able to identify the following:
 - Important people involved
 - Location information
 - Historical context
 - Current implications
 - 5 Once they've collected the details above, the group should plan a presentation in one of the following ways: Guidelines for each option can be found [here](#).
 - Display board
 - Comic strip / graphic novel
 - Storytelling presentation
 - Play
- (NOTE: This one-hour activity doesn't include the execution and delivery of the presentation)
- 6 Reflect on the process: *How did your group decide which resources were valid? How did you confirm that your information was accurate? How did your group determine the best method to present your research to the class?*

EXTENSION. Spend additional class periods developing and preparing their research presentations and delivering them to the class.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatrical experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *Blithe Spirit* at Theatre Calgary.

- 1 If you could communicate with a dearly departed loved one, what would you ask them, and why?
- 2 The characters in *Blithe Spirit* discuss the validity of ghosts and spiritualism before Madame Arcati arrives. How do you feel about ghosts and the possibility of the supernatural?
- 3 *Blithe Spirit* is a period piece that takes place in the 1940s. In what other time period could this play be set? How would this enhance or detract from the story?
- 4 Have you ever used humor to get through a difficult time? Why do you think it's so common to laugh in the face of danger or make light of less-than-ideal circumstances?
- 5 Ghosts often appear in literature, on stage, and in film and television. What do you think accounts for people's fascination with the spirit world?

THEATRE CALGARY PLAY GUIDES DEVELOPED BY

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