

## Exquisite, understated 'Oh Coward!' at Writers' Theatre gets to the heart of the man

By Chris Jones



Those who knew the late Noel Coward invariably said that sipping cocktails at the Savoy in a smoking jacket was hardly the measure of their man. Merely his act. Rub away the champagne sheen and you got a suburban-born creature happiest in carpet slippers while munching steak-and-kidney pie.

Rub Coward, and you actually got a whole lot of complicated things. The obnoxious snob who asked "Why do the Wrong People Travel?" The populist patriot who penned the gorgeous "London Pride." The self-aware wit who sung of "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," and the sexually veiled mystery who was "Mad About the Boy."

Especially on this side of the Atlantic, most performances of Coward material become overly entranced with puns, verbal ripostes and campy, veddy English comedy, thus missing the inherent darkness (albeit an impossibly energetic noir) of this iconic artistic figure of the early 20th century. Not Jim Corti's exquisitely toned and profoundly intimate Writers' Theatre production of "Oh Coward!," a remarkable theatrical accomplishment not least because it is shot through with so much ambiguity, texture and melancholy.

There is also wit, frivolity and energy aplenty. Such qualities are de rigeur for Coward. And thanks to the impeccable musical direction of Doug Peck, who accompanies on a baby grand, the purity of the notes and the accuracy of the lyrical articulations are near flawless. But more importantly, the trio of aptly elegant performers — Kate Fry, Rob Lindley, John Sanders — seem trapped together here in some glamorous, dangerous, sexually complex threesome that both reminds us of the banality of our own prosaic life and makes us grateful for comforts that don't require such obfuscation. And, well, such a lot of hard work.

This show hits many of Coward's diverse notes and deftly rolls around his fiendishly clever lyrics and haunting melodies on its collective tongue. But even though this 1970s revue created by Roderick Cook (and first performed while Coward was alive) still has the shards of that tiresomely old-fashioned linkage ("Mr. Coward used to say ..."), Corti and his crew shrewdly downplay the twee narration and concentrate instead on the emotional subtext inherent in the actual songs.

All three performances are superb. Sanders is understated and true. Fry — whose low notes are in especially fine fettle — is elegant and just a little sad. And Lindley, who most directly takes on Coward himself, reigns in any excesses and turns in a lushly ambivalent performance.

There is one more thing. Kevin Depinet's design work is simply extraordinary. The rear of this suburban bookstore has been turned into what feels like a 1930s supper club, draped with elegant fabrics and little tables for champagne. Remarkably, this feels far more than cosmetic. In this tiny box, Depinet has built not so much a set as a piece of period (and psychological) architecture, holding many talents to amuse, sure, but also a big, revealing mirror reflecting the irrepressible work of a haunted, fascinating man.

**THEATER REVIEW: "Oh Coward!" ★★★★★** Through March 21 at Writers' Theatre at Books on Vernon, 664 Vernon Ave., Glencoe; Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes; Tickets: \$40-\$60 at 847-242-6000 or [www.writerstheatre.org](http://www.writerstheatre.org). Starring Doug Peck, from left, Rob Lindley, Kate Fry and John Sanders.