

November 22, 2006

THEATER REVIEW

'A Marvelous Party' at Laguna Playhouse

■ A talent to amuse, in abundance.

By Daryl H. Miller, Times Staff Writer

"There is no time I can remember when I was not fascinated by words 'going together,' " Noel Coward wrote in the introduction to his collected song lyrics. The results of that fixation fill the ensuing 400-plus pages with cascades of crisp, witty rhymes. These were affixed to melodies that fizz like Champagne cocktails, mixing the sound of the British music hall with operetta and perhaps a dash of the art song.

More than two dozen of his best-known tunes — as well as several charming obscurities — are presented in the revue "A Marvelous Party" at Laguna Playhouse. The songs are sung by a trio of British-accented sophisticates in what looks like the ballroom of a manor home, with Coward (1899-1973) presiding over the affair not only in his music but also in the juicy bons mots — "My life has been one long extravaganza" — that the performers quote between songs. Though by no means revelatory about the man or his work, this little get-together is perfectly pleasant, even a bit giddy.

Coward wrote songs for his plays ("Someday I'll Find You" for "Private Lives") as well as musical revues ("Sigh No More"), operettas ("Bitter Sweet") and musicals ("Sail Away"). Himself an urbane entertainer, he sang many of them on the West End, in World War II encampments and, in the 1950s, in a highly successful engagement in Las Vegas.

The revue, which takes its title from a particularly madcap Coward song, was jointly introduced a year ago by Geva Theatre Center in Rochester, N.Y., and Northlight Theatre in Chicago. It was devised by director David Ira Goldstein, choreographer Patricia Wilcox and the three performers: Carl Danielsen, Mark Anders and Anna Lauris. Danielsen and Anders play piano as well as sing, with further accompaniment occasionally provided by an instrumental trio.

Songs are grouped by style or theme. A first-act segment re-creates the atmosphere of the music hall, for instance, by dressing five silly yet sly songs in boaters and canes, one-piece swimming suits and sailor uniforms.

Lauris possesses an effervescent soprano, Anders a sweet tenor and Danielsen a character-singer's baritone. In addition to lively group numbers, each gets solo moments: Anders delivers the haunting sailor call "Matelot," Danielsen accompanies himself at the piano for the wry story song "A Bar on the Piccola Marina" and Lauris plays all the parts — including American heiress, Italian count and female sextet — in the "Coconut Girl" segment from "The Girl Who Came to Supper." Coward's best-remembered songs — including "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," "Mrs. Worthington," "Why Do the Wrong People Travel?" and "Mad About the Boy" — are prominently featured, as is "If Love Were All," recently repopularized by Elaine Stritch in her autobiographical show.

Occasionally, Coward's lyrics display chilling prescience, as when the song "There Are Bad Times Just Around the Corner" announces "that we can't save democracy and we don't much care." But mostly, they provide endless delight, as when "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" slips in the double rhyme "Englishmen detest a siesta" to skewer the British tourist's mania for tramping about in the midday sun instead of sitting on a nice verandah with a refreshing cocktail in hand.

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'A Marvelous Party'

Where: Laguna Playhouse, 606 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays; no performance Thursday

Ends: Dec. 17

Price: \$30 to \$65

Contact: (949) 497-2787 or www.lagunaplayhouse.com

Running time: 2 hours