Legit Review

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

(Deaf, New Theater, 39th Street, 24th St.)

By Terry Morgan

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

Potter gives the best part of the evening as the sexually tense Leonora, a mixture of daily resolve, lust and finally self-dissent 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 assuaged and brutal as the unpleasant husband. Doonan is hilarious as the multitalented Piggie, often holding two conversations simultaneously, and Kitty Swivel is wondrously great as her husband-friend Clara.

Noel Coward's "Tonight at 8:30," a daunting series of 10 one-act plays, is rarely reviled 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 Anacrusis 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, Jim Farmer (Armin Shimerman), attempts to give his report on possible costs but is effortlessly ignored by resident diva Xenia James (Christine Pickles), ingénue Hester More (Deborah Serani), confectioner Johnny Bolton (Michal 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 have to explain things to her understandably confused husband, Hubert (Ned Schmitz), and her angsty sister, Clara (Anne Gey Byrd).

"The Astonished Heart" is a surprisingly serious and affecting story of how an affair ruins several lives. When Beverly (Sharon 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).

Shimerman's character gets his comeuppance: a cunning houseguest (Ned Schmitz) seduces the maid (Christine Pickles), and the two of them conspire to make life miserable for the wrong people. "Star Chamber" is a minor gem of a show, and the actors deliver performances that are both funny and poignant. Potte

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

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)."