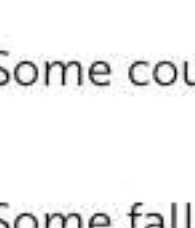




The Santa Cruz Shakespeare cast of "Private Lives" (left to right) Paige Lindsey White as Amanda, Chris Cherin as Victor, Charlotte Boyce Munson as Sibyl and Charles Pasternak as Elyot. Credit: Kevin Lohman

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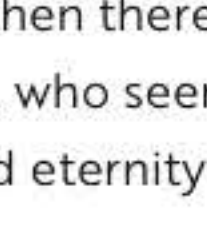
Santa Cruz Shakespeare's 'Private Lives' is deliciously funny — and gloriously toxic



BY JANA MARCUS

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Santa Cruz Shakespeare opens its fall season in delicious style with Noël Coward's "Private Lives." Charles Pasternak and Paige Lindsey White are marvelous as the spectacularly combustible couple who can't seem to stay together or apart, bringing sparkling chemistry and impeccable comic timing to Laura Gordon's stylish, laugh-out-loud production.

Some couples fall in love.

Some fall out of love.

And then there are Amanda and Elyot, who seem perfectly content to spend eternity doing both.

That deliciously combustible relationship is at the heart of Noël Coward's "Private Lives," which opens Santa Cruz Shakespeare's fall season with Champagne, satin gowns, wickedly good comic timing and one of the funniest marital battles you are likely to see onstage this year.

If you go

Who: Santa Cruz Shakespeare
What: Noël Coward's "Private Lives"
When: Through Oct. 4
Where: The Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park, 501 Upper Park Rd., Santa Cruz
Tickets: [Click here](#) or 831-460-6399

Directed by Laura Gordon, this is Coward exactly as you want him: sophisticated, stylish, very funny and just a little bit dangerous.

And while Gordon has assembled a wonderful five-person cast, there is no question who owns the evening.

Charles Pasternak and Paige Lindsey White are terrific together.

As Elyot and Amanda, the divorced couple who discover that neither marriage nor common sense has managed to cure them of one another, Pasternak and White have that elusive thing every production of "Private Lives" desperately needs: chemistry.

They know when to toss away a line, when to hold a look and, perhaps most importantly with Coward, when to let a silence do the work. From the moment they see one another, you believe their entire complicated history.

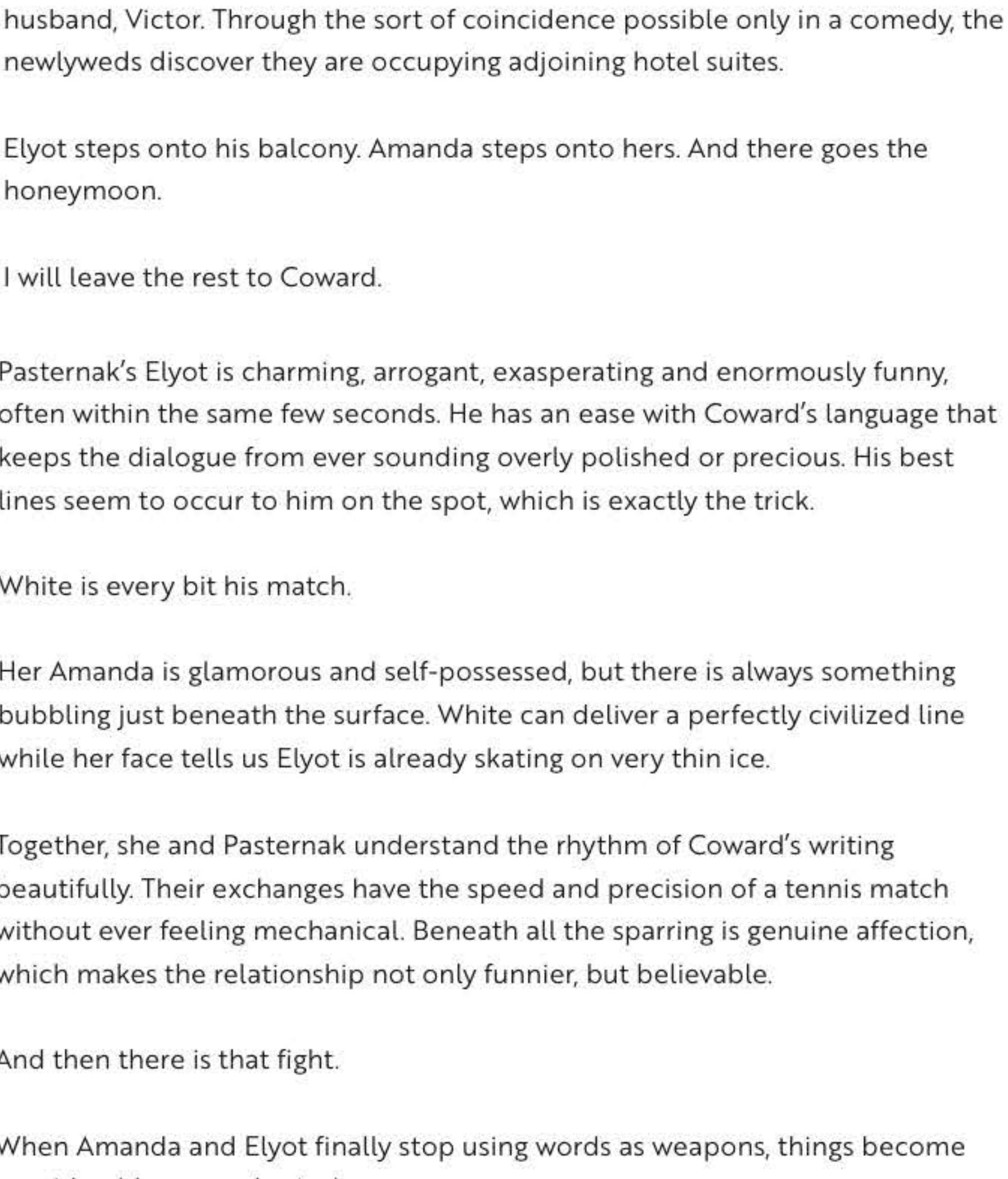
You also understand immediately why these two people should never, under any circumstances, be left alone together.

Coward wrote "Private Lives" in 1930, creating the role of Elyot for himself and Amanda for Gertrude Lawrence. Nearly a century later, it remains one of his most enduring comedies because Coward understood something romantic comedies sometimes prefer to ignore: Love does not necessarily make people behave better.

Sometimes it does quite the opposite.

Coward specialized in sophisticated people behaving badly, preferably while impeccably dressed and holding a cocktail. His dialogue sparkles with insults and wonderfully cutting little truths delivered so casually you can almost miss how sharp they are.

But beneath all that polish is something surprisingly recognizable: What happens when the person who understands you better than anyone is also the person most capable of driving you completely mad?



Paige Lindsey White as Amanda and Charles Pasternak as Elyot can't seem to stay together or apart in the comedy "Private Lives." Credit: Davis Banta

Enter Amanda and Elyot.

Five years after their divorce, both have remarried. Elyot is honeymooning with his considerably younger bride, Sibyl, while Amanda has arrived with her new husband, Victor. Through the sort of coincidence possible only in a comedy, the newlyweds discover they are occupying adjoining hotel suites.

Elyot steps onto his balcony. Amanda steps onto hers. And there goes the honeymoon.

I will leave the rest to Coward.

Pasternak's Elyot is charming, arrogant, exasperating and enormously funny, often within the same few seconds. He has an ease with Coward's language that keeps the dialogue from ever sounding overly polished or precious. His best lines seem to occur to him on the spot, which is exactly the trick.

White is every bit his match.

Her Amanda is glamorous and self-possessed, but there is always something bubbling just beneath the surface. White can deliver a perfectly civilized line while her face tells us Elyot is already skating on very thin ice.

Together, she and Pasternak understand the rhythm of Coward's writing beautifully. Their exchanges have the speed and precision of a tennis match without ever feeling mechanical. Beneath all the sparring is genuine affection, which makes the relationship not only funnier, but believable.

And then there is that fight.

When Amanda and Elyot finally stop using words as weapons, things become considerably more physical.

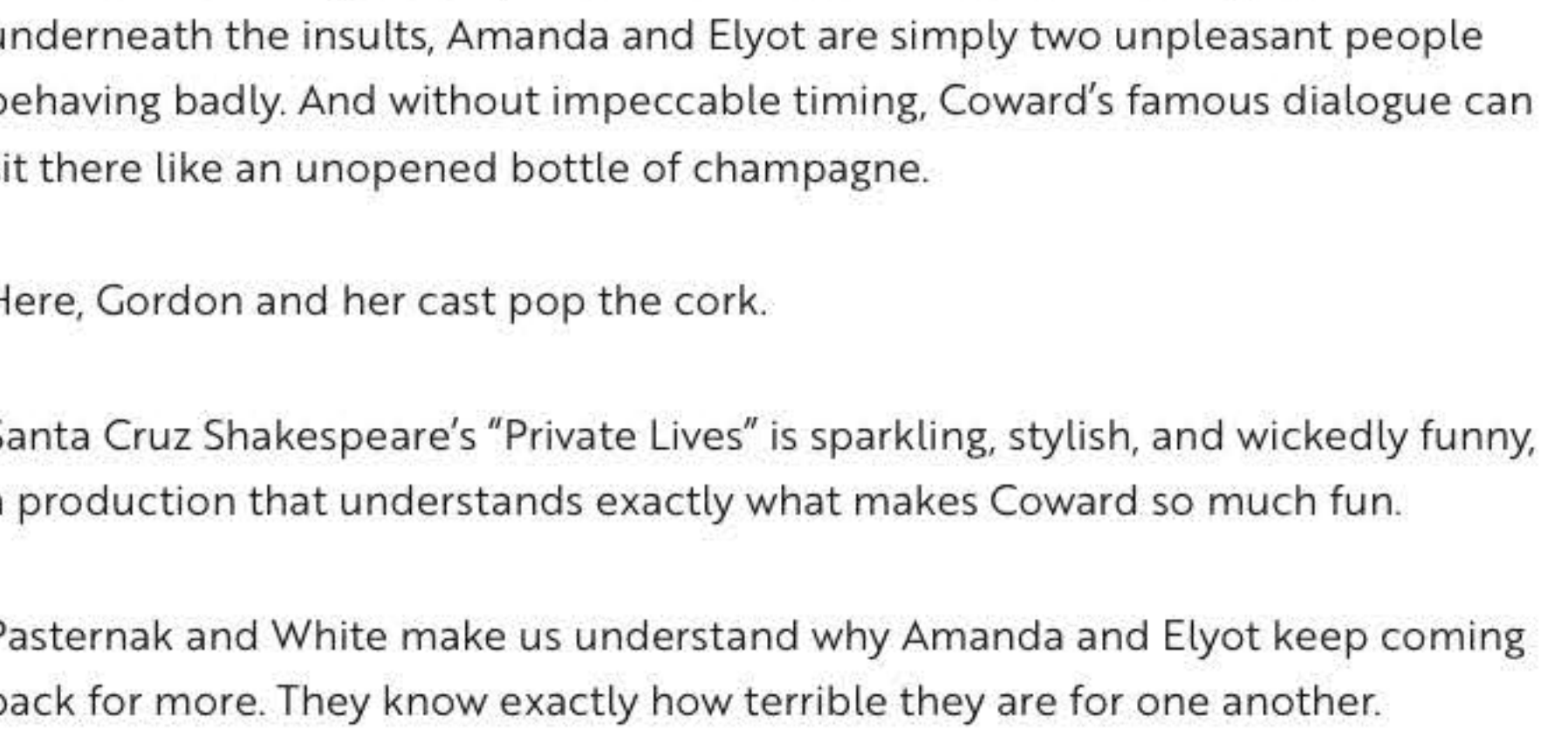
The sequence, choreographed by Izzy Pedego, is absolutely hilarious, escalating from marital warfare into something approaching full-scale combat. Pasternak and White commit to every beat, every reaction, and every increasingly ridiculous escalation.

You are laughing out loud while simultaneously thinking: How on earth are they doing this?

It is controlled chaos, beautifully executed, and one of the evening's highlights.

Charlotte Boyce Munson brings a wonderfully different energy to Sibyl, Elyot's new bride, whose expectations of married life are about to undergo some fairly significant revisions. Chris Cherin is equally enjoyable as Victor, Amanda's earnest new husband, a man convinced that adulthood and reason ought to prevail.

Good luck with that.



Charlotte Boyce Munson as Sibyl separates Chris Cherin as Victor and Charles Pasternak as Elyot in the Noël Coward comedy "Private Lives." Credit: Kevin Lohman

Both actors wisely resist turning Sibyl and Victor into simple foils. Their growing bewilderment adds another layer to the comedy as they begin to understand exactly what sort of people they have married.

Then, in Act 2, Izzy Pedego arrives as Louise, the French maid, and nearly walks away with the scene.

Pedego has relatively little stage time, but she makes every second count. Speaking fluent French and reacting to the insanity around her with a collection of hysterical facial expressions, she communicates volumes whether you understand every word or not.

Sometimes a raised eyebrow really is an international language.

Gordon directs the production with a sure understanding of Coward's world. That is important with Coward. The situations may be ridiculous, but the characters cannot know that.

The production also looks gorgeous.

Scenic designer Thomas Bigley creates an elegant Art Deco world that immediately drops us into Coward's sophisticated playground. Marcella Barbeau's moody lighting wraps it all in romantic glamour.

Austin Blake Conlee's period costumes are delicious, particularly the gorgeous green satin gown worn by White. Combined with Jessica Carter's beautifully detailed wig design, the visual world feels impeccably considered. Nothing looks vaguely "period." It feels specific, elegant and lived in.

Even before the actors arrive, the production is setting the mood.

At the grand piano, resident music director Luke Shepherd greets the audience with period tunes, transforming the grove into something resembling an elegant 1930s hotel lounge. By the time the show starts, Coward's world is already waiting for us.

"Private Lives" can look deceptively easy. Put attractive people in beautiful clothes, hand them cocktails, and let them trade clever insults.

But clever is not enough.

Without chemistry, the play becomes brittle. Without something real underneath the insults, Amanda and Elyot are simply two unpleasant people behaving badly. And without impeccable timing, Coward's famous dialogue can sit there like an unopened bottle of champagne.

Here, Gordon and her cast pop the cork.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "Private Lives" is sparkling, stylish, and wickedly funny, a production that understands exactly what makes Coward so much fun.

Pasternak and White make us understand why Amanda and Elyot keep coming back for more. They know exactly how terrible they are for one another.

And somehow, given the opportunity, you suspect they would do the whole ridiculous thing all over again.

Fall in love. Fall out of love. Repeat as necessary.

Thank goodness.

With Amanda and Elyot, happily ever after would be terribly boring.