Cultural Daily

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Virtual Cabaret: Love, Noel

David Sheward · Thursday, August 13th, 2020

The intimate environs of cabaret will probably be the last aspect of the entertainment industry to return to normal in this COVID world. Patrons squeezed shoulder to shoulder at tiny tables, mere inches away from performers projecting potentially infectious air particles is a scary atmosphere these days. Until a reliable vaccine becomes available, we will probably not be enjoying this unique, direct art form. Fortunately, the Irish Repertory Theatre has translated a delightful gem of a cabaret piece to the digital medium for a brief stay. *Love, Noel: The Songs and Letters of Noel Coward,* devised by Barry Day, assembles a sparkling sampling of the witty correspondence and the 300 songs by the brilliant polymath Coward. One of the great entertainers of the 20th century, Coward wrote some of the most durable light comedies of the repertoire (*Blithe Spirit, Private Lives, Hay Fever, Present Laughter*), composed heartfelt and fizzy songs, and dazzled audiences as an actor and singer on stage, film, television, and the cabaret and concert stage. Pianist Steve Ross and singer KT Sullivan are the amiable hosts of this marvelous party. Director Charlotte Moore smoothly paces this delightful pastiche of Coward's martini-dry wit and throbbing sentiment in the elegant Players Club amid the memorabilia of centuries of show business.

Steve Ross and KT Sullivan in *Love, Noel: The Songs and Letters of Noel Coward.*
Credit: Irish Rep

Sullivan delivers a passionate, aching version of Coward's most popular song, "Mad About the Boy" and is deliciously versatile delivering imitations of the Master's many leading ladies and female chums such as Gertrude Lawrence, Beatrice Lille, Marlene Dietrich, and Greta Garbo. The spoken exchanges of letters provides a treasure trove of gossip. There is one sinfully scintillating letter exchange from the last-named diva where she proposed to the gay Coward (coyly asking him to be her "bride") and you don't know if she's joking or not. Dietrich pleads for solace from Coward over her busted love affair with Yul Brynner and he scandalized when Mary Martin blithely bids Princess Margaret to say hello her sister Queen Elizabeth.

KT Sullivan in *Love, Noel: The Songs and Letters of Noel Coward.*
Credit: Irish Rep

In addition to his sensitive piano accompaniment, Ross provides a superb limning of Coward. His is more of a tribute than an impersonation, capturing the essence of the subject's light touch and joy in entertaining. He archly puts across the alternative verse to "Mad About the Boy," sung by a repressed businessman. (This version was written for the revue *Words and Music*, but cut for being

to too daring and open about homosexuality.) Ross has just the right touch to convey the intricate, interlocking lyrics of rare curios such as “I Like America” which includes a catalogue of the sexual habits of the inhabitants by state (“New Jersey dames/Go up in flames/If someone mentions bed/In Chicago, Illinois/When a girl meets a boy/She giggles and shoots him dead.”)

Steve Ross in *Love, Noel: The Songs and Letters of Noel Coward*.
Credit: Irish Rep

In the small space of the club, the pair occasionally play the delicate Coward material too big. Sullivan’s version of Elaine Stritch is a tad overblown as she hammers each gag line in “Why Do the Wrong People Travel?” from *Sail Away*. Likewise, she and Ross pound the joke of a seemingly blissful long-married couple actually despising each other in “The Bronxville Darby and Joan” from the same show.

But these are the only flaws in an otherwise scrumptious concoction that affords memorable interpretations of such evocative Coward favorites as “I’ll See You Again” and “Someday I’ll Find You.” Hearing both of these wistful masterpieces sung with such melancholy sweetness makes one yearn for the day when we can once again gather in small, intimate spaces and listen to great music.

Love, Noel: The Songs and Letters of Noel Coward is available until Aug. 15.

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