Reviewer 'Mad About' Coward

Walter Lazenby
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
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 “Marvel-
ous 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.

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.