

Sophisticated 'Coward' shines

THEATER | Glencoe back room transformed to posh 1930s club

By Hedy Weiss

Enter the back room of Glencoe's Books on Vernon – the unlikely space that serves as a continually re-invented second stage for Writers' Theatre – and you instantly feel like a guest at an elegant little supper club in 1930s London.

The room you find yourself in (a magical set design by Kevin Depinet) has rich architectural molding, a sleek black-and-white tiled floor, potted palms, little tables draped in silver cloth and, most crucially, a grand piano. And all this becomes the ideal backdrop for "Oh, Coward!," the alternately witty and rueful revue of Noel Coward songs initially devised by Roderick Cooke in the early 1970s.



Doug Peck at the piano, with John Sanders (from left), Kate Fry and Rob Lindley star in "Oh, Coward!"

Aside from the clink of martini glasses (that comes later), the only thing needed is the arrival of a blithe threesome. It is made up of one utterly beguiling woman (the ever-enchanted Kate Fry, whose upper-crust and Cockney accents are so spot-on she should get an honorary British passport) and her two male companions (the understated John Sanders and Rob Lindley, who sings with his heart on his sleeve). This, of course, was Coward's favorite romantic triangulation, particularly if the men were as happily drawn to each other as to the charming woman in their midst.

Coward – actor, songwriter, playwright, director and spy (during World War II, he gathered intelligence for the British government) – has moved in and out of fashion over the years. And as we are told in this show, he mourned being born so late in the Edwardian era (a time when "people took light music seriously"). But he was a true artist, and a playful one, a worldly man, if also an oddly lonely one. And his songs have an often surprising emotional power, despite his belief that he possessed little more than "a talent to amuse."

What a treat it is to hear three dozen of his alternately zany, sardonic, romantic, self-revealing, double-entendre-filled lyrics in songs that deal with everything from love, sex and friendship to patriotism and travel (the lunacies of Empire are ever with him). The influence of the music hall, the operetta stage, the cabaret and even the blues world can all be heard.

Doug Peck, the invariably superb pianist-musical director, has written beautiful arrangements for several songs. And Jim Corti's sophisticated staging is ideal.

One small caveat: The program for this show should have included a song list.

'OH, COWARD!'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through March 21

Where: Writers' Theatre at Books on Vernon, 664 Vernon, Glencoe

Tickets: \$40-\$60

Phone: (847) 242-6000