FREDERIC WOOD THEATRE

You Can't Take It With You

George S. Kaufman
by Paul Bacon

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George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart
A Collaboration

1930	Once in a Lifetime
1934	Merrily We Roll Along
1936	**YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU**
1937	I'd Rather Be Right
1938	The Fabulous Invalid
1939	The American Way
1940	The Man Who Came To Dinner
1943	Dream On, Soldier

In Broadway's Golden Days

"People like that should be in the crazy house."
- - - George Kaufman's mother, on ***You Can't Take It With You***

Broadway seems a decaying empire now. Its most glittering celebrities are real estate moguls and professional sports entrepreneurs. Theatre audiences consist largely of busloads of tourists. New musicals, once the touchstone of American theatre, are imported from England to the eager colonies. Times Square is distinctly seedy, and good new plays are few and far between.

Kaufman and Hart dubbed theatre "the fabulous invalid" - always on the brink of death, but always reviving. Present-day Broadway theatre seems like an invalid, to be sure, but hardly a fabulous one. Broadway's dominance of American theatre reached its height in the 1920s and 1930s, persisted through the 1950s, and settled into anecdotage in recent decades. The golden age of Broadway, like most golden ages, was very short, and spawned a legend which long outlived the vitality of an extraordinary time.

Is it only coincidence that the greatest years of Broadway theatre occurred during the working career of George S. Kaufman? He was a journalist, a critic, and one of America's foremost stage directors. He was a respected member of the "Round Table," New York's famous collection of humorists, who met daily at the Algonquin Hotel to have lunch and to exercise their celebrated wit. But most importantly, Kaufman was the leading playwright of Broadway's golden age. Between 1921 and 1940, he wrote no less than 23 Broadway hits (each running for more than 100 performances), plus almost as many near-misses. In 1966, five years after his death, there were so many revivals of Kaufman's plays that he was described as the hottest playwright on Broadway.

Writing can be lonely work. Although Kaufman was a shy man, he wrote almost all his plays with collaborators: *Beggar on Horseback* with Marc Connelly, *Of Thee I Sing* with Morrie Ryskind and the Gershwin brothers, *Dinner at Eight* and *Stage Door* with Edna Ferber, *You Can't Take It With You* and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* with Moss Hart. As a director and sometime "play doctor," Kaufman's sure hand with structure and dialogue helped many other playwrights to early success. After Kaufman directed

the premiere of *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck wrote, "I didn't realize that little things in writing made such a difference, and George taught it to me for the first time in my life."

"Plays are not written," said Kaufman, "they're rewritten." In his autobiography, *Act One*, my favourite of all backstage books, Moss Hart draws a vivid portrait of the workaholic perfectionist Kaufman. Hart's true story would be scarcely credible as a poor-boy-makes-good stage comedy. An unsolicited manuscript catches the attention of a Broadway producer, who persuades the experienced hitmaker Kaufman to collaborate with the unknown young talent Hart. They work for months rewriting Hart's manuscript, a play prophetically entitled *Once in a Lifetime*. The multi-talented Kaufman decides to act in the play as well as direct it. In out-of-town tryouts, audiences laugh uproariously through the first act, but become restless and sullen during the next two. After many late-night work sessions and more tryouts, Kaufman regretfully summons Hart to his dressing room to give him the bad news: he is giving up on the play. But young Hart, determined not to let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity slip through his fingers, perseveres and manages finally to diagnose the critical dramatic flaw. He bursts into Kaufman's apartment and, interrupting his ex-partner's breakfast and shouting over his objections, reads him the new script changes. The hitmaker sees a glimmer of hope. The play is taken up again, and finally opens on Broadway to tumultuous acclaim. The rest, as they say, is history - the history of the most successful playwriting team of the American theatre.

Despite their other achievements as writers and directors, together and separately, the pinnacle of Kaufman and Hart's success was *You Can't Take It With You*. Their popular madcap comedy opened on Broadway in December 1936, and won a Pulitzer Prize the next year. While the Depression is barely mentioned in the play, it lurks unmistakably just outside the door. In this parlous time, *You Can't Take It With You* captured the resilience of American individuality and American optimism. The Vanderhof/Sycamore home itself is the opposite of a crazy house - which is the point of the play. It is a sanctuary against poverty and oppression and a shrine to gentle strength, common sense, honesty, and love.

Denis Johnston

(Denis Johnston teaches Canadian theatre history in the UBC Theatre Department.)

The Wit of George S. Kaufman

When questioned about his flamboyant but favorite collaborator, Kaufman was asked, "Does Moss always tell the truth?"

"He does," Kaufman replied, "but I don't think he can stand a withering cross examination."

*

When he was in Hollywood he complained he never had time for books. Standing on a street corner with Leonard Lyons, he watched two airplanes writing in the sky urging people to drink Pepsi-Cola.

"That's the only thing I've read since I've been out here," Kaufman told Lyons.

*

Kaufman's hypochondria was fair game even for Kaufman. An old friend recommended a physician whose knowledge of the theatre was remarkable.

"The kind of doctor I want," Kaufman said, "is one who, when he's not examining me, is home studying medicine."

*

While walking along Fifth Avenue with Nunnally Johnson, Kaufman saw his friend stop in front of the specialty shop of Mark Cross. Johnson looked at the wares in the window. Kaufman shook his head.

"Pay no attention to this," he said. "Moss can take you to Cartier's and get you the same thing for three times the money."

*

During the Philadelphia tryout of a musical in which he was interested, Kaufman was pessimistic about the dress rehearsal on which he worked all night. At 3:00 A.M., he entered a diner and studied the menu. He told the waiter, "I want something that will keep me awake thinking it was the food I ate and not the show I saw."

*

At costume parties, Kaufman very much favored Abe Lincoln. A beard, a high hat, and a shawl were enough. He bore a striking resemblance to the rail-splitter.

And then actor Raymond Massey scored success after success playing Lincoln. It was with a trace of envy and a touch of pettiness that Kaufman said, "Massey won't be satisfied until he's assassinated."

*

From Howard Teichmann's excellent biography
George S. Kaufman: An Intimate Portrait,
New York 1972.

A Note on the Director

When John Wright was born in Pioneer Mine, B.C., *You Can't Take It With You* was still running on Broadway. Being a rather colicky child, his mother would soothe him by reading reviews of plays and sports results to him. A review by Edmond Gagey of the Kaufman & Hart masterpiece caught John's attention, and he began to plan for the eventual staging of this delightful comedy.

Years later, in John Brockington's directing class at UBC, he had his first encounter with the actual script of *You Can't Take It With You.* He graduated from UBC in Theatre, and went on to Stanford University where he received his M.F.A.

Returning to Canada in 1967, John Wright worked as a director, actor and teacher until the mid-seventies, when he left the theatre to become a writer, producer and director for film and television.

In 1977 his wife became the successful novelist L.R. Wright. In 1987 his two daughters Kate and Johnna, graduated in Theatre from UBC.

The next year Mr. Wright himself returned to UBC, the Edmond Gagey review still clutched in his hand, to teach in the Film Studies program. This year, at long last, *You Can't Take It With You* was scheduled for production and the now more aged, but still enthusiastic Mr. Wright was invited to direct.

FREDERIC WOOD THEATRE

★★ COMING ATTRACTIONS ★★

OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD

by Timberlake Wertenbaker

January 16 - 26

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