

The wit and music of Noel Coward

By Douglas J. Keating
Inquirer Staff Writer

Noel Coward once wrote a song titled "Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington." Thank goodness his own parents didn't follow that advice with their son, thereby denying the world the pleasure of Noel Coward's company.

A talented actor, playwright and songwriter who died in 1973, Coward maintained a public personality that personified the white-dinner-jacket sophistication and wit that he captured so well in plays such as *Private Lives*. It is this public Coward, the sharp-witted, urbane conversationalist, who animates the admirable one-man show *Noel Coward ... at the Cafe de Paris*.

Actor Will Stutts' evocation of Coward is a stylish, clever presentation — a show, one feels, that Coward, who knew a little something about style and cleverness, would appreciate.

In the cabaret-style production, directed by Adelle S. Rubin, Stutts' Coward chats about himself and sings the humorous patter songs for which he was famous. Stutts skillfully integrates the music and the spoken material into a relaxed, engaging presentation that seems to speak very much in Coward's voice.

Review: Theater

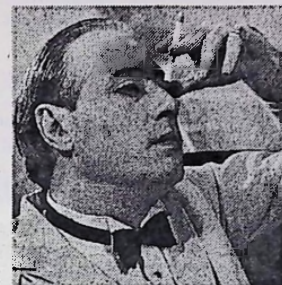
NOEL COWARD ... AT THE CAFE DE PARIS
Words and music of Noel Coward. Devised by Will Stutts; directed by Adelle S. Rubin; settings by Robin Jaffe, Yvette Ratner and William Werner; vocal direction by Howard Haines; lighting by Stephen Keever. Presented at Society Hill Playhouse, Second Space Theater, 507 S. Eighth St. Ends Dec. 17.

Noel Coward..... Will Stutts
Pianist..... Kevin Arruda

An accomplished, locally based actor who specializes in one-person shows (Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman are among his subjects), Stutts here speaks in an authentic, convincing British accent. And his mannerisms — the graceful wave of a cigarette, the expertly held martini glass — fit the sought-for image of sophistication with a touch of dandification.

One-person shows usually try to plumb the personalities and explain the lives of their subjects. Stutts, however, avoids such exploration. The Noel Coward here is the man Noel Coward wanted the world to see.

If the script often seems superficial and ready to break into song or a funny story whenever it starts get-



Will Stutts stars in the one-man show "Noel Coward ... at the Cafe de Paris."

ting personal, one suspects that Coward would have done the same. After all, dears, an audience is to entertain, not to get too chummy with.

Born in 1899 to a middle-class family in London, Coward was on stage by age 11; by his teens, he was acting steadily in London. Stutts' Coward is quite forthcoming about his life up to about the age of 25, when he wrote *The Vortex*, a serious drama very unlike plays such as *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives* and *Blithe Spirit*, which established his reputation as a master of martini-set comedy.

The Vortex made Coward's name in

the theater — and, that done, Stutts seems to lose interest in biography. Thereafter, personal information about Coward gives way increasingly to humorous show-business stories and Coward's inimitable songs, which are a pleasure even though Stutts hasn't much of a singing voice. He strains to reach notes that even an average singer could hit without fuss, but he presents the songs with droll wit, a fine sense of timing and the verbal alacrity that the quick-paced ditties demand.

The songs include "I Went to a Marvelous Party," "Nina," "Why Do the Wrong People Travel" and "Mad Dogs and Englishmen." Stutts also does a fine job with Cole Porter's "Let's Do It," a song to which Coward added his own lyrics and sang in his cabaret act.

A few simple touches by scenic designers William Werner, Robin Jaffe and Yvette Ratner have turned Society Hill Playhouse's Second Space Theater into an attractive imitation of a 1940s nightclub. Small tables with red tablecloths are decorated with delicate vases each holding a single artificial flower, and the floor has been painted with black and gray squares that reflect those on the small stage where Stutts and pianist Kevin Arruda perform. Drinks are sold in the lobby.

11/13/89

PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

Will Stutts Captures Coward in Aspic

By Bill Kent

Special to the Daily News

Will Stutts, the actor who brought us studied, one-man-show portraits of Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, has taken on one of the wittiest, cleverest, nastiest and bitchiest theatrical legends of all time in his new show at the Society Hill Playhouse.

Though he died in 1973, Noel Coward, the famed English actor, playwright and songwriter — the veddy personification of British wit, class and decadence — returns for another bow in Stutts' "Noel Coward ... at the Cafe de Paris."

"In my life, there have been many curtain calls," Stutts as Coward begins with appropriate pomp. "The curtain has gone up and down so much in my life that it's made a draft."

And you will applaud the sheer brilliance of Coward's wit: "Las Vegas is the Nescafe Society," and his songs, "A Room with a View," "The Party's Over" and "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," as well as some obscure, naughty numbers about deviant deeds among Britain's armed forces and New York's dinner-jacketed party animals. Stutts, accompanied by Kevin Arruda on the piano, talks his way through most of these, as Coward did, his arch upper-class accent, swishy mannerisms and limited singing voice duplicating Coward's elegantly

REVIEW

Noel Coward ... at the Cafe de Paris

A one-man show with Will Stutts as Noel Coward. Produced by Jim McClelland, directed by Adelle S. Rubin, devised by Will Stutts.

Playing at: The Second Space Theater & Cabaret at the Society Hill Playhouse, 507 S. 8th St., weekends through Dec. 17. Showtimes: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday. Tickets: \$12 & \$15. Box office: 923-0210.

edgy stage personality.

The show, as Stutts performs it, is an expanded version of Coward's nightclub act, with autobiographical anecdotes, clever declamations ("It's very strange how potent cheap music is") and gossip about other stage personalities. Marlene Dietrich, he tells us, "has been on the verge of retirement since birth") and Sir Laurence Olivier was a notorious "giggler."

Coward became a legend on Broadway due to his carefully created image. He was one of the original poseurs, and his stage personality transcended his plays and his critics. One could almost not get enough of the bored and bemused upper-class sophisticate who has the right line for every occasion, enjoys equal amounts of refined grace and decadent debauchery, and looks absolutely smashing in a white dinner jacket.

As Stutts portrays him, Coward is



Will Stutts plays Noel Coward

delightful and wry, a haughty sourpuss overwhelmed by his talent and vaguely annoyed that the world, which has so earnestly celebrated his early efforts, ignored him at the end of his life. This is probably the Coward that Coward would have shown us, and, as a re-created illusion, it is diverting fun.



Will Stutts: weekends through Dec. 17 at Society Hill

This Coward-ly Lionizer Stands Alone

Will Stutts Brings the Suave Talking-Singer to Life Once Again

By Nels Nelson

Daily News Theater Critic

His full name is Will Bankhead Stutts. Yes, *that* Bankhead — the late Tallulah was a second cousin. Southern-bred, Philadelphia-based Will Stutts, 40, of course is an actor, too.

He is possibly the most frequently seen and least frequently recognized character actor in the country. His one-man shows rooted in the lives of Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, John Wilkes Booth, Mark Twain and other historical figures have been seen by an estimated 1.5 million theatergoers in the U.S. and Canada, albeit usually before school and college audiences.

Starting tonight, and on subsequent Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through Dec. 17 in the Society Hill Playhouse's Second Space Theater, the versatile Stutts is tackling a personage more contemporary than those historical greats but one who is only a shadowy presence to many of today's younger theatergoers.

"Noel Coward was the epitome of sophistication; he was what the theater was all about," Stutts noted the other day in an interview.

"In his mind the theater was supposed to be this glamorous Never-Never Land."

Coward died in 1973, not long after he was knighted in recognition of an extraordinary career as performer, playwright, composer and filmmaker. But like many of his stellar contemporaries — Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne come quickly to mind — he is barely known to much of today's audience.

Stutts researched his new character for a year and a half, rereading the Cole Lesley and Sheridan Morley biographies, listening to Coward recordings, screening archival films made available via Dick Cavett's Daphne Productions, and so on.

"In the late '50s, his career at rock bottom and his tax burdens mounting, Coward began doing cabaret performances to stay alive," Stutts related.

"Wilbur Clark brought him into the Desert Inn in Las Vegas and did turnaway business with this sophisticated Englishman talking these songs — Coward, like myself, never envisioned himself as a great singer, so the cabaret aspect we're using in the show is just dead on."

Stutts wears a specially tailored Perry Ellis tuxedo not appreciably different from the ones Coward wore, and does snippets of some two dozen songs associated with Coward, moving the biographical

thread according to the songs that seem to denote the period. Act I takes Coward up to World War II; Act II conveys some ambiguous time in the '60s.

"I change to a white dinner jacket after intermission — another Coward trademark. There are a lot of anecdotes and stories and name-dropping."

Does he touch on Coward's homosexuality?

"I follow the same philosophy I used with Walt Whitman," he said. "If that's a primary ingredient, somebody else can do that."

Stutts was born and reared in Jasper, Ala., and took to putting on playtime circus and carnivals from the age of 4 as "defense mechanism."

"My father, a retired Navy man who owned a river barge company, was an alcoholic, and in that day and time there were no resource groups or hotlines I call. So my sister and I developed our own imaginations. But my father had an extensive library and I was reading plays from the time I was a child."

Stutts entered the University of Alabama as a pre-med student but ultimately switched to a theater major. "I had

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STUTTS

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subsidize myself by devising one-person plays to work my way through college. I enjoy the interaction of characters on a stage, but to be completely mercenary, the one-man shows are cheaper to do, and from my vantage point I continue to accept those bookings because you can't look a gift horse in the mouth."

He sampled the California scene in the middle '70s but, "worried about never doing stage work again," came East and eventually settled in Milford, Delaware County, to avoid "the hassles and exorbitant prices" of New York.

He's been in seven Broadway shows, including the 1983 production of "Present Laughter" with George C. Scott and "The Queen and the Rebels" with Colleen Dewhurst. He's a member of the National Council of the Actors Equity Association and is active in the Equity affairs of this region.

He finds the Coward piece "a great deal of fun — the response thus far has been very positive; we've already had some definite interest in bringing the show to Boston."

If You Go

World premiere of Will Stutts as "Noel Coward" at the Cafe de Paris, opening at 8 tonight (through Dec. 17) at the Second Space Theater and Cabaret of the Society Hill Playhouse, 507 S. 8th St. Tickets \$12-\$15. Info: 923-0210.



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Will Stutts Productions

401 Baltimore Avenue Milmont Park, PA 19033-3208 (215) 461-8885

10 March 1989

Mr. Alfred S. Groh
Cultural Advisor
Wilkes College
Donothy Dickson D'Ante Fine Arts Center
Wilkes-Barre, PA. 18766

Dean AL:

This Letter will confirm our conversation of several months ago regarding a performance of my one person play, *A JOURNEY THROUGH THE MIND...EDGAR ALLAN POE*, for Wednesday 3 May, 1989, at Wilkes College.

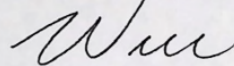
Our agreement was an inclusive fee of Twelve Hundred Fifty (\$1,250.) dollars, plus overnight accommodations in Wilkes-Barre for two persons.

The POE presentation has had a tremendous year. We did 'turn away' business at Society Hill Playhouse's Second Space Theatre last June (review enclosed) and brought the show back there for five weeks in November, to early December.

Of course, I will forward a complete publicity package with press releases, 8x10 photos, etc. within the next two weeks.

If you'll be kind enough to send me a letter back confirming these terms, etc. Look forward to seeing you again. Best wishes to Jane.

Sincerely,



Will Stutts

WS/iff
Encls.

Will Stutts Productions

401 Baltimore Avenue Milmont Park, PA 19033-3208 (215) 461-8885

22 March 1989

Al Groh
Cultural Advisor
Wilkes College
P.O. Box 111
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766

Dear Al:

Received your letter this date. Thank you.

I sent a publicity package last week which I assume you have received.

I am enclosing a couple of color slides taken during performance of the "Poe Play" at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington a couple of years ago. We played to SRO for two weeks! They will need to be processed as photos for use and I would appreciate your retaining them to return to me after use. If any of your local newspapers do "color spreads" perhaps these will prompt that opportunity as well.

At this point, I would appreciate two single rooms for the one night of 3 May after the performance. There is a possibility that I will have to return here after the performance and be unable to stay over depending on my schedule at that time. I will try and let you know well in advance of the performance date so you can cancel the reservations if necessary.

My Social Security number: 423-70-7763

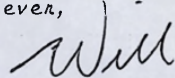
I will have my Tech man, Stephen Keeven, forward basic lighting requirements and set furnishings requirements ASAP.

To my knowledge, it's been a least five years since I was at King's College so the audience there -- and, of course, at Wilkes, is potentially totally new for the production.

Certainly am looking forward to seeing you again... and, hopefully this time to see Jane as well.

All good wishes,

As ever,



Will Stutts

Will Stutts Productions
Incorporated

401 Baltimore Avenue
Milmont Park, PA 19033
(215) 461-8885

NEW YORK: (212) 730-1188

3 October 1987

Al Groh
Wilkes College
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766

Dear Al:

Thank you so much for having me back in Wilkes-Barre at wonderful Wilkes College and that beautiful Darte Center. Thanks also to Bruce, et. al., for their kind and able assistance on MASS APPEAL. The whole experience was delightful and it was especially grand to see you again! I look forward to coming back anytime -- please keep me in mind for your '88 season as (I told you) 1988 will be my 20th consecutive year of working in professional theatre and touring one person plays.

My best, as ever, to Jane. I am sorry I didn't get a chance to see her. Again, thank you so much for your generous hospitality and on-going support.

Sincerely,

Will

Will Stutts

Wed May 3, 1987
Whitman?