

SM 12
2:10:22

Noel Coward's cynicism runs deep

THEATRE

By BERWYN LEWIS

Cowardy Custard
Devised by Gerald Frow, Alan Strachan and Wendy Toye
Phillip Street Theatre
Cast: Myra de Groot
Meg Chilton
Ric Hutton
Robert Berry
Director: Peter Williams
Musical Director: Garey Campbell
Choreography: Karen Johnson
Designed by Michael O'Kane

THE custard is a mercurial composite of Noel Coward's songs, poems, philosophy, extracts from his plays and his autobiography.

The title was suggested by the master himself. Twelve months before his death in 1973, when this show was pieced together for the

opening of the Mermaid Theatre, London.

It captures the spirit of Coward's total love affair with theatre. It recreates a bygone era when grace and gentility went hand in hand with razor satire and cruel wit. This is belied by the exquisite style of the times reflected in the set design and costumes.

Black decollete gowns worn by Myra de Groot and Meg Chilton are straight from the covers of 1920s Vogue magazines creating the impression of animated art deco figurines. The dinner jackets worn by Ric Hutton and Robert Berry are authentic Coward too.

"Moonlight can be deceptive," said Noel Coward, in this show his dreams, magic, predictions (about competitive sport, religion and machines) and observations on life are brought back to life and given contemporary significance. Boy

factors, debonair bachelors, doting mothers, lisping and in-bred cousins in panelled halls of stately homes, cruel vamps, vile bodies, pre-war wimps and lovers are all part of the passing parade with its small talk and music, delivered, in this case by the fingers of pianist Garey Campbell.

Coward's cynicism runs deep but it is this side of gentle and wistful with its despair, love, absurdity and its constant contradiction. For this reason this show has universal appeal while maintaining its punch and sizzle.

Noel Coward's ability to provoke and amuse was a wonderfully mischievous and prodigious talent. He slips through audience fingers like quicksilver and so does this fast-moving show. When you take him seriously he's not and when you don't it makes you ask who is being superficial?