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Polished cycle of Noel Coward

"If you've got it, flaunt it" is a maxim the Antaeus Company takes to heart when it comes to spotlighting the depth and versatility of its classically trained talent pool. For its first full staging since relocating to a temporary home at NoHo's Deaf West Theatre, Antaeus takes on the entire cycle of short plays in Noel Coward's "Tonight at 8:30" collection.

Unlike the single three-piece subsets in which the works are typically revived, this undertaking spans two evenings, each composed of four playlets. Double-casting each set adds to the logistical complexity — more than 40 actors appear in the cycle, most in multiple roles.

Coward conceived the entire

cycle as a star showcase for himself and his stage partner Gertrude Lawrence, but the emphasis here is on ensemble uniformity (accents, manners and sensibility are impeccable). While individual character shadings will inevitably vary between the two casts, the reviewed Part II performance demonstrated insightful handling of overall tone, pacing and emotional impact by the respective directors (Stefan Novinski, Robert Goldsby, Stephanie Shroyer and Brendon Fox), allowing each segment to stand on the merits of its script.

The selections in Part II, subtitled "Come the Wild," fit together particularly well, although purists will have to accept that the fixed bill violates Coward's original conceit (in which each evening's lineup of three plays was randomly selected to provide a mix of farce, music and drama).

Where Part I focuses primarily on the breezy aristocratic world with which Coward is most commonly associated, three episodes in Part II depict working-class struggles in 1930s Britain. Roughly parallel in construction with the other bill, Part II opens with a behind-the-scenes showbiz satire, "Red Peppers," in which a wittily bickering song-and-dance team of musical hall performers (John Prosky, Rhonda Aldrich) run afoul of their seedy touring venue.

"Fumed Oak" is a nominal comedy that darkens when a milquetoast (Josh Clark) turns the tables on his greedy, manipulative family.

The dramatic anchor is "Still Life," a hauntingly sympathetic series of snapshot scenes depicting the doomed adulterous affair between a doctor (Prosky) and a housewife (Alicia Woolerton) who meet in a train station (Coward later expanded the piece into the film "Brief Encounter").

The song-ridden "Family Album" is a slight bit of fluff about an affluent clan anticipating sizable inheritances from its recently deceased, mean-spirited patriarch, but it sports a pitch-perfect turn by Philip Proctor as the hard-of-hearing butler who proves (much like this entire no-frills production) that real class has nothing to do with wealth.

— PHILIP BRANDES

"Tonight at 8:30 Part II - Come the Wild," Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Ends Dec. 23; see website for schedule. \$30-\$40 (\$50 for Parts I & II). (866) 811-4111 or www.antaeus.org. Running time: 2 hours, 50 minutes.



MICHELE K. SHORT Antaeus Company

'TONIGHT AT 8:30': Rhonda Aldrich and John Prosky in "Red Peppers," one of eight one-act Noel Coward plays.