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## Theater: 'A Marvelous Party: The Noël Coward Celebration'

Review: At the Laguna Playhouse, an evening of Cowardly fun provides the perfect antidote for our trying times.

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I don't know about you, but I could use a big dose of Noël Coward at the moment. Someone who made his fellow Brits chuckle during the darkest days of the Second World War would come in handy right now, don't you think?

The Laguna Playhouse agrees. Playhouse artistic director Richard Stein saw "A Marvelous Party: The Noël Coward Celebration" in Chicago last season — a terrific new revue that gives us a glimpse into the celebrated songwriter/playwright's musical-hall roots and rolls out some little-known late-career gems in a brisk, two-act format for three busy performers. Stein nabbed the show for its West Coast premiere long before four recent Jefferson Awards (Chicago's version of the Tonys) made it a much hotter property.

"Party's" creators — David Ira Goldstein, Carl Danielsen, Mark Anders, Patricia Wilcox and Anna Lauris — are wise enough to know we expect to hear some of Coward's classic ditties, and we get a smattering: "Mrs. Worthington," "The Stately Homes of England" and, of course, "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" (delivered with breezy sangfroid by Anders, who shares the stage with fellow co-creators Danielsen and Lauris).

They're intermixed with some obscure Coward works — songs that those who aren't mad about the boy would probably never have stumbled across.

"What Ho! Mrs. Brisket" is a naughty bit of sauce with some frankly sexual references that must have been doubly shocking back in 1963, when the song first appeared in "The Girl Who Came to Supper."

The showstopper of that musical is an extended medley called "The Coconut Girl," which Coward penned for the talented Florence Henderson, who starred in the original Broadway production. Lauris plays a winsome young starlet who describes a silly musical in which she plays just a bit part. That doesn't stop her from re-enacting the entire plot: six complete little songs ending with "The Walla Walla Boola," a bang-on parody of a '20s dance-craze number.

It's a masterpiece in miniature — imagine "The Drowsy Chaperone" compressed into less than 15 minutes. Lauris performs it flawlessly, with the comic precision of a master and the manic energy of a kid on a sugar buzz.

Another highlight is the show's title song, "I've Been to a Marvelous Party," from the 1938 revue "Set to Music." As sung by Anders, it brings back a half-forgotten time when carefree Londoners with means decamped to Mediterranean playgrounds like Cap Ferrat to behave in ways that they never could at home:

*Poor Grace started singing at midnight  
And didn't stop singing till four;  
We knew the excitement was bound to begin  
When Laura got blind on Dubonnet and gin  
And scratched her veneer with a Cartier pin,  
I couldn't have liked it more.*

Anders shines in character-driven songs such as this, and he captures Coward's slyly anarchic spirit as well as any interpreter that I've seen. It's all about what's between the lines, and Anders excels in those small, silent moments of implication and provocation.

Danielsen is the best dancer of the trio, and he gets to showcase his tapping abilities. He's also an impressive pianist (he and Anders share piano-playing duties at a pair of uprights that are frequently wheeled onstage, though the lion's share of the accompaniment is provided by a tight and period-perfect upstage trio led by pianist John Randall). Danielsen is a standout with Coward's musical hall numbers such as "Mrs. Brisket" and "Has Anybody Seen Our Ship," in which the greatest challenge is making tricky words and choreography seem natural, even improvised.

Goldstein directs with a light touch that belies the complexity of a show such as this. Underlying Coward's devil-may-care surface is a virtuoso's repertoire, and it's no easy feat to balance its tone with its technical demands.

Bill Forrester's set works unobtrusively but effectively. The band slides downstage to be integrated into the action during the second act, and everything is framed by an ornament-encrusted false proscenium that gives us the feeling we're in a down-at-the-heels English music hall, ca. 1935. It's a wonderful place to visit—and it makes you wish Coward was still with us, to give us comfort by making light of our own troubled times.