

A CurtainUp Los Angeles Review

Tonight at 8:30—Part One, If Love Were All

By Laura Hitchcock

You're so foolish, up on your romantic high horse—how often have you ridden it wildly until it went lame and you had to walk home?—Chris in The Astonished Heart.

A little Coward is a dangerously delicious thing, lampooning puffery in settings and situations that are as relevant today as in the early decades of the 20th Century when Noel Coward's "talent to amuse" put him on top of the world. In the skilled and experienced hands of the Antaeus Classical Theater Ensemble, the plays two parts are done in repertory. Part I is preceded by an appropriate overture as two performers in shirtsleeves rehearse Coward favorites at an upright piano: a few bars here, a few lines there.

The evening opens with the rarely seen *Star Chamber*, in which a committee of actors on the board of a retirement home for destitute actresses is called to approve a building extension. Here Coward sends up, not only the vanity of actors, but the self-centeredness of committees in general. Susan Sullivan chairs as elegant president Xenia James, complete with a little lap dog optimistically named Bravo who becomes so smelly he's delegated to the prop room. Bravo, the most sympathetic character, gets the last woof.

We Were Dancing gently twits the seductive power of cheap music, in this case, dance music which so enchants Louise (Emily Chase) that she's determined to leave her elderly husband Hubert (Ned Schmidtke) and elope that night with Karl (Bill Brochtrup). There are no surprises here but dancers everywhere will identify.

The Astonished Heart is the evening's longest and most serious play, though again taking aim at a contemporary issue, psychiatry. Christian, a married psychiatrist (Michael Reilly Burke), falls for his wife's friend Leonora (Kirsten Potter). Wife Barbara (Shannon Holt) counsels an affair, after which they can resume their comfortable marriage. But this physician cannot heal himself. All the jealousies that have poured into his office over the years possess him.

The final play, *Hands Across The Sea* is the most hilarious, with Susan Sullivan sveltely at the helm again as globe-trotting Piggie who thinks she's entertaining a couple who were so hospitable to her in Malaya (Ann Gee Byrd and Phil Proctor). This drawing room comedy takes a backstage look at the manners and mores of café society, as well as reminding us of one of Coward's most pointed songs, "Why Do The Wrong People Travel When The Right People Stay At Home?"

A. Jeffrey Schoenberg has designed truly delicious period costumes and John Iacovelli has come up with elegant furniture that makes the most of the Deaf West Theatre's small deep space. The play is double cast. The company also draws on its directors' roster, using three different ones.

Coward wrote these short plays to celebrate the form and also to give himself and his favorite co-star Gertrude Lawrence, who played all the leads themselves, a welcome relief from a long run in the same play night after night. Antaeus contains some of the best talent in town and they're hosting "a marvelous party!"

TONIGHT AT 8:30

Playwright: Noel Coward

STAR CHAMBER: Director: William Ludel. Cast: Armin Shimerman, Lawrence Pressman (JM Farmer), Josh Clark, Ned Schmidtke (Jimmie Horlick), Devon Sorvari, Brooke Bloom (Hester More), Philip Proctor, Michael McShane (Johnny Bolton), Steven Brand, Bill Brochtrup (Julian Breed), Amelia White, Kitty Swink (Violet Vibary), JD Cullum, Ray Porter (Maurice Searle), Melinda Peterson, Ann Gee Byrd (Dame Rose Mailand), Jeanie Hackett, Shannon Holt (Elisa Brodie), Christina Pickles, Susan Sullivan (Xenia James), Ryan Spann, Nathan Patrick (Press Photographer), Bravo (Alberton the Dog)

WE WERE DANCING: Director: Michael Murray. Cast: Bernard White, Michael Reilly Burke (George), Faye Grant, Kirsten Potter (Eva), Josh Clark, Ned Schmidtke (Hubert), Nike Douglas, Emily Chase (Louise), Amelia White, Anne Gee Byrd (Clara), JD Cullum, Bill Brochtrup (Karl), Armin Shimerman, Ray Porter (Major Blake), Ryan Spann, Nathan Patrick (Ippaga). **THE ASTONISHED HEART:** Director: Stephanie Shroyer. Cast: Jeanie Hackett, Shannon Holt (Barbara), JD Cullum, Bill Brochtrup (Tim), Melinda Peterson, Kitty Swink (Susan), Phil Proctor, Michael McShane (Ernest), Josh Clark, Lawrence Pressman (Sir Reginald), Faye Grant, Kirsten Potter (Leonora), Bernard White, Michael Reilly Burke (Christian)

HANDS ACROSS THE SEA: Director: Michael Murray. Cast: Devon Sorvari, Brooke Bloom (Wafers), Nike Douglas, Susan Sullivan (Piggie), Steven Brand, Ned Schmidtke (Peter), Josh Clark, Ray Porter (Aladain), Christina Pickles, Kitty Swink (Clara), Melinda Peterson, Anne Gee Byrd (Mrs. Wadhurst), Phil Proctor, Lawrence Pressman (Mr. Wadhurst), Ryan Spann, Nathan Patrick (Mr. Burnham), JD Cullum, Bill Brochtrup (Bogey)

Set Design: John Iacovelli

Lighting Design: Leigh Allen

Costume Design: A. Jeffrey Schoenberg

Sound Design: John Zaleski

Running Time: Two hours, 40 minutes, one intermission

Running Dates: October 27-December 23, 2007

Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, 866-511-4111

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on October 27