

September 29, 2015

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# First Nighter: Noel Coward's *Bitter Sweet* Gets Sweet, Bitter Bard College Revival

Posted: 08/08/2011 10:40 am EDT | Updated: 10/08/2011 5:12 am EDT

We need to thank director-adapter Michael Gieleta for the revival of Noel Coward's *Bitter Sweet* at Bard College's Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts. Correction: We need to thank him up to a point.

Coward confected *Bitter Sweet* in 1929 when he'd already established himself as London's cleverest artist on the rise, a composer-lyricist-actor-jack-of-all-theater-and-literary-trades who came to be known affectionately--sometimes satirically--as "destiny's tot." And much later was amusingly and accurately described by critic John Lahr as "industry in cap and bells"

Trend-settingly urbane as Coward was -- he'd taken to wearing turtle-necks and thereby caused the fashion to sweep the land -- he remained grateful to the influences on him when he was growing up as a lower-middle-class lad with an eye on grander prizes. So he decided he'd honor some forebears by writing an operetta, or, as he termed, it, an "operette." This was in homage to the national love of the form, even as -- whether practiced by W. S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan or less jocular peers -- it was waning.

Setting himself to work, the gleefully industrious Coward imagined a narrative in which Lady Shayne, a woman of a certain age in 1934, meets a younger woman about to marry a rich man she doesn't love rather than the poor man whom she does. Remembering a similar dilemma she faced several -- Lady Shayne hopes to convince her uncertain new acquaintance to choose love.

On this nostalgic branch, Coward hung evergreen-leaf songs, the most familiar being "I'll See You Again," which may be his most famous -- and which, he always contended, came to him wholly formed as he sat in a taxi during a Manhattan traffic jam.

Another of the songs, along with the sinuous faux-Gypsy ballad "Zigeuner" and the whimsical "Ladies of the Town," is the devastating "If Love Were All," If any one of the master's unforgettable numbers can be considered autobiographical, this is it. It includes the line: "I believe that since my life began, the most I've had is just a talent to amuse." (The last four words were appropriated by Sheridan Morley as the title of his definitive Coward biography.)

Coward's results are a song collection any fan would want to hear in context, especially as the opportunity has been extremely rare. Since the 1929 Broadway production, which followed on the heels of the initial London mounting, the only Main Stem appearance was briefly in 1934. So director Gieleta's bringing it to Bard is a favor for Coward lovers.

But how much of a favor is it to longtime Cowardians? How meaningful is it to audiences for whom the 82-year-old work is new? There's the rub. Although I can't say how closely Gieleta as adapter adheres to the story's every turn -- having known the score for some time but never having been exposed to Coward's libretto -- I can say the songs, for the most part, are gorgeously sung by the cast.

Indeed, it feels as if they've been chosen more for their voices than their acting abilities. Among them are Sarah Miller as Sarah, the earlier Lady Shayne incarnation, and William Ferguson as Karl Linden, the impoverished musician with whom Sarah impulsively elopes.

The exceptions to the chosen-more-as-singers-than-actors ensemble is, first, Sian Phillips as Lady Shayne. Her treatment of the now worldly-wise older Sarah leaves nothing to be desired. On the other hand, her voice isn't ideal for the sumptuous melodies Coward dreamed up. And it's a shame for ticket buyers that much of Phillips's on-stage time is spent wandering forth to observe the tribulations Lady Shayne's younger self suffers once she's quit her home and potentially safe marriage and become, as she puts it, "a dance partner in a cabaret."

The other exception is Amanda Squitieri, who plays Manon La Crevette, the cabaret's star attraction. Not only does she expertly portray the character's disappointment with life but she sings "If Love Were All" so stunningly that a listener begins to wonder if anyone (excluding Coward) has more effectively plumbed the depths of its bruised wisdom.

It's up to this point that bouquets can be set at Gieleta's feet. What's not so posy-worthy is his decision -- an understandable one -- to update

Coward's script. Likely assuming ticket buyers in 2011 wouldn't have much affinity for an operetta-informed play set 80 years ago and then 50 years before that, he's moved the two periods visited to 1969 and 1920.

Doing so, however, he's overlooked Coward's using his dates as a metaphor for the waxing and waning of operetta. Even though lighting director Christopher Akerlind finds many opportunities to cast long shadow across Adrian W. Jones's striking, high-walled set and thereby to make a statement on how the present and past cast shadows on each other, Gieleta's changes drain the eras' connotations.

This is particularly apparent in an early sequence when the '60s figures stop their Chubby-Checker twisting and start singing music redolent of the '20s. Another, and even more egregious tweak, is the deracination of Coward's comic and subtly iconoclastic ditty, "Green Carnations." The title refers to the tinted boutonieres Oscar Wilde popularized as a symbol of the dandies (read, homosexuals) who populated turn-of-the-century England, waggishly mocking nature as unnatural. Delivered in the '20s setting by four singing waiters, the Coward lyric that goes "We are the reason for the '90s being gay" is changed to "We are the reason for the '20s being gay" -- and Coward's puckish in-joke is subverted.

Maybe today's spectators won't care about any of this when offered Coward's songs scented with such fragrant perfume. (James Bagwell is the careful conductor.) After all, *Bitter Sweet* opened in New York a mere six weeks before the 1929 market crash. With the market looking worrisome now, fun-seekers may be glad for the entertainment being offered, no matter how compromised.

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