

THE FACE

ROSALIE HIGSON
meetsJOHN MICHAEL SWINBANK
NOEL COWARD EXPONENT

ALL his Christmases have come at once: tonight John Michael Swinbank will perform at London's famed Garrick Club at the annual gala of the Noel Coward Society. Three days later, on December 16 — Coward's birthday — a six-week season of his cabaret *Noel at Noel* opens at the New End Theatre in Hampstead.

Coward — actor, dramatist, songwriter, dandy and wit (1899-1973) — mercilessly skewered English manners and mannerisms during his heyday from the 1920s to the '50s. He wrote about 50 plays, ranging from comedies and social commentary to ghost stories, and 400 popular songs, among them comic observations such as *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* and, more tenderly, *Mad about the Boy*.

Swinbank was a teenager when he came across Coward's works, thanks to a charismatic drama teacher at Perth's Wesley College, who made acting cool, even among the rugby players.

"Drama became rather admired, which was a very good thing given that I wasn't good at sport," Swinbank says. "I went from being the most unpopular boy at school to one of the most popular."

The young man from Geraldton in Western Australia had always loved singing but now was seriously bitten by the theatre bug. He joined Perth's amateur Patch Theatre Company and also worked at the professional Hole in the Wall youth theatre, where he performed some of Coward's 1929 comedy *Private Lives* in a revue.

"I had a ball, and I found it daring, suggestive, and exquisite high camp. All those things that excited the hormones racing around young bodies at 16. It was amazing to bump into subtlety, really."

"And a bit later I did the full play, still aged 16. It must have been something to watch the enthusiasm and drive of this precocious brat," he says.

"But when you know no better you are just full of vim and pluck and bravery. Now I almost fall over with nerves."

He performed his first Coward cabaret act in 1982 and went professional at Ricardo's wine bar the next year, alongside friend David Helfgott.

In 1988 he was invited to turn his act into a full evening's entertainment for Perth's ArtRage Festival. The show was a critical and popular success, and resulted in successful tours to Hong Kong, Thailand and Singapore, where he'd wear his father's 1940s dinner suit for performances.

"In that world, that Far East atmosphere, it works very nicely. Grand hotels, Somerset Maugham, gin and tonics, going native. That thing of proprietary being unable to resist the natural environment."

"So often in Coward's songs he has these



Picture: Andy Tyndall Wright

people who know how to behave behaving very badly because they can't help themselves. He loves poking fun at what could really be described as Victorian hypocrisy."

Swinbank's successful tours strengthened his resolve to continue with Coward: "It revealed to me that what Marie [Sermon, his teacher and accompanist] and I had been doing wasn't just reserved to some crazy little group of people in Perth. Suddenly there was a whole world out there."

Swinbank is the youngest son of English immigrants, "10-pound Poms" who arrived in 1965. The Swinbanks were all good chapel and God-fearing folk, with a long tradition of farming. "I believe that it was not a good time for farming in [Western] Australia in the mid-'60s, but it was a good time for iron ore, and [my father] worked on the wharf, loading big ships with ore for Japan."

Swinbank Sr soon saw an opportunity and developed a caravan park catering to Geraldton's many tourists. "It was right beside the sea and it became a thriving business. It was a wonderful childhood, spent on the beach, although paid for now by endless trips to the dermatologist."

Singing was part of his life, from Sunday school through six years of chapel choir at Wesley. "That saw me go through soprano, alto tenor and bass, sometimes all at the same time," he says with a laugh.

"I know the Methodist hymnbook inside out, and I still like a good hymn now and again. I suppose it keeps the levity of my other passion somewhat in check."

For many years he studied and worked with Sermon, and performs with long-time accompanists Tim Cunniffe and Richard John, who will each do three weeks of the London season.

Swinbank's interpretation of Coward's work is not an impersonation, nor does he follow the great man's style slavishly, although he does have a stash of memorabilia, songbooks, signed photographs and the like.

"I'm irreverent as well, but I think he would have approved. It's that Australian thing, and I do think that's why Australians have such success in all sorts of things. We have a

particular take on material from the old world.

"I'm not interested in doing museum pieces. If it doesn't somehow sing to the audience, then out it goes. That's my only criteria: does it work for the audience?"

Coward certainly keeps on keeping on. Stephan Elliott's film *Easy Virtue*, based on the 1925 play, with Colin Firth and Kristen Scott Thomas, premiered at the London Film Festival recently, while Peter Hall's stage revival of *The Vortex* won critical approval earlier this year in London.

The stream of royalties that continues to roll into Coward's estate is the reason the Noel Coward Society was formed.

"There were no heirs and what do you do with this money? The foundation makes bequests and grants to further Coward's work," Swinbank says.

"A lot of composers do that, even ones still

alive, like Stephen Sondheim. It's kind of like a big fan club with a grand name."

He joined early on as a fan. "I just wanted to be connected. And I was never too sure when I should tell them just what an obsessive tragic I was."

So why the lifelong devotion to Coward? "It's such a hard question, I think about it quite a lot," he says.

"I think it's the language, married to delightful or beautiful music. The curious thing about the songs, the comedy songs especially, [is that] they're very minimalist, like little worlds or a little play where you can create character. So there's quite a bit going on, but foremost is the irreverent wit, and the suggestive nature of it, which communicates a whole range of things very quickly."

"His view of the world somehow makes a mad world sane."

CLOSE-UP

Big break: An invitation to perform at the grand reopening of Raffles Hotel, Singapore, after its \$200 million facelift.

Career highlight: During my first international season, an invitation to fire Hong Kong's *Noonday Gun*, immortalised in Coward's *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*.

Career lowlight: Fielding a phone inquiry from a venue manager: "So, what's Noel doing in the show?"

Favourite Noel Coward song: *Matelot*, a sublime lyric of unconditional love over music as restless as the sea.

Guilty pleasures: Apart from singing the Methodist hymnbook privately, a deep and abiding love of champagne.