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**YOU CAN'T
TAKE IT
WITH YOU**

By Moss Hart and
George S. Kaufman
Directed by Penny Metropulos

Sept 21 - Oct 20

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Synopsis

KIRBY: "Why do I keep on?...why that's my business. A man can't give up his business.

GRANDPA: Why not? You've got all the money you need. You can't take it with you."

--You Can't Take It With You

Curmudgeonly, playful, 75-year-old Martin Vanderhof is the patriarch of a wacky New York City household in the mid 1930s. His motto is "live and let live" and he has never discouraged anyone in his family from doing just that. His daughter Penelope (Penny) Sycamore began writing plays the day a typewriter accidentally was delivered to the doorstep. Her husband, Paul Sycamore, has devoted all the time in his life to manufacturing fireworks in the basement along with his friend, Mr. DePinna. Essie (Paul and Penny's daughter) ceaselessly dances ballet in the living room despite being told she has no talent. Ed (Essie's husband) always seems to be around to accompany her on his xylophone when he's not copying subversive slogans on his printing press. Alice (Paul and Penny's other daughter) is the only one who illustrates a contemporary way of living. She works in a Wall Street broker's office where she has fallen in love with the boss's son, Tony Kirby. Alice adores her zany family dearly, but she is reluctant to arrange a meeting between the Vanderhofs and the ultra-conservative Kirbys. When she finally does, and the Kirbys arrive on the wrong night, the results are more than exciting... they're explosive!

In the midst of this madness and mayhem, the characters evoke real sanity in the way they choose to live their lives in this 71-year-old American comic classic.

The Playwrights

But [the play] 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.

—George S. Kaufman, playwright ¹

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart are remembered as masters of comedic playwriting. Though each made important contributions to the American theatre on his own, they are best known for the successful and influential comedies on which they collaborated in the 1930s.

George S. Kaufman was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on November 16, 1889, the son of German Jewish immigrants. After graduating from high school in 1907, he briefly attended law school, soon to become disenchanted. He dropped out and took 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 working as a columnist for the *Washington Times*—which ended when the editor opposed the young man’s harsh satire—Kaufman returned to New York and soon became a theatre news reporter for *The New York Times*. Later he was promoted to drama editor, a post he never relinquished even when he attained success as a playwright.

Although he rarely smiled and sometimes appeared gloomy, Kaufman 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, “the first wit of his time.”² For example, when asked by a press agent how to get a leading lady’s name in his newspaper, Kaufman replied, “Shoot her.”³ 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 writing partners.

Despite his claim that he knew nothing about music and hated it in the theatre, Kaufman collaborated on many musical projects. His most successful efforts included two Broadway shows crafted for the Marx Brothers, *The Cocoanuts*, written with Irving Berlin, and *Animal Crackers*, written with Morrie Ryskind, Bert Kalmer and Harry Ruby. These two productions allowed the Marx Brothers to make the transition from vaudeville into the more prominent world of “legitimate” musical comedy and film. Kaufman was one of the writers who excelled in writing intelligent nonsense for Groucho Marx, a process that became inevitably collaborative, given Groucho’s skill of improvising upon the scripted material. Though the Marx Brothers were notoriously critical of writers, they expressed admiration and gratitude towards Kaufman.

Humor derived from political situations was of particular interest to Kaufman. He collaborated on the hit musical *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), which won a Pulitzer Prize—the first musical to be so honored—and its sequel, *Let ‘Em Eat Cake*. Working with Kaufman on these ventures were Ryskind, George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin. Later, he collaborated with Moss Hart to write the book for *I’d Rather Be Right*, a musical starring George M. Cohan as Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Kaufman’s first big hit, *Dulcy*, written with Marc Connelly, was produced in 1921. Both Connelly and Kaufman were part of the influential and famous intellectual group known as 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 Kaufman collaborators such as Alexander Woollcott, 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.

The Playwrights

Moss Hart, born October 24, 1904, was raised in extreme poverty by his English-born Jewish immigrant parents in the Bronx, New York. Inspired by an eccentric Aunt Kate who loved theatre, Hart was stage-struck at a young age. While still a teenager, he worked as an office boy for a theatre manager; this man produced Hart's first dramatic effort, *The Beloved Bandit*, in 1923. The show opened in Chicago and immediately flopped; 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.

Finally, in 1929, producer Sam H. Harris agreed to stage Hart's comedy *Once in a Lifetime* on condition the young writer revise the play with the well-known Kaufman. The 26-year-old Hart idolized Kaufman and was thrilled at the prospect of working with him. This mutual collaboration proved difficult, but when *Once in a Lifetime* opened in September 1930, it was an unqualified success. The 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."⁴ 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, garnering among its honors a Pulitzer Prize. Some critics consider the duo's next play, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939)—another story about a house filled with eccentric characters—to be their best work.

Kaufman and Hart ended their partnership in 1940, but both men continued successful careers in the theatrical world. Kaufman collaborated on numerous popular plays throughout the 1940s and

50s, though most critics find that these works do not match the quality of his earlier efforts. He died on June 2, 1961. Hart went on to write six more plays on his own, as well as four screenplays, including those for *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and *A Star is Born* (1954). He won a Tony Award for directing the original production of Lerner and Lowe's *My Fair Lady*. Not long before he died on December 20, 1961 Hart completed an autobiography, *Act One*, about his early days in the theatre. It was praised by critics for its candor and insight.

The only credential the city [New York] asked was boldness to dream. For those who did, it unlocked its gates and its treasures, not caring who they were or where they came from.

--Moss Hart, *Act One*, (1959), part II.

1. Goldstein, p. 271.
2. Galens, p. 299.
3. Winokur, p. 115.
4. Galens, p. 299

Bach, Steven. *Dazzler: The Life and Times of Moss Hart*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

Galens, David, ed. *Drama for Students*. Farmington Hills, MI: The Gale Group, Inc., 2002.

Goldstein, Malcolm. *George S. Kaufman: His Life, His Theatre*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Winokur, Jon, ed. *The Portable Curmudgeon*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moss_Hart

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_S._Kaufman

COLLABORATIONS BY KAUFMAN AND HART:

Once in a Lifetime 1930

Merrily We Roll Along 1934

You Can't Take It With You 1936

I'd Rather Be Right 1937

The Man Who Came to Dinner 1939

George Washington Slept Here 1940

GLOSSARY

Father Divine: a controversial African American spiritual leader from 1907-1965. He founded the International Peace Mission movement.

Leon Trotsky: Bolshevik revolutionary and Marxist theorist who was exiled from Russia in one of Stalin's purges. He fled to Mexico where he was assassinated by a Soviet agent.

Kay Francis: a film star of the 1930s.

Sergei Diaghilev: director and impresario of the Russian Ballet (Les Ballet Russes de Diaghilev) who made dance a contemporary art.

The Good Earth: a novel by Pearl S. Buck about family life in China in the 1930s. It won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1932.

Erector sets: a model construction set comprised of metal strips, plates, wheels, gears, nuts and bolts that could be used as a teaching tool.

Spiritualism: a movement whose members believed that spirits of the dead could be contacted by mediums.

Blintzes: a Russian pancake or crepe stuffed with a cheese or meat filling, then fried in oil.

THEMES OF THE PLAY

[My Grandfather]...gave me, for good or ill, a relish for people of thunder and lightning and a distaste for the humdrum.

—Moss Hart, *Act One*

Y*ou Can't Take It With You* contrasts the eccentric family of Grandpa Vanderhof with the conservative Kirby family. As such, the two families represent different perceptions of the American Dream. While Mr. Kirby has attained financial success and a position of social and economic power, Grandpa Vanderhof's version of success is to earn just enough money to survive and do exactly as one wishes. Mr. Kirby thinks Grandpa's ideas are un-American, but very few plays project the sense of the American dream family that this one does. "They constitute a veritable social unit, a community whose members know one another's habits and moods extremely well and respond to them in accordance with their knowledge."¹ Contrast the chilly, rigid family relationships of the Kirbys with those of the Vanderhofs. The play encourages the audience to re-examine their definition of the American dream to include both attainment of material success along with personal fulfillment and solid family relationships.

Throughout the play the Vanderhof-Sycamore way of life questions the conventional definitions of success and failure. Although Essie and Penny might be called "failures" because they are talentless at dancing and painting/playwriting respectively, the play depicts them as successful because each clearly finds joy in what she does. Tony Kirby initially thinks that in order to be successful, he must forsake his college dreams and accept his position as vice president at Kirby and Company. But his contact with Alice's family convinces him it is a mistake to give up one's dreams; he gives up the rat race to join the human race.

Moss Hart reflected on this: "I suspect... that the overwhelming emphasis placed on the necessity of competing and of success are due in part to the strange taboo we have set against that softness in ourselves which brings men closest to the angels."² In the world of the play, the choice not to follow one's dreams and desires is the only genuine failure. Again, the audience is asked to re-define "success" in terms of happiness and peace of mind rather than in terms of money and status.

The positive portrayal of eccentric and singular behavior in *You Can't Take It With You* reflects the American belief in individualism. The Vanderhof-Sycamores could be classified as "rugged individualists" because they follow the dictates of their own hearts and disregard those who disapprove. Grandpa has forged his own way by taking control of his destiny; in that sense he fits the definition of a libertarian: "all persons are the absolute owners of their own lives and should be free to do whatever they wish with their persons or property, provided they allow others the same liberty."³ To libertarians, an individual has sovereignty over his/her body, extending to life, property and liberty. Thus, for Grandpa and other members of his family, liberty is being completely free in action, as long as you don't damage another's quest for freedom.

The Vanderhof-Sycamores not only stand apart as different from the conventional world around them, but they are also willing to accept others who are different. Their openness is reflected—through humorous exaggeration—in the way they allow anyone to move into their house or sit down with them at dinner. Twenty-first century audiences may be offended by the stereotypical manner in which Russian and Irish characters are portrayed, but the play depicts the value systems of the 1930s audience.

Kaufman and Hart embraced the past and based characters on people they knew. Grandpa was part Barnett Soloman (Hart's storytelling grandfather) and part Mark Twain (Kaufman's favorite writer). Ed, who sells candy door-to-door and composes on his xylophone, is drawn from Barnett Hart (Moss' father) who was a door-to-door salesman. "The personality of the Grand Duchess Olga was inspired by a phony Russian prince who ran a fur salon in Beverly Hills."⁴

Finally, the play has a persistent theme of free will whose messenger is Grandpa, living everyday as if it were his last. He reminds us that we have the choice in how we wish to live our lives, and that as the decision makers or the "deciders," we pick the path.

1. Goldstein, p. 273.
2. Hart, p. 29.
3. wikipedia.org, p. 1
4. Bach, p. 147.

Bach, Steven. *Dazzler: The Life and Times of Moss Hart*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

Galens, David, ed. *Drama for Students*. Farmington Hills, MI: The Gale Group, 2002.

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Hart, Moss. *Act One*. New York: Signet Books, 1960.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarianism>

<http://www.19.5degs.com/element/16525.php>

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE

HENDERSON: “According to our records, Mr. Vanderhof, you have never paid an income tax.

GRANDPA: That’s right.

HENDERSON: Why not?

GRANDPA: I don’t believe in it....I wouldn’t mind paying if it were something sensible.

HENDERSON: Sensible? Why, what about Congress, and the Supreme Court, and the President? We’ve got to pay them, don’t we?

GRANDPA: Not with my money—no sir!”

—You Can’t Take It With You

In 1862, President Lincoln signed into law a revenue-raising measure that would help pay for the Civil War. The measure created a Commissioner of Internal Revenue and the nation’s first income tax which levied a 3% tax on incomes between \$600 and \$10,000 and a 5% tax on incomes over \$10,000. Five years later Congress cut the tax rate because of public opposition. From 1868 until 1913, 90% of all revenue came from taxes on liquor, beer, wine and tobacco. Congress revived the income tax in 1894 but the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional the following year.

With the threat of World War I looming in 1913, Wyoming became the 36th and last state needed to ratify the 16th amendment which states: “Congress shall have the power to lay and collect taxes on incomes, from whatever source derived, without apportionment among the several states, and without regard to any census or enumeration.”¹ The first 1040 Form was also introduced after Congress levied a 1% tax on net personal incomes above \$3,000 with a 6% surtax on incomes over \$500,000.

In 1917, during World War I, the top rate of income tax rose to 77% to help finance the operations, but dropped sharply in the post-war years, especially during the Depression. During World War II, Congress introduced payroll withholding and quarterly tax payments.

Through the years the IRS has gone through changes and reorganization. In the 1950s the patronage system of hiring was replaced with career employees. In 1998 the IRS Restructuring and Reform Act provided the most complete modernization in 50 years and established a Taxpayer Advocacy Service “as an independent voice inside the agency on behalf of the taxpayer.”² In 2000, the IRS enacted its own reforms, which instituted four major operating divisions: Wage and Investment Income, Small Business/Self-Employed, Large and Mid-size Business and Tax Exempt and Government Entities.

Obviously, Grandpa’s views about the government are reflected in his opinions on taxes, not unlike many other Americans. What would he have said if he learned that in 2003 the IRS had 100,000 employees and a budget of \$9.9 billion?

1. cookco.us, p.2.
2. loc.gov, p. 2.

http://www.cookco.us/Historical_Highlights_of_the_IRS.htm

http://www.loc.gov/rr/business/hottopic/irs_history

<http://www.irs.gov/irs/article/0,,id=149200,00.html>

THE SITUATION IN RUSSIA IN 1936

KOLENKHOF: "No Grandpa, you cannot relax with Stalin in Russia. The Czar relaxed, and look what happened to him."

—You Can't Take It With You

Josef Stalin was not involved in the assassination of Czar Nicholas II in 1918, but he did become dictator of Russia from 1929 to 1953. After Vladimir Lenin's death in 1924, the top-level members of the Communist Party—Trotsky, Stalin, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Kamenev—struggled for leadership of the party. Employing political intrigue, Stalin began to amass power by destroying his rivals until he became the leader in 1928.

Josef Stalin began his rule with a series of five-year plans for economic development. The first one (begun in 1928) eliminated private businesses and socialized the production of industrial machinery and farm equipment. By 1932, the output of Russian industry more than doubled the pre-World War I level. In 1929, Stalin began to collectivize Soviet agriculture by ending private farming and transferring the control of farms, farm equipment and livestock to the government. The second five-year plan (1933-37) and the third (1939-43) attempted to pay more attention to the development of light industries with the production of more consumer goods to satisfy the general public. But the threat of World War II was looming and thus, attention was shifted to heavy industry again.

Under the Czar the Russian secret police often arrested revolutionaries and sent them into exile without a trial. But under Stalin, there was a massive reign of terror. Millions of people were executed or sent to labor camps; neighbors were ordered to spy on one another, and the government broke up families by urging children to inform on their parents. During 1935, Stalin began a purge of most of the old Bolsheviks associated with Lenin and killed anyone who might threaten his power. He also executed thousands of Communist Party members including countless officers in the Soviet army. When he decided to cooperate with Adolf

Hitler in 1939, there was no one left to oppose his policies. Not until 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, did Stalin recognize the true enemy.

"Josef Stalin." *World Book Encyclopedia*. Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1972.

<http://www.thecorner.org>

RUSSIAN ROYALTY IN AMERICA

KOLENKHOF: 'She is a great woman, the Grand Duchess. Her cousin was the Czar of Russia, and today she is a waitress in Child's Restaurant, Times Square.'

—You Can't Take It With You

Following the bloody Russian Revolution of the early 20th century, members of the ruling class fled Russia in fear for their lives. As the Romanov dynasty crumbled, many former aristocrats went into exile in other countries, including the U.S. While some retained their fortunes other had to begin life again as penniless refugees.

New Yorkers were familiar with Russian *émigrés* of nobility if they saw the play *Tovarich* (1935). Written by Jacques Duval and translated from French by Robert E. Sherwood, the plot concerned two Russian nobles who fled to France after the Russian Revolution. They pose as servants while in possession of the Czar's fortune.

The Russian royalty in the United States still celebrate their heritage today. The Russian Nobility Association was formed in the United States in 1938, with aims both philanthropic and genealogical. The Association directs donations to charitable organizations that provide food, shelter and medical treatment for disadvantaged people in Russia, Europe, South America and the US. It also provides direct aid to Russian orphanages, the indigent elderly, orthodox seminaries and other needy Russian-related charities. Membership in the Association is limited to direct descendants of the families listed in the Registers of the Nobility of the Russian Imperial Senate. The Association sponsors many events that welcome all comers, especially those with an interest in Russian culture. The Russian Nobility Ball has been a highlight of the New York social season for more than 50 years.

<http://www.barynya.com>

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THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE 1930s

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1937

In the mid-1930s when Kaufman and Hart wrote *You Can't Take It With You*, Americans were suffering through one of the worst economic periods in United States history, the Great Depression. Many people lost their jobs, home and life savings in the stock market crash of 1929 and the numerous bank failures that followed. Unemployment rose higher than ever before, reaching 20% in 1935. An apparent upturn in the economy in 1936 raised hopes, but those were dashed when the recovery collapsed in 1937.

The Depression led to the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932. He created programs known as the New Deal to overcome the effects of this huge economic downturn. "These programs expanded government intervention into new areas of social and economic concerns and created social assistance measures on the national level."¹ Such agencies as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration and the National Recovery Administration were created to try to get America back on its feet again. The Great Depression basically changed the relationship between the government and the people, who now came to expect and accept a larger federal role in their lives and their finances.

Although the New Deal eased the effects of the Depression, the 1930s were exceptionally tough for the majority of Americans. The hardships endured by ordinary people led people to question the benefits of free market capitalism. Socialist ideas gained in popularity during the decade and labor unrest led to strikes across the country. In addition, the psychological impact was damaging. During the prosperous 1920s, many individuals believed success went to those who worked hard for it and deserved it. With that attitude, the massive unemployment was a crushing blow. "If the economic system really distributed rewards on the basis of merit, those who lost their jobs had to conclude it was their own

fault."² Self-blame and self-doubt became prevalent; asking for assistance was humiliating to men who had thought of themselves as self-sufficient and self-reliant.

These political and economic factors influenced American popular culture. The art and literature of the 1930s provided works intended to argue political ideas and other works intended to give escape from the squalor of everyday life. On the one hand, newspapers printed more editorial opinions and political magazines such as *The Nation* and *New Republic* flourished; yet papers also included more comic strips and serialized stories than they ever had. Pulp detective and mystery fiction became best sellers. In the meantime, the radio offered frequent news reports balanced with comedy programs such as *Amos n' Andy* and *Fibber McGee and Molly*. In the theatre one could see a propaganda play such as Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) or escape to a comedy by Kaufman and Hart. The movies, too, focused on the harsh times with films such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1936). But most films offered optimistic escapism in slapstick and screwball comedies; in classic animated features such as Walt Disney's *The Three Little Pigs* (1933) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), and the movies featuring child star Shirley Temple in *Little Miss Marker* (1934) and *Heidi* (1937). With little money to spend on entertainment, many Americans stayed at home to work jigsaw puzzles or play bridge.

On a personal level, the hardships suffered during the Depression affected many American attitudes toward life, work and community. Some who survived the 1930s decided to protect themselves from ever going hungry or lacking necessities, so they developed habits of frugality, hoarding and accumulating material possessions to create a comfortable life. These beliefs, for many, have persisted into the 21st century.

1. Encarta, p.1.
2. Encarta, p.1.

Galens, David, ed. *Drama for Students*. Farmington Hills, MI: The Gale Group, 2002.

http://encarta.msn.com/text_761584403_/Great_Depression_in_the_United_States.html

REACTIONS TO THE PLAY

When *You Can't Take It With You* opened in New York in December 1936, the critics were ecstatic. John Mason Brown of the *New York Post* wrote that, “the play is something to be prized. It is moonstruck, almost from beginning to end.”¹ He was particularly impressed with the character of Grandpa Vanderhof whom he described as “happy because he has been able to remain a child of impulse in a sternly coercive world. He is more than strange. His strangeness is the measure of his wisdom and the point of his philosophy.”² Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* was equally pleased. “When a problem of conduct raises its head for a fleeting instant in the Sycamore family, grandfather solves it with a casual nod of philosophy, ‘So long as she’s having fun.’ Mr. Hart and Mr. Kaufman have been more rigidly brilliant in the past, but they have never scooped up an evening of such tickling fun.”³

Over the years critics have examined the play to see its lasting values. Ethan Mordden in *The American Theatre* says it’s the premise that “screwballs have their world in order; it’s everybody else who’s disoriented.”⁴ Much of the time the show gives its reading of anti-authoritarianism: “Do what you want before it’s too late.”⁵

Erika Kreger writes that the main purpose of the play is to produce laughs while it repackages “the individualistic and anti-materialist ideas of American thinkers such as Ralph Waldo

Emerson in his essay ‘Self Reliance’ and Henry David Thoreau...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.”⁶

In this century, June 18, 2007 to be specific, Jeremy McCarter of *New York Magazine* viewed a revival of the play at a small theatre. He wrote: “Moss Hart and George Kaufman put every character, every entrance, every line at the service of their marvelous comic machine. Some of the jokes pay off in seconds, others build for hours, and the whole thing has been engineered so ingeniously that even now, at 70, the script has more vitality than just about anything in town.”⁷

1. Brown, p. 313.
2. Brown, p. 314.
3. Atkinson, p. 315.
4. Mordden, p. 159.
5. Mordden, p. 160.
6. Kreger, p. 310, p.312.
7. McCarter, p. 134.

Galens, David, ed. *Drama for Students*. Farmington Hills, MI: The Gale Group, 2002

McCarter, Jeremy. “The Theatre.” *New York Magazine*. June 18, 2007.

Mordden, Ethan. *The American Theatre*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.