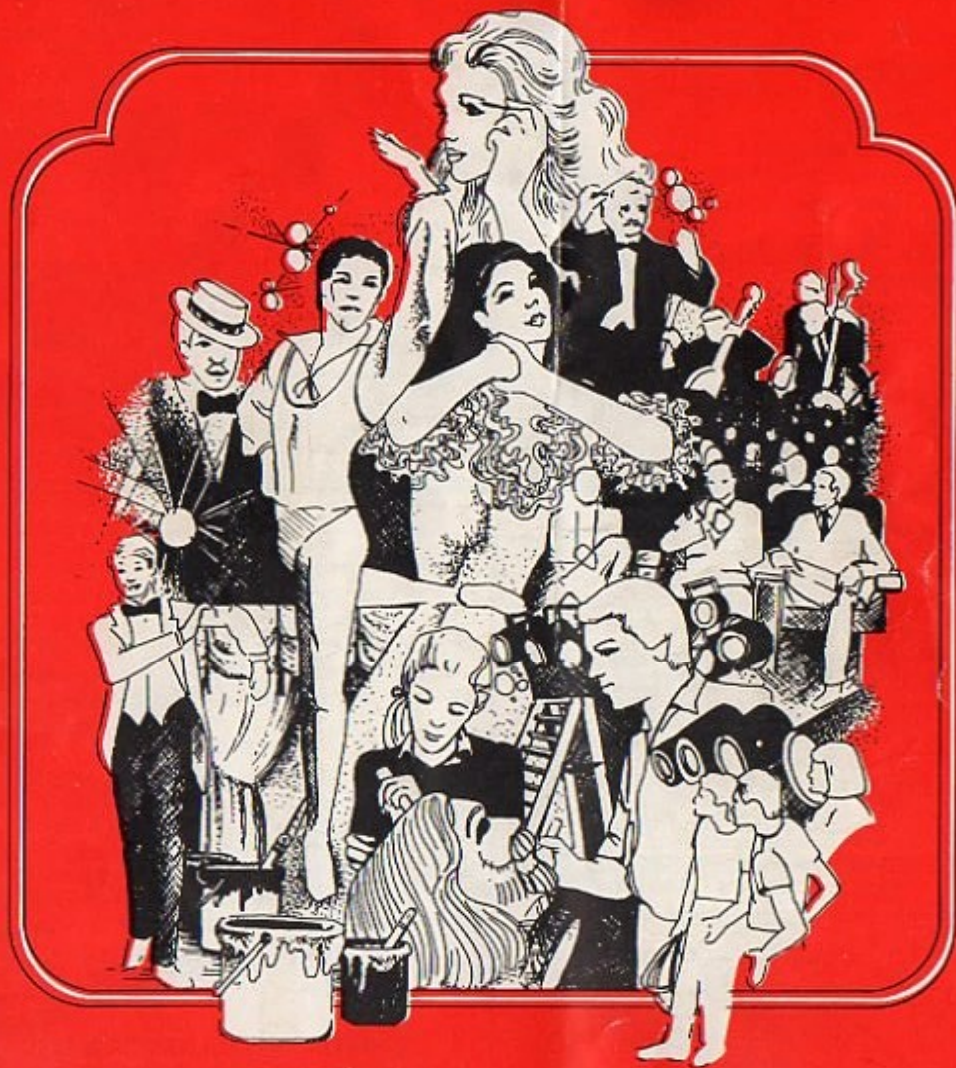


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MUSICALS IN THE AIR

by Eric Shorter

Everybody's heard of it. Everyone knows the tunes. And hands up anyone who didn't know that Grace Kelly, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra were the stars or that Louis Armstrong put in a wholly unwarranted appearance with his band — unwarranted from a dramatic point of view, that is, since no one could fail to welcome a "guest" appearance from such a character.

Yes, it's "High Society". Even if you've forgotten the plot or how it came about (from an American comedy called "Philadelphia Story") or you happen not to know the M-G-M film, you can hardly be unaware of this new British-made American musical comedy.

That's the first thing. It's an all-British effort with American roots (like the dialogue and the music by Cole Porter). There would once have been doubts about the daring. Not only because we weren't good at American accents but also because Broadway knew how to do this sort of thing so much better.

Today however we are not only so competent that we send musical comedies to Broadway after their birth in London (or Leicester which has a name for launching shows with an American accent). We also know how to produce non-American musicals. "Phantom of the Opera" or "Cats" or "Les Misérables" are so

successful that London is the world's centre for musical comedy.

Why are we so good? The British musical used to be a thing of Ruritanian romance or quaintly camp humour or brusque political or social satire. What there was of it was often excellent and very English. Ivor Novello or Julian Slade or Sandy Wilson or Lionel Bart or Joan Littlewood's musical forays down at the Theatre Royal, Stratford E., were fine in their way; but it was never American. Now we are almost showing the Americans how.

Whether it was the influence of men of high repute in the classical British theatre who began turning to musical comedy, or whether it was our drama schools expanding the education of their students with song and dance, or whether it was just cheaper to stage these things in London, they are a fashion now and (mostly) thriving.

1987 No.14

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The Royal Shakespeare Company has lately revived "Kiss Me Kate" at Stratford-on-Avon which was to tour before a spell at the Old Vic, London, as if Cole Porter were part of its repertoire. Since the show is "based" on "The Taming of the Shrew" the choice was apt enough, as would be "West Side Story" or any of the other musicals inspired (however vaguely) by the Bard.

And no one pretends to see anything amiss in one of our major subsidised companies falling back as a box office draw on Cole Porter and the Spewacks. Critics may bleat but everybody knows (managers anyhow) that the great British public is easier to round up for something it can tap its feet to than for anything impinging on its mind. At these rhythms therefore the British are judged best on both sides of the footlights.

So good in fact that if a musical "Pygmalion" needed making today we imagine we should be able to do it ourselves. Whether in fact we could is still doubtful. Why don't we dig it up if we're so good? When comes something comparable from Shaftesbury Avenue (or Leicester)? We still, I think, have need of American production know-how. Would for example "West Side Story", without the staging skills of Jerome Robbins, have become such an exciting landmark in the history of musical comedy?

If we have learned however to put on these shows with our own kind of transatlantic zip, it would be nice to see more of it being put into English stories. We know about "Nicholas Nickleby" and are grateful (again) to the RSC but it hardly counts as a musical like "Oliver!". "Cats" counts as English (because of its sources and composer) but it hardly tells us much about the English in the way that "Guys and Dolls" tells us about some Americans.

What was marvellous in the National Theatre's revival (though the production went to pot when it moved to the West End just as the recent raucous "Joseph and The Technicolor

Dreamcoat" shocked those of us who saw it originally) was that its director Richard Eyre had not a name for musicals. On the contrary, his work had been mainly on serious (though not humourless) plays.

Much respected as director of the Lyceum, Edinburgh, and then the Nottingham Playhouse where Trevor Griffiths' "Comedians" made such a mark, Mr Eyre won all our hearts with "Guys and Dolls". So it wasn't surprising that some years later when he came in line as successor to Peter Hall at the National Theatre he should find himself doing (at Leicester) another American musical, "High Society".

Wouldn't memories of the film be too green? Who's to play Crosby, Sinatra, Kelly, not to mention Armstrong? And who's to write it? Films are never talkative enough to make plays, so Mr Eyre who scripted as well as directed, went back to Philip Barry's 1939 play as well as the 1956 film musical. There was less in both than met the eye. The Cole Porter tunes and the mid-Atlantic English acting were charming.

But while it's no bad thing for the director-designate of the National Theatre and his executive-director designate (David Aukin) to have a musical hit on their hands before taking over from Peter Hall at the South Bank next year, I wish that all the energy, imagination, patience and affection for this thin if tuneful stuff had gone into something native to these parts.

Maybe Messrs Eyre and Aukin will find such a thing when they take up office, something thoroughly British.

"High Society" will however still be running. If it isn't, the auguries have indeed been misleading.

Perhaps it will even go to Broadway.

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Cast in Order of Appearance

Cast in Order of Appearance

Buzz Collins
Sheriff
Maude
Susan Mahoney
Henry
Finian McLonergan
Sharon McLonergan
Woody Mahoney
Og (A Leprechaun)
Amy
Senator Billboard Rawkins
1st Geologist
2nd Geologist
Diane
Jed
Ricky
'Necessity' singers

Hire
Purchase
1st Gospeller
2nd Gospeller
3rd Gospeller
Deputy
Deputy

David Ogden
Colin Arrowsmith
Janet Sinfield
Sally Pearson
Stuart Panton
Mike Gilbert
Julia Harris
Howard Wright
Geoff Knight
Melanie Wheeler
James Inwood
Roger Panton
Richard Bodek
Helen Lindsey
Jeremy Hyde
Richard Lindsey
Katie Golding, Elspeth Lindsey,
Sally Pascoe & Jean Streeton
Jean Streeton
Katie Golding
Colin Arrowsmith
Roger Panton
Richard Bodek
Leslie Gershman
Richard Bodek

Sharecroppers and Tobacco Pickers:

Richard Bodek, Caroline Cody, Sue Collings, Rosemary Dimes,
Leslie Gershman, Katie Golding, Marjorie Hanson, Colin Heath,
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ACT I

- Scene 1. A sunny afternoon. The day of Woody Mahoney's home-coming.
 Scene 2. Four hours later. A moon lit night.
 Scene 3. Next morning on Senator Rawkins Estate.
 Scene 4. The following afternoon.
 Scene 5. Later that afternoon.
 Scene 6. Later still that afternoon.

ACT II

- Scene 7. A few weeks later.
 Scene 8. The same day.
 Scene 9. Later the same day.
 Scene 10. The next morning — just before dawn.

There will be an Interval of 20 minutes between Acts.

MUSICAL NUMBERS

ACT I

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| This time of the Year | Company |
| How are things in Glocca Morra? | Sharon |
| Woody's Entrance | Company |
| Look to the Rainbow | Sharon |
| Old Devil Moon | Sharon and Woody |
| How are things in Glocca Morra? (Reprise) | Sharon |
| Something sort of Grandish | Sharon and Og |
| If this isn't Love | Woody and Company |
| Something sort of Grandish (Reprise) | Og |
| Necessity | Sharecroppers |
| That great come-and-get-it day | Woody and Company |

ACT II

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| When the Idle Poor become the Idle Rich | Sharon and Company |
| Old Devil Moon (Reprise) | Sharon and Woody |
| Dance of the Golden Crock | Susan |
| The Begat | Gospellers and Rawkins |
| Look to the Rainbow | Company |
| When I'm not near the Girl I Love | Og |
| How are things in Glocca Morra (Reprise) | Sharon and Company |
| That great come-and-get-it day | Company |

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| 1956 | Iolanthe, Patience. | 1975 | Fiddler on the Roof. |
| 1957 | The Mikado. | | How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying. |
| 1958 | Yeoman of the Guard. | 1976 | Music Hall. Iolanthe. |
| 1959 | Trial by Jury. | 1977 | Flappers and Flannels. Maid of the Mountains. |
| 1960 | Pirates of Penzance. | 1978 | Oh! What a Lovely War. |
| 1961 | The Godoliers, Gypsy Baron. | | Orpheus in the Underworld. |
| 1962 | Iolanthe. | 1979 | Free as Air. The Arcadians. |
| 1963 | HMS Pinaford. | 1980 | Music Hall. Cabaret. |
| 1964 | Brigadoon. | 1981 | Carousel. Call Me Madam. |
| 1965 | The Mikado. | 1982 | Sweet Charity. The Card. |
| 1966 | La Belle Helene. Trial by Jury. | 1983 | Memories. The Gondoliers. |
| 1967 | Rudligore. | 1984 | States Alive. Fiddler on the Roof. |
| 1968 | Lilac Time. Music Hall. | 1985 | The Sorcerer. Oklahoma. |
| 1969 | Yeoman of the Guard. Music Hall. | 1986 | The Mikado. |
| 1970 | Merrie England. Me and My Girl. | | Oh! What a Lovely War. |
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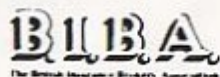
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ROGUES AND VAGABONDS

by Patrick Ludlow

When, early in the century, someone asked: 'What's a duchess like?' the riposte was: 'A chorus girl who's had a lucky break.'

That, with Irving's knighthood, was the beginning of the merging. No longer were mummers 'rogues and vagabonds'. The separate streets which housed the pro were infiltrated by ordinary folk. Actors started to dress like city men with bowlers.

Mark you, the merging had only reached the metropolis. On the road the pro had the exclusive right to certain digs; and Thespian landladies wouldn't dream of letting to what the theatre world called *civilians*.

Incidentally *civilians* included those in the armed forces! And those old dears were a snobbish lot. If they were in the habit of receiving Sir John and Lady Martin Harvey, Fred Terry and Julia Neilson (or his paramour Violet Fairbrother), and other stars, you needed to be well billed to acquire those exclusive rooms. Today the pro must put up with the impersonal hotel at forty times the price.

While the change was slower in the regions the trend towards gentility was there too for managers advertised for actors who: 'Must dress well on an

off.' And I remember in my first provincial contract the clause: 'No parcels on train calls'.

In London the transition was more rapid. Cocky elevated the chorine announcing: 'Mr Cochran's young ladies'. Du Maurier wanted gentlemen who wore tweeds and played golf. Other managers followed the strain and it came to be said that if your suits were not built by Hawes and Curtis you couldn't get a job in the West End.

Certainly actor-managers were much grander in those days. The great Sir Charles Hawtrey had his path cleared when he walked the few yards from his dressing room to the stage; and lesser lights (like myself) wouldn't have dared address him as Charles. In point of fact you only spoke when spoken to.

Today fellow artistes call Sir John Gielgud John, Johnnie if they're really chummy, and Jack if they're intimate. But his wrath can be as cutting as any of the great ones of yesteryear.

Half way through our century actors were still something of a race apart for I remember when some academic don was suggested to direct a play the

impresario, Binkie Beaumont, said: 'It's no good having someone who doesn't speak our language.'

The Thespian language is hard to define for it's more than just using technical terms. 'From the top' (the beginning), 'Move on stage' (nearer centre), and 'Not so way out' (exaggerated) are all fairly easy to comprehend. But we are, or used to be, an insular tribe; and anyone who didn't understand who was meant by Binkie, Bea, or Boo, was thought to be a bit dim.

'Camp' means airy-fairy. Which isn't necessarily the same as 'pansy', 'puff', 'queer', or 'gay'. My, what a lot of useful words those chaps have absorbed.

An artiste who forgets his words has 'dried', and one who laughs out of place has 'corpsed'. The latter is usually looked upon more gravely than the former, and anyone who has been an actor-manager knows how damaging that can be. I know of a family of *civilians* who eschew any play by Ayckbourn because during one scene in the hilarious 'The Norman Conquest' the company dissolved into giggles.

Very reprehensible. Very irritating. The cause is usually some *dénouement* such as a cat crossing the stage. And the deeper the artist is entrenched in his part, the more likely he is to corpse. The 'dry', of course, can affect the most trusted trouper.

There is one occasion when actors may laugh, as it were, out of turn, and that is when the audience are let into the joke. Way back when that master of comedy, Seymour Hicks, was playing a curtain raiser (obviously not a

very good one), with his adorable wife Ellaline Terriss, they had the bust of some celebrity in a prominent position.

And on a set cue the head fell off. Of course the public, thinking it was accidental, forgave the artistes their levity, and roared their heads off. Mark you, I don't hold with such stunts. Besides, what happens when you see the show a second time? Anything that destroys our art of make-believe is bad.

Now, nearing the end of the century, the merger is pretty well complete; and there is little difference between the actor's calling and other vocations. With TV and films, added to the stage, there are not as many financial problems; but backstage isn't as much fun. The pro no longer jokes: 'Has the ghost walked?' but asks: 'When is treasury?'

Gone is the glamour of a leading lady like Gertie Lawrence with her mink, Rolls, and bouquet; and the Gaiety Girl training to be a duchess is a thing of the past. The actor wears jeans and incompatibly carries a briefcase; and only dresses well on stage at the expense of the management. He has his car, so he misses the jolly journeys with other pros.

And whoever inserted that clause in my contract: 'No parcels on train calls' would be appalled to see an artist wearing, besides the inevitable jeans, three sweaters. One on, another tied round the waist, and still another dangling from the shoulders. And withal lugging endless bulging plastic bags in one hand, while the other is occupied holding a tin from which she sips, through a straw, some concoction.

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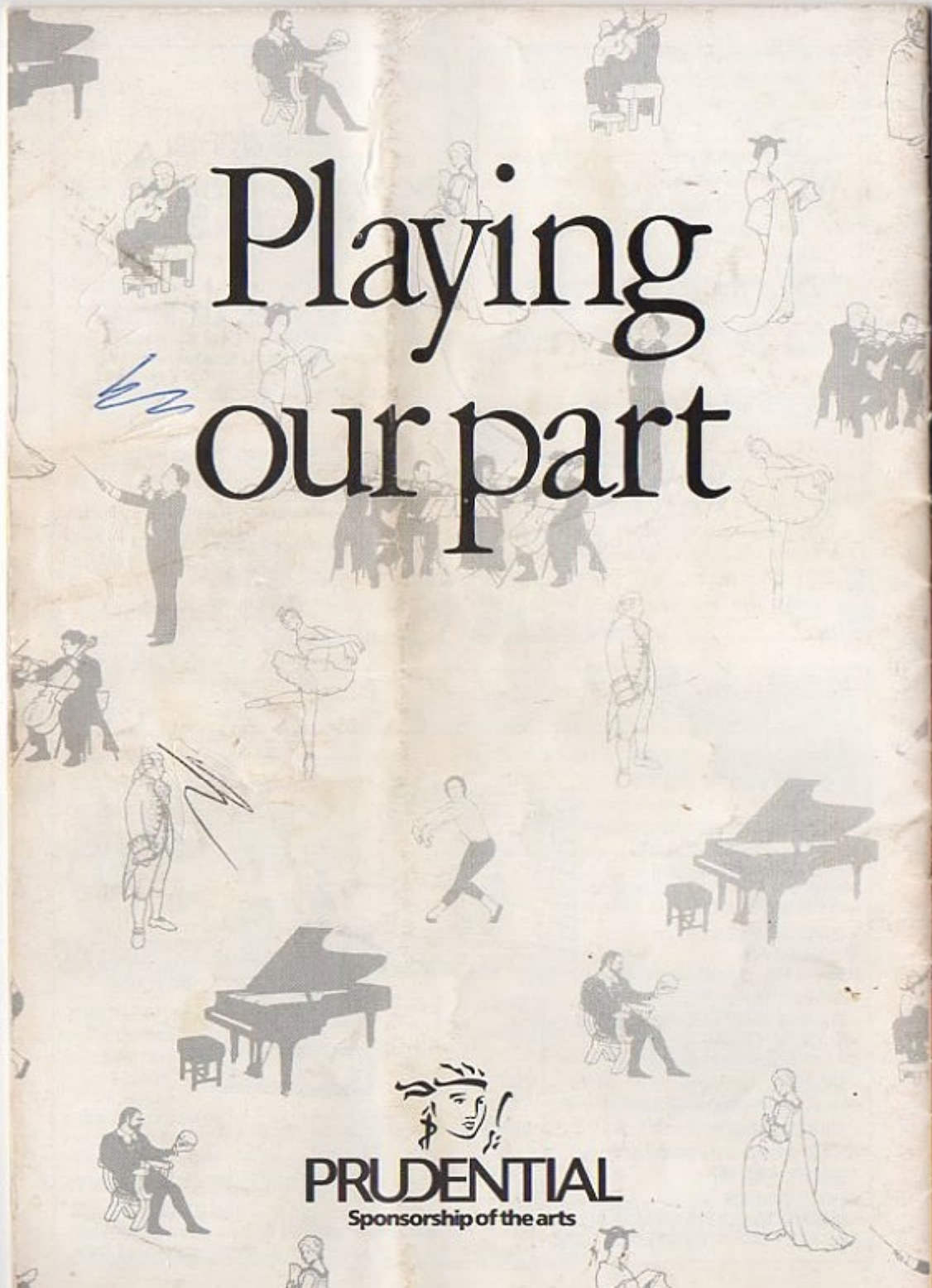
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