

'Cowardly Custard' offers vintage songs

As part of its summer celebration of English playwright, actor and songwriter Noel Coward, Stanford Repertory Theater opened on Thursday a cabaret evening featuring 20 of Coward's songs. Called "Cowardly Custard," the show was first produced in London in 1972, a year before Coward died.

Although Coward is best remembered as the playwright of "Blithe Spirit," "Private Lives," "Hay Fever" and "Design for Living," he also acted in many plays and films, and wrote hundreds of songs. In the current 75-minute show, Stanford offers 20 of these songs, sung by four actors dressed in evening wear, and backed by a three-piece



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nightclub combo.

Set designer Annie Dauber has turned Stanford's black box Nitery into a cozy boîte from decades past. Audience members sit at small round tables, dimly lit by lamps of varying and striking design.

Although perhaps less posh than the venues Coward often haunted, the Bohemian songwriter would have been at home. And listening to his music is like sitting in your grandfather's attic, playing old 78 rpm phonograph records on the Victrola.

The show opens with Coward's



'COWARDLY CUSTARD' — Samantha Rose Williams sings in "Cowardly Custard" at the Nitery Theater at Stanford.

song "Has Anybody Seen Our Ship?" Here four drunken revelers in fancy evening dress, on shore from a cruise, stumble around looking for their ship.

A debate about the songs

This reminds us that, although Coward was not born into privilege, he became a teenage theater performer, where he met the upper-crust partying class of the 1920s, about whom he then wrote most of his songs and plays over a very successful career.

ty" — one of Coward's most famous numbers, in which the catty singer (Dante Belletti) recounts his pleasure at the embarrassing actions of various acquaintances making fools of themselves at a drunken debauch.

In "Stately Homes," Andre Amarotico mocks aristocratic twits of the early 20th century, who were patrician-born and Eton-educated, but who fell into financial distress and tried to keep the old family estates solvent by selling Anthony Van Dyck paintings.

'Mad about the Boy'

One highlight is "Mad about the Boy," a torch song about the joys and pains of sometimes required, sometimes unrequited love. (Coward was gay.)

Later, director Brendon Martin stages "You Were There" with open gender options. Among the two women and two men on stage, who loves whom?

"Cowardly Custard" is a quick tutorial of songs by one of England's most successful theater artists. But just as it's fun to root through your grandparents' trunks in the dusty attic, when you close the trunks, the songs go silent, and only the memories linger on.

For information and tickets, visit repertorytheater.stanford.edu. John Angell Grant is the

Post's theater critic. Email him at johnangellgrant@gmail.com.

The storyline for "Cowardly Custard" is thin — basically just an excuse for the songs. Early on one performer argues that the songs are too inconsequential and out-of-date to make a successful cabaret production.

Another notes that Coward was a piano player but not a strong singer and was known for talking his own lyrics, rather than singing them.

The performers debate their song list, consider some options, and turn quickly to "I Went to a Marvelous Par-