

# His master's voice

**An actor from Perth, of all places, is acclaimed as one of the world's best impersonators of a thoroughly English performer.**

In John Michael Swinbank's line of work, timing is everything.

Ask him about his worst stage experience and he doesn't miss a beat. "It was horrendous. It didn't go down well at all. They were violently screaming at me. 'Poofter!' And that was just the women!"

Until that brutal baptism of fire at a Pinjarra mining camp in 1984, the young Swinbank's curious fixation with Noel Coward — the brilliantly witty writer and performer who defined English sophistication — had been shared only by close Perth theatrical friends and Coward devotees. They would gather and "listen and scream and drink martinis and when the martinis ran out we just continued drinking from whatever bottle we could find," Swinbank says.

His earlier shows, lunchtime concerts at the University of WA's Octagon Theatre, had been packed with "little old ladies of Nedlands and Claremont" who stood proudly each time God Save the Queen was played.

But the Pinjarra miners weren't theatrical types. And Coward's humour was a more precise instrument than the sledgehammer they were used to.

"It started when they saw me in my dinner suit before they even heard me," Swinbank recalls. "This terrified me. Initially all I did was smile. I could hardly hear the piano because of the yelling but somehow I did and struggled through one and a half songs."

Part-way through the second song, the yelling subsided momentarily. "Then there was one tiny little joke that got someone in the front laughing. It took everyone by surprise."

In those days, Swinbank always ended his set with a Coward-style interpretation of Cole Porter's Let's Do It. "Well of course, that's one of the most sexually suggestive songs of all time and it is tremendous fun and everyone kind of knows it." He grins and sings a few bars. "*Bürrdss do it! Beeeess do it! Even over-educated fleeeaaass do it.*"

"They loved it. It was one of those great disaster-triumphs. I ended up afterwards having drinking competitions with one of the mining men who had the extraordinary ability to drink a middy of beer with one gulp. He taught me how to do that. I do that now when I'm facing a similar audience. It is the only way to get through."

That Swinbank could win over a hostile mining crowd with the work of one of England's most sophisticated lyricists is a testament to the power of Coward's words and to the genius of Swinbank's delivery.

His skill at interpreting the man they called The Master has earned the Perth-based performer the distinction of being one of the world's best Coward interpreters. He played Coward at the 1991 reopening of Singapore's Raffles Hotel and fired Hong Kong's Noonday Gun immortalised in Coward's famous song Mad Dogs and Englishmen.

He has performed before the Thai royal family at The Oriental in Bangkok, toured India and sung on the QE2. And he has crossed paths (and cocktails) with Gore Vidal, who famously said: "John Michael Swinbank is better looking than my old friend Noel Coward and very funny."

He is a quick wit, can hold an audience with ease (two and a half hours for this interview) and is an entrenched favourite on Perth's social circuit, switching between performing and paying the bills with his work as a publicist.

But Coward has always been his obsession and moments of his life seem to him to be vague echoes of Coward's experiences.

Born in England but raised in Geraldton, Swinbank fell into performing Coward 25 years ago when he was a boarder at Wesley College. "I was, at one time, the most unpopular boy in school. Everyone else . . . thought I was a big poofter, basically an English-sounding, music-loving, arts-loving queer. I sometimes look back on that and think I almost fell into a stereotype.



**"I became quite popular in that I went on stage. I became this outrageous aesthete."**

"But later on I became quite popular in that I went on stage. I became this outrageous aesthete. My version of it."

His talent for reading Shakespeare and an uncontrollable desire to perform which he attributes to a need to conquer his fear and insecurity led him after school to Perth's Patch Theatre.

"Patch's director David Crann said something which had an extraordinary effect on me. He said: 'I want to use your near-

perfect voice in a play.' Of course I was thrilled and that kind of began it. The play was (Coward's) Private Lives.

"I played Elyot Chase at the age of 16 which is just outrageous, looking back on it. But it fired me up enormously. I loved that high comedy style and had the ability, which was a natural ability, to say comedic lines. It was a curious thing for a 16-year-old to have. But it was a lot of fun."

To celebrate his 25-year journey, Swinbank

is taking on the role of Coward in the world premiere of John Aitken's play Imperial Facade. Set in Singapore in 1929, the comedy was written especially for Swinbank.

"Perth is still a great Coward city," he says. "And I think I've had a role in that — keeping the flame burning for The Master."

**Imperial Facade is on at the Rechabites Hall, Northbridge, until October 15.**