

Every year three cities celebrate the vast creative talents of Noel Coward on his birthday – New York, London and Perth. The man responsible for keeping Coward's crackling wit alive Down Under is John Michael Swinbank.

I BEGAN as an inveterate choir boy. I sang with the chapel choir for six years and must admit there is nothing like a good hymn. I loved singing and I loved music. I was a boy soprano, an alto, a tenor, then a base and, technically, I'm a baritone. Deep down there was something in me saying there should be applause at the end of this, and maybe a few laughs.

When I first came across Noel Coward's work it stuck. I feel very attuned with his language and his intention.

I've been obsessed with Coward's words and music for over 25 years now. Coward died in 1973 and I've been celebrating his birthday, December 16, with a tribute to the funniest and most moving lyrics.

The thing I love most about performing is the communication. It's wonderful to communicate with an audience and I like to share my enthusiasm for Coward's songs and the lyrics – the experiences that are in the songs.

I adore Coward's ability to choose words and to make wonderful comedic situations come alive. They are bright, fast, witty, suggestive and terribly clever but I also love his more nostalgic songs and their beautiful sentiment.

Coward was so successful in so many areas. From play and lyric writing, to music, performing, acting, singing, films and musical theatre – he was a multifaceted individual. One of the things that I admire and believe in absolutely is having a sense of humour.

What makes it interesting for me as a performer is the real challenge to evoke the spirit of Coward. I never feel like I play him – I play the character, I don't play the man. I really don't believe I impersonate him. I interpret him.

There is a sense of amusement and irony in his work that is similar to my own attitudes and beliefs. I can't think of anything funnier than to be able to find the world amusing. I have a tendency sometimes to get very serious and I think it's important to send that up sometimes.

I took my act halfway around the world and back again and had a wonderful time doing that. In some ways I followed in Coward's footsteps, traversing some of these wonderfully nostalgic parts of the world.

I was very fortunate to be able to travel the world with a suitcase, a piano and an accompanist, with that lifestyle. It was really quite glamorous and quite wonderful.

I work with an accompanist, a brilliant pianist called Tim Cunniffe, and together we perform some of Coward's greatest comedy songs.

We also include some Cole Porter, who is his great contemporary, a real alter ego of Coward. And also a little bit of Stephen Sondheim.

I've really enjoyed revealing and sharing with the audience that these songs are not museum pieces, they are living and breathing and there is nothing else quite like them.

I have a very different lifestyle – I've always worked in the theatre and the arts, in both music and theatre. For many years I was dedicated to performing. That's how I expressed myself.

One of the more memorable moments in my career was performing at a mining camp in Pinjarra.



Picture: Ross Swanborough

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As the show began the barrage of abuse was so loud and so long that I couldn't hear the piano. When I eventually realised that the accompanist was playing, I started to sing. By the second number the crowd had finally exhausted themselves and stopped, perfectly timed for a funny lyric, and someone laughed. The room went quiet and I was allowed to finish the song.

Then as we launched into the final number we brought the house down and I became the toast of the Pinjarra mining camp and had drinking competitions in the bar afterwards. I now know how to down a middy in about a second and occasionally have to do that if I need to face an audience.

as told to JESSICA BARKER

■ John Michael Swinbank will be performing *Merry Noel!* at the Old Mill Theatre from Dec 17-19, bookings at BOCs.



■ I have just read your wonderful story on the Re Store (Sister Act, Dec 3) – my idea of a glutton's Aladdin's cave. You captured the wonder and diligence of the family and their unique creation. You caused some tears (of respect) – one tear for the family's beauty, another for your accurate transmission. The photo of the sisters in front of the coffee roaster captured their unity and eccentricity. Unfinished conversations sums it up. Their minds and tongues move at such speed that wrapping a completion is unnecessary and intrusive. Well done.

Julian P. O'Brien, Victoria Park

■ I'd had a trying weekend and was feeling a bit blue. When I turned to Page 22 of STM, my spirits just lifted in delight at your spread entitled Water Babies. What a treat to see models with such natural bodies and sunny smiles in their colourful costumes. Thank you.

May Perks, via email

■ Despite not owning a copy of the new Oasis best-of CD, I was struck by a couple of glaring errors in its review by Jay Hanna (Nov 26). Firstly, the band has recorded six studio albums, not five (though I'd bet Oasis would be happy to pretend at least one of their less fondly recalled albums didn't exist). Secondly, *Some Might Say* does in fact feature on the new CD. As second cab off the rank on disc one it's hard to miss. Also, a riposte to Simon Collins' letter defending the Big Day Out line-up (Letters, Nov 26). Each to their own tastes I guess, but to my mind both Jet and the Killers are over-hyped purveyors of shallow mimic rock. It's no surprise that both bands have fallen prey to dodgy second-album syndrome. The current popularity of them is more to do with exposure via *The O.C.* and an iPod commercial than it is with having good tunes. As for the rest of the line-up, if prog rock isn't your thing, it looks more like being a "Big Day In" at home.

Lucien Wilkinson, via email

■ Thank God for people like David Andrews and Robert Larbalestier (Two of Us, Nov 26). I recently had a myxoma (heart tumour) removed by Dr Andrews. After reading about the personal toll their profession has on their lifestyle, I wish I had given him the hug I wanted to instead of just shaking his hand when I thanked him for saving my life.

Julie Cotterill, via email

Email your letters to STM@sundaytimes.news1td.com.au or post to STM Letters, GPO Box D174, Perth, WA 6840. Readers whose letters are published this week win a double in-season pass to *Charlotte's Web*, based on E.B. White's best-selling children's book. In cinemas now, the film features the voices of Julia Roberts, Oprah Winfrey, John Cleese and Robert Redford.

