

MOONEY

on theatre

Review: *Nude With Violin* (East Side Players)

By [Istvan Dugalin](#)



Chaos ensues after a shocking post-mortem reveal in *Nude with Violin* playing at Toronto's Papermill Theatre

There is a charming little venue at [Todmorden Mills](#), tucked in beside the Don Valley Parkway—it's called the [Papermill Theatre](#); I went there last night to see the [East Side Players](#) production of [Noel Coward's](#) [Nude With Violin](#). It was a night of firsts for me: first Coward play, first time at the Papermill, and my first experience with the East Side Players. On all counts, it was more than worth the long, cold walk down Pottery Road.

Set in Paris in the early 50s, the play begins just after the death of a famous artist. Like vultures, his socialite family members flock to his studio to leech off his estate. To their chagrin, the late artist left a letter revealing he was a fraud who never painted a single picture. This confession

had been left in the hands of his faithful valet—who, during the rest of the play, negotiates with the family to determine if the truth is to be made public or suppressed.

There are many outrageous characters that come and go, each adding a new piece to scandalous puzzle. It seems as if Coward wrote this play to provide as much opportunity as possible for actors to show off their skill with accents. From the pushy Brooklyn reporter to the foul-mouthed Russian princess, linguistic shtick abounds here.

It's all very silly, of course, but not entirely superficial. Coward's characters wrestle with the many aspects of art that overlap and conflict—the nature of creativity, the pretension of artistic criticism, and the shrewd business of selling art. The play doesn't examine these notions in any great depth, but Coward was certainly questioning how we *value* art—particularly modern art, which often defies the classical standards one might use to judge its merit.

On the whole, the performances are agreeable. I laughed out loud a handful of times, but spent most of the play quietly chuckling to myself. There are a few wooden moments where accents waver uncomfortably and characters laugh without much genuine humour. Though sometimes distracting to me, the occasionally stilted delivery does sort of work as an aesthetic—and perhaps that was the intention.

There is a palpable sense of forced civility here. Nuance would not be entirely appropriate for this comedy of manners, where affectations are exaggerated for comic effect. Here, people clutch their pearls in horror at the slightest hint of impropriety.

Daryn Dewalt (in the lead role as the loyal valet) is, by far, the most consistently amusing presence on stage. But I must give a shout out to my favourite performer of the evening—Tyler Tanner. He plays three distinct roles exceptionally well, but it was his turn as a snarky photographer that nearly knocked me out of my seat with laughter. It is a small role, but delivered so perfectly that I wished he were a main character.

The set is stunning. Bill Corcoran has created an artist's studio that is minimalist yet fanciful. The furniture and props are realistic and period appropriate, but where walls should be, paintings of various styles seem to hang in mid air. It is rare for directors and set-designers to so blatantly draw attention to the [proscenium](#), so I admire this production for its playfulness: the front of the stage has been fashioned into a large bronze frame—turning the action of the play itself into a work of art for us to contemplate.

What it all boils down to is this: talented actors, in gorgeous costumes, on a handsome set, bantering drolly about art—there you have it! If that sounds like a good time, then take a stroll—or, better yet, a *warm* drive—down Pottery Road to catch [Nude With Violin](#). You have two weeks left!