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COWARD CLASSIC (left to right) Paul Gross & Kim Cattrall in *Private Lives*. Photo: Cylla von Tiedemann



Theater Review

Kim Cattrall impressive in uneven revival of Noël Coward's classic, *Private Lives*

PRIVATE LIVES

Written Noël Coward

Directed by Richard Eyre

Through February 5, 2012

Music Box Theatre

239 West 45th St.

(212-279-4200), <http://www.privatelivesbroadway.com>

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By David NouNou

I guess the *raison d'être* for *Private Lives* is Kim Cattrall, The question is: can she shed her Samantha Jones persona from “Sex and the City” and actually play a different character? The answer is a resounding yes. I might also add that everyone else in the cast is good, but somehow there is no chemistry or any heat being generated at the Music Box Theatre. The play, written brilliantly by Mr. Coward in 1930, is arguably his best. The lines are as crisp today as when they were first heard. However, as delivered by this cast, they are just that—*delivered*, without the panache and wit for which Mr. Coward is renowned.

Being divorced for five years and now honeymooning in Deauville, France, with their respective new spouses, Amanda (Kim Cattrall) with Victor (Simon Paisley Day) and Elyot (Paul Gross) with Sybil (Anna Madeley), unbeknownst to both Amanda and Elyot that the other one is there with their new spouse and to make matters worse, they have adjoining suites. Starting as a comedy of manners with acid-sharp repartee it quickly turns to brawls and bawdy fights by act II and act III. Although they have each married someone else, Amanda and Elyot realize they have never stopped loving each other and by end of Act I run off together and leave their spouses behind.

Act II is a very difficult one due to its two-character banter. Elyot and Amanda dissect their marriage and divorce and their love and passion for each other but none of it is visible. What handicaps them even further is the sparseness of the set, which seems to swallow the two up. The set should be wrapped around them to make them appear as two big fish in a small pond. Instead they appear as two small minnows in a large pond. It is here that you see Richard Eyre's expert direction by giving them all sorts of tidbits to do to fill the void, but alas it is of little avail. There are just no sparks and it's a shame, because they try valiantly to make it fun.

Ms. Cattrall is very capable at being ladylike, bawdy and scrappy and Mr. Gross is adept at delivering his acerbic lines. However, they don't come together cohesively. When playing Coward's characters, especially *Private Lives*, there has to be instant chemistry and sparks flying all over the stage. Amanda and Elyot have to be so in sync with each other that they can know each other's thoughts and can finish each other's sentences. As their prospective mates, Victor and Sybil, Mr. Day and Ms. Madeley are adequate and try hard at playing pompous to the point of being annoying.

It is always amusing to revisit *Private Lives* no matter how sedate it might appear: you will laugh at the brilliant writing, if not necessarily the delivery. Anyone who has ever studied Mr. Coward's work at the academic level might argue that there are myriad meanings behind the story in *Private Lives*: conflicting emotions, and even shades of highbrow camp, but 80 years later, the story still holds up as one of the finest English-language comedies of the past century.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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