

# VARIETY

Regional

## Tonight at 8:30 (Part 2 -- Come the Wild)

(Deaf West Theater; 60 seats; \$30 top)

By TERRY MORGAN

An Antaeus Company presentation of four one-act plays by Noel Coward. Directed by Stefan Novinski, Robert Goldsby, Stephanie Shroyer, Brendon Fox.

George/Johnnie/Richard - JD Cullum, Lily/Dolly/Emily - Gigi Bermingham, Alf/Stanley - Ramon DeOcampo  
Bert/Burrows - Philip Proctor, Mr. Edwards/Jasper - Robert Pine, Mabel/Mrs. Rockett - Angela Paton  
Elsie/Mildred - Emily Eiden, Doris/Harriet - Laura Wernette, Henry/Albert/Charles - Josh Clark, Laura/Jane - Shannon Holt, Myrtle - Anne Gee Byrd, Beryl - Angela Goethals, Alec/Edward - Mirron Willis, Bill - Ryan Spahn, Lavinia - Amelia White



JD Cullum and Gigi Bermingham star in "Red Peppers," one of four one-acts in Noel Coward's "Tonight at 8:30" at the Deaf West Theatre.

The second part of the Antaeus Company's ambitious production of Noel Coward's series of one-act plays is even better than the first. The stories run the gamut – sharp-edged backstage comedy, stirring romantic drama, the joy of a man abandoning his rotten family, an oddly cheerful funeral wake – in a demonstration that Coward was a more versatile playwright than he's generally given credit for, and a surprisingly modern one at that. Four directors elicit superb work from an excellent (double-cast) ensemble.

In "Red Peppers," the married couple of George (JD Cullum) and Lily (Gigi Bermingham) are a comedy team performing at a provincial British theater. Polished onstage, behind the scenes they're a mess, the downward trajectory of their careers souring their partnership. When others attack them, they become a united front, and harmony is temporarily restored.

"Fumed Oak" follows a day in the life of the Gow family, as angry wife Doris (Laura Wernette) and her mother, Mrs. Rockett (Angela Paton), accuse and complain at each other as teenage daughter Elsie (Emily Eiden) whines. Long-suffering husband Henry (Josh Clark) seems oblivious, until that evening when he tells them abruptly he's leaving for good, but, before he goes, he intends to tell them what he thinks of them all.

"Still Life," (which was adapted into David Lean's classic film "Brief Encounter") concerns the short but intense love affair between Laura (Shannon Holt) and Alec (Mirron Willis), two married people who meet by chance in a railway station café. At first content to be friends, the couple falls passionately for each other. But the guilt from betraying her marriage becomes too much for Laura to bear, and the relationship – likely the most important one of their lives – must end.

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*Family Album* takes place at a funeral wake. The patriarch of the Shipin family has died, and his adult children and their husbands and wives are gathered to mark the occasion. Jasper (Robert Pine) isn't feeling particularly glum, however, reminding his siblings about what they could buy with their inheritance money, which lightens the mood considerably. Lavinia (Amelia White) finds this frivolity shameful, at least until she's had a few drinks and finally admits the truth about their deceased father.

Cullum and Bermingham are a sheer delight in "Peppers," both in their corny comedy act and their hilariously bitter infighting. Cullum is also amusing as the sardonic brother Richard in "Album," and Bermingham is just right as the oblivious Dolly in "Life." Wemette and Paton are excellent foils in "Oak," each trying to outdo the other in self-righteousness, and Eiden is gawkily great as the petulant Elsie, screeching and stomping and sobbing to get her way. Clark is very funny as the giddy Henry, slapping his mother-in-law and relishing his escape, and he's equally fine as railway station employee Albert in "Life."

Holt is a marvel, fragile and nervously brave in "Life" yet darkly comical in "Album," in a pair of perfs that ably demonstrate her impressive range and talent. Willis is excellent as the smitten Alec, and a silent scene of Laura and Alec gazing at each other, sheer longing in the air between them, shows that words are not always necessary for great acting. Anne Gee Byrd is crankily amusing as cafe manager Myrtle, and White is very fine as Lavinia, each perf both funny and surprisingly touching. Finally, Pine brings a seemingly effortless charm to his role as Jasper, and Philip Proctor is quite good as the loyal if mostly deaf servant Burrows.

Directors Stefan Novinski ("Peppers"), Robert Goldsby ("Oak") and Brendon Fox ("Album") do terrific work with their comedies, with perfect pacing and lively staging. Shroyer, however, outdoes herself with "Life," getting subtle, layered performances from her cast, deftly balancing comedy and drama, using sound and lighting expertly -- the loud train sound effect begins to seem like the onrush of doom -- and ends up with perhaps the best of all of the one-acts in this production. Mention should be made of John Iacovelli's sets and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes, both of which continue to add color and depth to each part of this admirable show.

Sets, John Iacovelli; costumes, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg; lighting, Jose Lopez; sound, John Zalewski; musical director, Matt Goldsby; production stage manager, Young Ji. Opened, reviewed Nov. 10, 2007; runs through Dec. 23. Running time: 3 HOURS.