



[Private Lives](#) at [The Royal Exchange Theatre](#)

Directed by Michael Buffong

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) March 2011

At times one wants to spend an evening in the theatre pondering the deepest truths of life, wrestling with contemporary problems or questioning one's beliefs – at other times it is preferable to pass a couple of hours in the company of attractive, witty, articulate people who entertain with a confection of bitingly amusing quips. For that go along to the Royal Exchange's revival of Noel Coward's 'Private Lives'.

From Michael Buffong, the director who brought us last season's award winning 'A Raisin in the

Sun', this is another – although very different – modern classic.

A divorced couple Amanda (Imogen Stubbs) and Elyot (Simon Robson) accidentally find themselves honeymooning in the same hotel with their new spouses. Old passions are reignited and quarrels and chemistry abound.

In the words of Amanda (Imogen Stubbs) this is the story of a love where you can't live with someone and you can't live without them.

Noel Coward's characters reflect the post First World War mood of emotionless cool – where people use wit to hide their true emotions.

Simon Robson, who dazzled in last season's *Pygmalion*, plays Elyot – a memorable combination of intelligence and well hidden passion, he too hides behind his articulateness. As in last year's *Henry Higgins* he portrays a winning combination of head and heart.

Stubbs matches him – playing a beautiful, mature and truly sophisticated woman – her performance ensures that we never forget that the witty verbal tennis match masks an enduring passion.

The second couple played by Clive Hayward and Joanna Page, manage to hold their own – although the audience always knows that second marriages are second best. Page in particular, breaks away from her TV persona (in 'Gavin and Stacey'), creating a winning dumb blonde.

In this top-class production Coward 's witty confection is brilliantly served by cast, director and designer and shows that he can still provides an evening of sparkling entertainment – with a group of amusing and sophisticated people playing the game of love.

**One of Noel Cowards "most brilliant and sophisticated plays". □ □ Performing
23 February - 9 April**