

(MUSIC)

ANDREW SMITH: Welcome to The Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast.

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HANNAH HESSEL RATNER: Welcome to Episode 6 of the Shakespeare Theatre's Prosecast. This is our episode for "Private Lives," the last play of the 2013-2014 season. My name is Hannah Hessel Ratner. I'm the Audience Enrichment Manager, and I am joined here by Drew Lichtenberg, the Literary Associate. We have been coming to you now for all of the plays this season in these Prosecasts, and it's so much fun to do, so we look forward to doing it again next season as well. Um, and I just wanted to say also, at the top, how wonderful it is to talk to audience members who've been listening to the Prosecasts, and it's really great when they come up and introduce themselves and say that they listen, and it makes us happy, so, please, if you are listening, and you run into one of us at the theatre, please do say hi. We would like to talk to you. So, we're going to be talking about Noël Coward's "Private Lives," and we are being joined, later on in this recording, with Maria Aitken, the play's Director and a Noël Coward aficionado as an actress and director and fan—

DREW LICHTENBERG: Master teacher.

RATNER: Right, exactly, so that's really exciting. I mean, I'm, I'm thrilled to have that opportunity to talk to her, and to find out what's happening in the rehearsal room. Um, they just started rehearsals a couple of days ago from when we are now recording, and they have the shortened rehearsal period because this is the same cast that performed "Private Lives" in 2012 in Boston at the Huntington Theatre, so they're returning to it, and don't need as much time as we might generally give to a production, so it's—it'll be interesting to hear what's different now, and how she's returning to the play, rather than starting on it from scratch, but, before we do that, I kind of feel like Drew and I have should have cocktails and be on the Riviera and—

LICHTENBERG: Gimlet.

RATNER: Uh huh. Right. So—

LICHTENBERG: So, what do you wanna ask me, Hannah about Noël Coward, or what do you wanna talk about?

RATNER: So we, yeah, well, I, I wanna have a conversation with you about, about Noël Coward and about this play, Drew, because I find it, it fascinating that this play has the longevity it does, that it still feels, when you see it, modern—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm. Yeah.

RATNER: —and I was thinking about this. I know, at the beginning of the season, when we looked at it all spread out, we're like, "Oh, it's this season that we're doing Noël Coward and Oscar Wilde, the, these two great, stylish writer figureheads, you know. They, they frequently are mentioned in the same breaths now, that they, they both demonstrate their generations, they're both at the forefront of, yeah—

LICHTENBERG: Right, this very, uh, very similar kind of verbal English—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —comedy. It's about wit more than it's about, sort of, slapstick humor—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —although, there is slapstick in both “The Importance of Being Earnest” and “Private Lives—”

RATNER: —and it, and it becomes the basis of what we think of as British comedy.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and Michael was saying at Meet the Cast that we've done “Much Ado” and “Earnest” and “Private Lives” this season—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —so, we've done probably the three best comedies in the English language, and they're all, they all feature these couples that sort of war with each other, using wit as a weapon. They're all kind of descendants, right?

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: Amanda and Elyot in this play—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: are the descendants of Jack and Gwendolen or Beatrice and Benedick.

RATNER: I think that's a great, a great point and—

LICHTENBERG: —stolen from Michael Kahn, one of his pet riffs on the play.

RATNER: Well, it makes a lot of sense because there's something that keeps us coming back to this play, and that makes it feel modern, and I guess the “war of the sexes—”

LICHTENBERG: Mmm. Yeah.

RATNER: —becomes a timeless thing to riff on, you know what I mean?

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, but it's also surprising because—

RATNER: I mean, it's why this podcast works, too.

LICHTENBERG: Haha. Yeah, right. The war of the, the war of the dramaturge sexes, and, you know, I think, it's really surprising that the play has longevity because you look at the circumstances in which it was written. I mean, Coward was on a tour of Asia, suffering from the flu, and he said he had a vision

of Gertrude Lawrence in a white dress, in the South of France, and he wrote the play in 4 days. So, the play is transparently, a kind of, throw away, a sort of star vehicle for him to star in with Gertrude Lawrence, and you would think that that kind of play would just be forgotten—

RATNER: Right, but

LICHTENBERG: —the next year, but it's one of the—it's probably— I think it's the most revived Broadway play ever, either British or American.

RATNER: Yeah, I was looking, I was looking at the production history and there's, every five years or so, there's a major production, I mean, it's been continual since the '40's, '30's—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor starred in it. Maggie Smith starred in it with her husband.

RATNER: Well, so the fun thing about all of these couplings—let's, let's back track a little bit because I realize some of our listeners may not be familiar with “Private Lives.”

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: We are, we are making the assumption that people know this play, and, of course, if you're not a regular theatregoer, or maybe, perhaps, you are a regular theatergoer and you just keep missing every opportunity to see it. Um, and there haven't been any films, which is actually quite surprising that no one's made a film version.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

RATNER: So, “Private Lives” starts on the French Riviera. We're overlooking the balcony of two hotel suites, each one with honeymooning couples. The kicker is, though, that both of the couples used to, or—

LICHTENBERG: Amanda and Elyot, yeah.

RATNER: —one person in each couple, Amanda and Elyot.

LICHTENBERG: They should up with their very attractive and very stupid and dull—

RATNER: —and younger, new—

LICHTENBERG: —new husband and wife, respectively.

RATNER: But they used to be married.

LICHTENBERG: Right, and Amanda and Elyot see each other on the balcony, and that's— I mean, that's really all the plot you get, uh—

RATNER: Yeah, and they run off to Paris together.

LICHTENBERG: They run off to Paris together—

RATNER: —and then you have two Acts in Paris—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: —which are them coming together, going apart, coming together, going apart, just exploring their dynamics.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and the plot is paper thin. The characterization, in a sense, is, is very thin. We don't get, we don't get any idea of where these people were born, or what jobs they have, or what their family situation is. We just, we just get a sense of their personalities in the, the present tense.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: We just watch them behave.

RATNER: So, it's interesting that this is, then, one of the world's most popular comedies when it is a complete surface comedy. We, we are not given a world that's filled in with, you know, what's happening politically or what's happening, you know—

LICHTENBERG: There's no political or social dimension.

RATNER: —in their past. We don't know what their parents were like. I mean, I feel like now, when we see these comedies, they're so filled with all these bits to make it seem very realistic, and, and part of what makes this play special, I think, is that it's glamour in the very version of the world, right, that it's, in the word, an imposed glamour that makes us forget about everything else.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I think, I think it's, it's sort of a time capsule in a sense that, like—well, it's not a time capsule.

RATNER: Right, it's a time capsule of a time that never was.

LICHTENBERG: It's timeless. It's not of—it's worldly, but it's not of this world.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: It is, um, it is isolated from in a World War I / World War II kind of milieu, against which it was set, or against which it was written. It's this, it's this place you can go and it feels like a bubble, lighter than air—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —um, and also, as you said, he—but, Coward, by taking away the past and taking away the future, he makes you focus on what's happening right now—

RATNER: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: —which is a strategy that, you know, surprisingly, Beckett and Edward Albee and Pinter would kind of copy or rip off in a way.

RATNER: Yeah, I mean, I, I kind of feel that if you took away Coward's famous dinner jacket and gimlet and cigarette, right, and took away those things, he would really just be one of these thinkers—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: —these existential thinkers.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. You get a version of no exit, which is what this play sort of is.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Amanda and Elyot, they love each other, but they also can't live with each other. There's no exit from this relationship—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and, and they're miserable and depressed as much as they are rapturous and in love with each other.

RATNER: One of the fascinating things, I think, looking at the performance history, is how many of the couples that have played these parts have undergone similar relationships.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

RATNER: I mean, Coward and Gertrude Lawrence had a notoriously rocky friendship, I mean, he was gay, she was straight, so, there was nothing romantic.

LICHTENBERG: I think there was something romantic.

RATNER: According to things I have read, there was nothing romantic.

LICHTENBERG: No, I mean, there's a rumor that the only heterosexual relationship Coward ever experienced ever had was with Gertrude Lawrence.

RATNER: I heard it was never sexual

LICHTENBERG: But, there were also rumors about him and Lawrence Olivier, who was also in this play.

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: A young Lawrence Olivier.

RATNER: Right, but, here, let me, let me go back to the point that I was trying to make, though that the two of them would be bickering constantly on- and offstage—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: —that what he captured in the writing, knowing he was writing it for her, was a little bit of their relationship. Whether or not there was a sexual component, they still had this amazing chemistry onstage and amazing love for each other—

LICHTENBERG: —and when you're watching this play, it's built for star power—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and it's built for star performances in a sort of unique way. I think that's why there's no film that was made of it is because it has to be these two people sort of locked in a room, unable to eject—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and something you can only feel in the theatre.

RATNER: So, fun production history tidbits that I love: So, Maggie Smith and Robert Stephens were married when they did "Private Lives" on the West End, and they were not married a year later—

LICHTENBERG: Huh.

RATNER: —when Maggie Smith took the play to Broadway with a different leading man—

LICHTENBERG: Interesting.

RATNER: —and there's a, a story that she found him backstage with Vanessa Redgrave, and, in an attempt to punch Vanessa Redgrave, ended up punching Robert Stephens and taking out two of his teeth, which is just, you know—I love Maggie Smith.

LICHTENBERG: That sounds like a scene from the play.

RATNER: I know. Isn't it quite amazing?

LICHTENBERG: I mean, yeah, "A woman should be struck like a gong repeatedly" is a line in this play—

RATNER: (laughs) Although, maybe, maybe Robert, Robert Stephens should be struck like a gong.

LICHTENBERG: —I mean, Robert Stephens is like a gong—

RATNER: —and, then, the most recent London production actually featured their son, Toby Stephens, and his wife is in it, too, but—

LICHTENBERG: —and they're gonna get divorced—

RATNER: —but, his wife is playing Sybil, which, I think, is a much smarter choice.

LICHTENBERG: Ahh. Ahh.

RATNER: He doesn't have to play the Amanda-Elyot relationship. One of the most famous productions, of course, is the Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, and, by that point in their careers and in their romance, you know, they have been married, divorced, married, divorced. At that point, they were, most certainly, not romantically coupled, and it really did seem like it was a ploy to get—to sell tickets—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

RATNER: —to say that this couple that had this star chemistry quality and fighting and all of this—that you were gonna see it again recreated live, but, it didn't seem to actualize onstage, and the review that Frank Rich wrote is one of the best worst reviews I've ever read, and I just wanna read one line because I love it. He said, "The two Acts," and this is referring to the final two Acts of the play, "The two Acts have all of the vitality of a Madame Tussauds exhibit and all the gaiety of a tax audit." Can we say, "Ouch?"

LICHTENBERG: Uh, yeah. My favorite line from a review is, uh, John Lahr's review of the most recent Broadway production of Paul Gross and Kim Cattrall, where he says that it "is a plot-less play for purposeless people—"

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: —and he means it as a complement, actually.

RATNER: But—and, so what is the Oscar Wilde? "It's a trivial comedy—"

LICHTENBERG: "—trivial comedy for serious people."

RATNER: "—serious—" So, it's almost the reverse?

LICHTENBERG: I guess so. I mean, both plays are, kind of, seriously frivolous, and, there's—I think there's a line in Act II where Amanda is asking Elyot, like, "What's it all mean? What's it all mean?" and he says, like, "It doesn't mean anything, but you have to keep laughing." You know, "You don't want those philosophers to win. You have to, sort of—" I'm, I'm doing a terrible impersonation—

RATNER: No, your British accent is, is charming.

LICHTENBERG: Um, but, yeah, he's very aware of, like, the kind of existential implications of the play, but he also is careful to undercut them with wit and with humor and with quips. Yeah, so, I don't know, I think he's one of those secret fathers of a lot of serious drama that people don't realize or appreciate or respect the breadth—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —of his influence.

RATNER: Well, let's talk more, uh, can you give some more background, maybe, about his career because it seems that "Private Lives" rises to the top of his plays that we know about, but, of course, "Blithe Spirit" is currently running in England with Angela Lansbury.

LICHTENBERG: Right, and we did, um, “Design for Living” a few years ago—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —which Michael Kahn directed, and I think this is the second Coward we’ve done.

RATNER: Well, and we did the presentation of “Brief Encounter—”

LICHTENBERG: —and we just did—yeah—

RATNER: —which, of course, was also Coward, but, a very different type of Coward—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I mean, Coward, Coward, in his lifetime, he’s, he’s thought of as this, kind of, uh, time capsule playwright, this, kind of, classic now, but, in his time, he was a very controversial and scandalous playwright. His first play, “The Vortex,” was about a drug-addicted young man and a mother, who was oversexed, and, uh, I think the censor said, “If we ban this, we shall have to ban ‘Hamlet,’ ‘cause it is the same plot,” and then, yeah, if you look at all of his big hits, maybe with the exception of “Blithe Spirit,” which is about a ghost and is a farce, they’re all about these very taboo subjects. “Private Lives” is about adult romance. These are people who have been married, who have been physically intimate with each other—

RATNER: —and there’s frank conversations about sex.

LICHTENBERG: —about sex and sexuality.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: “Design for Living:” It’s very clear that a character in the play has had a homosexual experience, and what’s being dramatized is a ménage à trois, and, and, and the play was not performed in London until almost 10 years after it was written because it was simply so controversial. And then, “Brief Encounter,” which we just, uh, had a presentation of here, is a play that is sympathetic portrait of adultery, which is still, kind of, something that you don’t see a lot of playwrights gravitating to: Is people who are dissatisfied with marriage or dissatisfied with monogamy, dissatisfied with normal moral code of society. So, when I look at Noël Coward’s career, I see this, this writer who is flaunting convention repeatedly with everything he did, and, you—it’s not just his plays. He was acting this stuff onstage, and he was, he was sort of an out gay man in his lifetime, or it was this very open secret.

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: So, in many ways, he’s a, he’s a trailblazer. Um, he was just able to walk that line in maybe a more subtle way than Oscar Wilde was, you know. He never was on trial for indecency.

RATNER: Well, and maybe, I mean, a lot of it is the time—

LICHTENBERG: Maybe it’s a sign of progress—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —right? Yeah, so I think, like, we shouldn't underestimate how scandalous, uh, and controversial his career was, and how successful he was.

RATNER: Yeah. I do think that when we think about him now, our image of him really is, as you said, a time capsule image, but we are not looking at all these other aspects of the edginess—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: —that, you know, if he was a writer today, would make him just as fascinating to our audiences now than—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: —and just as popular now as he was then—

LICHTENBERG: —and I also, I also think of the two sides of Coward. Like, people think of him as a comic writer, uh, but, if you look at even his comedies, there's a lot of serious and sad and melancholy stuff in there, and if you look at "Brief Encounter," that's a play in which all of the laugh lines, for the most part, have been taken out, and it is just a devastatingly sad and very accurate portrait of the way society was in between the World Wars in England, and it's just a devastating play.

RATNER: Yeah, and the play is—the original play that he wrote is still life—

LICHTENBERG: Still life. Yeah, which, I think, is—

RATNER: —but, was then turned into the film—

LICHTENBERG: Even though it's only an hour long, I think it's actually better than "Brief Encounter" because it's theatrically more interesting. It's just this one train station, and you get snap shots of all these people's lives, frozen in time, and, you know, I think, I think Coward was his own worst enemy, 'cuz he would write, "Oh, dear old Cock," you know, "I just wrote this play, and it's actually not too bad," you know, "it's not entirely rubbish," something like that. He would always—

RATNER: —undercut—

LICHTENBERG: —downplay—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —in this very British, kind of, unintellectual way, how good a craftsman he was and how good a playwright he was.

RATNER: But, at the same time, it seems that he was really good at selling his brand, and, certainly, didn't shy away from conversations with every literary, everybody. I mean, his diaries and letters, you have—

LICHTENBERG: Oh, my God.

RATNER: —you know, him communicating with George Bernard Shaw and Virginia Woolf, and, you know—

LICHTENBERG: J.M. Barrie.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Terrence Rattigan, Pinter, Albee—

RATNER: He, he was right at the center—

LICHTENBERG: Olivier—

RATNER: —of all of the letters, all of the writing of the 20th Century, British writing of the 20th Century.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and I love the, I love—it's in "Asides," but, the letter from Shaw, where he says, "You'll have a very long career, as long as you don't emulate me in any way, and you remain yourself," and I think Woolf said something similar, which is just, like, "I've try to reform him from being completely nonsensical all the time, but I failed horribly," and he was just always incorrigibly himself, and all of his plays have that kind of quicksilver elusive quality that is Noël Coward. I think that's why they remain so popular.

RATNER: Well, I think that's a great place to hold for a moment, while we wait for our director to join us, and, then, we'll pick up the conversation with Maria.

LICHTENBERG: Great.

(MUSIC)

RATNER: And now, we are back, and we are joined by Maria Aitken, and it's wonderful to have you with us. Thanks so much for coming down from rehearsal.

MARIA AITKEN: Not a bit. I'm quite relieved rehearsals are over today.

LICHTENBERG: You were saying, Maria, that, uh, you're exhausted, that you had a long day today.

AITKEN: Well, it's a very peculiar process just at this stage, when you're putting together something. I think a remount is about 10 times more trouble than a mount—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

AITKEN: —uh, because you're—it's part memory, part muscle memory, part emotional memory, and, of course, you've got a chance to improve things, so, we're, we're just, sort of, running along two tram lines that don't quite mesh. They're beginning to. Today was exciting because we did change quite a few things, and we are all pretty certain that it's for the better, and since we thought we were perfect already—

RATNER: Did you have a list of things you wanted to change, or is this more, as time has passed, you've reflected on character choices or whatever is it?

AITKEN: I don't think I came into this with a list of things I wanted to change because I really did think it was a very good production before, and I never think that about my own stuff, never, never, never. I sit writhing with horror, um, but this one was an astonishing experience. I actually enjoyed it like a member of the audience—

RATNER: Mmm.

AITKEN: —and roared with laughter freely, and it was, it was bizarre. I had somebody behind me who was reacting exactly as I did, and to the, to the more subtle things that you wouldn't expect them to get really, and I turned around at the Interval, and it was Sam Waterston, and I thought, "Is that because he's James' father—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

AITKEN: —or has he actually got the best sense of humor in the world?"

RATNER: And, and we should say, for people listening who don't know, um, our Elyot is Sam Waterston's son, James Waterston.

LICHTENBERG: You actually have a funny story about how James ended up sneaking into one of your master classes on Coward.

AITKEN: Well, it wasn't exactly that he snuck in, but that he hadn't registered. He's part of the company I was doing it for, but he hadn't actually registered or paid, paid for the class—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs) —typical actor's problem there.

AITKEN: Indeed, and, um, but, he was came. It was clear to me, within minutes, that this guy had a real aptitude for this material, and, so, I kept using him in scenes, and I could tell there was a sort of a freseau of something going around the room. I thought they were all appreciating him, like me, but, actually, they were all saying, "He's not in this class. He's supposed to be an observer."

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: "He's taking the best parts!"

RATNER: Right, and then, you cast him in shows.

AITKEN: Well, then, I said, at the end of it, "I don't suppose you'll come to the auditions for this," and he said, "I'm first up tomorrow morning. I'm already on the list," so he was under, you know—he is, he is a very unusually marvelous Elyot, a very idiosyncratic one.

LICHTENBERG: Do you think that, uh, you need to have a certain quality for actors to play Amanda and Elyot?

AITKEN: Well, in a way, I do, but, it's not a quality that you can isolate by saying they need to be beautiful or they need to be posh or they need to be something like that. What you need is a quality that enables you to hear the play off the page, to, to recognize the collision of sounds and what they mean. I mean, it's literally like a musical score.

RATNER: Well, Coward was, of course, a composer as well, so, do you think that he was writing with the, the music of the words in mind the same way he would write with the music of notes?

AITKEN: I think so, and I—when you, when you get used to it, you realize that he's done an inordinate amount of work for you, and that, when in doubt with Coward, don't work hard. Just let the words come out and bleach them of tone, and it—the line will tell you what the joke is or how to say, just the shape of it will, and I think that's the, the one quality that you really have to have. You can be taught it, but it's not the same.

RATNER: Yeah, and looking at past productions, I was reading through a bunch of old reviews, and a lot of the productions say wonderful things about Amandas and terrible things about the Elyots, and, so I wonder if it's something that women have an easier time grasping or if it's just that men pretend to be Coward and don't fully understand that they just need to relax and do it?

AITKEN: Well, you're absolutely right to say that when they pretend to be Coward, it's the kiss of death. I mean, that really is the worst possible way of approaching it. But, actually, the interesting thing about Coward's plays is they're not gender driven. I mean, when I rehearsed Amanda, myself, um, I got in a muddle with my Elyot during one rehearsal and we took each other's lines in the, in the second Act, where they're arguing, and the only time, I think it became apparent to us, and we then stopped, was when the gender of the offstage lover that we were quarreling about made it clear, and the director said, "Don't stop. It's absolutely fascinating. They are, in a way, the same person—"

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

AITKEN: —and they are, and Coward doesn't do overt sex. He does do jealousy, which is almost as good. It, you know, it throws everything into relief in the same sort of the same way.

LICHTENBERG: There is the sense that Coward sees women simply as they are.

AITKEN: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, well, he sees them as just being human beings—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —right, who have their own problems and hangups, and he's very, um, he's a very unbiased observer in that way.

AITKEN: I think so, too. He's, I mean, he's a feminist in the, in the best sort of way, in that he didn't have any particular other assumption—

LICHTENBERG: Huh.

AITKEN: —to quash in the first place, but when you say “Is Amanda is a better part than Elyot, or is it the Elyots themselves who—”

RATNER: Hmm.

AITKEN: —I think, there is, possibly, a kind of slight showiness to the women in these kinds of plays. I’m thinking of Beatrice and Benedick—

RATNER: We were talking about that before.

AITKEN: Mirabell and Millamant, certainly in “The Way of the World,” I think Millamant has a much better time than Mirabell does, and generally steals it, but that’s because her speech rhythms are almost modern and her meaning just zings into a modern audience’s ear in a way that Mirabell’s, perhaps, doesn’t. You’re done all of those here, haven’t you?

LICHTENBERG: Yes, we have. Yeah. We did “Earnest,” obviously, earlier this season. Michael did “Way of the World” five years ago? Something like that.

RATNER: Something like that. I wasn’t here then.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I didn’t see it. Ah.

AITKEN: It’s a very difficult play. It’s got—I always avoid telling the plot to anyone because I can’t—nobody can—

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: It’s very harsh, actually.

AITKEN: It’s very harsh. It’s also impenetrable. I mean, it’s so complicated.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: It’s a good thing we didn’t have to do a podcast for that one.

AITKEN: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: But, you know, you point to something interesting, which is that, unlike “Earnest” or, uh, “Much Ado,” the plotting, the point of attack for Coward in “Private Lives” is much later than in those plays. These are older characters.

AITKEN: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: It’s a comedy of remarriage, in some ways.

AITKEN: Yes. Yes, indeed it is. Um, and you're not even sure—I mean, in, in earlier plays, marriage is a state devoutly to be wished, and when that happens, you know that the play has reached fruition, and you don't really question it as an ending. With this, you're pretty sure they'll bounce out of the room, and five seconds later, they'll be quarreling again, so, you know, marriage is not the sort of heavenly state that it's presented in all—in the other comedies.

RATNER: Yeah, I mean, it's interesting. Comedies typically end with a marriage and this one ends with a fight.

AITKEN: Well, no, this one ends with a, an escape.

RATNER: Well, but not—only for Amanda—

LICHTENBERG: Act II. Act II ends with a fight.

RATNER: But, well, no, 'cause it ends—

AITKEN: —with the other—

RATNER: right with Sybil, and, um—

AITKEN: —and Victor—

RATNER: —and Victor fighting, right.

AITKEN: Yes, and it's true. Of course they are.

RATNER: —and there's something that feels almost romantic about that then, that they found each other.

AITKEN: Well, at least you feel they have evolved—

RATNER: Yeah.

AITKEN: —from the prison of good manners, which is that how Coward always presents good manners.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, it's, you know, he's questioning the institution of marriage, I think, in a very modern way—

AITKEN: Yes, I think so, too.

LICHTENBERG: —just like, he was, he was doing the same in "Design for Living" and "Brief Encounter," and—he's always calling into question social mores, social taboos.

AITKEN: Mmm. Well, of course, he lived on the edge of the social taboo, um, because he was gay—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

AITKEN: —and, you know, in those days, it was a, a jail-able offence. It was a very, it was, you know, it was a situation that engendered tremendous caution—

RATNER: —but, he was, he was fairly out. I mean, he wasn't walking down the street holding hands with someone, but he certainly didn't make a big show of hiding.

AITKEN: He was out in his own circle—

RATNER: Yeah.

AITKEN: —but he wasn't, he wasn't out, and, indeed, you know, tremendously distinguished people of the time in the theatre, like Sir John Gielgud, went to jail, I mean, really, the most barbaric thing you can imagine.

LICHTENBERG: Now, Maria, not to, uh—it's fascinating to talk about "Private Lives" with you. I mean, we could do it all day, but you've also, I think, starred in more Coward leading roles than any other actress.

AITKEN: Well, I believe that's true.

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

RATNER: It says so on Wikipedia.

LICHTENBERG: It must be true, since it says so online.

AITKEN: I think the reason—I think it may be true because I played the young ones and the old ones, and it's very rare that you live long enough or act long enough to do that, um, and so I did Amanda and Gilda and all the, you know, well, many of them, always, I said, the best parts. I never did a supporting part in Coward. And then, I did "The Vortex," which was an unusual—it was a very new thing to revive. It hadn't ever been revived when I did it—

LICHTENBERG: And did you play the mother?

AITKEN: —and I played the mother with Rupert Everett playing my son, and it was, um—

LICHTENBERG: Wow.

AITKEN: —it was a most wonderful production—

RATNER: When was that production?

AITKEN: Ugh, don't ask me. I'll never remember anything except by the age of my son—

RATNER: (laughs)

AITKEN: —but it was, it was a long time ago. I think I—but it was a rather young for it, but, then, she's supposed to be eerily well preserved—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

AITKEN: —um, so, I always think it's great to do those sort of parts like Arcati bit early—

LICHTENBERG: Right, rather than waiting 'til—it's, it's like "Lear," in a way.

AITKEN: Yeah, yeah, and I'll tell you what I think is the hugest travesty of all: Is doing "Fallen Angels" with people who are out of their thirties—

RATNER: Mmm.

AITKEN: It's about the seven-year itch in a marriage. I mean, to me, if you have old bags doing it, it wouldn't make any sense at all.

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

RATNER: Well, and how old do you think Amanda and Elyot should be?

AITKEN: Well, I have to say, these are the youngest that have been seen in America for a long time, and they're not all that young. I think they should be in their thirties. He should be 35. Amanda should be 31, 32.

LICHTENBERG: I believe Coward was 31—

AITKEN: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —when he performed in it.

AITKEN: And, you see, the older they get, the more repellent their behavior seems.

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

AITKEN: When you're young and atrociously bad-behaved, it's kind of charming in some way, or can be, but you get people—I mean, I saw, uh, the Burtons doing it when they were—not in, not just in the first flush, but fat and all sorts of things—

RATNER: Yeah.

AITKEN: I was very fond of the Burtons. I acted with them when I was an undergraduate, so I didn't go in with any kind of prejudice, but it was an embarrassment. It was a nightmare because it was so unattractive.

RATNER: Mmm. But, before we say goodbye, and let you get on with your night, you talked a little bit about what's happening in the rehearsal room, but I wondered if you could be a little bit more specific just because we never get a chance to see in there. What did you work on today? Did you do a run?

LICHTENBERG: What's an example of something that you thought, uh, that you were surprised that you had to re-do, perhaps?

AITKEN: Well, you see the possibilities, suddenly that you—something worked before, but you see another way, which might actually work better, and, so, for example, when Victor and Elyot are having a terrific round, Elyot rushes out of the room, calling him “a rampaging gasbag,” uh, Victor picks up a cushion and goes slightly ape-shit with it because he hasn't been able to hit Elyot, and throws it down, and then slumps into a chair, and, at that point, um, Amanda comes in and says, “Well, what happened?” and he used to get—and answer rather angrily that nothing had happened, and he didn't know why nothing had happened, but this time, we decided that all the anger had been discharged into the, into the cushion that he had attacked—

RATNER: Mmm.

AITKEN: —so, he was literally, a kind of airless balloon, a rampaging gasbag—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

AITKEN: —and, you know, all the wind had gone out of him, so, he's actually pathetic, and especially very funny.

RATNER: It's interesting. We put so much hype into doing something new and being the originators of work, but it seems that there's something very special about being able to return to something after many years. I mean, I think we're having that with “Henry IV” as well with Michael returning to this material with some of the same actors, but—

AITKEN: It is. It's a magic opportunity, uh, to—I mean, I've revisited this play quite a bit because I was in it for a year, and I directed it in London when I was—oh, I think the first thing I ever directed—

LICHTENBERG: Hmm.

AITKEN: —uh, not in London, it was a tour, uh, with a, with a wonderful actress who was the right age—

RATNER: (laughs)

AITKEN: —um, and then I taught it, uh, because I do have a theory that it isn't confined to particular types, um, and it can be played by anyone if they have this grasp of, of sounds.

LICHTENBERG: Right, if they have technique and also imagination—

AITKEN: Yes, yes.

LICHTENBERG: —as actors.

AITKEN: You'll be amazed, how, how—what similar decisions people come to. People have taught it in Alaska, I've taught it in, um, Saskatchewan, I've taught it all over the place, and, and in Julliard and at Yale, and people, in the end, come to similar conclusions about phrasing and meaning and emotional content if the message in the ship's bottle, which is the text, um, is clear enough.

RATNER: Well, that's a great place to end.

LICHTENBERG: I wanna know about that.

RATNER: Thank you so much for joining us.

AITKEN: Not at all. It was a pleasure.

(MUSIC)

RATNER: Well, it was lovely to have Maria with us.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. She, um, you know, you, you'd never know it from talking to her, but she is probably the world's foremost expert on staging, directing, and acting Noël Coward plays.

RATNER: So, as you said, as she was leaving—and I don't think we caught that on tape—but, she has a little bit of that Noël Coward downplaying her own ego.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, she likes to make it look effortless—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —but, she is tremendously sophisticated theatrical mind and, I think, like, Coward, she needs to remain fresh at all times. She told me this story, in confidence, and I hope I'm not shattering any, any trust here, but, she directed the Broadway and West End production of "The 39 Steps—"

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —which won the Tony Award and the Olivier Award, and she kept changing it. Uh, she would go everywhere that it was on tour, and change the blocking around because it needed to be, you know, fresh. It needed it to be real, and the producers finally said, "Maria, you have to stop changing. It's like a ballet," you know, "the blocking should be set for every city that it goes to," and so she finally had to just stop, but I think that, I think that tells you something about the kind of artist and director that she is.

RATNER: Yeah, it's very exciting.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, yeah, and she's a lovely and nice and sweet person, too—

RATNER: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: —which can never be said enough about people in the theatre—

RATNER: —and it's, it's really wonderful, I think, you know, when we're talking about these great classic plays, a play like "Private Lives," a 20th-Century classic, it's a play we can almost hold on to, you know, that it's, it's still, it's so close, and though she is nowhere near old enough to have been in, you know, original productions, it still feels like she's part of the trajectory of Noël Coward's history.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and she's only, you know, she's only a few generations—I think, um, she told me a story that Graham Payn, the executor of Coward's estate, and, I think, maybe, his partner at the end of his life, came to see her in a production of "Private Lives," and approved of her, and then, she was in the circle.

RATNER: —and she's now one of the trustees—

LICHTENBERG: —she's a trustee of the Coward Foundation.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —um, which is, you know, run by the estate, and trying to get productions of his plays, um, stepped on, excuse me.

RATNER: Very exciting.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, so she's, uh—it's—and she was also saying that it was a blessing to have this chance to come back to a play and to revisit it and to keep on discovering things because, as you were saying, these, these texts are, are very supple things, and you can do an infinite amount of things, and they can all be true with them.

RATNER: Yeah, I mean, that's one of the things, I think, when we talk about what makes a classic play, one of the things that makes a classic play is that we can continue to rediscover these—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and continue to restage them and reimagine them. It's openness to a certainly flexibility of interpretations.

RATNER: Yeah, and what keeps this play in our minds is the timelessness of these, this couple, who can't live with and can't live without each other, but also, just the, the brilliant musical quality of his language, like she was talking about.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I—and just the references Noël Coward always make me laugh. You know, there's a line about the Hungarians being sad because they eat pretzels in Act II—

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: —that's just, I think, is so ridiculous. It always makes me smile when I read it, and I'm sad because I think Maria's cut it from the production, but, there are, like, billions of tiny little throwaway things like that that are so completely absurd and nonsensical.

RATNER: Well, and as you mentioned before, all these things that they're saying is really—they're really hiding the underneath text, which is just "I want you. I love you. I can't stand you."

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, they're covering, they're covering something. Yeah, and, and Barry Day, who wrote an article for us—Harold Pinter was a great admirer of Coward, and he said that he—when he went to a production of "Private Lives," he realized, for the first time, that you can see characters saying something onstage, and the audience knows that they mean something else—

RATNER: Hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and it's the key to, sort of, Pinter's dramaturgy, is Noël Coward, and Maria was telling me when she directed by Pinter in a production of "Blithe Spirit"—and she said it was, it was both the best of times and the worst of times because Pinter had such reverence for Coward that he refused to cut a single word from the play, which, she thought, was a terrible mistake with, with "Blithe Spirit," terrible mistake, much too long a play. So, yeah, so we're part of that continuum, I think, hosting Maria doing Coward.

RATNER: Yeah. Well, it's very exciting, and I'm sure our audience is eager to watch the play just as I am, and that is it for this recording of the Prosecast for "Private Lives." We start productions on May 28th, and run through, I believe, the beginning of July, though I don't have that date on me, and maybe extending, I don't know. It was depend on you, our listeners, our audience. But, we do look forward to seeing you at the theatre, and hope you can make it to some of our discussions, and next year, we will have more Prosecasts coming your way, featuring lots of other guest artists, and if you have any feedback or want to let us know who you want to hear from, um, you can just drop a line on the Facebook page for the Shakespeare Theatre or via Twitter or email. Bye bye!

(MUSIC)

SMITH: You've been listening to the Shakespeare Theater Company's Prosecast, Episode number 17, featuring Hannah Hessel Ratner, Drew Lichtenberg, and, special guest, Maria Aitken. You can find additional episodes and subscribe to the podcast by searching iTunes for "Shakespeare Theater Company Asides" or visit the "Asides" webpage at shakespearetheatre.org. Tickets can be purchased by calling our Box Office at (202) 547-1122, or simply visit shakespearetheatre.org.