

University of Delaware ensemble shines in 'Private Lives'

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Michael Gotch stars as Elyot and Carine Montbertrand as Amanda in Noël Coward's "Private Lives." (Paul Cerro)

Early in 1930, the saber-witted British stage diva Gertrude Lawrence cabled her friend Noël Coward about his "Private Lives."

"Have read new play," she wired. "Nothing wrong that can't be fixed."

The playwright's parry? "The only thing that will need to be fixed is your performance."

This was typical of the slashing verbal dexterity between these titans. It's also an open secret that Coward wrote "Private Lives," his best play, as a vehicle for himself and the great, glistening Gertrude.

This sophisticated zenith of modern British comedy is now being performed by University of Delaware's professional Resident Ensemble Players.

Coward tells us his play concerns "the impossibility of sustaining love. The wit is merely the surface-coating to conceal hurt." And this hurt is seamlessly concealed, temporarily, with elegant, acerbic banter by Elyot (played by the inimitable,

impeccable Michael Gotch) and Amanda (the virtuosic Carine Montbertrand).

Elyot and Amanda, once married to each other, are now honeymooning, with new spouses, in adjacent hotel balcony suites. Let the verbal games begin!

Director Warner Shook, in his third go at "Private Lives," seems to have taken a cue from the formidable Tyne Daly, who believes an acting company's job is to take a script and make it "deeper, richer, fuller -- ultimately better." In this instance, if that's possible, Shook and company have done it.

Gotch's performance, with its grace and exquisite comic timing, purrs like a well-tuned engine.

Montbertrand's Amanda is like the weather, by turns sunny and pleasant, foggy and petulant, thundering and overbearing. And all of it works.

Meaghan Sullivan and Andy Nagraj are very strong as Elyot and Amanda's disconcertingly conventional spouses.

Deena Burke's imperturbable French maid brings a this-too-shall-pass balance to the whole affair.