

Tonight at 8:30 (Part I - 'If Love Were All')

by Noel Coward, directed by William Ludel, Michael Murray, Stephanie Shroyer

Antaeus Theater Company / Deaf West • September 20-November 4 (Opened 9/30; rev. 10/7e)

Audience members immediately feel like insiders as they arrive for 'If Love Were All,' the first half of the Antaeus Theater Company's two-part staging of Noel Coward one-acts (through December 23 at Deaf West Theatre). A ghost light guards the apron of a stage carefully set with the kind of between-production nonchalance the public seldom sees. To Glen Banks' upright accompaniment, company member Philip Proctor rehearses one of the playwright's music hall tunes: 'Please, Mrs. Worthington, don't put your daughter on the stage.' Thankfully, it's a plea that went unheeded by the 44 mothers of the ensemble who make up this great acting company.

'Tonight at 8:30' consists of eight one-acts divided equally between Part One, 'If Love Were All' (reviewed here) and Part Two, 'Call of the Wild' (opening November 10). Coward actually wrote 10 one-acts, and the remaining two – including a West Coast premiere – will be presented in special events during the run. This first quartet shows the range of interests, styles and achievement in these lesser-known, short-form examples of Coward's writing.

'If Love Were All' opens with a backstage comedy of colliding actor egos ('Star Chamber,' directed by William Ludel) and ends with a drawing room comedy of mistaken identities and misplaced persons ('Hands Across the Sea,' directed by Michael Murray). In between, the two pieces that straddle the intermission are, first, a hilariously mannered and warmly forgiving look at the sometimes bad timing of sexual obsession ('We Were Dancing,' Murray again) and then a surprisingly dark look at the same dilemma ('The Astonished Heart,' directed by Stephanie Shroyer).

'Star Chamber' is a chamber piece for actors, to be played allegro, without rests or digging for depth. Ludel obliges with well-modulated spinning of the hamster wheel that takes us on a wild ride before letting us back off where we got on. There are plenty of high points along the way, however, in this non-story about a real-time meeting of a theater board easily bored with running a theater -- or even a meeting.

Susan Sullivan displays a natural talent for the style, which she will use to even greater effect in the better-written final piece. Michael McShane's unfunny funnyman character offers some minor opportunities for the bittersweet, but McShane has mixed results shifting Johnny's weight between delivering and being the punch line of the jokes. The rest of the ensemble is packed with more tastiness than Mrs. Gump's chocolate box, including Anne Gee Byrd, Ned Schmidtke, Bill Brochtrup, Kitty Swink, Ray Porter and Nathan Patrick, all of whom appear in three of four plays. Brooke Bloom, listed as a member of the Antaeus Academy, is a stand-out as she delivers an envelop-pushing performance that stays in control and earns her her place among these veterans. And, a big tummy-rub goes out to the scene-stealing Bravo, who, as Atherton, performed an acrobatic Iron Cross for his big exit.

'We Were Dancing,' the most resonant piece of the evening, provides a tongue-in-cheek exploration of the aftermath of instant infatuation. A bachelor and another man's wife are head-over-heels in love following a dreamy dance at an elegant ball. After watching them follow their hearts beyond any propriety or reason, we get to hear the instigating song. That's when we see, in a way, that they were merely acting out the kind of take no prisoners passion that is the backbone of romantic fiction and popular song. Though it has a cast of eight, 'We Were Dancing' focuses on four characters played by Byrd, Schmidtke and Brochtrup in their second appearances, and Emily Chase in her only outing. Chase's Louise, younger wife of Schmidtke's Hubert, discovers that an innocent dance with the dashing Brochtrup has suddenly turned her world upside down. With exquisite timing, Chase and Brochtrup surrender to what we simultaneously see as both utter foolishness and life's greatest reward. With total conviction they tell Hubert, a wonderfully grounded Schmidtke, and his sister, Byrd in another spot-on characterization, that they are in love and will spend the rest of their lives together. Needless to say, the romance does not last a lifetime, but memories of this delightfully executed bit of comic insight likely will.

The one non-comedy is the adventurous 'Astonished Heart,' starring a colorful Shannon Holt as another longtime wife, Michael Reilly Burke as her doctor husband, and Kirsten Potter. It's a triangle mildly reminiscent of 'Constant Wife,' except that Potter's temptress is an intelligent force to be reckoned with. It doesn't land with the gravity intended and that may rest with the men: Coward for over-complicating some of the relationships with a time-travel construction (though Shroyer cleverly minimizes the confusion), and Burke, who plays the office-bound doctor with a retreating nature in the early going that may not serve the arc. He does burst forth late in the act but by that time we have missed a lot of the nuance underlying his duplicity. For her part, Holt drives the story well, creating so much distance between this character and her minor role in 'Chamber' as to create one of the evening's great chameleonic treats. And Potter, who we raved about in 'As You Like It' last year, shows her range with a completely different characterization.

With the evening's final piece, 'Hands Across the Sea,' Coward is back to his strength with a wonderful romp that ends the evening on a very high note indeed. Here the versatile Byrd is teamed with Dr. Proctor (who creates a hilarious sideshow of his own as he interacts with a powerfully seductive martini) as a couple visiting acquaintances. Swink sinks her teeth into the part of Clare and seems to have as much fun as she provides. Again, the ensemble is so strong that it's unfair to single anyone out. Still, Sullivan really puts on a clinic for stage comedians, getting every laugh without ever having to reach for one. It's the top highlight in an evening of highlights.

But then, another equally talented cast is in the wings to perform the same four plays on another night! And, if that doesn't drop the collective jaw, two more casts await to alternate in the four plays of 'Call of the Wild.' America will probably never get a national theater, but L.A.'s own theatrical phenomenon offers audiences 44 dance partners that should have them as smitten by the Antaeus ensemble as Ms. Chase's Louise is with Brochtrup's Karl.

Compliments to John Iacovelli for a set as versatile as the folks occupying it, A Jeffrey Schoenberg for period perfect costumes, and Jose Lopez for his all-manner-of lighting. A special nod to those who gave that 'Dancing' episode (and the rest) its grace: John Zalewski for sound, Matt Goldsby for musical direction and Kay Cole for the choreography.