

A Whole Lot of Noel in 'Tonight at 8:30'

Mad Reviews Four of Ten Plays in Part I

One of the best theatrical companies in town is tackling the huge task of presenting ten, count 'em, ten of the short plays of Noel Coward, which have never before been performed on one program. The full schedule of all ten plays, plus the recently discovered 'lost' Noel Coward one-act, "The Better Half", will be performed as a gala benefit for Antaeus, L.A.'s Classical Theatre ensemble on December 17 and 18 only.

Until December 23, eight of the plays, "Star Chamber", "We Were Dancing", "The Astonished Heart", "Hands Across the Sea", "Red Peppers", "Fumed Oak", "Still Life" and "Family Album" are being performed by two alternating casts, Wednesday through Saturday at 8:00pm and Sunday at 3:00pm and 7:30pm. "Ways and Means" and "Shadow Play" will be included only in the gala benefit show.

Noel Coward, considered by one of his harshest critics to be "probably one of the most talented and prodigiously successful people the world has ever known" wrote and performed, directed and produced over 50 plays and hundreds of songs, musicals, films, reviews and concerts. Intermittently successful and shocking, his humor and insight into the human condition remain as sharp today as they were in the early part of the 20th Century. As times and the social whirl changes, "...plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose...", roughly translated as—the more things change, the more they are the same.

The piece is shown in parts, and "Part I: If Love Were All", includes the following four short plays: "Star Chamber", "We Were Dancing", "The Astonished Heart", and "Hands Across The Sea".

"The Astonished Heart"

Directed by Stephanie Shroyer

Coward's "The Astonished Heart" surprises as a drama, not for its wit, but for its painful realization of the dark places of the heart and for the sacrifices made in its name. Hackett is superb here as the wife who understands what she has to do, and does it anyway, when her psychiatrist husband (Bernard White) falls fatefully into love with her high school enemy, Leonora (Faye Grant). White gives a desperately fraught, moving and exhilarating performance as the debilitated husband. This is a devastating one-act, which proves it can be done.



Photo by Michele K. Short

Bernard White as Christian and Faye Grant as Leonora in "The Astonished Heart".

"We Were Dancing"

Directed by Michael Murray

Josh Clark, Nike Doukas and JD Cullum star in "We were Dancing". The play is a short short about a spoiled young wife, Louise (adorably purred by Doukas), who falls in love, for half a magic hour,

while dancing with a debonair stranger, Karl (Cullum, at his debonair best), at the country club, while her forgiving husband (Josh Clark) patiently waits for her sanity to return.

"Star Chamber"

Directed by William Ludel

Christina Pickles as Xenia James in "Star Chamber", the first of Part I's four plays, which is a backstage snipe fest at a theatrical company's committee meeting. Christina Pickles is marvelously chic and self-absorbed as she chairs the meeting; Jeannie Hackett is the epitome of the concerned young actor who'd rather concentrate on theatre politics than on the whims of Xenia's (Pickles) pooch. Melinda Peterson is wonderful fun as a slightly dopey Dame Rose; Philip Proctor, the inveterate comedian of the piece, has some hilarious stories he's anxious to tell as Johnny Bolton; and J.D. Cullum, who virtually infests most of the plays with his can't-take-your-eyes-off-him laughability, broods through this one as a long-haired, black-sweatered, counter-cultural actorrrrr, with the emphasis on the final 'r's.

Hands Across The Sea

Directed by Michael Murray

The play "Hands Across the Sea" is one of those famous British drawing room comedies where alcohol and upper-classness combine to drive us gloriously into the farcical fringe of the rich and batty. Here, Doukas is amazing as Piggie, a lady who has everything but concern for the 'little people'. Pickles is splendid as the regal matron, Clare. Peterson and Proctor (in private life man and wife) are just lovely as the Wadhursts, the invited guests who turn out to be not what they seem. Cullum as the drunken drink-pourer is at the heart of the laughter again. It's a madcap whirl, like the best of those Mayfair comedies that still hold late-night audiences in jealous thrall. Oh, if life were only like that. Oh, thank heavens it isn't!

Before the play begins, and in the intermission, whoever's not busy doing something else, gathers around the piano, played by Glen Banks, and joins in the singing of Noel Coward's wonderfully silly ditties, like "Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington" and "Mad Dogs and Englishmen Go Out in the Midday Sun", songs I remember from my youth, and probably some you probably do too. Phil Proctor leads the singing; he's the kind of fellow you'd like to have stand around your piano, the one that's never played, who gets everyone to join in the fun.

Mad About Theatre



by madeleine shaner