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**George S.Kaufman's You Can't Take it
with you:A Display of comedy.**

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Abstract

This research paper which is called George S.Kaufman's *You Can't Take it with you*:A Display of comedy, consists of three sections . The first section is an introduction about the play that was first produced at the Booth Theatre in New York City, December 14, 1936. Near the end of the Great Depression, this Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman comedy in three acts was one of their many great successes. The original production played for 838 performances. The comedy won the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the introduction also contains author biography ,while section two tackles the display of comedy "*You Can't Take it with you*" . The research ends with a conclusion that sum up the research paper.

Section One

Introduction

The play "You Can't Take It with You" opened in New York in December of 1936 to instant critical and popular acclaim. This depiction of a delightfully eccentric family, the third collaboration by playwrights George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, proved to be their most successful and longest-running work. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1936, the comedy went on to run 837 performances on Broadway. Kaufman and Hart sold the film rights to Columbia Pictures for a record-setting amount, and the 1938 film won an Academy Award for best picture. Perennially appealing to audiences, *You Can't Take It with You* has become an American classic, regularly produced by high schools, colleges, and community theaters around the country. Successful Broadway revivals in 1965 and 1983 also attest to the play's timeless appeal.(Gould,1966:154)

You Can't Take It with You relates the humorous encounter between a conservative family and the crazy household of Grandpa Martin

Vanderhof. Grandpa's family of idiosyncratic individualists amuse with their energetic physical antics and inspire with their wholehearted pursuit of happiness. Kaufman and Hart fill the stage with chaotic activity from beginning to end. Critics have admired the witty one-liners, the visual theatricalism, and the balanced construction of the play's three acts.

Although *You Can't Take It with You* is undeniably escapist theater which prompts immediate enjoyment rather than complex analysis, it has clearly influenced American comedy. The formula originated by Kaufman and Hart—a loveable family getting into scrapes and overcoming obstacles—has been adopted as a format by most of today's television situation comedies.(Gould,1966:154)

Author Biography

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart are remembered as masters of comedic playwriting. Each made important contributions to the American theater on his own, but they are best known for the successful and influential comedies they wrote together in the 1930s.(Goldstein,1979:67)

George S. Kaufman was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 16, 1889, the descendent of early German Jewish immigrants. After graduating from high school in 1907, he briefly attended law school. Disenchanted with legal studies, he dropped out and proceeded to take on a series of odd jobs, ranging from salesman to stenographer. At the age of twenty he left Pittsburgh for New York City and began writing for the *New York Evening Mail*. After a stint as a columnist for the *Washington Times*—which ended when his editor objected to the young columnist's harsh satire—Kaufman returned to New York and soon became a theater news reporter for the *New York Times*. Later he was promoted to drama editor, a post he never gave up, even when he attained success as a playwright.(Goldstein,1979:45)

Although he rarely smiled and sometimes appeared almost gloomy, he was famous for his devastating sense of humor, particularly his one-liners. His peers considered him to be, as his friend Alexander Woollcott described

him in Brooks Atkinson's *Broadway*, "the first wit of his time." Kaufman began applying this wit to playwriting in 1917. He would eventually become known as the "Great Collaborator," after a long career during which he collaborated on more than 40 plays. A gifted writer of dialogue, Kaufman had little interest in forming plots and left this up to his many writing partners.(ibid)

Kaufman's first big hit—*Dulcy*, written with Marc Connelly—was produced in 1921. Both Connelly and Kaufman were part of the influential and now famous intellectual group called the Algonquin Round Table. These literary friends, who lunched and exchanged witticisms weekly at the Algonquin Hotel, included Tallulah Bankhead, Dorothy Parker, and Robert Benchley as well as several Kaufman collaborators such as Woolcott, Edna Ferber, and Ring Lardner. But it was not until he was 40, that Kaufman teamed up with the partner with whom he would find his greatest success, Moss Hart.(ibid)

Moss Hart, born October 24, 1904, was brought up in relative poverty by his English-born Jewish immigrant parents in the Bronx, New York. Inspired by an aunt who loved the theater, Hart was stage-struck at a young age. While still a teenager, he worked as an office boy for a theater manager; this manager produced Hart's first dramatic effort, *The Beloved Bandit*, in 1923. The show opened in Chicago and immediately flopped—one critic wrote a review in the form of an obituary for the play—and Hart's boss fired him after losing \$45,000 on the production. Hart, still only nineteen, went on to take a job directing social activities at resorts in the Catskills. He gained somewhat of a reputation for the amateur theatricals

he organized, but the six plays he wrote during this time were all rejected by producers.(ibid)

Finally, in 1929, producer Sam H. Harris agreed to stage Hart's comedy *Once in A Lifetime* on the condition that the young writer revise the play with the well-known Kaufman. The twenty-six-year-old Hart idolized Kaufman and was thrilled at the prospect of working with him. This initial collaboration proved difficult, but when *Once in a Lifetime* opened in September, 1930, it was an unqualified success. This play, a satire of the movie industry, introduced the elements that would reappear in future Kaufman and Hart productions: numerous characters, chaotic activity, and witty dialogue. In the next ten years Kaufman and Hart would collaborate on seven more plays. Their third effort, *You Can't Take It with You*, (1936) was their most successful and longest-running work, claiming among its honors a Pulitzer Prize. (Kaufman's second; in 1931 his *Of Thee I Sing*, written with Morrie Ryskind, had been the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama). Some critics consider the duo's next play, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939)—another story about a house filled with charming eccentrics—to be their best work. (ibid)

Section Two

George S.Kaufman's You Can't Take it with you:A Display of comedy

In the 1930s, Americans needed to laugh. The United States was suffering through the harsh economic times of the Great Depression and people went to theaters and movie houses to forget their troubles. So it is not surprising that in 1936 George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's *You Can't Take It with You* was a commercial success. This screwball farce filled the stage with eccentric characters who did silly things and made witty remarks while fireworks literally went off in the background. Both frantic and funny, the play gave audiences just the sort of escapist entertainment they wanted. (Pollack, 1988:67)

In You Can't Take It with You, Kaufman and Hart keep audiences amused with sight gags and witty lines. Act I introduces the wacky Vanderhof-Sycamore family. They all follow their dreams, making the best of what life and chance have presented them: Penny writes plays because a

typewriter was once delivered to the house by mistake, Essie dances and makes candy, Ed plays the xylophone and prints circulars on a hand-press, Paul make fireworks with the assistance of Mr. De Pinna, and Grandpa collects stamps and attends commencement exercises. None of them seems of mind that young Alice actually has a job as a secretary on Wall Street. In fact, no one seems to mind much of anything at all. No explosion is so loud and no behavior so strange as to disturb this family's balance.(ibid)

Kaufman and Hart begin their play in a liberated realm—Grandpa Vanderhof's living room. This is a reversal of the traditional comic model literary critic Northrop Frye once proclaimed, where, as in many Shakespearean romantic comedies, the protagonists must escape a world of hypocrisy and habit and create their own new society of truth and freedom. In *You Can't Take It with You*, there is no need for Alice and Tony to run away and make a new community, for they start out in a fully formed alternative society. The “real world” remains safely off stage, and the Vanderhof-Sycamore world order—no jobs, no taxes, no formalities—holds sway. The humor and fun, of course, comes from watching the conservative Kirby family at first clash with and later attempt to adapt to this unorthodox world. The overall structure of the play, however, is quite traditional; three balanced acts, in turn, set-up, complicate, and resolve the humorous situation.(ibid)

After Act I has introduced the unconventional cast of characters and made clear the problem of the play, that Alice and Tony want to marry but fear that their families are incompatible (a lighter version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), Act II generates hilarious complications by bringing Tony and his parents to dinner at the Vanderhof-Sycamore house on the

wrong night. (This formula of a likeable but unusual family placed in ludicrous circumstances is a familiar one. Many critics credit Kaufman and Hart with originating this scenerio so often adopted by television situation comedies such as *The Addams Family* and *The Simpsons*.) The second act illustrates the broad comic techniques of farce, which place exaggerated characters in awkward physical positions and silly costumes. Kaufman and Hart start off with Essie, in her tutu, leaping through the living room, the balding Mr. De Pinna dressed like a Roman discus thrower, and Penny in the caricatured costume of “the artist.” All funny sights even before the Kirbys show up in full evening dress (formal gown and tuxedo) to provide contrast. And the physical comedy continues throughout the scene, with Mr. Kolenkhov accosting the uptight Mr. Kir-by in an attempt to wrestle, Donald running in and out to the store, and finally the chaotic arrival of the F.B.I., which is capped by a fireworks explosion and pandemonium. When reading a comedy (as opposed to actually seeing it produced), it is easy to overlook the importance of the visual and physical elements which are a crucial part of the humor. Kaufman and Hart certainly intended *You Can’t Take It with You* to entertain both eye and ear; Kaufman in particular was well-known for adroitly choreographing the on-stage mayhem in productions he directed. (Mason, 1967:60-87)

The play is filled not only with clever sight gags but also with great oneliners. Audiences never fail to laugh when Penny muses about her play’s plot (“you know, with forty monks and one girl, something ought to happen”) or when Grandpa sums up his sense of the government’s value (“well, I might pay about seventy-five dollars, but that’s all it’s worth”). The caricatured Russian Kolenkhov energetically delivers some of the silliest lines in the play (“Life is chasing around inside of me, like a

squirrel”) and performers love the part. As the actor Gregory Peck said in *A Celebration of Moss Hart* about playing Kolenkhov, “it had that marvelous line—‘Confidentially she stinks’—in it. I had the privilege of saying that, I think, four times at every performance, and for the first time in my life hearing an audience just tear the joint up. That was the surestfire laugh line that any actor ever had.” Hart and Kaufman’s verbal wit shows up throughout the play, but perhaps a particularly good example of their ability to get big laughs from short lines is Penny’s word game, where Mrs. Kirby’s associations of bathroom—Mr. Kirby, honeymoon—dull, sex—Wall Street, are revealingly suggestive.(O’Hara.1969:190)

You Can’t Take It with You might stand as a model for aspiring comedic playwrights, illustrating balanced structure as well as a skillful blend of physical and verbal humor. Its enduring appeal more likely can be credited to the other lesson it has to offer, that of Grandpa Vanderhofs life philosophy. Living out Grandpa’s notions, the Vanderhof-Sycamores illustrate Ralph Waldo Emerson’s idea, famously expressed in his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance,” that to be an individual one must be a “nonconformist” and reject the “joint-stock company” of society which asks citizens to sacrifice their “liberty and culture.” As Alice says about her family, “they do rather strange things” but “they’re fun, and . . . there’s a certain nobility about them.” American audiences raised on individualistic beliefs are inclined to agree that there is something noble about folks who “just don’t care about things that other people give their whole lives to.” Society demands conformity, but in the world of Kaufman and Hart’s play, those who follow society’s dictates get little satisfaction from life, while those who make up their own rules find contentment.

Echoing Emerson, *You Can't Take It with You* emphasizes the pleasure of following one's bliss. In this comedic world, nonconformists have fun. It really is a play about "play," in the sense of games and entertainment.)*ibid*)

Grandpa laments the fact that most people have forgotten about having fun: they work because they are supposed to but no longer know what they are working for. He asks, "why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" Grandpa himself used to "get down to the office at nine o'clock sharp, no matter how [he] felt" and "lay awake nights" worrying about contracts. He had been "right in the thick of it—fighting and scratching, and clawing"; the working world was a "regular jungle." Then one day he realized he "wasn't having any fun" so he "just relaxed" and has "been a happy man ever since." Grandpa's experience and realizations echo the well-known statements of Emerson's contemporary Henry David Thoreau, who in his 1854 book *Walden*, declared that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Thoreau argued that people "labor under a mistake."

Even when they try to have fun, an "unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called. . . games and amusements . . . there is no play in them, for this comes after work."*ibid*)

As theorist Stanley Cavell suggested in his discussion of 1930s film comedies, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, characters with individualistic and anti-materialist ideals like the Vanderhof-Sycamores underscore the difference between those who know what has true value in life and those who have forgotten what really counts. In Cavell's words "happiness is not to be won just by opposing those in power but only, beyond that, by educating them, or their successors." We see this in *You Can't Take It with You* where the happy ending depends

upon Mr. Kirby and Tony learning to share Grandpa's ideals. In "screwball comedies" like this, as Cavell argued, fulfillment "requires not the fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs." Grandpa wants Tony to make such a reassessment so that he will not "wake up twenty years from now with nothing in his life but stocks and bonds." Grandpa's advice to the Kirbys is very much in the tradition of Thoreau—who wrote that he went to live at Walden Pond so that he would not "discover that I had not lived." "You've got all the money you need," Vanderhof tells Mr. Kirby, "you can't take it with you." So now is the time to consider what will bring happiness. As Grandpa goes on to say, "how many of us would be willing to settle when we're young for what we eventually get? All those plans we make. . . what happens to them? It's only a handful of the lucky ones that can look back and say they even come close." Certainly the VanderhofSycamores are just such a "handful of lucky ones." They all seem to have followed the approach to life put forth in *Walden*, which encourages its readers to "simplify, simplify," to get back to the basics, and to relax like Thoreau for whom "time is but a stream I go a-fishing in." Although the disasters of Act II cause some doubts about this philosophy at the opening of Act III—when Paul wonders if he's been wrong to have "just been going along, enjoying myself, when maybe I should have been thinking more about Alice" and Alice herself wishes her family "behaved the way *other* people's families do"—the play's happy resolution affirms that Grandpa's way really is best.)ibid)

Given the economic hardships of the 1930s, we can see why audiences of the time would want to believe Grandpa when he says "life is simple and kind of beautiful if you let it come to you." Of course Kaufman and Hart,

through occasional satiric moments, point out the impracticality of their philosophy with quips like Kolenkhov's reminder that "you cannot relax with Stalin in Russia. The czar relaxed and what happened to him?" Reminders of Depression-era reality aren't totally absent either, although they are always played for laughs. Donald's remark that going to pick up his relief check "breaks up his week," the peculiar dinner menus, Kolenkhov's just-in-time-for-a-meal arrivals, and the F.B.I.'s investigation of Ed's seemingly subversive circulars bring to mind welfare, hunger, and bureaucratic paranoia respectively. *You Can't Take It with You* does not aim for political satire but rather hopes to generate mirth, to, at least temporarily, help the audience forget the trials of the real world. The satire here is gentle and the hint of "bad times" only emphasizes the light-hearted good times we see depicted on the stage.(ibid)

Comedy traditionally affirms the possibility of change and growth. There is always a new and better day to come. As Thoreau wrote, "it is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof." So even the older Mr. Kirby can learn to change his mind and see the world through Grandpa's eyes. When considered in the context of traditional American individualism, as expressed in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, the Vanderhof-Sycamore philosophy which Mr. Kirby initially thinks is "dangerous" and "un-American" seems just the opposite: distinctly American. *You Can't Take It with You* deserves recognition not only as an excellent farce but as a classic celebration of American individualism. As Moss Hart said, "I do not look down my nose at comedies; They are an ancient and honorable form of making certain truths palatable

“IN A WORLD IN WHICH THE SANITY USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH SUNSHINE IS SADLY OVERVALUED, YOU CAN’T TAKE IT WITH YOU IS SOMETHING TO BE PRIZED”

With laughter, and an age can be understood as well by its comedies as by its tragic dramas.”) Erika,1997)

Hart and Mr. Kaufman are fantastic humorists with a knack for extravagances of word and episode and an eye for hilarious incongruities. Nothing this scrawny season has turned up is quite so madcap as a view of the entire Sycamore tribe working at their separate hobbies simultaneously. When Mr. Kirby of Wall Street and the Racquet Club walks into their living-room asylum his orderly head reels with anguish. The amenities look like bedlam to him. What distinguishes *You Can’t Take It With You* among the Hart-Kaufman enterprises is the buoyancy of the humor. They do not bear down on it with wisecracks. Although they plan it like good comedy craftsmen, they do not exploit it like gag-men.(Brooks A.1970:277 -278)

Conclusion

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart are remembered as masters of comedic playwriting. Each made important contributions to the American theater on his own, but they are best known for the successful and influential comedies they wrote together in the 1930s , their famous play is called "You Can't Take It with You". It is not only pleased depression-era theater-goers, it went on in the decades which followed to become a classic American comedy, continually produced by theater companies of all kinds. The play might stand as a model for aspiring comedic playwrights, illustrating balanced structure as well as a skillful blend of physical and verbal humor .

Although You Can't Take It with You is undeniably escapist theater which prompts immediate enjoyment rather than complex analysis, it has clearly influenced American comedy. The formula originated by Kaufman and Hart—a loveable family getting into scrapes and overcoming obstacles— has been adopted as a format by most of today's television situation comedies .

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