Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival
Room Service
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo: Charles Metten in Room Service, 2006
Room Service

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Synopsis: Room Service

Gordon Miller is seated in a room in the White Way Hotel reading a script. Sasha, a waiter, is doing his best to convince Miller to give him a part in his new play. Mr. Gribble, the hotel manager and Miller’s brother-in-law, enters and it becomes apparent that Miller has not only avoided paying his own bill but he is also responsible for the food and lodging for a sizeable number of theatrical people. Harry Binion enters and we learn that the play, for which no financial backer has been obtained, is being rehearsed elsewhere in the hotel. Gribble is in a dither because of the imminent arrival of the auditor. Miller has decided the only solution is to skip town when his associate, Christine Marlowe, reports that she has found a backer for the play. The problem is, they have to arrange to stay in the hotel for a few more days until the deal can be finalized.

Leo Davis, the naïve country boy author of the play, unexpectedly shows up expecting to find everything in order and badly in need of cash. Eventually, Miller and company decide the only way to stay in the hotel is to have Davis fake a serious illness since it would then be illegal to evict him.

Hilda Manney, the manager’s secretary, enters. She and Davis sense an instant attraction. Wagner, the company executive, enters, demanding an explanation concerning Miller’s unpaid bill.

Simon Jenkins, representative of the long-awaited financial backer, arrives and agrees to consummate the deal the next afternoon. Wagner gives Miller one hour to pay up or leave. Davis is made up to look deathly ill as Act One ends.

Act Two finds a very hungry Miller, Davis, and Binion. Since the waiter, Sasha, is so desperate for a part in the play, they convince him to bring food in return for an audition. Wagner shows up, and a doctor is called in to check Davis’s condition and ends up locked in the bathroom. Jenkins arrives, ready to conclude the deal. Wagner enters at the worst of possible times, followed by Binion and Gribble, and the whole situation turns into a disaster. Jenkins, who has already signed over the check to Miller, leaves, convinced he has been dealing with madmen and vowing to stop the check.

Doctor Glass is released from the bathroom, having overheard the identity of the secret backer of Davis’s play. Blustering at Wagner, he reveals the well-known name, and Wagner agrees to allow Miller and his acting company to remain in the hotel, if the check can be deposited in the hotel’s account.

When it is revealed that Jenkins intends to stop the check, Miller plots to charge everything he needs against his hotel credit and open the play in five days before Wagner can learn that the check has been stopped.

Act Three finds a bank messenger revealing to Gribble that Miller has been signing Wagner’s name to everything he has charged to the hotel. Further, Gribble learns that the check has bounced. A clerk from the bank calls and now Wagner knows about the check. He vows that the curtain will never rise on the play, which is due to open in thirty minutes. A plot is devised to have Davis fake his suicide, knowing that Wagner, fearing for the reputation of the hotel, won’t call for medical help. Davis, however, must continue to “die” long enough for the play to conclude. Senator Blake, whom Wagner has been trying to impress, enters, declaring the play to be a hit and that he’s promoting Wagner. Sasha, the waiter, is the star of the show, Davis and Hilda are in love, and everyone is happy at last.
Characters: *Room Service*

Sasha Smirnoff: A waiter in the hotel and a would-be actor.

Gordon Miller: A fast-talking, quick-witted producer with big ideas and a very small budget, Gordon Miller is a fly-by-night leader of a penniless theatrical troupe.

Joseph Gribble: The harassed and helpless manager of the White Way Hotel where an indigent theatrical troupe can't pay their tab.

Harry Binion: A witty stage director who can't think with his clothes on.

Faker Englund: Gordon Miller's man Friday, Faker Englund is the idea man and stage manager. He is an expert in dodging hotel bills.

Christine Marlowe: Young and pretty, Christine Marlowe is responsible for finding a backer for Miller's production.

Leo Davis: A naïve playwright from Oswego, Leo Davis is the author of Miller's intended production. He is young and inexperienced in the ways of the world.

Hilda Manney: A sweet simple soul, Hilda Manney is Miller's secretary.

Gregory Wagner: The apoplectic and roaring hotel executive, Gregory Wagner is a red-faced and over-bearing company man who inadvertently becomes a backer of Miller's play.

Simon Jenkins: Miller's “angel,” Simon Jenkins is a representative of a money magnate who wants in invest in the play.

Timothy Hogarth: The man from the collection agency, Timothy Hogarth has come to repossess Davis’s typewriter.

Dr. Glass: The harassed hotel doctor who advertises in elevators.

Bank Messenger

Senator Blake
John Murray and Allen Boretz
By Marlo M. Ihler
From Insights, 2006

When playwrights John Murray and Allen Boretz created the zany farce Room Service in 1937, little did they know it would engender a successful Broadway run, a Marx Brothers’ movie, and a Frank Sinatra musical.

Room Service came during a time when its post-Depression audiences needed and appreciated a way to escape from the hard knocks of life. Its portrayal of the “dodges and makeshifts” of show business is done through physical humor and screwball comedy (Don B. Wilmeth, ed. Cambridge Guide to American Theatre [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 402). It tells the story of penniless theatre producer Gordon Miller, his theatre sidekicks, and their antics to hold on to their hotel rooms and rehearsal space by sidestepping the hotel management and their creditors in preparation for opening night of what they believe to be the next Broadway hit, the answer to all their problems.

Playwright John Murray was born October 12, 1906 in New York City. His parents were Morris and Kate Pfeferstein and his father was a grocer. He graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1924. From 1925 to 1928 he attended the City College of New York and Columbia University. During World War II he served as a captain in the Signal Corps. On October 20, 1941 he married Joan Loewi, with whom he had one son. It was said his interests included swimming, reading, history, and current events. He died on June 17, 1984, in Connecticut.

Murray’s professional life comprised numerous genres and decades. He worked as a lyricist, composer, and playwright, and contributed songs and sketches to the musical revues Ziegfield Follies (1946), Earl Carroll Vanities (1940), and Straw Hat Revue (1939). His sketches were part of another revue Sing for Your Supper (1939), and Alive and Kicking (1950), and he produced and wrote the West Coast revue, Sticks and Stones (1940).

He was also involved in writing for radio and television. He worked as the head writer for the radio shows of Eddie Cantor and Phil Baker. He wrote scripts for television’s Hallmark Hall of Fame (NBC), Schlitz Playhouse (CBS), Ford Theatre (CBS), and adapted Room Service for the television series “Broadway Television Theatre” (1952).

Murray was a member of ASCAP, the Dramatists Guild, and the American Guild of Authors and Composers. A few of the popular songs for which he is credited are: “If I Love Again,” “Have a Little Dream on Me,” and “If I Were You.” His published works include One Act Plays for Young Actors (1959) and Modern Monologues for Young People (1961) (Don B. Wilmeth, ed. Cambridge Guide to American Theatre [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 701-702).

Allen Boretz, the other half of the Room Service writing team, was born on August 31, 1900, to Moishe and Hanah Boretz. He also grew up in New York City, and attended the City College of New York and New York University. He married and divorced three times throughout his life, and died in Branford, Connecticut, on May 21, 1986 (Walter Rigdon, ed. The Biographical Encyclopedia and Who’s Who of the American Theatre [New York: James H. Heineman, Inc., 1966], 309).

He was a prolific songwriter, playwright, and screenwriter. He joined ASCAP in 1941, and wrote songs for Radio City Music Hall and the Broadway musicals The Garrick Gaieties (1930) and Sweet and Low (1930). He is credited with writing the songs “Whistling in the Dark,” “Love is Like That,” “Dark Clouds,” and “So Shy.”
As a playwright, his work includes The School Teacher (1936), Off to Buffalo (1939), and The Hot Corner (1956). But it was the successful 500-performance run of Room Service (1937) on Broadway that led to offers from Hollywood for screenplays and the film version of the play in 1938, starring the Marx Brothers and Lucille Ball.

Boretz’s other film credits as a screenwriter include Up in Arms (1944), Ziegfield Follies (1946), My Girl Tisa (1948), Two Guys from Texas (1949), and the movie musical adaptation of Room Service for RKO Radio Pictures, Step Lively (1944), featuring Frank Sinatra (http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0096394/bio).

In the early 1950s, Boretz’s screenwriting came to an abrupt halt when he was blacklisted by the House on Un-American Activities Committee. However, this did not stop him from writing, and Room Service has never stopped being produced by professional and amateur theatre companies throughout the world, and has been revived on Broadway several times (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allen_Boretz).
Making Hay in the Great White Way
By Lawrence Henley
From Insights, 2006

Ever had to get creative in order to float a loan payment, dodge creditors, or stave off an impending foreclosure? Chances are you probably didn’t find much to laugh about while bobbing and weaving in avoidance of shutoff deadlines or an eviction notice. Once those troubles were behind you, perhaps you found some humor looking back on some of those situations. Still—those are times that can be highly destructive to nervous systems.

We’ve all likely been in situations like these, and cathartic it is to take an opportunity to have a good laugh at people whose financial entanglements make our own look miniscule. Room Service presents us with a grand opportunity for a good old-fashioned howl at a cagey Broadway producer faced with almost certain fiscal ruin: a madcap with a mob of loonies who stretch the ethical boundaries of theatrical finance back in one of Broadway’s most golden of eras, the 1930s.

Have you ever wondered what the life of a real Broadway producer must be like? In all probability, you would imagine it to be incredibly hectic, hurried, and stressful, right? Whatever chaos you might envision would pale in comparison to the insanity and havoc generated by the producing team depicted in Room Service, primarily by the quick-thinking lead character. Gordon Miller and his equally dexterous partners (Harry Binion, the director and Faker Englund, Gordon’s assistant) push their faith and their own agility, guile, and good fortune to the breaking point on an hourly basis. Everything in the world of Room Service rides on the spurious gamble that their new show will be the talk of old Broadway. The goal, of course, is to become filthy rich, wildly famous, and the envy of their peers.

They sleep, do business, and rehearse in digs the namesake of which is derivative of Broadway’s own nickname for its intensely bright sidewalk illumination. Miller’s entire crew are holed up at the White Way Hotel (which, ironically or coincidentally, has within its physical plant a theatre that has been “dark” for the past three years). These rapscallions have stretched the hotel management’s rubber welcome mat about as taught as possible. Like the straining mat, their careers are primed to snap at any time. Without a solid backer, the production’s prospects are rapidly sifting to the depth of a shrinking hourglass.

For the previous four months, Miller has raced toward the limits of his dwindling line of credit. A huge tab has been run up for the entire company’s room and board and for theatrical expenses. Miller’s brother-in-law, hotel manager Joseph Gribble, has sought to hide the hopelessly inflated bill and avoid the ire of his boss, Supervising Director Gregory Wagner. Gribble has been successful in his shell game right up until the instant the curtain rises on Room Service. And, of course, Miller and company are not the only ones with something to lose here: both Wagner’s promotion to vice president and Gribble’s continuing employment hang in the balance. Once the hotel’s auditors realize that Miller’s entire troupe is about to skip on a $4,000 tab, heads will certainly roll.

The production Miller and his cronies are trying desperately to cash in on has been given the grandest title: Godspeed, a Historical Fantasy. Sounds fascinating, does it not—almost as fascinating as, say, Springtime for Hitler? Adding to Miller’s already backbreaking pressures, Leo Davis, the naïve playwright of the “epic,” turns up at the White Way. Davis is expecting to be handed an advance on his share of the play’s profits, and anticipates that his masterwork is well on the way to showbiz immortality. Instead, the young “auteur” encounters Miller and crew at their dodgiest, and nearly at the end of their wits.

Alas, their bad luck turns to worse. When a backer is finally located (with Davis’s help), the financier’s representative (Jenkins) catches the scent of the production’s wobbliness via a not-so-subtle series of exchanges from the eternally-edgy Wagner, holder of the show’s expense tab. To Miller’s augmented horror, an order to stop payment is placed on the check which was to have brought salvation. The
Jenkins and playwright Davis ready plans to give Godspeed to a rival producer, Morton Fremont. Fremont is an established producer with a much loftier reputation.

The ensuing chaos and the Miller team’s rescue of Godspeed are pricelessly funny, and the last act alone is more than worth the price of admission. Thanks to their ability to survive a series of hair-clenching close calls, the gutsy production team save the day for one and all, and their show—at last—makes it to opening night. All debts are settled, the show is a hit, and an immigrant star is born. One of a number of deliciously funny characters in Room Service, Sasha Smirnoff is the immigrant waiter/ would-be-actor working at the White Way Hotel. Sasha has continually extolled his extraordinary performance in Uncle Vanya at the Moscow Art Theatre, this prior to hitting the decks of a boat that brought him across the seas. He lobbies Miller for a role that will make him (or break him) as an actor in his adopted land. In return, Miller and his cast get to eat on extended credit.

Wagner, the big boss man, is also blessed with a marvelously explosive personality. Generations familiar with 1960s television will be reminded of the penny-pinching, behind-kissing banker Mr. Drysdale of Beverly Hillbillies fame (exquisitely played by Raymond Bailey), or perhaps Gale Gordon as Mr. Mooney on The Lucy Show. Still, the biggest scene stealers here are the zany and slippery Gordon Miller and his nimble accomplices. It is small wonder that the zany eyebrow-twitching comedic genius Julius “Groucho” Marx was selected to play Miller in the screen version.

Room Service was a smashing success at the Cort Theatre, running for 500 performances between May 1937 and July 1938. Later in 1938, RKO Pictures purchased the script as a vehicle for the incomparable Marx Brothers. Also featured in the motion picture were a young ingénue named Lucille Ball and leggy young dancer Anne Miller. Both ladies would become major Hollywood stars in the next decade. The show has been produced the world-over (professionally and non-professionally) and was revived on Broadway in 1953. Although authors Allen Boretz and John Murray were responsible for another half dozen Broadway shows between them, Room Service was, by far, their most successful venture. Boretz (1900-1985), later a screenwriter, was one of many artists in the entertainment field who found themselves blacklisted during the McCarthy years. Murray was also a co-producer of Charley’s Aunt.

Speaking of producers, what is truly admirable about Miller and his cohorts is the lengths to which they go (and depths to which they stoop) in order to keep their ship afloat. In avoidance of hunger, handcuffs, seeing their work on the play amount to a flop, and three box seats in the poorhouse, Room Service’s braintrust basically will stop at nothing in order to preserve the show, despite it’s questionable merits. In the course of the play, this infinitely versatile and elusive trio feign just about everything—identities, disease epidemics, and mortality itself! In theatre vernacular, they are “troupers” personified.

Although penned in 1937, Room Service makes for a very interesting and timely choice of production for the present day. Not coincidentally, today’s theatergoers have gone mad for Mel Brooks’ stage version of his classic 1968 film The Producers. That show’s lead characters bear some resemblance to Miller and crew. In a sense, Room Service serves the Brooks comedy as an ancestor—both shows have somewhat slippery, scheming Broadway producers who have taken leave of their senses in order to smell the sweetness of success. Both become completely immersed in situations made of pure desperation. And Max Bialystock and Gordon Miller have both undertaken last ditch attempts to save the day and join the ranks of Manhattan’s wealthiest moguls.

The primary message contained in Room Service, of course (however wacky its delivery may be), is not one that is weighty or philosophical. Nor is the show completely about the ethics of the Broadway producer. When you get right down to it, there is a strong theme that rings true in those of us who have toiled for years in the theatre, and continue to—despite a myriad of hardships, financial and otherwise, that only people in show business can fully appreciate. Friends, Room Service serves to reinforce that ironclad, age-old saw of the theatre which, even today, is written indelibly on the bottom line: no matter what may befall the onstage and backstage heroes that bring theatre to your lives—the show must go on!