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Theater: Party time for legendary wit

The creators of a new Noël Coward revue discover gold in his early career.

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How do you pull off a musical revue about the wit and wisdom of Noël Coward without actually imitating Noël Coward?

The English playwright, songwriter, party boy and Vegas entertainer owned one of the most distinctive stage personas of the 20th century: dinner jacket, a martini permanently affixed to one hand, droll delivery, wit as dry as the Sahara. It's hard to imagine many of Coward's songs — the snide "Mrs. Worthington," for example — performed by anyone else but him, or somebody who looks and sounds like him.

But that's what Graham Payne wanted. Coward's longtime partner and executor of his estate made that stipulation when he was asked to grant his permission for a new full-length show about Coward.

"He gave us carte blanche to choose whatever material we wanted, but with two restrictions: We couldn't impersonate (Coward) and we couldn't change any of his lyrics," said David Ira Goldstein, who with Carl Danielsen, Mark Anders, Patricia Wilcox and Anna Lauris devised "A Marvelous Party: The Noël Coward Celebration." The show recently won five Jefferson Awards in its Chicago premiere last year; it opens this weekend at The Laguna Playhouse.

Goldstein and his co-creators had a few ideas that would make it somewhat easier to follow Payne's directives.

"We'd all done the other Coward revues," Goldstein said. (There are two: "Oh Coward" and "Cowardly Custard.") "We wanted something different. I think what's different about this show is that it really reflects a certain part of Coward. He was born in the Edwardian age. His roots are in the English music hall and the revues of the 1920s. This is about that younger Coward."

Coward's career spanned most of his busy life. Born in 1899, he was a successful child actor and apprenticed at the knee of a famous Victorian stage performer, Sir Charles Hawtrey.

Much of Coward's best-loved work, including such frothy shows as "Design for Living" and the wickedly funny "Private Lives," was written before he was 35. He enjoyed more success at a young age than almost any other British theater artist.

Mid-career financial and artistic travails changed the man and his output. Unabashedly homosexual, he worked as a spy for England during World War II; according to some

sources he was high on a Nazi death list. After the war, Coward moved to Jamaica to avoid his native country's stiff income-tax laws, and his career went into semi-decline following a string of early '50s theatrical flops. He was rediscovered near the end of his life and had become an icon of an earlier, more playful time by the time of his death in 1973.

Friendly fire

"He had an amazing career," Goldstein said. "While maybe he isn't the composer that George Gershwin or Irving Berlin were, or a great lyricist like Sondheim, he was a very polished all-around artist and knew exactly what his own strengths were."

Goldstein admires Coward's determination to remain engaged, even when his career reached its nadir.

"He never stopped writing or looking for things to do. He got into the movies. He went to Vegas. He had the kind of multi-faceted career you just don't see anymore."

Performing Coward's songs, even when you're not imitating Coward, takes a certain Coward-like élan and exactitude.

"There was a definite flavor and precision to his style. He used to say he wanted diction that was so accurate it sounded like you were clicking a bus ticket."

"Marvelous Party" doesn't hew to a story per se. "If there's a through-line, it's chronological," Goldstein said. "We pulled from his autobiography. We start out with his early years as a boy actor. We do a musical-hall medley.

"The first act ends with one of the greatest things he ever wrote, a piece called 'The Coconut Girl.' It's 14 minutes long. He wrote it for Florence Henderson in the '60s."

The song consists of a single performer acting out an entire 1920s musical comedy. "It's kind of like a one-person 'Drowsy Chaperone,'" Goldstein said.

The creators of "A Marvelous Party" were all veteran Coward interpreters, but they learned some fascinating and hitherto little-known facts about the man as they researched their show.

"The thing most people don't realize about Coward is that he had a middle-class upbringing," Goldstein said. "His father was a piano tuner and his mother, well, she was a stage mom. He didn't come from money at all.

"The other thing about him was that for all the drinking and carousing, he worked incessantly. And he was an incredibly generous man — an over-tipper."

But Coward had his rapier-sharp wit, too, and he unleashed it even on his friends, Goldstein discovered.

"A few years ago, Carol Channing told me this story. Coward had come back to see her in her dressing room after a performance of 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.' He got down on his knees and said, 'I'm forever in love with you.' Later he asked her to do one of his plays and she refused."

Goldstein laughed. "He cut her dead. He said in his diaries that she would have performed the role like a version of Lorelei anyway (Channing's ditzy heroine in 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'). Coward said something like, 'Even if she performed Lady Macbeth it would come out like Lorelei.' "