

# A SWELLEGANT ELEGANT PARTY

**Marianka Swain** had a ball at the Old Vic's *High Society* on May 19

**T**en years after beginning his tenure with *The Philadelphia Story*, departing artistic director Kevin Spacey finishes in grand style with Arthur Kopit's stage version of *High Society*, made a fully-fledged musical with the addition of several – tangentially related – Cole Porter songs. Though Porter's witty ditties are irresistible, they clutter a first half already burdened with sluggish set-up, particularly as many underline rather than advance the plot.

But once it kicks into high gear, the show becomes a toe-tapping, Champagne-swilling delight. Kate Fleetwood's Tracy Lord, the socialite torn between feckless ex-husband Dexter, earnest nouveau riche fiancé George and chippy reporter Mike, forgoes Grace

Kelly's froideur, instead taking the Hepburn route of smart, spirited defensiveness. When she finally gives into her inner hedonist, making "Let's Misbehave" a statement of intent, she's a comedic joy.

Fleetwood's full-blooded performance anchors Maria Friedman's astute production, which – setting the action in 1958 – converts dated snobbery into a sympathetic case for universal compassion. Remarriage results less from Tracy's weakening than

her supported personal growth, a journey shared by maturing Mike and newly temperate Dexter, though the thematically linked subplot involving the reconciliation of her parents lacks impact.

However, *High Society's* true appeal is its effervescent escapism, and here Friedman delivers. The moonlight romance is beautifully understated, screwball antics well paced, arch one-liners punchily delivered, and, seated in the round, the whole audience is invited to the party. Joe Stilgoe's jazz maestro warms us up

with an improvised mash-up, later topped by a rollicking duel with Theo Jamison, accompanied by fearless tapping atop the pianos.

Nathan M Wright's vivacious choreography, transcending a small space, combines meticulous Busby Berkeley patterning with jubilant abandon. Scene changes are effectively covered by the servants' echoing song-and-dance segments – it's *Downton Abbey: The Musical*. Tom Pye's slick set supports the marvellously fluid staging and produces a moment of theatrical magic.

Outstanding turns among a tight ensemble include Jamie Parker's warm, wise-cracking Mike, Rupert Young's languorous Dexter, Annabel Scholey's sparky Liz, and scene-stealing Ellie Bamber's rebellious Dinah. As the principals finally surrender to unstoppable love, we too surrender to this sensational shindig. ●



The cast of *High Society*