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Tonight at 8:30 (Part II - 'Come the Wild')

by Noel Coward, directed by Brendan Fox, Robert Goldsby, Stefan Novinski, Stephanie Shroyer

Antaeus Theater Company / Deaf West • November 4-December 23 (Open'd 11/10, rev'd 11/11)

When last we climbed the Deaf West Theatre's aisle steps, it was to watch part of a healthy percentage of Antaeus Theatre Company perform the first four Noel Coward one-acts of their current two-part collection of eight, entitled 'Tonight at 8:30' (through December 23). A week or so later, we're in part two, with two more ensembles dividing up the roles. By luck or design, we see some favorites from part one among the new faces spread over four plays. While the range of themes and styles is narrower than in Part One, the acting remains full and satisfying.

Like part one, 'If Love Were All' (reviewed here), 'Come the Wild' (from Coward's 'Come the Wild, Wild Weather,' sung to introduce the fourth play), opens with a backstage comedy. But where 'Star Chamber's' elbowing egos made it timeless, the aging husband-and-wife Vaudeville team or George and Lily Pepper makes 'Red Peppers' dangerously archaic. But, try imagining a home without iPods, cell phones, CD players, televisions or even radio. Back when a home entertainment center was a parlor piano, people flocked to live theater and Vaudeville. A variety of performers were kings and queens of the stage, passing on their acts through generations.

John Prosky and Rhonda Aldrich are George and Lily. Director Stefan Novinski introduces them in costume and make up that completely hides their ages. Back in the dressing room as the sailor outfits come off, the years come on, and the wearing on and tearing at each other begins. The Peppers fit the classic take on the form: harmonious onstage; incompatible off. However, the twist is that they aren't really that well-timed on stage, where they drop props and punch lines. But once under attack in the dressing room, they bond together in a blind, self-sabotaging act of anti-management resistance. Of course, the Peppers' routines are excruciatingly corny. They are intentionally stacked with weak jokes. All the more to signal the inevitable end of their era, which will come in part through the theater managers like Ned Schmidtke's nothing-personal Mr. Edwards. Philip Proctor and Anne Gee Byrd make appearances as fellow performers.

The other three plays are even darker, with the second and fourth, 'Fumed Oak' and 'Family Album,' qualifying as nice black comedies, and the third, 'Still Life,' serving as the evening's ode to inconvenient passion.

For the Svengali cast of 'Fumed Oak,' Josh Clark (substituting for co-Artistic Director John Apicella, currently in 'History Boys'), joined Katy Tyszkiewicz, Kitty Swink, and Lynn Milgrim. Here Coward takes a page from the W.C. Fields' playbook, setting up a put-upon male breadwinner (hiding his thoughts behind morning paper and late night "work") who has been supporting three generations of women: a useless mother-in-law (the hilarious Milgrim, with her Ruth Gordon drawl played to great effect), a shrewish wife (Swink in another fine showcase for the versatile actress), and a pampered daughter (Tyszkiewicz, a basket of tsks and pouts). The hook is that Henry has been maintaining his sanity and holding his tongue by stashing away his resentments with an allowance in a secret bank account. In Scene Two, Henry locks the door before the ladies can head for the picture show and lays out the new world order. His behavior is unconscionable. It's dastardly. It's enough to have protective mothers in the audience cover their little boys' eyes. But it's pretty damn funny and the Egbert Sousés of the world would certainly give it a standing ovation. (If their wives aren't with them.)

In 'Still Life,' the single-set is a cafe near the London underground. The station employees – Anne Gee Byrd, Devon Sovari, Adam Meyer and Clark (again in for Apicella) – pair off in age-appropriate sets of flirtation, making romance look easy for the unattached who are unencumbered by unquenchable needs. This prepares us for Laura, Alicia Wollerton in a beautifully detailed performance, who is attended by a dining doctor, played with equal care by Prosky. The doctor's tenderness is enough to activate something in the long-married and likely ignored Laura. Equally married, but more frightened of missing a final fling, Dr. Alec, pushes the agenda and it is evident in subsequent meetings that the two are involved. Coward doesn't give these two a lot of dialogue to clarify the progress of their passions. There are jump cuts, and ferreting out just where they are is harder than it should be. Nevertheless, we get it, and the two leads give us enough indications of success around the frustration, which is the main emotion Coward saddles them. When the final moments come, with Aldrich showing up as a gossipy shopaholic, we feel the pair forced into silent final parting. It may not be the most well-crafted bit of playwriting, but it fits with these generally sketchy one-acts and is a very nice showcase for Prosky and Wollerton, who then bounces back in the fourth show with a wonderfully funny member of the mourning party.

The evening's largest company is assembled for the funny final piece, 'Family Album.' The blackest comedy inevitably involves the dead, and 'Album' begins with a great ensemble of mourners – Aldrich, Prosky, Schmidtke, Milgrim, Swink, Wollerton, Clark and Bill Brochtrup, taking it small in Part Two after big contributions to One. Philip Proctor returns as a hard-of-hearing butler in loud slippers. The story has a jolly arc, as the black-clad next of kin work their way from reverence for the dead to a conspiratorial act of protecting their interests – all to the chuckling rhythm of pouring brandy. As the lips loosen and the stories and true feelings burst forth, Coward reveals his great knack for letting the devilishly funny be as wicked as it is laughable.