

Los Angeles Times

November 9, 2007



Hit and miss on four Coward plays

An evening of one-act plays by Noel Coward would seem like a slam dunk for most theater companies. Just deliver the lines without messing up and audiences will be rolling in the aisles.

But not so fast: The Antaeus Company's uneven production of "Tonight at 8:30" proves it's all in the execution. When you perform Coward properly, it's sublime; when you don't, it's torture.

This is the company's first of two installments of Coward's cycle, and it consists of four one-acts. (Two casts alternate nights.) The best plays come after intermission: "Hands Across the Sea" is a farce that takes place in the living room of Lady Maureen "Piggie" Gilpin, a British socialite with a short attention span and a long list of house guests. In the tragic "The Astonished Heart," a psychiatrist's wife confronts her husband's infidelity with a surprising proposition of her own. On a recent Sunday, Nike Doukas and Jeanie Hackett played Piggie and the wronged wife, respectively, and both actresses delivered performances of astonishing nuance and impeccable timing.

Before experiencing those marvelous works, however, audiences will have to endure two less successful plays. "We Were Dancing" is light even by Noel Coward standards — a colonial wife wants to leave her husband for a man she met while dancing, only to reverse her decision in the harsh light of day. In the backstage comedy "Star Chamber," a troupe of British actors attempts to get through a committee meeting. It's definitely not a good sign that a lap dog receives the play's biggest laughs.

Antaeus will debut the second installment of Coward's one-acts this week. Perhaps they'll consider dropping the period songs that the cast performs in between plays. Coward's vintage writing needs no help in the ambience department.

— D.N.

"Tonight at 8:30 — If Love Were All," The Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. See website for schedule. (866) 811-4111 or www.antaeus.org. Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes.