

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## High Society

Music and Lyrics by Cole Porter, Book by Arthur Kopit based on The Philadelphia Story by Phillip Barry

Shaftesbury Theatre  
(2005)

The Regent's Park Open Air Theatre opened in 1932 and amazingly, Ian Talbot's recast version of Cole Porter's film hit is its first ever West End transfer.

The plot will seem familiar to those who know the movie or who saw Kevin Spacey and Jennifer Ehle in [The Philadelphia Story](#) at the Old Vic earlier this year.

Ian Talbot does not have the budget for a really lavish set, a characteristic Park version from Paul Farnsworth featuring topiary with a doll's house sized white mansion in the background sufficing. Nor can Talbot afford a big name cast to compete with the silver screen's Grace Kelly, practising to become a real life Princess, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby or Celeste Holm.

He makes do with some talented musical names with glamour added by Jerry Hall playing Mrs Lord, the genial matriarch who in this case looks great, acts perfectly well but avoids all but one opportunity to demonstrate her solo not-really-singing voice.

Katherine Kingsley is Tracy Lord, a society debutante who comes across as excessively spoilt until you see her precocious brat of a little sister Dinah, either delightfully or irritatingly played by Claire Redcliffe depending on taste.

Tracy is on the eve of second marriage to dull, nouveau riche George, having given up on the seemingly perfect pairing with wealthy, witty CK Dexter Haven, played by Graham Bickley. Throughout, it seems inevitable that these two will get back together, never more so than during an incredibly romantic and memorable rendition of that homage to a boat and a marriage, *True Love* (an Oscar nomination for Best Music, Original Song).

The dysfunctional family is completed by Miss Hall and two unreconstructed womanisers, James Jordan as Seth who ignores his beautiful wife for an affair with a dancer and Royston Kean's wonderful, ageing Uncle Willie, tiny with flashing teeth, who chases women around like a latter-day Harpo Marx.

A little political depth is offered by a journalistic pair, Mike and Liz, ostensibly wedding guests but in fact covering the event for Spy Magazine - Hello?

This latter pair, played by Paul Robinson and Ria Jones, do a good job of competing with Bickley and Miss Kingsley. They get the song that became a game show, *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire*, and work wonders with it. Miss Jones has a lovely rich voice while Robinson is rather appropriately, a Sinatra sound alike.

Ian Talbot knows when he is on to a good thing and allows the best songs to resonate throughout the production, in particular filling gaps as scene changes take place, often aided by choreographer Gillian Gregory whose speciality seems to be lively, large-scale tap routines.

The musical arrangement that goes a little awry is an oddly-paced *Well Did You Evah?* For strangeness, this rivals the very much more modern version delivered by Iggy Pop and Deborah Harry on the *Red Hot and Blue* tribute to Cole Porter's work and is not favoured by the comparison.

It will be interesting to see whether Regent's Park can export a long-running (double Olivier-nominated) musical to the West End. It is relying on the musical's high-profile name and that of its glamorous Texan star and that may not quite be enough to give the Shaftesbury the true hit that it strives for.

*The touring version of this production, with a slightly different cast, was reviewed by Peter Lathan in [Sunderland](#) and David Chadderton in [Manchester](#).*

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)