

BWW REVIEW: 'Oh Coward!' A Delectable Gift from the Gods at Writers' Theatre

By Paul W. Thompson

In this, its 18th season of award-winning and insightful professional theater, Writers' Theatre, "focusing on the word and the artist," has decided to bless us all with only its second musical offering ever—and what a production! This north suburban jewel box theater company has placed a gem in the hands of Chicago area theatergoers, a gem of a heaven-sent confection that's both martini marvelous and champagne sweet. And oh, so thrillingly intimate! "Oh Coward!" will be with us until March—but with only 50 seats per performance, you'd better book your seats now! You've been warned. Seriously warned. Act now, and do not miss this show!

At the rear of the unassuming but pleasant Books on Vernon bookstore, in quiet downtown Glencoe, within walking distance of the Metra tracks and with plenty of onstreet parking, is a performance space that has been transformed by scenic designer Kevin Depinet into a combination Georgian drawing room, Art Moderne supper club and mid-century cruise ship piano bar. There's a sleek black Yamaha baby grand piano against a mirrored wall, and two rows of seats against each of the other three walls. Over those rows of seats are mounted large photographs of "The Master," Noel Coward himself (1899-1973), one of the most multi-talented of men and one whose celebrated "talent to amuse" in all its guises is the stuff and subject of this 1972 "musical comedy revue," originally devised by actor Roderick Cook.



Through songs, yes, but through short spoken excerpts as well, we are plunged into a witty, incisive and moving evening (shorter than it seems, actually, for there is so much to take in) that is by turns hilarious, sophisticated and breathtakingly close. Every move, every spotlit pose and polished gesture by this top-drawer cast is surely, exactly designed to point the observer's gaze, arrest the thinker's thoughts and move both soul and body. The English of the 1930s have never before seemed so fascinating, so multi-cultural, or so radiantly, buoyantly, melodically and linguistically alive.

And what a cast! While bearing an imagined (or is it?) resemblance to Coward himself, to his long-time partner, actor Graham Payn, and to his great acting partner, stage star Gertrude Lawrence, Writer's Theatre's cast of intelligent and stylish singing actors has set such high marks for themselves that they now have only themselves to blame for having to maintain these high standards for a projected four month run. Their very public ménage a trois may very well become the stuff of local theatrical legend. And did I mention the list of 37 songs?

Versatile character leading man John Sanders sounds uncannily like Coward in many of the dialogue sections of the piece, and looks strappingly handsome for an indoorsman (like a

combination of Ian Charleson in "Chariots of Fire" and John Barrymore in, well, anything). He is sexy without a bit of trying, sings like a dream, and lands every barb in "Why Do The Wrong People Travel." No wonder the two other characters on stage must want him.

Dark-haired singer-actor Rob Lindley, all fey sighs and revealing insights, has more intimate moments than I thought possible for one actor to deliver. In his sure hand, "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" is a wonder to behold, and "I'll Follow My Secret Heart" is heartbreaking, lovely and still. Are these songs the product of the middle of the twentieth century, or incisive commentary on today's headlines? No wonder the other two characters on stage love him so very much.



And icy, saucy Kate Fry, that Shakespearean extraordinaire, is just delicious, whether enveloped in the crook of musical director Doug Peck's piano during "If Love Were All" at the end of the first act, channeling the English music hall tradition in several numbers, or writhing about as Gertrude Lawrence in the second act. She is, to put it quite simply, the kind of woman that men of all persuasions cannot help but love, as the other two characters on stage surely do. She makes a brain tantalizingly sexy.

Among the other musical highlights are the trio "We Were Dancing," in which the audience first gets a taste of that Oscar Wilde kind of love that the English are so famous for, the two men paying homage to "The Stately Homes of England," all three actors begging "Mrs. Worthington" not to put her daughter on the stage, the fastest version ever staged of "I Went to a Marvelous Party," and a trio of "A Bar On the Piccolo Marina" followed immediately by "World Weary." The delights abound, and heap upon themselves. Did I mention that the actors, and pianist Peck, never leave the playing area? And there are none of those bar stools that one might expect to see in a three-person composer revue. Have no fear—there are none.



The accomplished actor, director and choreographer Jim Corti has staged this remarkably polished evening with panache and detail. I must credit dialect coach Claudia Anderson for the most remarkable, and most remarkably consistent, English accents I have ever encountered in a musical production, anywhere! Rachel Anne Healy has supplied suits and a cocktail dress for Act One, and dinner jackets and an evening dress for Act Two, and she can dress me anytime. Ray Nardelli's sound design is somehow responsible for every whispered word to be heard, and Jesse Klug has supplied wonderfully atmospheric lighting, with a perfect magical effect halfway through Act One.

I guarantee you a delightful evening at "Oh Coward!" You will learn things, feel things, understand things, snort and laugh and ponder things. You'll wish you had a martini. You'll wish you were having one with Noel Coward. And, in a way, you will be. His immortality assured through the technical brilliance and the social insightfulness of his theatrical songs, he lives again this winter in Glencoe. Pay him a visit, won't you, darling? You really simply must.

Oh Coward!, words and music by Noel Coward, devised by Roderick Cook, direction by Jim Corti with musical direction by Doug Peck, is at Writers' Theatre, 664 Vernon Avenue in Glencoe, Illinois, through March 21, 2010. For more information, visit www.writerstheatre.org.

Photo credit: Michael Brosilow.