

COWARDY CUSTARD

1995

4

Times, Friday, September 15, 1995

ENTERTAINMENT

TEDDINGTON THEATRE COMPANY

Teddington's Old Master receives local tribute

ALTHOUGH Noel Coward wrote "I cannot remember, I cannot remember, the house where I was born", he did recall that it was in Waldegrave Road, Teddington, and now number 131 will be identified by an English Heritage plaque as the official birthplace of this prodigiously talented man.

Teddington Theatre Club is also acknowledging the genius of this actor/singer/songwriter/playwright and poet this week at Hampton Court Theatre with a welcome revival of *Cowardy Custard* - a celebratory compilation of his words and music by Gerald Frow, Alan Strachan and Wendy Toye, first staged at the Mermaid Theatre in 1972.

And the company of eleven, which should have been twelve, directed with

precision by Jon Scarrott, musically directed by Catherine Scarrott, plus Gordon Edwards and Jessica Winterstein, made it an affectionate and memorable tribute.

In spite of Jen Lacey's absence due to an accident, the other five women and six men in the cast took over her numbers and provided an almost seamless production.

Without trying to emulate the Master, Steve Bentley got his essence, suavely achieving a laconic style in delivering his poetry and prose, with an admirable vocal dexterity in the tongue-twisting lyrics of songs like "Nina".

Mandy Stenhouse in great voice and looking magnificent in a scarlet gown, was superbly funny in "I Went to a Marvellous Party", which was

performed with impeccable timing.

At her considerable best in bluesy numbers, Wendy Bedford's mellow, velvety tones were a delight in "Twentieth Century Blues" and "Mad About the Boy" and accompanied by the versatile Edward Jeoffroy, she made an hilarious "Derby & Joan".

Whether tap dancing, doing the links, or singing, Joe Early seemed perfectly at home in the Coward style and Matt Hilliard showed his acting abilities as a pretentious, aspiring young writer in a scene with Steve from "Present Laughter".

But ultimately this well directed and choreographed show is a group achievement which sent the appreciative Saturday audience happy into the night.

Jenny Scott

Noël's House Party

By JOHN LYONS

TEDDINGTON Theatre Club celebrates the work of the town's most famous son when it perform one of its last productions at Hampton Court Theatre from Saturday.

Noël Coward's work will be enjoyed when the theatre club puts on *Cowardy Custard* at its home of the last 22 years behind Hampton Court Green.

The theatre club is moving into a new home on Hampton Hill High Street next spring and has only three or four productions left at its current base.

But *Cowardy Custard* should prove to be a smash hit success.

Director Jon Scarrott describes the revue as 'at once hilarious, musical and poignant' and containing much of the master's best music and drama.

A cast of 12 actors and singers will be putting on the show for a week long run.

Theatre club appeal coordinator, Eric Yardley, said: "They have been rehearsing very hard. They are a very talented company with some fine singers.

"The show is a combination of music, dance and drama which the whole family

The timing of the production is also apt because English Heritage is planning to unveil a plaque at Noël Coward's birthplace in Waldegrave Road, Teddington, probably before the end of the year.

An original signed photo (pictured) of the star from his film *In Which We Serve* will be raffled during the run as a further attraction.

Mr Yardley added: "Over the years we have done many of his plays. He is a Teddington playwright and his work is very witty."

The appeal coordinator is hoping large crowds will turn up to boost the coffers of the theatre fund.

More than £750,000 was raised in four years to construct the new theatre, which should be ready next spring.

A further £175,000 needs to be raised to fit out the theatre, to be called the Hampton Hill Playhouse.

Some of that money has already been pledged by businesses, charities and individuals, but more is needed.

Mr Yardley added: "It should be a pop-



office."

Anyone wishing contribute to the fundraising campaign can telephone Mr Yardley on 0181 979 7904.

Cowardy Custard begins its eight day

Musical Custard

This week's Teddington Theatre Club revival of Coward's *Custard* is a family occasion for director Jon Scarrott. His wife Sue is behind the scenes as prompt, the colourful art-deco setting is designed by son Sam, and daughter Catherine is at the keyboard in the Angel niche to provide the reassuringly familiar melodies.

At the Mermaid in 1972 this dazzling anthology of the life and work of Noel Coward was the very first compilation musical, a genre which now fills half the theatres in London. But its begetter Wendy Aronson realised that, with Coward, it mattered as much if not more so that the music.

John Thaxter

Happily TTC's company of 11 (there should have been a dozen but for a last minute accident) is led by Stephen Bentley who brings an Oscarish vocal authority to the text. Witness his superb rendering of the young Noel's recollections of auditions for Christmas shows, moments in an empty theatre, and a powerful scene from *Present Laughter* with Matthew Hilliard as the tiresome tyro Roland Maule and Anne Low as the secretary.

Mandy Stenhouse, deputising at the last moment, is a great deal

funnier in *Marvellous Party* than her material. In particular, she is deliciously disdainful in the *Spinning Wheel* song, a char who's *Mad About The Boy* and an "absolute fizzer" as she spurns Jim Tickle in favour of Edward Jeffroy in the *You Were There* scene.

Daisy Hughes is amusingly subtle as the busy young Alice, whose activities down a country lane are wryly carolled by Joe Early; willowy Lois Jones comes into her own as the restless *Poor Little Rich Girl*; and Miles Hawkins gives winning support throughout the evening.

Unquestioned musical star of the show is Wendy Bedford in magnificent bluesy form in the final chorus

of *Mad About The Boy*. And she is absolutely unmissable in a definitive version of *Darby and Joan*, brilliantly paired with the wily Mr Jeffroy as *Bronxville* wrinkle.

Final performance at Hampton Court Theatre tomorrow.