

VARIETY

Regional

Tonight at 8:30 (Part 1 -- If Love Were All)

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

By TERRY MORGAN

An Antaeus Company presentation of four one-act plays by Noel Coward.
Directed by William Ludel, Michael Murray and Stephanie Shroyer.

JM Farmer/ Sir Reginald - Armin Shimerman, Jimmie Horlick/ Hubert/Peter -
Ned Schmidtke, Hester More/Walters - Devon Sorvari
Johnny Bolton/Ernest - Michael McShane, Julian Breed/Karl/ Tim/Bogey -
Bill Brochtrup, Violet Vibart/Susan/Clare - Kitty Swink
Maurice Searle/ Major Blake/Alastair - Ray Porter, Dame Rose Maitland/
Clara/Mrs.Wadhurst - Anne Gee Byrd, Xenia James - Christina Pickles,
Elise Brodie/Barbara - Shannon Holt, Press Photographer/Ippaga/
Mr. Bumham - Nathan Patrick, George/Christian - Michael Reilly Burke,
Eva/Leonora - Kirsten Potter, Louise - Emily Chase, Piggie - Nike Doukas,
Mr. Wadhurst - Philip Proctor, Atherton - Bravo



Kirsten Potter stars as a woman trying to seduce Michael Reilly Burke in 'Tonight at 8:30 (Part 1 - If Love Were All)' at Deaf West Theater.

Noel Coward's "Tonight at 8:30," a daunting series of 10 one-act plays, is rarely revived due to its length and logistical complexities. It takes a troupe with a deep appreciation of theatrical history and no lack of ambition to do the show justice, and the Antaeus Company has stepped up with an outstanding production. The group has divided the event into two parts, each featuring four of the one-acts, with the final two one-acts (and a third, "lost" one-act, unperformed since 1922) to be done as a holiday benefit show. Part 1, subtitled "If Love Were All," impresses with terrific acting, sparkling wit and unexpectedly strong drama.

"Star Chamber" concerns a meeting of a theatrical charity group as they discuss a possible addition to a home for retired actresses. The actors comprising the charity group can't resist engaging in "star" behavior, however. The representative from the retirement home, JM Farmer (Armin Shimerman), attempts to give his report on possible costs but is effortlessly ignored by resident diva Xenia James (Christina Pickles), ingenue Hester More (Devon Sorvari), comedian Johnny Bolton (Michael McShane) and the rest of the gossip group.

"We Were Dancing" examines the instant and intense love-at-first-meeting experienced by Louise (Emily Chase) and Karl (Bill Brochtrup) after they've danced at a party. This would be easier if Louise didn't then have to explain things to her understandably confused husband, Hubert (Ned Schmidtke), and his angry sister, Clara (Anne Gee Byrd).

"The Astonished Heart" is a surprisingly serious and affecting story of how an affair ruins several lives. When Barbara (Shannon Holt) invites old school rival Leonora (Kirsten Potter) over to her home one day, she doesn't realize that Leonora is intending to attempt to steal her husband, Christian (Michael Reilly Burke).

Finally, "Hands Across the Sea" is a daffy comedy, as Piggie (Nike Doukas) and her friends labor mightily under a couple of cases of mistaken identity.

~con't~

All of the one-acts are double-cast.

Shirmerman makes his character's gentle reticence compelling via myriad subtle details, and McShane deftly imbues his boisterous role with an underlying sadness. Brochtrup is an ideal Coward lead, serenely bitchy, while Sorvari excels as the wildly giddy Hester. Pickles is superb as Xenia, getting the maximum humor from every line. "Dancing" is the only one-act that comes off as somewhat dated, but Chase is very good as the cool-even-when-impassioned Coward heroine. Schmidtke makes his amazingly forgiving character believable, which is an admirable feat, and Byrd is bluntly amusing as the appalled Clara.

Potter gives the best perf of the evening as the casually treacherous Leonora, a mixture of chilly resolve, lust and finally self-disgust that creates an all-too-human portrait. Holt is her equal as the unfortunate Barbara, looking as though she may come apart from sheer nerves at any moment. Burke is properly anguished and brutal as the unfaithful husband. Doukas is hilarious as the multitasking Piggie, often holding two conversations simultaneously, and Kitty Swink is woozily great as her drunken friend Clare.

William Ludel's direction of "Chamber" and Michael Murray's helming of "Hands" similarly keep the comedic anarchy bubbling along without collapsing into chaos -- both impressive balancing acts. Murray's work on "Dancing" is fine but can't make the piece seem realistic. Stephanie Shroyer's direction of "Astonished" is tightly paced, creatively staged and detailed in its levels of style and emotion. John Iacovelli's sets are basic but effective, and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes are lush.

Sets, John Iacovelli; costumes, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg; lighting, Jose Lopez; sound, John Zalewski; musical director, Matt Goldsby; production stage manager, Young Ji. Opened Oct. 27, 2007. Reviewed Nov. 3. Runs through Dec. 23. Running time: 2 HOURS, 45 MIN.