

RE-LOVELY

Actor Kevin Kline Returns to His Musical Roots in MGM's Biopic of Cole Porter, "De-Lovely"

by Kim Williamson

It was fall 2001; actor Kevin Kline was walking along an Upper East Side sidewalk near his New York City abode toward a coffeeshop for an interview about his leading turn in director Irwin Winkler's "Life As a House." Beside him strolled his longtime wife, actress Phoebe Cates. Fretting about the upcoming meeting with the journalist, Kline asked if she had any advice. Replied Cates, "Just don't be yourself."

Three years later, it seems that that—not being himself—might be the one thing that Kline cannot do, at least in real life. Onscreen, Kline—as the well-adjusted Harold in "The Big Chill"; as the manic Otto in "A Fish Called Wanda"; as the repressed Howard in "In & Out"; and now as the bisexual composer Cole Porter in MGM's upcoming "De-Lovely"—has made a career of roles that seem to have no common connection; every Kline appearance is, as he might say, "sui generis." But in **BOXOFFICE**'s conversation with Kline he is exactly what he's seemed in the many interviews that have occurred during his quarter-century as one of Hollywood's best actors: thoughtful, well spoken, attentive to the text, occasionally comic—as comfortable with a Latin phrase, likely a holdover from his Catholic prep school days in his St. Louis hometown, as with a nicely turned bon mot, natural enough coming from a player whose favorite role of all time is Shakespeare's Benedick.

Yet Kline does have a preferred method of acting, and that in part explains his second time out with Winkler, who helms "De-Lovely." Asked why this director and he seem to like working together so well, Kline asks, "Yes, why do all the other directors complain about [me], but Irwin hasn't yet?" The Oscar winner (for "A Fish Called Wanda") laughs, then turns more serious. "Irwin, like my other favorite directors, is a great collaborator. There's a whole spectrum of types of directors, that go from the ones for whom actors are a necessary evil—that they have to



somehow get to do their bidding in order to realize their vision—to others at the other end of the spectrum, directors like Irwin, for whom their actors are a major participant, a major collaborator, and the sine qua non of realizing a vision; they

have as much to say about the final realization of a character as the director does.

"Ultimately, I've always thought that you can get an actor to do something that feels organically wrong for him, if you will, but it's going to look that way. In other words, it looks like he's carrying out a direction or directive. It doesn't have quite the same immediacy; it just has an aura of falsity about it or manipulation about it, as opposed to, you know, when you're watching a movie and it's just so fresh and it's really happening and it's original and it doesn't seem formulaic or imposed. It's just kind of flowing."

For a role such as Porter in this 2004 version—wherein his preferences for the most high-on-decadent parties and, despite his deep affection for his socialite wife (played by Ashley Judd), for big strong men are clear, and where there are none of the comfortable, Porter-invented fictions such as his writing ditties in the trenches of World War I that characterized the "paean to a great living composer" that was the Gary Grant starrer "Night and Day" of 1946—perhaps that freedom to flow is a good thing. "I remember Irwin saying, 'This is not a musical; this is a love story with music,'" recalls Kline. "It's not a musical where people burst into song—when mere words or conversation no longer suffice, which is usually the motivation for songs in musicals, at least onstage. This is one of the first interviews I've done [about "De-Lovely"], but I know when I've tried to describe it to friends and in discussions with people who've seen it it is hard to compare it to something else. And that's one of its prime virtues: I think it is sui generis. It's unique."

The project dates back a number of years on Winkler's side. Recalls Kline, "We talked about it when we were working on 'Life As A House' together—just that it was something that he had been developing and he was going to produce. And then we talked a bit about Cole Porter and what a fascinating life et cetera. But we never talked about me playing it."

