Acting Edition

Blithe Spirit

by Noël Coward

Abridged Version
by Laurence Maslon

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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CHARACTERS

RUTH CONDOMINE
CHARLES CONDOMINE
DR. BRADMAN
MRS. BRADMAN
MADAME ARCATI
ELVIRA

SETTING

The action of the play passes in the living room of Charles Condomine's house in Kent.

TIME

Scene One. Before dinner, a summer evening
Scene Two. Later the following day

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The last syllable in "Condomine" is pronounced as "meen" not "mine." Also "Elvira" is pronounced as rhyming with "clearer."

ADAPTOR'S NOTES

This is a shorter version of Coward's original 1941 text; slight modifications were made sparingly to maintain continuity in the story and the characters.

Regarding the appearance of Elvira and (subsequently) Ruth in spectral visage and attire, the suggestion of otherworldliness can be left to the discretion of the production and actors. Any imaginative suggestion of their ghostly nature is encouraged – iridescence, LED lights in costumes, etc.; please note, however, that an application of gray or white facial makeup may not be the most appropriate solution.

Scene One

(The scene is the living room of the Condomines' house in Kent. The room is light, attractive and comfortably furnished. On the left there are French windows opening onto the garden. On the right there is an open fireplace.)

*(***RUTH** *enters center briskly. She is dressed for dinner, but not elaborately. She crosses to the fireplace and then gives a comprehensive glance round the room.)*

*(***CHARLES** *comes in center and moves to the back of the sofa. He is wearing a loose-fitting velvet smoking jacket.)*

CHARLES. No sign of the advancing hordes?

RUTH. Not yet.

CHARLES. *(Moving to the drinks table.)* A dry martini, I think, don't you?

RUTH. Yes, darling. I expect Madame Arcati will want something sweeter.

CHARLES. We'll have this one for ourselves, anyhow.

RUTH. I have a feeling that this evening's going to be awful.

CHARLES. It'll probably be funny, but not awful.

RUTH. You must promise not to catch my eye. If I giggle – and I'm very likely to – it will ruin everything.

CHARLES. You mustn't. You must be dead serious and if possible a little intense. We can't hurt the old girl's feelings, however funny she is.

*(***CHARLES** *gives her a cocktail.)*

Here, try this.

RUTH. *(Sipping it.)* Lovely – dry as a bone.

CHARLES. *(Raising his glass to her.)* To *The Unseen*!

RUTH. I must say that's a wonderful title for a mystery novel.

CHARLES. If this evening's a success, I shall start writing the first draft tomorrow.

RUTH. Used Elvira to be a help to you – when you were thinking something out, I mean?

CHARLES. Every now and then – when she concentrated – but she didn't concentrate very often.

RUTH. I do wish I'd known her.

CHARLES. Poor Elvira.

RUTH. Does it still hurt? When you think of her?

CHARLES. *(Sitting on the left end of the sofa.)* I remember her very distinctly indeed. I remember how fascinating she was, and how maddening. I remember how badly she played all games and how cross she got when she didn't win. I remember her physical attractiveness, which was tremendous, and her spiritual integrity, which was nil.

RUTH. You can't remember something that was nil.

CHARLES. I remember how morally untidy she was.

RUTH. Was she more physically attractive than I am?

CHARLES. That was a very tiresome question, dear, and fully deserves the wrong answer.

RUTH. You really are very sweet.

CHARLES. *(Smiling.)* I love you, my love.

RUTH. I know you do; but not the wildest stretch of imagination could describe it as the first fine careless rapture.

CHARLES. Would you like it to be?

RUTH. We both have been married before. Careless rapture at this stage would be incongruous and embarrassing.

CHARLES. I hope I haven't been in any way a disappointment, dear.

RUTH. There are moments, Charles, when you go too far.

CHARLES. That's exactly what Elvira used to say.

RUTH. Poor Elvira!

CHARLES. I was devoted to Elvira. We were married for five years. She died. That was seven years ago. I have now – with your help, my love – risen above the whole thing. Of course, I still miss her very much. She had a certain ethereal, not-quite-of-this-world quality.

RUTH. Nonsense! She was of the earth, earthy.

CHARLES. Well, she is now, anyhow.

RUTH. You know that's the kind of observation that shocks people.

CHARLES. It's discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit.

RUTH. Write that down; you might forget it.

(A bell is heard.)

CHARLES. That's probably the Bradmans.

RUTH. It might be Madame Arcati.

CHARLES. No, she'll come on her bicycle. She always goes everywhere on her bicycle.

RUTH. It really is very spirited of the old girl.

(After a moment, **DR.** *and* **MRS. BRADMAN** *come into the room,* **CHARLES** *goes forward to meet them,* **DR. BRADMAN** *shakes hands with* **CHARLES**.*)*

DR. BRADMAN. We're not late, are we? I only got back from the hospital about half an hour ago.

CHARLES. Of course not. Madame Arcati isn't here yet.

MRS. BRADMAN. That must have been her we passed coming down the hill. I said I thought it was.

RUTH. Then she won't be long. I'm so glad you were able to come.

MRS. BRADMAN. We've been looking forward to it. I feel really quite excited.

DR. BRADMAN. I guarantee that Violet will be good. I made her promise.

MRS. BRADMAN. There wasn't any need. I'm absolutely thrilled. I've only seen Madame Arcati two or three times in the village. I mean I've never seen her do anything at all peculiar, if you know what I mean?

CHARLES. Dry martini?

DR. BRADMAN. By all means.

*(***CHARLES** *goes up to the drinks table and starts mixing fresh cocktails...)*

CHARLES. *(Mixing.)* She certainly is a strange woman. It was only by chance of seeing her up on the Knoll on Midsummer Eve dressed in sort of East Indian robes that made me realize that she was psychic at all.

MRS. BRADMAN. Is the whole business a fake?

CHARLES. I suspect a professional charlatan. That's what I am hoping for, anyhow. The character I am planning

for my book must be a complete impostor. That's one of the most important factors of the whole story.

DR. BRADMAN. What exactly are you hoping to get from her?

CHARLES. Jargon, principally; a few of the tricks of the trade.

MRS. BRADMAN. Do you think she tells fortunes? I love having my fortune told.

CHARLES. We really must all be serious, you know, and pretend that we believe implicitly. Otherwise she won't play.

RUTH. Also, she might really mind. It would be cruel to upset her.

DR. BRADMAN. I shall be as good as gold.

(There is the sound of the front door bell.)

RUTH. Here she is.

CHARLES. You go and meet her, darling.

DR. BRADMAN. She knows, doesn't she, about tonight?

CHARLES. Of course. It was all arranged last week. I met her at the tea shoppe – old girl doesn't have a phone – and I told her how profoundly interested I was in anything to do with the occult, and she blossomed like a rose.

MRS. BRADMAN. I really feel quite nervous; as though I were going to make a speech.

*(***MADAME ARCATI***'s voice, very high and clear, is heard.* **MADAME ARCATI** *enters with* **RUTH**. *She is a striking woman, dressed not too extravagantly but with a decided bias towards the exotic.)*

CHARLES. My dear Madame Arcati!

MADAME ARCATI. I'm afraid I'm rather late; but I had a sudden presentiment that I was going to have a puncture so I went back to fetch my pump.

*(***MADAME ARCATI** *takes off her cloak and hands it to* **RUTH**, *who puts it on the chair right of the door.)*

MADAME ARCATI. And then, of course, I didn't have a puncture at all.

CHARLES. Perhaps you will on the way home.

MADAME ARCATI. *(Moving to shake hands with* **DR. BRADMAN**.*)* Doctor Bradman – ah, the hands that heal!

DR. BRADMAN. This is my wife.

*(***MADAME ARCATI** *shakes hands with* **MRS. BRADMAN**.*)*

MADAME ARCATI. We are old friends – we meet coming out of shops.

CHARLES. Would you like a cocktail?

MADAME ARCATI. *(Peeling off some rather strange-looking gloves.)* If it's a dry martini, yes – if it's a concoction, no. Experience has taught me to be very wary of concoctions.

CHARLES. *(Up to the drinks table.)* It is a dry martini.

(He gives one to **MADAME ARCATI**.*)*

MADAME ARCATI. How delicious. Thank you. Cheers! Cheers!

(Drinks.) This is the best dry martini I've had for years. You're a very clever man. Anybody can write books, but it takes an artist to make a dry martini.

MRS. BRADMAN. May I ask you: Do you feel funny when you go off into a trance?

MADAME ARCATI. In what way funny?

RUTH. *(Hastily.)* Mrs. Bradman doesn't mean funny in its comic implication; I think she meant odd or strange.

MADAME ARCATI. The word was an unfortunate choice.

MRS. BRADMAN. I'm sure I'm very sorry.

MADAME ARCATI. It doesn't matter in the least. Please don't apologize.

MRS. BRADMAN. Can you foretell the future?

MADAME ARCATI. Certainly not. I disapprove of fortune tellers most strongly.

MRS. BRADMAN. *(Disappointed.)* Oh, really? Why?

MADAME ARCATI. Too much guesswork and fake mixed up with it. You can't count on it.

RUTH. Why not?

MADAME ARCATI. *(Patiently.)* Time values on the Other Side are utterly different from ours.

CHARLES. *(Cheerfully.)* Well, Madame Arcati – the time on *this* Side is drawing near.

MADAME ARCATI. Who knows? It may be receding!

CHARLES. How very true.

DR. BRADMAN. I hope you feel in the mood, Madame Arcati.

MADAME ARCATI. It isn't a question of mood. It's a question of concentration. I'm absolutely ready.

(She rises.)

Heigho, heigho, it's off to work we go!

CHARLES. Is there anything you'd like us to do?

MADAME ARCATI. Do?

CHARLES. Yes – hold hands or anything?

MADAME ARCATI. All that will come later.

(Crossing below the séance table, over to the mantelpiece. Then she walks about the room – twisting and untwisting her hands.)

MADAME ARCATI. This is a moment I always hate.

RUTH. Are you nervous?

DR. BRADMAN. A bit late in the game to be nervous about this kind of thing, I should think.

MADAME ARCATI. You should think, Doctor Bradman, but I fear you don't; at least, not profoundly enough.

MRS. BRADMAN. Do be quiet, George. You'll put Madame Arcati off.

MADAME ARCATI. It is of no consequence. Will you all sit round the table, please, and place your hands downwards on it?

RUTH. Come, Mrs. Bradman –

CHARLES. What about the lights?

MADAME ARCATI. All in good time, Mr. Condomine. Sit down, please.

(The four of them sit down at each side of the séance table. **RUTH** *is upstage facing* **MRS. BRADMAN**. **CHARLES** *on* **RUTH***'s right.* **DR. BRADMAN** *on* **RUTH***'s left.* **MADAME ARCATI** *comes to above the table between* **RUTH** *and* **DR. BRADMAN** *and surveys them critically, her head on one side.)*

The fingers should be touching... that's right. I presume that's the gramophone?

(She moves to the gramophone left and scours the records on the shelf...)

Now let me see – is there any dance music?

RUTH. They're the loose ones on the left.

MADAME ARCATI. I see.

(She stoops down and produces a pile of dance records.)

CHARLES. I'm afraid they're none of them very new.

MADAME ARCATI. Ah, here's a lovely one – Irving Berlin. 'Always.'

CHARLES. *(Half jumping up.)* 'Always'!

RUTH. Do sit down, Charles. What *is* the matter?

CHARLES. *(Subsiding.)* Nothing – nothing at all.

RUTH. Charles, do keep still.

MADAME ARCATI. Now there are one or two things that I should like to explain; so will you all listen attentively?

RUTH. Of course.

MADAME ARCATI. Presently, when the music begins, I am going to switch out the lights. In due course I shall join you at the table and attempt to communicate with the beyond. Whilst doing so, I must ask you not to address me or move or do anything in the least distracting. Is that quite, quite clear?

CHARLES. Perfectly.

MADAME ARCATI. Of course, I cannot guarantee that anything will happen at all. On the other hand, one of you might have an emanation, for instance; or we might contact a poltergeist, which would be extremely destructive and noisy.

RUTH. *(Anxiously.)* In what way destructive?

MADAME ARCATI. They throw things, you know.

RUTH. No, I didn't know.

MADAME ARCATI. Now, then; are you ready to empty your minds?

DR. BRADMAN. Do you mean we're to try to think of nothing?

MADAME ARCATI. Absolutely nothing, Doctor Bradman. Concentrate on a space or a nondescript colour. That's really the best way.

DR. BRADMAN. I'll do my damnedest.

MADAME ARCATI. Good work! – I will now start the music.

(She goes to the gramophone, puts on the record of 'Always,' *as performed by a popular singer of the 1940s**: *The lyrics go: 'I'll loving you always. With a love that's true, always...' etc. She begins to walk about the room; occasionally she moves into an abortive little dance step. Then with sudden speed, she runs across the room and switches off the lights.)*

CHARLES. *(In a strained voice.)* Not 'Always.' Don't play 'Always' –

RUTH. Why ever not, Charles? Don't be absurd.

MADAME ARCATI. Quiet – please!

(In the gloom **MADAME ARCATI**, *brings the stool and sits at the table.)*

Is there anyone there? ... *(A long pause.)* ... Is there anyone there? ... *(Another long pause.)*

...One rap for yes...two raps for no. Now then...is there anyone there?

(After a shorter pause, the table gives a little bump.)

MRS. BRADMAN. *(Involuntarily.)* Oh!

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