Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

You Can’t Take It with You
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: Michael Thomas Holmes (left) and Laurie Birmingham in You Can’t Take It with You, 1995.
You Can’t Take It with You

Contents

Information on the Play
Synopsis 4
Characters 5
About the Playwright 6

Scholarly Articles on the Play
Happy Lunacies 7
Still Speaking to Audiences 9
Synopsis: You Can’t Take It with You

The Vanderhof family at the center of You Can’t Take It with You is a collection of cheerful and erratic (yet lovable) incompetents. First, there’s Grandpa Martin Vanderhof, the salty and philosophical patriarch of this wacky family and a man who made his peace with the world, if not the Internal Revenue Service, long ago. Then there is his daughter, Penelope Sycamore (a cheerful and unpublished playwright, at least at the moment) and her husband, Paul (who happily manufactures fireworks in the cellar). The third generation consists of Penelope and Paul’s daughters and son-in-law: Essie Carmichael (the eternally optimistic, and inept, ballerina), her husband Ed (who has a passion for printing presses and xylophones), and Alice. Seemingly the only normal character in the household is Alice, a Wall Street secretary.

Into this whirlwind of activity comes Tony Kirby, Alice’s boyfriend, the son of her boss, and the epitome of normality and success in the business world. Tony is amused by Alice’s family and loves Alice in spite of the craziness in the family home. Alice, on the other hand, is sometimes merely chagrined, sometimes mortified by what happens when she brings Tony to the house. Despite the differences between the two families, Alice and Tony are soon engaged, and (over Alice’s protests) a dinner party is planned for Tony’s parents—at the Vanderhof home. Alice, of course, has misgivings about bringing Tony’s strait-laced parents into this maelstrom of activity: as she explained when she introduced Tony to her family: “I want him to take you in easy doses. I’ve tried to prepare him a little, but don’t make it any worse than you can help.” The family assures Alice that they will be on their best behavior, and the night is set.

However, as with most things in the Vanderhof family, things don’t go exactly as planned. Tony arrives with his parents in tow—but mistakenly arrives the night before the planned dinner party. And the Vanderhof tribe, rather than being on their best behavior are at their unplanned and hilarious worst. The Kirbys, predictably, are appalled at the wild unorthodoxy of the Vanderhofs, which presently results in the arrest of the family—and of the Kirbys themselves. Alice, convinced that the two families will never get along, determines to leave hers; but Tony, seeing something deeper in the family that his parents or perhaps even Alice don’t see, tries in vain to dissuade her and explains that he brought his parents to the party a night early on purpose: “I wanted [my parents] to see a real family—as they really were. A family that loved and understood each other.”

The Kirbys are angry at their son and disturbed that he could love such a family, but he insists that he still wants to marry Alice. Everything, eventually, is brought back to the important center by Grandpa, as he talks to Mr. Kirby and to Tony about what is really important and teaches everyone some vital lessons about life: “You’ve got all the money you need. You can’t take it with you. . . . And what’s it got you? Same kind of mail every morning, same kind of deals, same kind of meetings, same dinners at night, same indigestion. Where does the fun come in? Don’t you think there ought to be something more. . . . We haven’t got too much time, you know—any of us.”
Characters: You Can’t Take It with You

Penelope Sycamore: The daughter of Martin Vanderhof, mother of Essie and Alice, and wife of Paul, Penelope is the fluttery, gentle lady of the house. She decided to become a playwright when a typewriter was delivered to their house by mistake. Since that time this accidental playwright has spent much of her time writing works with titles such as Poison Gas.

Essie: The daughter of Penelope and Paul, granddaughter of Martin Vanderhof, and wife of Ed, Essie is a pixie in toeshoes. At the age of twenty-nine, she wants to be a dancer in the worst way—and, according to any unbiased observer, that is exactly what she is. The eternal student, she takes lessons from Boris Kolenkhov and is constantly dancing across the living room.

Rheba: The maid in the Vanderhof household, she probably understands this unusual family better than anyone.

Paul Sycamore: The husband of Penelope and father of Essie, Paul Sycamore is in his mid-fifties, but with a kind of youthful air. His quiet charm and mild manner are distinctly engaging. However, under that unassuming exterior lies a man who lives for his fireworks—the ones he manufactures in the cellar.

Mr. De Pinna: Years ago Mr. De Pinna was delivering ice to the Vanderhof home—and just decided to stay. Now the mad genius of pyrotechnics helps out Paul in the cellar.

Ed: The husband of Essie, Ed is a nondescript young man in his mid-thirties. However, he has two passions: the printing press and the xylophone.

Donald: Rheba’s boyfriend, Donald spends a lot of comfortable time at the Vanderhof home.

Martin Vanderhof: The patriarchal head of the family, Grandpa Martin Vanderhof is about seventy-five, a man whom the years have treated kindly. He is a man who made his peace with the world long, long ago, and his whole attitude and manner are quietly persuasive of this. He does, however, have a long-standing “disagreement” with the Internal Revenue Service.

Alice: The daughter of Penelope and Paul and sister of Essie, Alice is a lovely, fresh young girl of about twenty-two. Because she is a secretary in a Wall Street office, she is in daily contact with the world and seems to have escaped the tinge of mild insanity that pervades the rest of the family; however, her familial devotion and love are readily apparent. In the course of the play she is engaged to marry Tony Kirby, her boss’s son.

Tony Kirby: The boyfriend and later fiancé of Alice, Tony Kirby is a personable young man not long out of Yale and Cambridge. Although he fits all the physical requirements of a boss’s son, his face (and his spirit) has something of the idealist in it, invoking in him a certain fondness for the Vanderhofs’ quirkiness.

Boris Kolenkhov: Essie’s dance teacher, Boris Kolenkhov is a hearty, explosive, Russian ballet-master.

Mr. Kirby: Tony’s father and Alice’s boss in the Wall Street office, Mr. Kirby is a successful businessman who wants his son to follow in his footsteps; thus, he is very disapproving of the Vanderhof family and of his son’s engagement to Alice.

Mrs. Kirby: Tony’s mother, Mrs. Kirby is of the same mind and temperament as her husband.
The Playwrights:

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart

In the records of the American theatre, the Kaufman and Hart collaboration lasted only ten years, from 1930 to 1940. This, however, seems hard to believe. The popularity of their plays was so tremendous during their partnership and their plays have continued to be so popular ever since, that they seem, in the perspective of the present day, to have been “always there”—like Gilbert and Sullivan or Rodgers and Hammerstein.

The story of their first joining up together was fascinatingly told in Moss Hart’s autobiography, Act I, published in 1959. Hart, at twenty-five years of age, was in 1929 a penniless, aspiring young man with one single ambition: to be a Broadway playwright. He had written a handful of plays with no success until he completed a comedy about the migration then taking place of actors from the stage to Hollywood, as the change-over from silent films to “talking pictures” put a premium on actors who could “talk.”

This comedy won some interest from the highly-reputed Broadway producer, Sam Harris, who offered to have the play adapted into a musical comedy. Though yearning greatly for any kind of stage production, Hart said “no.” Harris then offered a production if Hart would enter into a collaboration with George S. Kaufman, who could help iron out the comedy’s kinks.

Since Kaufman was one of the most successful playwrights in the country, this was for Hart a wonderful opportunity which he hastened to accept.

The play he and Kaufman wrote—and rewrote and rewrote again and again—was Once in a Lifetime. On its opening in September 1930, it became one of the greatest successes of its time. Hart sprung overnight from penury to riches, from oblivion to being one of the brightest stars of the inner circle that was known as the Algonquin Roundtable. It put Kaufman and Hart as a team on a pedestal in the theatrical hall of fame.

Over the next ten years they wrote seven other shows together. All of them won the most enthusiastic attention—the opening of each was a major event. Four of them were long-run hits, and the other three were successes that would have been consider major accomplishments from any other playwrights than these two from whom only fifty-megaton smashers were now expected. The seven were Merrily We Roll Along (1934), You Can’t Take It with You (1936), I’d Rather Be Right (1937), The Fabulous Invalid (1938), The American Way (1939), The Man Who Came to Dinner (1939), and George Washington Slept Here (1940).

After 1940 the two did not work together again—not because they had a falling-out, as was the case with Gilbert and Sullivan, but because Hart had a psychological need to prove that his success was not due to a dependence on Kaufman. He had to prove to himself that he could work alone. He did it brilliantly for the next seventeen years, and Kaufman’s career also continued to thrive.

During this time Hart wrote Lady in the Dark, Winged Victory, Christopher Blake, Light Up the Sky, and The Climate of Eden. In addition, he wrote many screenplays that were produced in Hollywood, including the 1954 version of A Star Is Born. His most notable screenplay was Gentleman’s Agreement which won an Academy Award.

Before and after working with Hart, Kaufman wrote such hits as The Butter and Egg Man, The Coconuts, and Strike Up the Band (all as a solo playwright); The Royal Family and Dinner at Eight (with Edna Ferber); The Dark Tower (with Alexander Woollcott); Animal Crackers (with Morris Ryskind); Park Avenue (with Nunnally Johnson); and The Solid Gold Cadillac (with Howard Teichman).
The two men remained the best of friends. Hart’s autobiography was regarded by many in 1959 as being largely an idolizing tribute to George S. Kaufman. On Kaufman’s death on June 2, 1961, Hart delivered a moving address at the funeral. He himself died barely seven months later, on December 20, 1961.

You Can’t Take It with You: Happy Lunacies

By Jerry L. Crawford
From Insights, 1995

The coveted Pulitzer Prize rarely goes to a comedy, but, in 1937, Messrs. Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman won the award with unanimous popular ratification for You Can’t Take It with You. The play fulfills what Dr. Samuel Jonson considered the chief aim of comedy: keeping an audience continually merry. Wildly funny as it is, the script is based on a text in the New Testament: “For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out (I Timothy 6:7).

You Can’t Take It with You was originally produced at the Booth Theatre in New York City on Monday night, December 14, 1936, presented by Sam H. Harris, noted producer. The play was staged by George S. Kaufman and featured Henry Travers as Grandpa Vanderhof and Josephine Hull as Penelope Sycamore, with such gifted supporting actors as Frank Conlan and George Tobias (as Mr. De Pinna and Boris Kolenkhov). On December 15, in his column for the New York Evening Post, distinguished critic, John Mason Brown, reported: “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. It is moonstruck, almost from beginning to end. It is blessed with all the happiest lunacies Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman have been able to contribute to it. The Sycamore family is the most gloriously mad group of contented eccentrics the modern theatre has yet had the good fortune to shadow.”

The play had a run of 837 performances and has been consistently produced for fifty-eight years, ranging from high schools and colleges to community theatres, regional professional theatres, and Broadway revival. (Sam Harris sold You Can’t Take It with You to Columbia Pictures for a record price of $200,000, and Frank Capra directed a stellar Hollywood cast including James Stewart, Jean Arthur, Lionel Barrymore, Edward Arnold, and Spring Byington. The film was also a hit success.) The team of Kaufman and Hart remains one of the American theatre’s most cherished icons; they collaborated on such comedic triumphs as Once in a Lifetime (1930), Merrily We Roll Along (1934), I’d Rather Be Right (1937), The Fabulous Invalid (1938), The American Way (1939), The Man Who Came to Dinner (1939), and George Washington Slept Here (1940). Each author wrote other successes alone or with other collaborators (witness the 1993 Utah Shakespeare Festival comic romp by Kaufman and Edna Ferber, The Royal Family [written in 1927]).

In 1936 America was still in the Great Depression and the world was only three years away from World War II. The story of a family living near Columbia University who managed not only to survive in those terrible times but to enjoy life hugely appealed to thousands of playgoers both here and abroad. Its very absurdities and improbabilities endeared the play to them even more. Eager to forget the bad news at home and the ever-increasing threats from abroad, playgoers found this a kind of poor man’s Shangri-la on Morningside Heights. (Could it be that we relish the play today for comparable if not similar reasons?)

Coupled with the pleasure derived from observing the antics of a harebrained but happy
family living on practically nothing a week was the delight in viewing another cleverly
wrought product of one of the most expert writing teams in American dramatic history.

Neither Kaufman nor Hart made any pretense at being philosophers or creating seri-
ous or complex themes. They were unashamedly humorists—entertainers! You Can’t Take It
with You is an example of clever theatrical craftsmanship, of strikingly funny situations, of
dialogue that is humorous and stage worthy, and of a view of life that may have been in the
hearts of many who were living in the unhappy days that had not yet seen the last of the
Great Depression and were shortly to witness the beginning of World War II.

What really makes You Can’t Take It with You special and a pure delight is the array
of unique characters that populate its action. Here are non-conformists—1930s hippies.
Each one pursues a private imperative, yet connects with the ensemble. Kaufman probably
drew heavily upon his own family for prototypes of Grandpa Vanderhof, Penelope, and
Essie. Legend has it that Kaufman’s father, sister, and niece provided the impetus for those
characters. It is to Kaufman’s credit that no hint of sentimentality is involved in those cre-
ations. Matters of romance and sentiment necessary to the story were undeniably provided
by Hart. For example, it appears that Kaufman had nothing to do with act 1, scene 2 and
that early sentimental moments in act 3 are strictly the work of Hart. In fact, much of the
material disliked by a few critics seemed to have been written by Hart who deployed a gen-
tler brand of humor than his caustic collaborator. Nevertheless, it is the subtle blending of
viewpoint and style throughout the play which elevates all of it to stage worthiness. When
the playwrights were asked, “Which lines were yours?” theatre lore has it that each author
denied knowledge of line creations. Kaufman was famous for saying, “We both thought of
it.”

A personal memory: I once played the role of Ed in You Can’t Take It with You for a
professional summer repertory theatre. I was driven to distraction trying to learn to play
Beethoven on the xylophone! Finally, I mastered enough of the material and the instrument
to serve the play. There followed an amazing discovery. Ed Carmichael is supposed to play
as badly as I did! That was the point—the very spine of the character. Kaufman and Hart
knew that each of us participates in something for the sheer joy of it. Success and accom-
plishment become irrelevant in the face of the happiness resulting from trying to fulfill a
small, personal dream (skill and training aside). A great and serious lesson emerges, one
which underscores the subtle solemnity of the Biblical title of this master play.
You Can’t Take It with You:
Still Speaking to Audiences

By Aden Ross

From Midsummer Magazine, 1995

You Can’t Take It with You opened in 1936, when America was still in the Depression and the world was on the brink of World War II. Eager to forget the bad news at home and the worse news abroad, people flocked to this lunatic play for 837 consecutive performances. In addition, it won the Pulitzer Prize for the 1936-37 season. Is this minor classic by George Kaufman and Moss Hart only a period piece, certainly worth admiring in its own right? Or can it still speak to audiences at the turn of the twenty-first century?

From the beginning, the description of the Vanderhof’s living room sets the tone and the play’s parameters. It is actually an “every-man-for-himself room . . . . 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” (p. 225; all references to You Can’t Take It with You are from Three Comedies of American Life [New York: Washington Square Press, 1961].

Kaufman and Hart then interject into this setting in which anything can happen a cast of zany characters capable of doing virtually anything. The time is two weeks before the Fourth of July, and the father of the family is (naturally) designing and building his own fireworks in the basement. His wife, Penny, is (naturally) writing her eleventh play, while their daughter (naturally) toe-dances around a batch of cooling candy. Grandpa, the patriarch of the family, has just returned from the latest graduation at Columbia, because thirty-five years ago he jettisoned his job and the Establishment to raise snakes, play darts, and attend commencements. The play also presents the obligatory young lovers, whose fate hangs in the balance between her crazy Vanderhof family and his far too stolid Kirbys. Unfortunately, we recognize his family: Mr. Kirby is a stock broker at the top of the socio-economic ladder, and Mrs. Kirby is a proper matron whose repressed sexuality can only surface in a parlor game.

Plot questions rapidly evolve from simple ones like, “Will the boy get the girl?” to more intriguing ones like, “Who are the sinister men following Ed on his delivery route?” to hilarious ones like, “Why is there a Russian duchess in the kitchen and a drunken actress on the sofa?” The playwrights consistently use a sure-fire technique for comedy: they develop concurrent but unrelated situations, then, at key moments, overlay them. The effect sounds like an impromptu string trio in which each instrument is playing a different melody. For example:

Paul: Mr. De Pinna was right about the balloon. It was too close to the powder.


Penny: I’m going back to the war play, Paul.

Paul: Oh, that’s nice. We’re putting some red stars after the bombs and then the balloon. That ought to do it.

Essie: You know, Mr. Kolenkhow says I’m his most promising pupil.
Penny: You'd think with forty monks and one girl that something would happen. (p. 231)

This technique is most hilarious in the classic scene closing act 2. At that point, the prospective in-laws are attempting to leave after a disastrous Vanderhof “dinner.” But three G-men have suddenly appeared and, in their search, have found the drunken actress in a negligee, whom they carry downstairs. Right then, a whole year’s supply of fireworks explodes, the cook and Mrs. Kirby scream, Penny races to save her manuscripts, Ed worries about his xylophone, and everyone is—arrested.

Second-rate comic writers, like many in current television, simply establish a pitch of insanity and continue raising it in a given script. Kaufman and Hart instead intensify their comic effects by providing subtle perspective, often through structural parallels between trivial and serious events. For example, the possibility of World War II is a constant backdrop in You Can’t Take It with You. On the opposite end of the war spectrum, Paul is building fireworks—pseudo-warfare for the quintessentially American holiday. Halfway between the tragedy of real war and the festive artillery of Independence Day falls the play’s “war” between the two families. In the same vein, Penny is writing a war play, which must be as ridiculously chaotic as her other scripts. Structurally parallel to that is the situation of the Russian duchess, now a waitress, who embodies the very real breakdown of Russian society. On the spectrum of chaos, the events of Kaufman and Hart’s comedy fall halfway between Penny’s literary efforts and the Bolshevik Revolution, between the fictional confection and the ultra-real. Comic writing like this is as intelligent as it seems effortless.

While You Can’t Take It with You is less symbolic than many plays, Kaufman and Hart nonetheless develop appropriate images to underscore their main ideas. Snakes, whether in the Vanderhof household or in Eden, remain suggestive to Judaeo-Christian audiences, especially since Mrs. Kirby is terrified of them and symbolically loses her innocence in the parlor game. Food also comprises a major symbol: Penny eats candy out of a human skull made of plaster of Paris; Essie makes candies entitled “Love Dreams”; the dinner for the Kirbys devolves from canned salmon to frankfurters; and the final reunion is, symbolically, a dinner of roast goose and blintzes made by the duchess. Likewise, music serves both a dramatic and a symbolic function, from Essie’s optimistic toe-dancing, to the actress’s drunken singing, to Ed’s re-composing Beethoven on the xylophone. Traditional comedy, like traditional music, literally ascends from confusion to understanding, from dissonance to harmony.

Politics forms one of the play’s major themes, sometimes dating the script, but more often illustrating its continuing relevance. Donald, the charming boyfriend of the cook, is “on relief,” at once sparking comic debate and revealing America’s perennial ambivalence toward the welfare system. The conflict between the Soviet government and old Russia forms an interesting counterpoint to events in the late twentieth century, as do the characters’ views on Stalin. The most delightful politics in the play come from Grandpa Vanderhof, who has refused to pay income taxes all his life because he couldn’t see what he got for his money. Today he would be in Congress.

Kaufman and Hart expand the theme of the welfare state into a thoroughgoing examination of work. What constitutes “work”? What good is it? What bad is it? Mr. Kirby, the workaholic, really wanted to be a trapeze artist or a saxophone player. Much happier in their work, Penny writes plays, Ed delivers candy, and Paul designs skyrockets. Alice and Tony, the young lovers, work for Mr. Kirby; hence their souls are in danger. Grandpa worries that
Tony will “wake up twenty years from now with nothing in his life but stocks and bonds,” just like the elder Kirby. America has always had a love-hate affair with the Protestant work ethic, and this play reflects it. To what extent, it asks, is work a conscious denial of one’s own natural impulses—indeed, an expression of fear of freedom? On the other hand, to what extent is personal happiness irresponsible?

The affirmation of individuality lies at the heart of this play. This house demands that people do as they like. This time makes “love dreams” come true—both the dreams of love and the love of dreams. This family cherishes the eccentric, the free, the particular, the brave. For Alice to reject her family, to choose “roast beef and two green vegetables” over candy and corn flakes, will profoundly harm her as a human being and as a contributing member of society.

Most comedies offer happiness in one form or another; this play actively celebrates joy. Penny marvels that she and Paul are as happy as the day they were engaged, as are Ed and Essie, or Donald and Rheba. When asked how he feels, Kolenkhov answers, “Magnificent! Life is chasing around inside of me, like a squirrel” (270). Even when he seriously contemplates the war and the future, Grandpa insists that “nobody can take [my happiness] away from me, no matter what they do to the world” (309). Grandpa finally and fortunately teaches Mr. Kirby that the businessman has all the money and material comfort he needs: “You can’t take it with you.” Life will come to us, in all its ecstatic splendor, if we simply let it.

In a recent editorial in Artweek, Rosetta Brooks described how contemporary America suffers from “too muchness—too many options, too much information, too many images, too little time to digest life—much less art” (“Viewpoint,” February, 1995, p. 4). The fact that You Can’t Take It with You still holds so much appeal does not merely attest to the entertainment value of “escapist” theatre. This play does give us time to digest life and art. It reminds us that certain truths still exist: charm, wisdom, eccentricity, innocence, selflessness, good will. Raymond Chandler once wrote, “In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption.” This lovely old play may not offer “redemption” on a macrocosmic scale, but it offers a quotidian grace our hyper-accelerated culture so desperately needs.