

THEATER REVIEW: Playhouse's 'Party' truly marvelous

By TOM TITUS

Playwright, director, actor, composer, lyricist. Noel Coward was something of a one-man band back in the 1920s, '30s, '40s and '50s, and even into the 1960s.

His talents encompassed so many fields that to celebrate them in one stage revue hardly would be adequate, so there have been three such tributes — "Oh, Coward," "Cowardly Custard" and the current attraction at the Laguna Playhouse, "A Marvelous Party."

Although Coward wrote some landmark comedies for the stage ("Blithe Spirit," "Hay Fever," "Private Lives"), it is his way with words in song that is celebrated here.

His lyric-writing acumen has been approached by just two composers, his contemporary Cole Porter and the current Broadway monarch Stephen Sondheim.

It was Porter who originally wrote "Let's Do It," for which Coward added several other verses. These are delivered gleefully in the playhouse's production — along with some up-to-the-minute additions concerning Nancy Pelosi and Donald Rumsfeld.

The minuscule cast — Mark Anders, Carl Danielsen and Anna Lauris — are three who do the work of 30 under the direction of David Ira Goldstein. Danielsen doubles as musical director and shines in the keyboards in a segment of "dueling pianos" with Anders.

The first half of "A Marvelous Party" focuses on Coward's early career, and the accent is definitely English as the performers present a series of music hall routines with vaudeville-style blackouts. The latter are served up with gusto by Anders and Danielsen as two hapless sailors in a number called "Has Anybody Seen Our Ship?"

Anders delivers one of Coward's most famous ditties, "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," as a backhanded tribute to those who enjoy going "out in the noonday sun." Lauris rings down the curtain on the first act with a terrific solo performance of an entire six-number show entitled "The Coconut Girl."

Highlights of the second act include Lauris' torchy "Mad About the Boy" and Anders' treatment of the show's title song, along with the paean to pessimism "There Are Bad Times Just Around the Corner." All three are at their snooty best as shipboard snobs in "Why Do the Wrong People Travel?"

Old standards "Someday I'll Find You" and "If Love Were All" are done comparatively straight, but the up-to-date rendering of Porter's "Let's Do It" is guaranteed to produce audience eruption.

Choreographer Patricia Wilcox puts the trio through some intricate paces, and David Kay Mickelsen's costumes beautifully reflect the grand old days of musical theater. Scenic designer Bill Forrester has fashioned a glittery music hall atmosphere, complete with stars twinkling above the stage

It is, indeed, "A Marvelous Party" and a glowing tribute to one of the theater's mightiest talents. Few composers possessed Noel Coward's rapier wit, and this gift is lavishly displayed on the stage of the Laguna Playhouse.

