

Private Lives.

Written by Noel Coward.

Directed by Mark Stratton.

Esk Valley Theatre, Glaisdale until September 1st.

One of the great joys of reviewing theatre in the summer months is to travel over the moors to the Esk Valley Theatre where this year Mark Stratton is directing Noel Coward's masterpiece *Private Lives*. How encouraging on leaving the dark clouds behind and arriving in glorious Glaisdale sunshine to see the House Full sign outside the theatre door and producer Sheila Carter welcoming patrons to the theatre.

Noel Coward wrote the play while suffering from influenza in four days in 1930 during a tour of the Far East. He made no secret of the fact that the new comedy was for himself and Gertrude Lawrence. The play opened at The Phoenix Theatre London after a regional tour with reviews ranging from the ecstatic to the disgusted, but London gave the play a rapturous welcome.

The play opens on the terrace of a hotel in Deauville France in 1930 with Elyot played by Nicholas Goode and Amanda played by Rhiannon Sommers having adjoining balconies. They were once married to each other for three years but are now on honeymoon with their new partners. Sybil played by Laura McAlpine is a very young bride and is devastated by the events that follow. On the other hand Victor played by Garry Summers is a complete bore.

Elyot and Amanda once loved each other with undying passion, but love brought with it hatred, jealousy, insecurity and many arguments. But when they see each other again their undying passion is once more ignited. 'To hell with love' as they abandon their partners and make a dash for Paris.

You can't help seeing and hearing Noel Coward in this exquisite comedy as the two characters begin to sort out their lives with a glint of amusement in Elyot's eyes and a sardonic smile on his lips. Rhiannon Sommers is a perfect feisty Amanda bringing a sense of sophistication to the part even as she rolls on the floor trying to smash Elyot on the head. The sounds of 'Some Day I'll Find You' filters through the auditorium.

Although the play was written decades ago it has lost nothing of its power to contain relative emotions of today with stylish costumes designed by Christine Wall and set designed by Graham Kirk. Society may have changed over the years

but human emotions have not and couples still have passionate love-hate relationships that can be ruthlessly cruel.

Private Lives is more than a Noel Coward comedy, it is a triumph for the beautiful Esk Valley Theatre with Mark and Sheila's choice of play being absolutely perfect for this small and intimate theatre. Mark directs his characters with superb timing while allowing them to deliver their lines with aplomb.

In 2005 actor Mark Stratton and choreographer Sheila Carter set up Esk Valley Theatre with nightly performances of their chosen play throughout the month of August. Not only does the audience applaud the wonderful actors on stage but the volunteers who help to make the production possible making the visit a truly rural theatrical experience.

Bravo Mark and Sheila, Noel Coward would have loved your production of Private Lives.