Indiana Repertory Theatre

You Can't Take It With You

By G.S. Kaufman and Moss Hart

study Guide

Photo from the original production of *You Can't Take It With You*, Booth Theatre, New York City, 1936. This scene pictures the Kirby's unexpected arrival for dinner as Penny works on her painting of Mr. DePinna posing as the discus thrower, Essie practices her ballet for Mr. Kolenkhov, and other members of the Sycamore household pursue their various eccentric hobbies.

American in the 1930's – the era which produced *YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU*

Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman wrote *You Can't Take It With You* in 1936, the year which some historians call the brightest year of the Depression. Unemployment decreased slightly that year although there were to be at least three more dark years before the Depression drew to an end. Since the Stock Market Crash in 1929, America had been in an economic depression which caused the bleakest years that America had ever known: unemployment was astronomically high, hundreds of banks had closed, thousands of schools closed because there was no money to keep them open, building construction had come to a virtual standstill, thousands of people had lost their homes, food rationing was in effect in many parts of the U.S. – in short, it was the darkest time in American history, rivalled only, perhaps, by the present circumstances.

It was a grim period, but in that decade of the thirties there was much more than the fierce struggle for survival; there was excitement, social revolution, changes in our government which rebuilt our lives, and experimentation in arts and science. Looking back it seems that our domestic disaster made Americans once again aware of their neighbors and taught them to face the cold, brutal fact that only close cooperation could pull them and their nation out of the quicksand of despair.

Outside the U.S., things were perhaps more forbidding: Hitler was gearing up for a revolutionary event that in the thirties was only a vague threat to Americans, Spain was at war, Edward VIII abdicated the English throne in order to marry a divorced Americn woman – many aspects of society and politics seemed to go haywire. Communism spread, rather fashionably, in America as a boon to all the social ills.

The pace of the social life of the Twenties suggested a greed – live all you can, forget all you can – that was a part of the moral, economic, and political life. Inflationary in many repects, the joy ride of the Twenties seemed feverishly unhealthy. When the stock market crashed and government control with welfare state characteristics appeared in Roosevelt's administration, individualistic-minded people saw difficulties. Americans sensed that they were in essence paying for the frivolities of the Twenties which seemed so secure, and the terrible Thirties were visited upon them as a form of penance. Weather conditions seemed to bear out this theory: dusts bowl in the mid-thirties caused millions of dollars of damage in the midwest as thousands lost homes; tornados were uncharacteristically frequent and damaging. Natural disasters seemed to be following economic ones.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President through most of the Thirties, and became the only President to serve for three consecutive terms. Many of the reform measures were instigated in his terms – the WPA (Works Progress Administration) which provided government jobs for many unemployed Americans was a major part of the "New Deal" legislation that helped get America back on its feet. Relief programs were necessary to shorten the bread lines, decrease the number of unemployed (which rose to 15 million by 1933) and help restore small businesses, 85,000 of which had gone bankrupt by 1933.

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Many of the things which we now take for granted either did not exist in the Thirties or were considerably less advanced – there was no TV, radio was the popular form of entertainment, movies were in their infancy (talkies hit the market in the early thirties), things like washing machines, basic kitchen appliances and many other electric objects were primitive compared to their modern equivalents today. It is often difficult for us to imagine a world without computers and advanced electronics but the America of the thirties was just such a world.

Entertainment of all kinds was popular in the thirties no doubt to help people escape, for a moment, from the harsh realities of the day-to-day world. Musicians, actors and actresses, baseball players and comedians were the toast of the country, and magazines and tabloid newspapers followed their activities with relish. Serialized novels appeared in magazines, and cartoons were extremely popular. As a sort of sidelight to this celebrity excitement, an increase in bizarre crimes occurred in this decade, many of them related to mob activites. Prohibition, the legal banning of liquor in America, was finally repealed in 1933, and the sale of illegal liquor was no longer a mob issue.

The decade that started with the crash of the stock market ended with the crash and boom of guns and bombs. The decade that began with business depression and unemployment ended with mills, factories and shipyards working around the clock. Instead of a shortage of jobs, there was a shortage of help. The spector of unemployment had been laid. The fear for economic security dissipated. However, now there were new fears. The dark shadow of the war was spreading, the lights were out over much of the world. But no longer were the American people desperate. They faced the threat of war and the enemies of freedom with courage and determination.

This rehearsal photo of the IRT cast of *You Can't Take It With You* includes from front left: Bella Jarrett (2nd year company member playing Penny), Craig Fuller (2nd year intern playing Ed), Barry McGuire (1st year company member playing Paul), Lowry Miller (guest actor playing Mr. DePinna), Rae Randall (2nd year company member playing Olga Katrina), Hank Jordan (2nd your company member playing Kolenkhov), Dalton Dearborn (guest actor playing Mr. Kirby), Frank Raiter (2nd year company member playing Grandpa), Priscilla Lindsay (3rd year company member playing Essie), Jim Tasse (2nd year intern playing Tony Kirby), Karen Nelson (2nd year intern playing Alice), and standing Chuck Cooper (guest actor playing Donald) and Avery Sommers (guest actor playing Rheba).

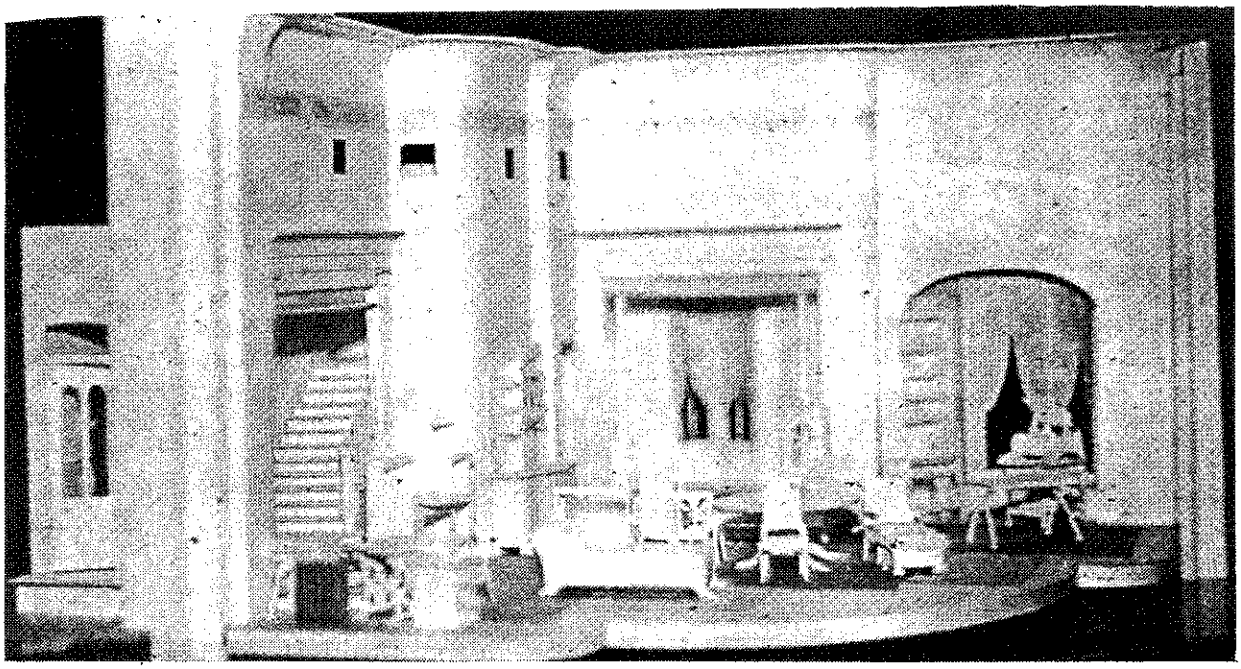
RESIDENT COMPANY FORMS AN ONSTAGE FAMILY

(Note: This story is excerpted from an article written by Ben Cameron, the director of *You Can't Take It With You*, who is also the Associate Artistic Director at the IRT. As such, he has associated with various members of the Resident Acting Company over a two-year period. The resident company idea was formulated two seasons ago by Artistic Director Tom Haas as a method to improve the quality of productions at IRT by gathering a group of actors together that would work in several productions each year. This system is uncommon in theatres in the U.S. who generally "job in" actors for individual productions but very common in European theatres where tradition and the classics are cultivated. Mr. Cameron explains the enormous benefit of working with a company of resident actors on this particular play.)

The resident company of actors at the IRT have worked together over an extended period of time. The advantages of such a system may not be readily apparent, but for a director, this history of past work is terribly important. Much of the work done in early rehearsals with a new company consists of "feeling one another out" – trying to understand each other's acting rhythms, growing accustomed to idiosyncratic habits, testing new ways of working and sharing. With a resident company, actors already have a shared emotional history. They know how to make one another laugh, they understand each other's professional needs and styles, they share a wealth of performance and anecdotes. They are, in short, a family.

You Can't Take It With You is a play about families. More specifically, it is a play that deals with the growth of Alice Sycamore – a young woman who comes to accept her family and her own identity as one of them. With this acceptance of her own heritage, she can finally accept love and find the happiness she has so ardently desired.

This moment of acceptance is captured in the third act as she rushes across the stage and throws herself into Grandpa's arms. I hope that in our production this moment will be heightened. On one level, we the audience will watch Alice Sycamore accept her fictional family, but on a second level, we will see an actor coming home to her acting family, to celebrate the bonds that unite this group of performers, to give thanks for the experiences that they have shared. In this way, the idea of a resident company becomes fully realized. The emotional complexity of the acting interplay – a complexity impossible with a group who have come together for a single project – will make us believe in and rejoice for the family onstage.



This is a picture of the model of the set for *You Can't Take It With You* built by set designer Russ Metheny. The theatre technicians use the model to assist them in visualizing the completed set.

YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU – AMERICA'S CLASSIC COMEDY

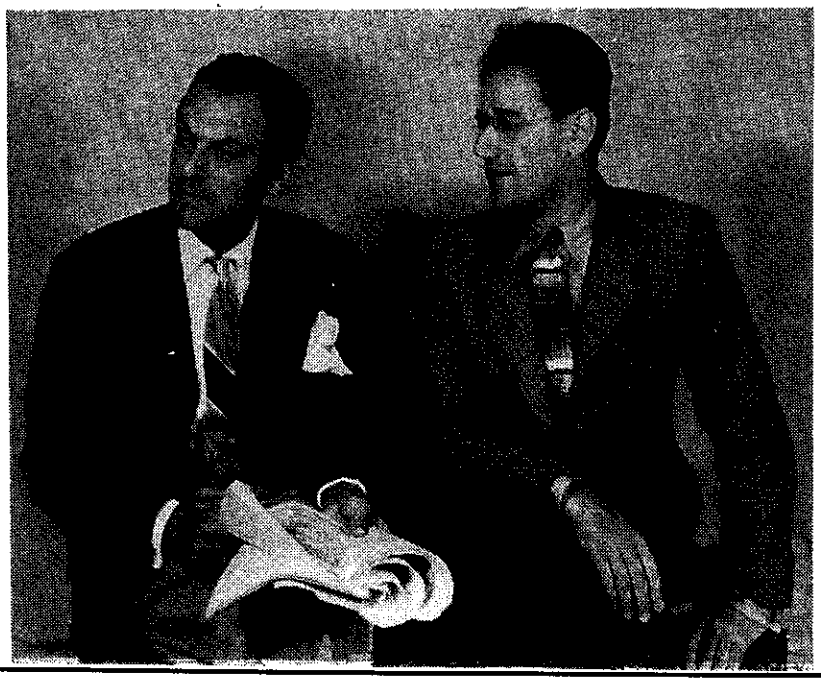
"Scene One: The home of Martin Vanderhof – just around the corner from Columbia University, but don't go looking for it. The room we see is what is customarily described as a living room, but in this house the term is something of an understatement. The every-man-for-himself room would be more like it. For here meals are eaten, plays are written, snakes collected, ballet steps practiced, xylophones played, printing presses operated – if there were room enough there would probably be ice skating. In short, the brood presided over by Martin Vanderhof goes on about the business of living in the fullest sense of the word. From Grandpa Vanderhof down, they are individualists. This is a house where you do as you like, and no questions asked."

This is surely the description of a setting for a comedy: there are interesting, active things on the stage that are sure to be played, used, picked up and generally made available to tickle the fancy. The family mentioned promises to be as crackpot as their possessions and they surely are: Penny, the daughter of Grandpa Vanderhof writes plays as a hobby (which, in the Vanderhof household means an occupation, for each person's hobbies, constitute their lifelong endeavors) because a typewriter was mistakenly delivered to the house eight years ago; Paul Sycamore, Penny's husband (whom she married after one date) makes fireworks in the basement assisted by Mr. DePinna, a former iceman who delivered ice eight years ago and simply never left; Essie, Penny and Paul's elder daughter, has taken ballet lessons for eight years and makes candy which her husband, Ed (who came for one date and again, never left) delivers around the neighborhood to sell. Ed has the record number of hobbies in the household for he plays the xylophone (while Essie dances) makes masks and prints circulars on his printing press which he distributes in the candy boxes. Unfortunately, Ed will print whatever he happens to be reading at the time, and as he has been reading Trotsky, he has most recently printed "God is the State; the State is God," which proves irritating to the FBI men that finally track him down and arrest the entire family at the end of Act II. Alice, Penny and Paul's younger daughter, is the only member of the household that actually has a regular job (Grandpa's modest income for a piece of land that he owns seems to amply provide for this household of zanies) and of late she has been seeing a lot of the boss's son, Tony Kirby. Alice is the center of the play, for it is around the mishaps over Alice's engagement to Tony and her subsequent embarrassment over her strange family that the play revolves. But yet the household is not complete; Grandpa himself was once a successful businessman until he one day decided that he wasn't having any fun and, as Alice relates, "He started up to his office in the elevator and came right back down again. He just stopped. He could have been a rich man, but he said it took too much time. So for 35 years, he's just collected snakes, and gone to circuses and commencements." Grandpa provides insights into everyone's lives, having set the example to have fun while you can because "you can't take it with you." Grandpa also provides the social satire in the play: he is visited by a tax collector from the IRS who explains that the Vanderhofs haven't paid income tax in 21 years. By the end of the the play Grandpa has managed to get around this minor road block in his otherwise blissful life in a very funny and unexpected way. Not to be forgotten are Rheba, the black maid (of sorts) that lives with the family much like another daughter and her boyfriend, Donald who won't take any money for the chores he does around the house so that he can continue to "stay on Relief." Before the evening's hilarity is over, the family is visited by several other eccentric characters including Tony's parents (who turn up for dinner an evening early) a deposed Russian Grand Duchess (who is a waitress at Child's) and of course, Essie's dancing teacher, another Russian, Kolenkhov.

The aspects of this delightful comedy that make it a classic – and that won it a Pulitzer Prize in 1936 – are clear: endowing a family with crazy, fun-loving features, a daughter that longs to be "normal," and a mistaken dinner invitation are sure to make for a character/situation comedy that will please generations of theatre-goers. But this play has one thing more: it strikes at the very heart of the conflict between American work ethic which made our country strong (represented by the get-ahead Kirby's), and the anarchic "do your own thing" philosophy on which this country was founded (embodied in the Vanderhof household). Eventually, the play has remained a well-loved classic of the American theatre because above all, it celebrates the strength of the American family and its ability to overcome hardships both big and small.

"I have a pet theory of my own, probably invalid, that the theatre is an inevitable refuge of the unhappy child. Like most pet theories, this one also contains the fallacy of too broad a generalization. But certainly the first retreat a child makes to alleviate his unhappiness is to contrive a world of his own, and it is but a small step out of his private world into the fantasy world of the theatre."

Moss Hart



You Can't Take it With You has a point, as you can see – that the way to live and be happy is just to go ahead and live, and not pay attention to the world. I think the play will have a nice love story and a certain tenderness, in addition to its madness."

George S. Kaufman

Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman, playwrights of *You Can't Take It With You*

About the Playwrights

"Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman have seldom been funnier, prankier, collected so many caricatures of the human race with such crazycat bodies, such thistledown souls. But that's where they fool you completely, this time. Instead of in an acid bath of scorn and fury, these collaborators put these foolish folks of theirs in a sun-pool of purest amiability, of sheer, unashamed lovableness. You come away from *You Can't Take It With You* hugging close your memory of every affectionate loon they've shown you on the stage."

This commendation from Gilbert W. Gabriel of *The American* in his review of the original production of the play, alludes to Kaufman and Hart's tradition of successful collaboration. In all, they wrote eight plays together between 1930 and 1940, of which *You Can't Take It With You* (1936, for which they won the Pulitzer Prize), and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939) are the most popular. Kaufman, a frequent collaborator with many different playwrights, was known for his sparkling and barbed wit and aptitude for farce; he was also a fine director. Hart, fifteen years younger than his partner, was a brilliant hand at character construction and proved to Kaufman's most compatible collaborator. Together they wrote satiric farces which mocked social conventions and institutions. Among their targets were movies, theatre (especially directors and producers) politics, high society, businessmen, love and various personalities from the social and literary worlds.

Kaufman and Hart were truly craftsmen of the theatre. In their plays they take delight in bizarre stage props, funny costumes, lots of stage hubbub, and elaborate examples of orchestrated pandemonium which brings each act to its climactic end. Yet despite the wacky goings-on, the wit in their plays is always grounded in the human condition, in an honest concern for human affection, in human failings happily solved.

It is interesting that two men from such vastly different backgrounds became partners and great friends. Kaufman, from a fairly well-to-do Pennsylvania family, had a good education and quickly became a member of the elite set in New York, frequenting such social circles as the Round Table group at the Algonquin Hotel which included such personalities as Alexander Woollcott, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Robert Sherwood, and Edna Ferber, all noted writers of their day. Hart, on the other hand was born in the Bronx into a very poor family, left school in the eighth grade, and never knew anything of the "good life" until he met and began to work with Kaufman. Their first success together, *Once in a Lifetime* (1930) allowed Hart to move his destitute family into a nice apartment in New York and launched Hart in a lifestyle which he had heretofore seen only in the movies. The men became great friends, sharing the lavish praise garnered for their plays with little concern as to which of them had contributed more to any given project. Their partnership shines in the annals of American theatre history as one of the greatest collaborations ever achieved and their plays stand as some of the best examples of light farce comedies.

Study Questions

What is Kaufman and Hart's purpose in making Grandpa Vanderhof a tax-evader?

Why do you suppose Kaufman and Hart wrote a fun-loving play about a zany family in which there is almost no reference to serious political or economic events in the same year that Hitler invaded the Rhineland, war spread from Morocco to Spain, Edward VIII abdicated in England and unemployment was at a record low in the U.S.A.?

Do you think that the reviewers that accused Kaufman and Hart of ignoring the facts of real life in the 30's had a legitimate complaint? Does art always have to mirror life or can't it sometimes provide us with an ideal picture of things if they were just as people would like it? Isn't much of what we see on TV today really a product of wishful thinking that is at least as preposterous as the hobbies and the devil-may-care attitude of the Sycamores?

Source Material

The acting edition of the play is published by Dramatists' Play Service, New York, 1937.

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