

The Ghost Writers

A one-act drama

Written by

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Characters

Amanda Price (F)	Married to Victor, previously married to Elyot
Elyot Cheney (M)	Friend of Sybil, previously married to Amanda
Victor Price (M)	Married to Amanda
Sybil Davies (F)	Friend of Elyot
Noel Coward (M)	Playwright
Jane Austen (F)	Novelist
Laura Cruikshank (F)	Ship's Librarian

Scene 1 – Late evening

(Action takes place in the Library of a Cruise Ship. Time: The present. Upstage is a backdrop of various types and sizes of books within dark wooden bookcases, giving the impression of a bygone age. Upstage centre is a drinks trolley containing cups, saucers, glasses, ship's decanter, plus sundry beverages. Upstage right is a small desk and chair. Centre stage are two leather armchairs with a small coffee table between.)

(Noel is seated in chair centre stage right, reading a book. He is wearing a smoking jacket and holds a long cigarette holder. Enter Amanda stage left, holding a glass in one hand. She is dressed in glittery party gear with bold accessories. A little worse for drink, she stumbles into the room, as if by accident.)

Amanda: (Steadying herself and brushing some spilt drink from her clothes) This ship will be the end of me. (seeing Noel) Oh, I didn't see you there.

Noel: It's the shoes.

Amanda: What?

Noel: The shoes. May I venture to suggest...flatties? Much easier than teetering about a ship in high heels.

Amanda: Flatties? Oh you mean trainers. And what would *you* know?

Noel: Merely an observation. I've been on board for some time.

Amanda: (slumping into the other chair centre left) You're probably right. (takes off her shoes one by one, then looks around to get her bearings) What is this place? A bit creepy isn't it? (Sniffs) Smells musty, an all.

Noel: This - is the Ship's Library. A rarity these days I'm told. Passengers apparently prefer to be entertained by second rate performers with little or no talent to amuse. Imaginations have become - stultified.

Amanda: Well, I wouldn't know nothing about that. Hey, why are you dressed like that? Fancy Dress was last night (to herself, trying to remember) I think.

Noel: I like to maintain the standards of a luxury cruise ship, and if that means dressing appropriately for the time of day, so be it.

Amanda: Bit old fashioned, isn't it?

Noel: If you say so. Now, may ask *you* a question?

Amanda: If you like.

Noel: Very well, I'll be blunt. What are you doing here?

Amanda: I'm on my honeymoon.

Noel: (Taken aback) I don't believe it!

Amanda: That's a bit rude. I know I'm not in the first flush. It's my second honeymoon.

Noel: No offence meant. I'm sure a luxury cruise is a romantic way of confirming your union.

Amanda: No. You don't understand. It's my second honeymoon with my second husband.

Noel: Incredible!

(Amanda suddenly bursts into tears).

Noel: Oh my dear. **(Rising to his feet)** I didn't mean to upset you. **(Noel goes to the drinks trolley upstage, pours out a brandy and hands it to Amanda)** Your honeymoon should be a cause of joy, not tears.

Amanda: It is. It was. But then, today I discovered my Ex, walking on the deck, bold as brass, with his new lady-friend...

Noel: **(pacing up and down behind her)** ...and all the old memories came rushing back, knocked you sideways, setting your conflicted emotions into a spin.

Amanda: Yes, and then.... **(turning to look at Noel)** How did you know?

Noel: Never mind that now. What is your husband's name?

Amanda: Elyot. No... Victor. I don't know. Can you stop walking about? You're making me dizzy.

Noel: And you must be Amanda.

Amanda: You seem to have found out a lot about me. So, who are you?

Noel: Noel. **(Resumes his seat)** Noel Coward.

Amanda: Rings a bell. Have we met before?

Noel: Not to my knowledge.

Amanda: Then how do you know my name?

Noel: You might find this difficult to believe...

Amanda: Try me.

Noel: One of the many plays I have written, and performed in, describes something of your situation: two couples, on honeymoon, meet up by chance with their former partners.

Amanda: On a ship?

Noel: **(Disdainfully).** No, not on a ship. Their encounter was at a luxurious hotel on the French Riviera.

Amanda: Victor and me thought of that. But then I found this special offer on cruises. Should have known that's the sort of thing Elyot would pick, to show off to his new lover.

Noel: And Elyot is...?

Amanda: My Ex.

Noel: Of course he is. And his wife's name?

Amanda: Oh, they're not married.

Noel: I see.

Amanda: That's why I think I might still have a chance with him. Sounds stupid but when I saw Elyot again, that old feeling ... kind of... came back to me. We should never have parted. She means nothing to him.

Noel: Sybil?

Amanda: Yes. Look, how do you know all our names? It's... it's... you're weird.
(Starts to get up to leave) I'm going.

Noel: (Stands up) No, please. I didn't mean to startle you. I may be able to help.

Amanda: (Sinking back into her seat) How?

Noel: A very long time ago, I found myself in a similar situation.

Amanda: What did you do?

Noel: We ran off to Paris together.

Amanda: What? You and your....

Noel: ...former wife. Yes.

Amanda: Bloody 'ell!

Noel: That's exactly what it was. Hell on earth. Of course, to begin with, we were head over heels in love all over again, reminiscing about old times, drinking and smoking too much. The first few weeks were spent in a total haze of smoke and booze.

Amanda: So what happened?

Noel: We began to quarrel. Nothing serious at first, just friendly banter. Then the petty squabbles turned into violent temper tantrums. We would lash out at each other, throw things, till we were exhausted - and covered in bruises.

Amanda: Oh, my Gawd! That's physical abuse.

Noel: But we loved each other so desperately, you see. We couldn't go on like that, of course - repeating the same behaviour formed in our marriage, and the very reason we parted in the first place.

Amanda: (As if to herself) Yes, I do see. (After a pause) You say you've written about this?

Noel: I called it "An Intimate Comedy".

Amanda: A comedy?

Noel: Of course. I am known for my wit and repartee. The play contains some very amusing moments, albeit with serious intentions. Divorce was frowned upon at that time so I gave it the more discreet title: "Private Lives". It's often performed in the West End, and now and again in Ships' Theatres, I'm told. If you care to browse through these shelves you'll find copies of my works.

(Noel exits silently upstage right. Amanda moves towards the shelves upstage centre. Enter Victor stage left. He is formally dressed in dinner jacket and black tie)

Victor: There you are, darling. I've been looking everywhere. (Looking around) What is this place?

Amanda: It's the Ship's Library.

Victor: I can see that. I heard voices. Who were you talking to?

Amanda: Victor? Do you love me?

Victor: Darling, of course I love you. We're on our honeymoon.

Amanda: I know, but... I met someone - in here...

Victor: I thought so. Where is he? I'll knock his....

Amanda: No, no, it's not like that. He's an older man, a gentleman. I've heard his name before. 'Noel' something...Coward?

Victor: Noel Coward? Don't be silly. He's been dead for years. Amanda? Are you all right? You look a bit peaky.

Amanda: He *was* here. He gave me a brandy. We had a talk about... about things he's done, real life experiences. Some of it just like us, well not like you and me but like... me and Elyot.

Victor: Oh, here we go. You're married to me now. Forget Elyot. He's in the past.

Amanda: You don't understand, Victor. He's not in the past. He's in the present. Here on this ship.

Victor: What?

Amanda: They're here. Elyot and... Sybil... his posh lady friend.

Victor: Are you sure? Have you spoken to them? (Amanda says nothing). Amanda!

(End of Scene)

Scene 2 – Later into the early hours

(Enter Jane Austen upstage right. Jane is dressed as in the period of early 1800. She selects a book from the shelves upstage centre, blows the dust from it, flicks through the pages as she moves towards the chair stage left. Enter Noel upstage right)

Noel: Good evening Miss Austen.

Jane: **(Bobbing a courtesy)** Mr. Coward.

Noel: Miss Austen, I have been thinking that, that when we find ourselves together under these particular circumstances, we might dispense with formalities.

Jane: To which formalities do you refer, Mr. Coward?

Noel: Well, if you will permit me to refer to you as Jane, I would be obliged if you would address me by the name 'Noel'.

Jane: If you insist, but I must confess that I would find that out of step with manners of my day.

Noel: But we are not in your day now, Jane. Nor are we in mine. We are centuries apart from each other and another century apart from every person on this ship.

Jane: Very well – Noel. If you think it would help our purpose in being here.

Noel: And what is that? I need reminding.

Jane: You must know that ships' libraries are under threat of extinction. I believe we have been called to make passengers aware of the wonderful facility of a library where they can relax into reading some of our works - yours, mine, and others. In doing so, they may gain some insight into the complexities of modern life.

Noel: Wishful thinking, but worth a try. And now, Jane, until our next meeting, I must take my leave. **(Noel nods and exits stage right)**

(Jane bobs a courtesy and begins sorting the books on upstage shelf. Enter Elyot Stage left. Elyot has the smart casual look, but somewhat overdone)

Elyot: **(Seeing Jane).** Oh. I was looking for... who are you? Don't tell me – Jane Austen.

Jane: **(Moves to greet Elyot with a bob)** Your assumption is correct, Mister ?

Elyot: Good God. You even talk like her. Look, can we cut this AmDram stuff? It's getting late. I'm looking for my...my..

Jane: Your ex wife?

Elyot: How did you know?

Jane: She was here, several moments ago. I believe my colleague had some discourse with her.

Elyot: I bet he did. Look Jane, if that's your real name. I'm in a bit of a fix. Elyot's the name. Elyot Cheney. **(Elyot sits in chair stage left)**

Jane: I'm listening, Mr. Cheney. **(bobs, then sits in chair right)**

Elyot: I brought my girlfriend on this cruise as a special treat... I was intending to propose to her for God's sake, and then... but then... we were out on deck this morning and who should I bump into but my ex-wife?

Jane: That is unfortunate.

Elyot: That's putting it mildly.

Jane: Did you speak to her?

Elyot: Who?

Jane: Your ex wife.

Elyot: Amanda? No, we... we froze. We just stopped and stared at each other, and then walked on.

Jane: What were your feelings at the time, may I ask?

Elyot: Confusion, shock. Hard to describe but, in that one instance, all the old familiar... intimate things we shared, came flooding back. I have to see her again.

Jane: And you thought Amanda might be here, in the Library?

Elyot: Everywhere else has shut up shop for the night. I saw a light on, and...

Jane: What makes you think she has not retired to her cabin and fallen asleep by this time?

Elyot: I know her. She won't rest until we see each other again.

Jane: She is fortunate indeed.

Elyot: Fortunate?

Jane: What I mean is – she is allowed to express her feelings openly. In my day, women kept their emotions to themselves, without revealing thoughts or opinions, as you will read in my novels.

Elyot: No time for anything like that. What should I do *now*?

Jane: It's very late. May I suggest you go back to your – fiancée...

Elyot: ... no, she's... well, not yet... I told you... I...

Jane: **(interrupting)** ...try to sleep, and then in the morning when you are taking your preamble on the deck you will again encounter your ex-wife.

Elyot: How can you be sure?

Jane: Because that is how I would have contrived such a meeting in my novels.

Elyot: Genius! Oh, but what if she's with What's-his-name?

Jane: She will not be with him.

Elyot: Or worse, what if Sybil is with me?

Jane: Really, Mr. Cheney, I should of thought you could find a way of avoiding that possibility. **(Aside)** It seems that, after all this time, men have not improved on their artless approaches to women.

Elyot: OK, OK. **(as ideas begin to formulate)** Yes. Of course. Jane, you're a star!

(Elyot plants a big kiss on Jane's cheek and turns to Exit Stage Left)

Jane: **(pulls back in alarm and puts her hand to her cheek)** Oh! Mr. Cheney!

(End of Scene)

Scene 3 – The next morning

(Sybil is browsing through the library shelves. Enter Elyot stage left)

Elyot: Sybil, what are you doing here?

Sybil: Oh Elyot. Isn't this wonderful? It's the Ship's Library.

Elyot: I know, I...

Sybil: **(Placing some books on desk upstage right).** They've got all of Jane Austen, Dickens... and...

Elyot: You're not supposed to be here.

Sybil: Why ever not? You're not interested in reading, so I'm indulging in some quiet time in the library while you are at the gym? **(After a pause)** Ah, but you're not at the gym.

Elyot: I was...I am...

(Amanda appears in doorway stage left, casually dressed but wearing an excessive amount of jewellery and make-up))

Sybil: **(seeing Amanda)** Oh... I get it.

Elyot: It's not what you think.

Sybil: Isn't it?

Amanda: Well yes it is, actually. You must be Sybil.

Sybil: Correct. And I can see that you are Amanda.

Amanda: What do you mean by that?

Sybil: Look at you. Just as Elyot says – “all bling and no br...”

Amanda: ...no what?

Elyot: Whoa, whoa... stop! I can explain.

Sybil: No need. I have what I came for **((picks up library books from desk)).** I will leave you to your blatantly planned assignation. Ciao! **(Sybil exits stage left)**

Amanda: She uses long words. Is that what you see in her?

Elyot: Yes. **(Correcting himself)** No, of course not. This isn't what was supposed to happen. Jane said...

Amanda: Jane?

Elyot: Jane Austen. You wouldn't understand.

Amanda: Oh, I think I would. I was talking to Noel Coward last night. **(stifling a giggle)**

Elyot: Never! Where? In here?

Amanda: **(with a laugh)** Yes. Crazy, isn't it?

Elyot: Yes, yes, madness! Oh, Mandy, that's what I miss about you, your sense of fun, your Spirit of Adventure, your...

Amanda: Hang on. Isn't that the name of this boat?

Elyot: Something like that. "*Discovery*", "*Adventure*", it's all the same. And it's 'ship', not 'boat'

Amanda: All right, 'ship' then. You sound like Victor. He's always correcting me.

Elyot: I'm sorry.

Amanda: And I don't like being compared to a ship... or a boat.

Elyot: You know I didn't mean that ...oh?... you're joking? **(they collapse with laughter into chairs right and left centre stage)**

Amanda: **(gradually recovering, lets out a sigh)** Aah.... Well? Here we are, then.

Elyot: I had to see you again.

Amanda: Me too.

Elyot: Quite a coincidence. Us being on the same ship.

Amanda: Yes.

Elyot: I call it fate. I mean, what are the chances?

Amanda: It's too late, Elly. I'm on my honeymoon, and you're with Sybil.

Elyot: What's he like?

Amanda: Victor? He loves me, thinks I'm funny...and he's brainy, knows a lot of stuff.

Elyot: That's useful.

Amanda: I suppose so. What about Sybil?

Elyot: She's smart, intelligent, reads a lot.

Amanda: She sounds a right prig.

Elyot: **(Rising from his chair).** You are insulting the woman I intend to marry.
(Elyot moves to upstage centre and starts to pour coffees from flask)

Elyot: (Turning to Amanda) Please Mandy, let's not talk about them. We're here now, together. Let's make the most of it.

(Amanda moves to Elyot, puts her arms around his neck.)

Amanda: (After a pause) What did you feel when you saw me out there on the deck?

Elyot: It was as though... my heart stopped beating.

Amanda: A shock then?

Elyot: More of a surprise.

Amanda: A pleasant one?

Elyot: I don't know. A shocked surprise.

Amanda: So not a pleasant one?

Elyot: Of course it was. Look, are we arguing?

Amanda: No, just testing. I felt the same.

Elyot: Did you really, Mandy? Did you really?

Amanda: Time stood still, everything around just froze.

Elyot: Do you think this was meant to be?

Amanda: Meeting like this? I don't know. I'm confused. It's something Noel said.

Elyot: Noel Coward?

Amanda: Yes, he's written about us in one of his books. It's been on in the West End.

Elyot: You surely don't believe all that nonsense. He's not real.

Amanda: But he knows our names, Elyot. And not only ours', Sybil and Victor's, too.

Elyot: He could get those from the passenger list.

Amanda: I suppose so.... but listen, the Amanda and Elyot in his story ran off together, to give it another go.

Elyot: Good for them. What happened?

Amanda: Don't know. I don't think it worked out.

Elyot: That doesn't mean that *we* couldn't...

Amanda: What are you saying? Don't even think it.

Elyot: What's the next port of call?

Amanda: Vigo, I think. That's Spain, isn't it?

Elyot: Just think, Mandy... wonderful Tavernas... Spanish skies.

Amanda: Stop it, Elyot. You're tempting me.

Elyot: Good. That's the idea. We could disembark as per itinerary, arrange to meet somewhere, and then – just happen to forget the departure time of the next sailing.

Amanda: Accidentally, miss the boat? I mean, 'ship'?

Elyot: Yes! You've got it.

Amanda: Let's do it!

(End of Scene)

Scene 4 – late the following evening

(Jane is pacing up and down in an agitated fashion. Enter Noel stage right)

Jane: **(stops when she sees Noel).** Oh, Mister Coward... Noel. **(Gives a polite bob)**

Noel: What is it Jane? You look a little agitated.

Jane: I fear we may have made a terrible mistake.

Noel: How do you mean?

Jane: We have provided examples of how our fictional characters behaved and now our living characters are acting upon our advice.

Noel: I do not give advice. I disguised my counsel to Amanda and Elyot rather well I thought, by describing the volatile scenes enacted by their counterparts in my play. They must take from that what they will.

Jane: I wish it may not be too late to avoid any misfortune. And yet...?

Noel: And yet?

Jane: You will no doubt accuse me of outdated values, but my heart tells me that a second attachment is seldom attended with any serious consequences.

Noel: ...whilst original attachments remain in the heart forever?

Jane: Your tone is somewhat cynical, Mr. Coward.

Noel: I may strike you as being frivolous in nature, but I should be obliged if you would give me credit for having read some of your novels. Need I say more?

Jane: What is your opinion?

Noel: I believe we should allow the young people to play out their lives, be adventurous. Some things they will get wrong, but – c'est la vie.

(End of Scene)

Scene 6 – The following morning.

(Laura is seen seated at desk Upstage Right checking through some books. She is wearing large ear plugs. Enter Victor stage left)

Laura: **(removing ear plugs).** Good morning. Can I help you with anything?

Victor: I damn well hope so. I'm looking for Noel Coward.

Laura: **(Pointing towards upstage shelves)** They're sorted alphabetically, by author. You should find him under 'C' for Coward, if you care to have a browse.

Victor: No, I'm looking for Noel Coward. He was in here last night.

Laura: But he couldn't have been.... oh... you mean someone dressed as him at the Masquerade evening?

Victor: Call it what you like. He *was* here, and he's put some crazy idea into my wife's head. She's run off with her Ex and I....

(Enter Sybil stage left carrying two library books. Laura replaces ear plugs for remainder of scene)

Sybil: Victor?

Victor: Sybil? What are you doing here?

Sybil: Funny, that's what Elyot asked me when he saw me in here. I was so thrilled to discover a library on board. Then, guess what, Amanda appeared, bold as brass, and I... er... I left them to it.

Victor: **(after a pause, Victor sits in chair centre left)** Did you wait up?

Sybil: **(sitting in chair centre right)** No point, once the ship pulled anchor. We should never have gone our separate ways when we went ashore at Vigo. You see, I like to get away from the tourist trail and Elyot likes to explore the local cuisine.

Victor: You don't have to explain.

Sybil: I should have known he would take the opportunity to....

Victor: **(after a pause).** They're together, aren't they?

Sybil: It would appear so.

Victor: Any messages?

Sybil: Not a thing. But the ship's office confirmed that two passengers had failed to board in time for the next sailing.

Victor: Well, there's not much we can do about it now. Just sit tight and hope they meet us at Southampton. They'll need to pick up the rest of their luggage. You could fill a tanker with the stuff Amanda brought with her.

Sybil: (allowing herself a smile) I'm sorry Victor.

Victor: What for?

Sybil: I'm afraid I was rather rude to Amanda when we met.

Victor: Forget it. She probably deserved it. She would assume you were jealous and take an insult as a compliment.

Sybil: That's all right then – well, not really, but... **(rising from chair)** Look, do you mind if I go back to my cabin, and do a bit of reading?

Victor: **(getting up)** Apologies. You must be worried... I mean, tired. And I have some thinking to do. What do you say we meet again later this evening? We might have some news by then.

(Sybil nods her assent and they exit stage right)

Laura: **(Removing ear plugs, calling after them)** Find everything you were looking for?

(End of Scene)

Scene 7 – Later the same evening.

(Noel is reclining in chair centre right, cigarette holder in hand. Enter Victor stage left)

Victor: Ah! Noel Coward, I presume?

Noel: You presume correctly.

Victor: Well? Have you nothing to say to me?

Noel: **(Remains seated and looks up).** Not that I can think of - without your providing some context, or explanation.

Victor: You are responsible for my wife jumping ship, running off with her Ex, and you ask *me* for an explanation.

Noel: I don't think we have had the pleasure...?

Victor: Come off it. You know very well who I am.

Noel: I must assume you are Victor, and I imagine you are angry with your wife for her impulsive actions following the chance encounter with her former husband.

Victor: Too damn right, I'm angry. What did you say to her?

Noel: I merely proffered an example of a similar course of action, taken in the past, the consequences of which were far from pleasant.

Victor: You mean it didn't work out?

Noel: No. But it presented an opportunity for both couples to reconsider their relationships.

Victor: Too late for that. I'm married to Amanda. We're on our honeymoon! **(In despair, Victor slumps down into chair centre right, head in hand)**

Noel: **(rising from his seat)** It's never too late for love, true love that is. Some of us never find it. Others think they may have found it but merely wear a mask of pretence. May I suggest you contemplate your own position. **(Noel exits stage right)**

(Victor remains seated with head in hand. Enter Sybil stage left. She crosses to upstage right to place library books on the desk)

Sybil: **(Seeing Victor)** Victor! I didn't see you sitting there. Are you all right?

Victor: I'm not sure. I think so... feel a bit strange...

(Sybil pours a glass of water from flask on trolley upstage centre)

Sybil: **(handing drink to Victor)** Here. **(sits in other chair)**

Victor: I've been doing some thinking.

Sybil: After what's happened, we've both had a lot to think about.

Victor: It's something Noel said.

Sybil: Not Noel Coward?

Victor: Yes, have you seen him?

Sybil: No, but he's the talk of the ship, his ghost that is. He and Jane Austen. Some say it's a stunt to keep the ships' libraries open, get people reading again.

Victor: That's a brilliant idea, I'm all for that. But stunt or no stunt, Noel was here. I was talking to him a few minutes ago.

Sybil: I believe you. **(After a pause)** Victor, have you seen his play "*Private Lives*"?

Victor: Not recently, no.

Sybil: Think about it. The couples in that play are the four of *us*.

Victor: *Four* of us?

Sybil: Elyot and Amanda, you and me. They're on their honeymoons, in some exotic paradise, when out of the blue, they bump into their ex-husbands-stroke-wives.

Victor: Quite a co-incidence. But you're not on your honeymoon.

Sybil: That doesn't matter. The similarity is too glaring to ignore.

Victor: So remind me, what happened?

Sybil: Well... one couple hot-footed it to Paris to try to rediscover their frenzied passion, and the other...

Victor: That's you and me...

Sybil: yes...and the other couple were left... rather bewildered at first, but then... Oh I don't know Victor. We'll have to work something out.

Victor: **(suddenly)** I know!

Sybil: What?

Victor: The book, the play! What's it called?

Sybil: What are you talking about?

Victor: The book, it must be here!

(Victor gets up and rushes to look through library shelves upstage centre)

Sybil: **(Following Victor)** Yes, of course, “*Private Lives*”! But wait, that’s a play, not a book. They wouldn’t have it here.

Victor: Why not? Why else would Noel Coward be here, if not to promote his own works. He’s trying to tell us something.

Sybil: O.K. Let’s look through alphabetically. ‘A’ – Adams, Austen. Jane Austen! There’s a rumour that *she* struts about at night, too. Don’t you see? She wants us to gain from her insight into the society of her time.

Victor: Hardly relevant to today though, is it?

Sybil: Why do men turn their backs on Jane Austen? She created characters and situations that still exist, to the present day. If you think her novels are just trivial romances, you don’t know what you’re missing.

Victor: Right. A discussion for another time, I think. You grab a couple of Jane Austen’s and I’ll keep looking for Coward. **(Tracing along bookshelf with his fingers)** “Coward, Noel” Here he is: *Blythe Spirit, Hay Fever....Private lives!* Four copies.

(Victor settles himself in chair centre left and begins to flick through the scripts)

Sybil: Where to start? **(mumbles:)** *Persuasion, Emma....*

(Sybil picks out two or three books, sits in chair centre right and flicks through pages. Lights fade as they continue to look through the selections of books.)

(End of Scene)

Scene 8 – Later, the same evening.

(Sybil and Victor are in the same chairs fast asleep. Enter Jane and Noel upstage stage right)

Jane: **(seeing the pair asleep, quotes:)** “*Sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care...*”

Noel: **(continuing the quotation)** “*...Balm of hurt minds...*” Soothing words from the Bard - which I fear will have little effect on these two sleepers.

Jane: Cynical as ever, Mister Coward. And I beg to disagree with you. You may be in for a surprise.

(Exeunt Jane and Noel stage right. Victor begins to stir, looks around and sees Sybil still asleep)

Victor: Sybil, Sybil!

Sybil: **(rousing from sleep)** What is it? **(a ghostly shiver goes through her)** Oh, Victor, it’s you. I thought Jane Austen was standing over me... must have been dreaming.

Victor: Too much reading.

Sybil: **(yawning)** I thought you liked reading.

Victor: I do, I do. Just....too much of a good thing makes me sleepy.

Sybil: Did you come to any conclusion... after your sleep?

Victor: I think so, yes. I definitely identified with the characters in *Private Lives*. It’s a little uncanny.

Sybil: I told you! It’s spooky, isn’t it?

Victor: What about you?

Sybil: No surprises with Jane Austen. Skimming through her works only confirms her incredible powers of observation.

Victor: For instance?

Sybil: Well...in some novels, her characters look deep into their own hearts and then begin to question their existing values. Look, you don’t want to hear all this from me. You can read it up for yourself.

Victor: But I like listening to you.

Sybil: Thank you Victor. You know, I can never have this sort of conversation with Elyot. He wouldn’t understand. **(Starting to cry).** It’s not his fault. I think he was going to ask me to marry him.

Victor: I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. If it’s any consolation you’ve helped me to reconsider my position.

Sybil: Please Victor, don't do anything on my account. You're married to Amanda. I'm the one who might have had a lucky escape.

Victor: Yes, I see that now. Amanda and Elyot are two of a kind. They belong together.

Sybil: Does that mean you and I are two of a kind?

Victor: Too early to tell. But tell you what...

Sybil: What?

Victor: Will you agree to meet up when we get off this ship, and we'll go to the theatre together.

Sybil: A Noel Coward play?

Victor: Of course. Or a library – the British Library?... plenty there to interest us.

Sybil: On one condition: that you read at least one of Jane Austen's novels before we meet.

Victor: Done. I can make a start here and now, something to do on the last few days of the voyage.

Sybil: Good idea. **(They gather up their books and exit Stage left)**

(End of Scene)

Scene 9 Four days later.

(Ship has docked in Southampton at end of voyage. Laura is seated at the desk, upstage right. Enter Sybil stage left, carrying books under one arm and hand luggage in the other. She hands the books back to Laura. Enter Amanda stage left)

Amanda: Sybil. What are you doing here?

Sybil: Why does everybody keep asking me that? **(Emphatically)** This - is - a - *library*. I am returning the books I borrowed. That is how libraries work. Not that you'd know.

Amanda: How dare you? You, you stuck up prig! Where's my Victor?

Sybil: *Your* Victor?

Amanda: Yes, *my* Victor. We are married, in case you'd forgotten.

Sybil: It did slip my mind when you ran off with Elyot a few days ago.

Amanda: I came back to explain. They said I'd most likely find him in here.

(Enter Victor carrying Jane Austen novels and hand luggage)

Victor: **(seeing Amanda)** Ah... Amanda! And how was your 'off-piste' tour of Vigo?

Amanda: No need to be rude.

Victor: Must be hard, roughing it on board after the heady delights of L'Espagna. Romantic was it?

Amanda: Victor, I'm sorry.

Victor: Are you? Well, I'm not.

Amanda: You see... Ely and me... we... What did you say?

Victor: I said I'm not sorry. You've given me time to think, and I've come to the conclusion that I have probably made a terrible mistake, or should I say – a misjudgement.

Amanda: A misjudgement? About me?

Victor: You, and the frivolous life I was about to begin with you.

Amanda: I should have known. **(Pointing to Sybil who is sitting in chair centre right, flicking through the pages of a book with amusement).** It's *her*, isn't it?

(Enter Elyot stage left)

Elyot: What's going on?

Amanda: **(rushing up to Elyot).** Elyot! I was trying to explain to Victor about us, and he's been mean to me.

Elyot: Oh, has he? **(to Victor)** What's he been saying?

Victor: Your escapade with my wife has given me time to think. I told Amanda that I have probably made an error of judgement.

Elyot: That's a bit crude. Can't you see how hurt she is by that remark?

Victor: Well, I *am* sorry about that. What I was about to say is that if Amanda thinks you and she are meant for each other, she is perfectly free to go back to you, if that's what she wants.

Elyot: **(to Amanda)** Is that what you want, darling?

Amanda: Ye-es... No. I don't know. It's her - Sybil, sitting there all smug. She's the one who's got to Victor, with all her airs and graces.

Sybil: **(calmly rising from her chair)** It's true that, in your absence, I have been enjoying Victor's company. Here in this wonderful library we have discovered a mutual interest in literature.. **(making a show of her books before placing them on the desk upstage right)** ... that means: '*books*', if you didn't know.

Victor: Come on, Sybil. That's a bit strong.

Elyot: Too right. Do I detect a bit of the Green-eyed Monster here?

Sybil: You think I'd be jealous of *her*? We have absolutely nothing in common.

Amanda: Except Elyot.

Sybil: Yes, well... I must say I was taken in by his charm... at first, but now...

Victor: Now look here... We've got to settle this once and for all...

Laura: **(suddenly coming forward from her desk upstage right)** *please... Stop!*

(They all turn to face Laura)

Laura: I have to close up now, the rule is: two hours before passengers disembark. I must ask you to continue your... meeting - somewhere else.

Victor: But surely...? Five more minutes. Please.

(During the following dialogue Elyot and Amanda decide to leave the scene. Holding hands, they tip-toe out stage left, unseen by others)

Sybil: No, she's right. We should collect our things and get out of here.

Victor: Right, but it's hard to leave when this place, this library – has brought us together. It's in here that we discovered our mutual attraction.

Sybil: Is that what it was? I thought it was our interest in literature and the arts.

Victor: Well, that too. Didn't you feel anything, Sybil?

Sybil: Look, Victor, we've both had a lot to think about these last few days. We've already agreed to meet up once we're back on dry land. Can we just leave it at that, for now? **(Sybil picks up her hand luggage and goes towards exit stage left.)**

Victor: **(calling after Sybil).** Sybil! **(Looking round for Amanda)** Amanda! Sybil!

(Victor exits still calling out after both Amanda and Sybil. Laura tidies up her desk, looks around, makes sure door stage left is secured, then crosses over to exit upstage right)

(End of Scene)

Scene 10 - Epilogue

(Scene opens with Noel seated in armchair centre stage left in his familiar pose, holding a long cigarette holder. Enter Jane stage right.)

Jane: Mister Coward. You are looking quite content, if I may say so.

(Noel rises to greet Jane. Jane bobs in acknowledgement, indicates that he may resume his seat, then settles into chair beside him)

Noel: There is a certain satisfaction in knowing that some of my work lives on – if only as a mirror to modern society.

Jane: Would that I might feel the same about my novels, written with much labour and little effect, or so I thought at the time.

Noel: My dear Jane – modest as ever. The situations and characters you created then are instantly recognisable to any modern reader. You must know that your books have been transformed into brilliant theatrical performances, equally comparable to mine – well, almost.

Jane: (rising from her seat) But I did not write for theatre. I wrote for those who might enjoy some contemplative reading from which they may find some amusement - or even enlightenment. Is that not the purpose of us literary figures appearing in libraries here and there, on board ships such as this?

Noel: (standing) In that, my dear Jane, I believe we have both been successful.

Jane: In what way, may I ask?

Noel: We have most likely changed the course of at least four people's destiny, and who is to say that our (choosing the word carefully) - *presence* ... has not sparked an interest from all those other passengers who have ventured into a library for the first time, in the hope of seeing us?

Jane: Only time will tell...

Noel: ... and of that we have an infinite amount.

Jane: Mister Coward. (correcting herself) Noel. (Gives a little bob)

Noel: (bows, takes and kisses Jane's hand) Farewell Jane. Until we meet again.

(Jane exits upstage stage right. Noel returns to his chair and takes up his familiar pose)

CURTAIN

Production notes

Staging

Backdrop indicates various types and sizes of books within dark wooden bookcases, giving the impression of a bygone age.

Upstage centre is a drinks trolley containing cups, saucers, glasses, ship's decanter, plus sundry beverages.

Upstage right is a small desk with chair behind.

Centre stage are two leather armchairs with a small coffee table between.

Property list

Scene 1

Set upstage centre

Table or trolley containing sundry beverages, glasses, coffee machine, etc.

Set on desk upstage right – a few loose books, writing materials.

Set offstage left (Amanda)

Wine glass

Set offstage right (Noel)

Cigarette holder, book.

Scene 6

Set offstage right (Laura)

Large ear plugs.

Set offstage left (Sybil)

Two library books.

Scene 7

Set offstage left (Sybil)

Library books

Scene 9

Set offstage left (Sybil)

Library books

One piece of hand luggage

Set offstage left (Victor)

Jane Austen books

Hand luggage

Epilogue

Set offstage right (Noel)

Cigarette holder