

De-Lovely

Some film commentators wondered, after the success of the film version of *Chicago* (in 2002), whether a new wave of musicals would emerge from Hollywood. The wave has never happened, though this summer an attempt at a musical of the traditional type has been made with *De-Lovely*, a biography of the great Cole Porter studded with his songs. Kevin Kline is the mirthful, bright composer and playboy, for whom smart music and lyrics came as easily as breathing. His muse, and wife, is the comely Linda Lee (Ashley Judd) who is willing to follow where Porter's genius takes them--from posh digs in Paris to Venice to New York and Hollywood.

Since this is a modern biopic in a more open time, Porter's bisexualism and sundry affairs are a piece of the plot; though consistent with the rest of the throwback tone of the movie, the affairs are handled with considerable discretion. Throwback is the word, because the fact is that *De-Lovely*, even with its "modern" overtones, is very much like the musical biographies Hollywood used to make in the 1940's and 1950's (including a 1946 version of Porter's life, *Night and Day*, starring Cary Grant).

Another modern touch is having many of Porter's classic numbers performed on the sound track by today's talents, like Elvis Costello, Sheryl Crow, Natalie Cole, etc. Some of these versions work, some of them don't, but the best is not a contemporary star but a musical comedy pro, John Barrowman (seen here in DC in *Company* during the Sondheim festival). His rendition of "Night and Day," coached by Kline (who himself sings earnestly throughout the movie) is a highlight.

Unfortunately, the story is thin and trite (not helped by a framing flashback device featuring an ailing Porter and a cryptic director played by Jonathan Pryce), and, face it, it is really only the music that matters. But for real lovers of Cole's tunes, I would argue for putting on a disc of the Ella Fitzgerald Cole Porter Songbook rather than catching *De-Lovely* at the multiplex.

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