Benign and subversive

ND students welcome challenge of funny but edgy Coward play

THEATER & DANCE

By EVAN GILLESPIE
Tribune Correspondent
Director Siiri Scott says a desire to generate controversy had nothing to do with the choice of Noel Coward's "Design for Living" as the next production of the University of Notre Dame's department of film, television and theatre.

"When the department chooses to produce a play," she says, "it is a group decision based on balancing the season, having a number of good roles for men and women, and the benefits to the students in terms of their training. 'Design for Living' allowed us to do a period piece with elevated language and use a large number of students."

Michael Girts, left, Sarah Loveland and Patrick Vassel star in the University of Notre Dame's production of Noel Coward's "Design for Living," which opens Tuesday at the DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts.

University of Notre Dame
Photos/PATRICK RYAN

Yet the play has a long history of causing a stir. Written in 1932, it is the story of Gilda, a sophisticated woman of the world in love with Otto; unfortunately, Gilda is also in love with Leo, and in the course of a play that features Coward's trademark parlor-comedy wit and style, Gilda develops an innovative "design for living" that will allow the threesome to remain together in amorous harmony.

Gilda's solution, a not very carefully veiled ménage a trois, was a challenge to the mores of the time. Coward was necessarily coy about his own homosexuality, but he cast himself as Leo when the play debuted in New York in 1933, giving the roles of Gilda and Otto to his close friends Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. The free-spirited New York theater crowd was able to handle the play's edgy subject matter -- although the New York Sun did suggest that the play was "sometimes on very thin ice" -- and the New York run was a colossal success.

When Paramount decided to make a film version of the play that same year, director Ernst Lubitsch and writer Ben Hecht were warned by the Hays Office of film standards to remove all allusions to homosexual romance and render fuzzy the nature of the relationship between Gilda, Otto and Leo. Hecht balked at first but eventually threw out all of Coward's objectionable dialogue, leaving a sanitized and hollow version of the play.

Scott acknowledges the play's potential for raising hackles but thinks that today's audiences can tell the difference between moral statements and a lighthearted, funny play.

"I think the play seems benign on the surface but titillates with a subversive ending," she says. "The play is not a recommendation for a 'design for living' but the choice for these three people."

The cast, which includes Sarah Loveland as Gilda, has thus far had a great time working both with Coward's material and with Scott, a director perennially popular with students.

"It's been fantastic working on this show," MBA student Michael Girts (Otto) says. "It's been a rewarding process because Siiri has given us so much freedom to explore and discover. Thanks to her, the actors have taken a lot of ownership, and that's very fulfilling."

Patrick Vassel, a junior political science major who plays Leo, reminds everyone that, all considerations of subject matter aside, ultimately the play's the thing:

"I'm interested to see how audiences react, but I ultimately hope they just have a good time."

Although Coward's play has caused controversy in the past because of its ménage a trois situation, director Siiri Scott thinks today's audiences can tell the difference between moral statements and a lighthearted, funny play.

Onstage

The University of Notre Dame's department of film, television and theatre presents Noel Coward's "Design for Living" at the DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts.

Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and Nov. 16-18, 8:30 p.m. Nov. 19, and 2:30 p.m. Nov. 13 and 20.

Tickets are $12-$8; group rates are available. For more information, call (574) 631-2800, or visit the Web site www.performingarts.nd.edu.