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Exotic fable of the Far East



A new play with music stars John Michael Swinbank as Noel Coward on a Far Eastern Adventure in 1930.
Image: Crispian Chan Photo: Stephen Tate

by John Aitken

I HAVE a print of an old poster on my office wall. It dates from the 1920s and advertises the legendary

Raffles Hotel in Singapore, offering "electric light" and "bells throughout the hotel". It also boasts that Raffles is "patronized by Royalty and Nobility." Indeed in the late

19th Century and the first half of the 20th, Raffles was a bastion of Western imperialism set in a sea of - often to European visitors - bewildering exotica.

From its very early days, Raffles was also a magnet to writers and other peripatetic artists. Joseph Conrad was one of the first and he wrote whilst staying there:

"A gentle breeze entering through the windows, always flung wide open, brought into the bare room the languor of the earth, the bewildering breath of eastern waters..." Later came Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham who added that "Raffles stands for all the fables of the exotic East. Showbiz royalty also dropped in, like Charlie Chaplin and perhaps most famous of all - the 'Master', Mr Noel Coward.

Still a young man but already a major star, Noel had been on a tour of the "Far East" in 1929 with his friend Jeffery Amherst when disaster struck. Lord Amherst came down with dysentery and fearing for his companion's life, Coward had to dash through Vietnam and Siam [now Thailand] in a "mobile torture chamber they had the temerity to call a car" to reach Singapore and its superior medical facilities. Noel discovered Raffles and embarked on what appears to have been a life-changing experience. This is the premise of my new play *Imperial Facade*.

Like many young people of the time Coward appears to have "had a ball" during the Twenties. Flippancy was all the rage and Noel was right up there with the most flippant.

However during the Singapore sojourn he fell in with a down-at-heel touring theatrical company called 'The Quaints'. With only three day's notice, he took over the leading role of Stanhope in a play about the First World War, R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*. This experience made Coward revise his views on war and made him consider that perhaps his approach to the First World War had been unsuitably light-hearted.

On his way home to England Noel wrote the anti-war play *Post Mortem*. However it was deemed "definitely not Coward" by theatrical producers and agents and was not professionally produced in *continued on page 25*



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