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Reviewer 'Mad About' Coward

Saturday
19 Feb. 1977

By WALTER LAZENBY

CHARLESTON — Closing tonight: "Mad About the Boy: Noel Coward," at Eastern's Playroom.

Some reflections after opening night: "Interpreters' Theatre" though it is called, here is a full-scale production, with bits of plays and essays, skits, songs, dances, and piano accompaniment; with smart costumes and an Art Deco set whose simple elegance belies the hard work which must have gone into its creation.

The material is on the whole delightful — some of the best moments from Noel Coward's works, lovingly selected and

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pleasingly arranged by Donna Rice Shehorn. Being a Coward admirer myself, I applaud her decision to challenge her actors and amuse her audiences with this sophisticated fare.

She has managed a nice transition at one point from critics abusing Coward's "Private Lives" as thin and gossamer-like to a scene from its first act, as if to demonstrate that "gossamer" is not always a derogatory word. She has

included standard favorites from the Coward repertory, such as "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," "Nina" (from Argentina), "I've Been to a Marvelous Party," "Let's Do It" (with apologies to Coles Porter), and the title song. (But the latter is badly edited, so that the singer must render lyrics meant separately for a society woman and for a tart as if they were part of the same song!)

It seemed to me that James Kleckner did the best job of handling the clipped, polished dialogue, and his rendition of "Nina" was entertaining. The ensemble were at their best in "Design for Dancing" and "Let's Do It." The men of the

cast managed the clearest diction in "The Stately Homes of England," and Katie Sullivan's impersonation of a dowager enjoying a "Marvelous Party" came off well.

But while sitting in the theatre I asked myself, How well do the values of the texts come across? It was not a question about simulated British accents: some of my British friends in the audience readily accepted what one of them called the "Mid-Atlantic" compromise adopted by the most successful of the actors.

What I realized I was missing at many points was an easy delivery which would indicate that the actors really relished

the sophisticated language; rhythmic utterance, and phrasing which would allow the occasional rhymes to please; and precision of diction (I must say that all the French phrases seemed accurately pronounced, even if some of the English words were not). Tempo, too, was occasionally rather dreary in the first part of the show.

And I thought that the format — allowing actors to descend from a raised thrust stage and disperse themselves about the acting area, often distractingly near the audience — called attention to weaknesses in the singing that might not have been so readily apparent otherwise.