

LAWEEKLY

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Vivacious Coward

PICK TONIGHT AT 8:30 Noel Coward's 1936 experiment with a repertory of one-acts emerges with vivacity from the vault of museum theatrics over two evenings. John Iacovelli's elegant, moveable sets and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's gorgeous costumes are perfectly lit by Jose Lopez. The plays are slightly weaker in Part 1: "Star Chamber" presents a motley group of theater folk planning a charity function. Coward cut it from the 1936 and 1937 editions of the anthology, and this company should have followed suit. "We Were Dancing" is a fun, slight musical, and director Michael Murray brings out all of its silly joy. "The Astonished Heart" is a tortured melodrama that Stephanie Shroyer's obvious directing skills can't make believable. However, "Hands Across the Sea," a comic tour de force Coward created for his friend, Gertrude Lawrence, ends the evening with a joyous, wicked skewering of the upper class. Part 2 of the cycle is nearly flawless, mostly because it boasts some of Coward's most elegant and mature work, but also because of the sparking combination of directors and actors (all double cast). Pre-show, we're invited to surround a piano (fine musical direction by Matt Goldsby), singing famous Coward songs as if in a 1930s theatrical party. The evening then segues into "Red Peppers," a glimpse into the seedy world of third-rate English music hall entertainment. Director Bob Goldsby then brings to life "Fumed Oak," one of Coward's nastiest works about middle-class uglies, in an over-the-top staging that foreshadows Joe Orton. Following intermission, "Still Life" (made famous later as the film *Brief Encounter*) is a drama about an upper-class love affair transpiring in view of workers in a tea shop — all of which director Shroyer imbues with emotion, thanks to her remarkable cast. Brendon Fox stages "Family Album," an odd parody of operetta that doubles as a gentle study in one family's grieving. Antaeus Theatre Company at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7:30 p.m.; thru Dec. 23. (866) 811-4111. (Tom Provenzano)