

# DAILY VARIETY

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2007

## Legit Review

### Tonight at 8:30 (Part 1 — If Love Were All)

(Deaf West Theater, North Hollywood. 60 seats. \$30 top)

An Antaeus Company presentation of four one-act plays by Noel Coward. Directed by William Ludel, Michael Murray and Stephanie Shroyer. Sets, John Iacovelli; costumes, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg; lighting, Jose Lopez; sound, John Zalowski; musical director, Matt Goldsby; production stage manager, Young J. Opened Oct. 27, 2007. Reviewed Nov. 3. Runs through Dec. 23. Running time: 2 HOURS, 45 MIN.

- JM Farmer/  
 Sir Reginald ..... Armin Shimerman  
 Jimmie Horlick/  
 Hubert/Peter ..... Ned Schmidtke  
 Hester More/Walters ..... Devon Sorvari  
 Johnny Bolton/Ernest ..... Michael McShane  
 Julian Bredt/Karl/  
 Tim/Bogey ..... Bill Brochtrup  
 Violet Vibart/Susan/Clare ..... Kitty Swink  
 Maurice Searle/  
 Major Blake/Alnstairs ..... Ray Porter  
 Dame Rose Matland/  
 Clara/Mrs. Wadhurst ..... Anne Gee Byrd  
 Elise Brodie/Barbara ..... Shannon Holt  
 Xenia James ..... Christina Pickles  
 Press Photographer/Hypogal/  
 Mr. Burnham ..... Nathan Patrick  
 George/Christian ..... Michael Reilly Burke  
 Eva/Leonora ..... Kirsten Potter  
 Louise ..... Emily Chase  
 Piggie ..... Nike Doukas  
 Mr. Wadhurst ..... Philip Proctor  
 Atherton ..... Bruno

By TERRY MORGAN

Noel Coward's "Tonight at 8:30," a daunting series of 10 one-act plays, is rarely revived due to its length and logistical complexities. It takes a troupe with a deep appreciation of theatrical history and no lack of ambition to do the show justice, and the Antaeus Company has stepped up with an outstanding production. The group has divided the event into two parts, each featuring four of the one-acts, with the final two one-acts (and a third, "lost" one-act, unperformed since 1922) to be done as a holiday benefit show. Part 1, subtitled "If Love Were All," impresses with terrific acting, sparkling wit and unexpectedly strong drama.

"Star Chamber" concerns a meeting of a theatrical charity group as they discuss a possible addition to a home for retired actresses. The actors comprising the charity group can't resist engaging in "star" behavior, however. The representative from the retirement home, JM Farmer (Armin Shimerman), at-



Kirsten Potter stars as a woman trying to seduce Michael Reilly Burke in "Tonight at 8:30 (Part 1 — If Love Were All)" at Deaf West Theater.

tempts to give his report on possible costs but is effortlessly ignored by resident diva Xenia James (Christina Pickles), ingenue Hester More (Devon Sorvari), comedian Johnny Bolton (Michael McShane) and the rest of the gossip group.

"We Were Dancing" examines the instant and intense love-at-first-meeting experienced by Louise (Emily Chase) and Karl (Bill Brochtrup) after they've danced at a party. This would be easier if Louise didn't then have to explain things to her understandably confused husband, Hubert (Ned Schmidtke), and his angry sister, Clara (Anne Gee Byrd).

"The Astonished Heart" is a surprisingly serious and affecting story of how an affair ruins several lives. When Barbara (Shannon Holt) invites old school rival Leonora (Kirsten

Potter) over to her home one day, she doesn't realize that Leonora is intending to attempt to steal her husband, Christian (Michael Reilly Burke).

Finally, "Hands Across the Sea" is a daffy comedy, as Piggie (Nike Doukas) and her friends labor mightily under a couple of cases of mistaken identity.

All of the one-acts are double-cast.

Shimerman makes his character's gentle reticence compelling via myriad subtle details, and McShane deftly imbues his boisterous role with an underlying sadness. Brochtrup is an ideal Coward lead, serenely bitchy, while Sorvari excels as the wildly giddy Hester. Pickles is superb as Xenia, getting the maximum humor from every line. "Dancing" is the only one-act that comes off as somewhat dated, but Chase is very good as the cool-even-when-impassioned Coward heroine. Schmidtke makes his amazingly forgiving character believable, which is an admirable feat, and Byrd is bluntly amusing as the appalled Clara.



Christina Pickles plays a diva in "Star Chamber," one of four short plays by Noel Coward.

Potter gives the best perf of the evening as the casually treacherous Leonora, a mixture of chilly resolve, lust and finally self-disgust that creates an all-too-human portrait. Holt is her equal as the unfortunate Barbara, looking as though she may come apart from sheer nerves at any moment. Burke is properly anguished and brutal as the unfaithful husband. Doukas is hilarious as the multitasking Piggie, often holding two conversations simultaneously, and Kitty Swink is woosily great as her drunken friend Clare.

William Ludel's direction of "Chamber" and Michael Murray's helming of "Hands" similarly keep the comedic anarchy bubbling along without collapsing into chaos — both impressive balancing acts. Murray's work on "Dancing" is fine but can't make the piece seem realistic. Stephanie Shroyer's direction of "Astonished" is tightly paced, creatively staged and detailed in its levels of style and emotion. John Iacovelli's sets are basic but effective, and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes are lush.



Emily Chase and Bill Brochtrup fall in love in the "We Were Dancing" segment of Noel Coward's "Tonight at 8:30 (Part 1 — If Love Were All)."