Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

The Royal Family
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.

Insights is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

Copyright © 2011, Utah Shakespeare Festival. Please feel free to download and print Insights, as long as you do not remove any identifying mark of the Utah Shakespeare Festival.

For more information about Festival education programs:
Utah Shakespeare Festival
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, Utah 84720
435-586-7880
www.bard.org.

The Royal Family

Contents

Information on the Play

Synopsis 4
Characters 5
About the Playwright 6

Scholarly Articles on the Play

Director’s Notes 8
A Thinly Disguised Spoof 8
Delicious and Successful 10
Synopsis: The Royal Family

The Royal Family unfolds in a series of hectic, dialogue-filled scenes with many characters running about the stage talking at cross purposes. Rather than having a well-defined plot, it presents several conflicts. The central one involves the opposition of two ways of life—secure, dull materialism and domesticity versus the erratic, egocentric, but fulfilling, life in the theatre.

The play is set in the familial home of the Cavendish family, its members representing three generations of actors. Fanny, the mother, is a legendary actress in her seventy-second year. Her two children are box office sensations: Julie is a Broadway star; and flamboyant, swashbuckling Tony has allowed Hollywood to lure him from the stage. In addition, Julie’s daughter, Gwen, is a promising Broadway ingenue. Fanny’s brother, Herbert Dean, and his wife, Kitty, are a squabbling pair of thespians who try to outdo each other with aggrandized memories of past Broadway roles.

As the play opens, Julie Cavendish is pondering giving up her stage career to marry ex-suitor, now millionaire industrialist, Gil Martin, and move with him to South America. Her daughter, Gwen, is struggling to accommodate her developing acting career to her love for society scion Perry Stewart.

It soon becomes evident that the differences between Philistine (Gil and Perry) and artist (Julie and Gwen) are irreconcilable. As Gil describes the joys of his life among his “very fine” friends the Zamacos, Julie’s resolve to get away from the madness of the acting profession weakens. However, Gwen does marry Perry and bear his son, but she is soon planning to go back on the stage herself—and start the baby (who is named Aubrey for his great-grandfather, the Shakespearian actor) on the same path. It is abundantly clear that Gil and Perry will always be outsiders in their women’s lives.

While the two husbands become one set of fools to be defeated by the wisecracks of Julie and her mother, Fanny, those theatre people who are not true artists serve as another set. Paramount among them are the conceited hams Herbert Dean and his wife, Kitty, who, lacking talent and having lost youth, must descend from the legitimate theatre to vaudeville melodrama. They contrast markedly with grande dame Fanny, who, despite her age, is prevented from making a triumphant comeback tour only by the illness that leads to her death at the final curtain.

Fanny’s black sheep son, Tony, also comes in for some of the same type of satire, while providing much of the play’s humor as well, as he exaggerates the events of his own life into a never-ending melodrama. Tony has the true Cavendish talent, but he has sold out to Hollywood; he spends most of his time, not acting, but either evading women he has seduced and abandoned or hiding out from the reporters his scandals attract.

At the end of the play, however, all the family members are returning to the stage, Tony playing Christ in an updated version of the Passion play. Fanny is sitting alone in the library—happily savoring her joy that the entire family will soon be appearing in American theatres and relishing the debut of the little Aubrey: “He’s a Cavendish, and he’s going to carry on. We always have and we always will. When one drops out, there’s always another one to take his place.” Then suddenly her drinking glass drops from her hand, her hand drops to her side, and she is dead.
Characters: The Royal Family

FANNY CAVENDISH, the grande dame of the Cavendish acting clan and the mother to Julie and Anthony, is a legendary actress in her seventy-second year. Her greatest desires, right up to the time of her death, are to see her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchild be successful in the legitimate theatre.

JULIE CAVENDISH, the daughter of Fanny and sister of Anthony, is the most currently active of the Cavendish family in the theatre. She at one point decides to give up her stardom to marry an old flame and millionaire businessman Gilbert Marshall and move with him to South America, but the draw of the footlights is too strong and she never carries through with this resolve.

ANTHONY CAVENDISH, son of Fanny and brother of Julie, the member of the current Cavendish family with the most acting “gift,” has squandered it by giving into the lure of Hollywood. He is constantly in trouble, either with women he has seduced and then left or with the press hounding him about such stories.

GWEN, Julie’s daughter, is a third generation Cavendish and a promising young ingenue. However, she is torn between the stage and acting and her love for Perry Stewart. She finally marries and bears the fourth generation, Aubrey, named for his great-grandfather.

HERBERT DEAN, Fanny Cavindish’s brother, has faded from the spotlight as an actor and now spends most of his time trying to find a vehicle to showcase the diminishing talents of his wife, Kitty.

KITTY DEAN, Herbert’s wife, was a somewhat successful actor in her youth, but, now that middle age has set in heavily, she is no longer in demand and is currently trying to find a role in vaudeville.

OSCAR WOLFE, a theatrical manager and producer, spends much time with the Cavendish family, orchestrating their affairs.

GILBERT MARSHALL, a successful international businessman, returns to New York to persuade Julie to leave her hectic life and marry him. Although his allure is strong at points, he is never quite successful in these efforts, and never quite acceptable as a suitor of Fanny’s child.

PERRY STEWART, a society scion, who is interested in many things besides the theatre, marries Gwen—but never convinces her to leave the stage.
About the Playwright: George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber

From Insights, 1993

When George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber began their professional partnership with Minick in 1924, they found each other at the height of their individual and flourishing careers. Ferber had won the Pulitzer Prize for So Big and was in the midst of writing Show Boat. Kaufman’s tremendous output as a playwright had included co-authoring Merton of the Movies and Beggar on Horseback (both with Marc Connelly), The Butter and Egg Man, and the enormously successful The Coconuts, starring the Marx Brothers. But it was together that they put together some of the finest theatre of this century—including The Royal Family.

George S. Kaufman

George S. Kaufman, playwright, screenwriter, director, and producer of stage plays, was known as “the great collaborator.” His collaborative efforts won him the Pulitzer Prize twice. Of Thee I Sing, written with Morris Ryskind, George Gershwin, and Ira Gershwin, became the first musical ever to win the Pulitzer Prize. You Can’t Take It with You, which he wrote with Moss Hart, earned him his second Pulitzer Prize.

Kaufman was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1889. He moved with his family, first to Paterson, New Jersey, and then to New York City where he began earning a living as a wholesale ribbon salesman, after a few months of fruitless law-study.

His contributions of quips and humorous verse to the notable newspaper columnist Franklin P. Adams led to his being guided by Adams into a job writing a column of his own, and this in turn led to his becoming drama editor of the New York Times. Adams and Kaufman were leaders in the clique called the Algonquin Roundtable (of which Patrick Dennis’s Auntie Mame was fictitiously said to have been an ornamental member).

As drama editor of the Times, Kaufman was at the busiest crossroads of the theatrical world, and he soon began to tinker with writing plays of his own. The first two were failures, in 1918 and 1919, but he achieved a smash hit with his third try, Dulcy. Here again he was indebted to Adams, since the play was based on a fictitious character named Dulcinea who frequently appeared in Adams's column.

Dulcy was written in collaboration with Marc Connelly. The Kaufman and Connelly partnership, thus established, resulted in seven more plays by 1924, five of them hits, making them the greatest playwriting team of the time.

From then on, Kaufman was America’s most collaborating playwright. With sixteen different partners he achieved a tremendous output that was a major contribution to American theatrical history. He had a hand in writing forty-four plays and musicals. He directed twenty-two of these, plus sixteen written by others.

Inasmuch as an extraordinary proportion of these attractions were big hits (18 of those he wrote ran more than 200 performances on Broadway) his prodigious activity made him a big fortune—put him among the biggest money-makers in the history of the American theatre, and certainly left a heritage in the American theatre that will not soon be forgotten.

At the time of Kaufman’s death in June 1961, Moss Hart, who had collaborated with him on eight plays, said at his funeral: “No history of these forty years in the American theatre can be written without George S. Kaufman’s name and influence on it looming large and clear.”

Edna Ferber

Edna Ferber was born in 1885 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, but she was raised in Appleton,
Wisconsin. Her tremendous creative output began at age seventeen, when, following graduation from high school, she took a reporting job on the Appleton Daily Crescent; and she soon advanced to the Milwaukee Journal and the Chicago Tribune.

She discarded her first novel because she didn’t think it was good enough; however her mother retrieved it and had it published as Dawn O’Hara in 1911. From then on, Ferber was one of America’s most popular and esteemed authors.

Perhaps her greatest gift was her enormous sense of curiosity: ideas for many of her novels and stories came from snatches of conversation that happened to catch her interest. “I have never been on the Mississippi or in the deep South,” she once said. “I wrote Show Boat [which is set in the South]. I know nothing of farms or farming, which forms the background of So Big [which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1925]. I wrote Cimarron after spending just ten days in Oklahoma.” She spent more time in Texas, and her novel, Giant, about that state and its citizens infuriated the Texas populace. Yet, it sold five million copies and became one of the motion picture industry’s classic films, starring Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and James Dean.

Although Kaufman was generally gloomy and morose, Ferber was just the opposite, sunny and happy. For example, at one point in her career she rented the New York City penthouse of Ivar Kreuger, Sweden’s match-king. Upon moving into the apartment, she discovered to her delight that Kreuger’s various fruit trees on the terrace actually bore fruit. She promptly picked the fruit, jellied and bottled it, and joyfully sent the delicacies to her friends under the label: “Edna Ferber Farm Products, Park Avenue, New York.”

Ferber had written several stage works prior to the beginning of her association with Kaufman in 1924, most of historic interest only; among them Our Mrs. McChesney, The Eldest, and $1200 a Year.

Her death in 1968, at age 83, followed a long illness.

The Kaufman-Ferber Partnership

Kaufman and Ferber’s collaborative relationship began after Kaufman read Ferber’s short story, “Old Man Minick.” Kaufman insisted that there was a play in it, and the pair sat down and collaborated on it—the first of many plays that they were to write together over a period stretching from 1924 to 1948. Minick was subsequently produced at the Booth Theatre, New York, in September of 1924.

The Kaufman-Ferber association resulted in a list of popular successes that brought both individuals fame and fortune: including The Royal Family (1927), Dinner at Eight (1932), Stage Door (1939), The Land Is Bright (1941), and BravO! (1948).
Director’s Notes
By Howard J. Millman, director
From Souvenir Program, 1993

I keep wondering what it is that draws me back to The Royal Family; this production marks the third time I will have directed this wonderful play. Certainly the brilliant, larger-than-life characters have something to do with it. The Cavendishes have a zest for living that is remarkable: they are infused with what George Bernard Shaw called the “life force,” a spirit that seems to gobble up their world in huge chunks. Certainly we in the audience are affected by these vital people, and we leave the theatre feeling better about our own lives having encountered the Cavendish clan.

Yet the spirit of the characters is really not enough to keep me coming back. Rather, I think it has something to do with the deep and abiding love I have for this incredible profession called the theatre. Nothing I have said or read is better able to describe to you, the audience (whom we in the theatre like to call the “civilian world”), how most of us feel about a life in the theatre. How can we possibly explain the dedication that forces many of us to sacrifice family, lifestyle, and social life on the altar of this all-consuming temple? The Cavendish family demonstrates this love better than any essayist could possibly write it. The audience leaves the play with a deep understanding of the magical spell cast over those of us caught in the theatrical world.

Having said all that, there is something still more universal about The Royal Family: tradition. This tradition is somehow lost in the modern, fast-moving world in which we live; but the Cavendish family reminds all of us of the necessity of carrying on, the necessity of honoring what preceded us, and of treating with care what will come after us. Fanny’s remaining strength is dedicated to the proposition that the children must carry on the theatrical tradition. In other words there is value to our lives. For all Americans this is a lesson worth remembering.

A Thinly Disguised Spoof
By Robert Franklin Coleman
From Midsummer Magazine, 1993

The Royal Family, by George Kaufman and Edna Ferber, opened at the Selwyn Theatre in New York in December of 1927. It was hailed by critics as the best play in an otherwise bleak theatrical season. It is a play which, while it does not read well, comes alive on the stage as a riotous romp through the off-stage exploits of an acting family. But, like Noises Off, it is more than a play with literary pretensions: it is a comedy of the actor at home, off stage, and back stage. For three generations, the Cavendish family has been a family of conjurers on the American stage, and this capacity to conjure has spilled over into their everyday lives.

So what we have here is a comedy of manners, of theatrical manners, and a thinly disguised spoof of the real-life Barrymores. While W. P. Eaton, in the New York Herald Tribune, called this a play with “dialogue which is flat, without distinction, sometimes vulgar,” he added that here “the speaker becomes something finer than the words.” He called The Royal Family “a play to see rather than to read . . . [but one in which the] element of dignity is play, but we must, as theatre-goers, remember that plays are always meant to be seen but not necessarily meant to be read.”

Oliver Mayler, in the Saturday Review of Literature celebrated The Royal Family as an “intelligently, imaginatively, skillfully produced play.” He also pointed out that this caricaturing of an actual great but volatile acting family is no accident. He reminds us that “the authors of [this play]
cannot plead innocence unless they likewise admit ignorance, and that would be a more humiliating confession than guilt.”

However, the caricatures in this play are never ill-mannered, ill-humored, nor virulent. And, furthermore, the vein of travesty is not so slavishly observed as to make The Royal Family a mere period piece, something with historical or theatrical allusions so far removed from our contemporary experience as to make the play in the least obscure. In fact, one of its very greatest appeals is to the universality of the experience of the characters so that we are never left feeling that what happens on stage here could only have happened in the late 1920s or to a theatrical family.

Indeed, alongside the rich wit of this play runs a tender, even earnest thread of respect for the calling of an actor—or for any calling where there is bound to be overlap between the professional and the personal life. This royal family, as Sayler puts it, “profoundly believes in its prerogatives, its responsibilities, and the authors do not belittle that faith.”

Still, the uproarious send-up of the Barrymores and the Drews so infuriated Ethel Barrymore that she let it be known that the play “did not amuse [her].” But Brooks Atkinson of the Times felt that the authors had “toyed entertainingly and absorbingly with the madness of show folk and the fatal glamour of the footlights.” And we must remember that this play, since its first appearance in 1927, has enjoyed numerous revivals, the most recent of which is, of course, its inclusion in the Utah Shakespeare Festival 1993 season.

So this means that The Royal Family is neither dated nor of little or no interest to us today. It means, in fact, the opposite. It is no more dated than the play-within-the-play in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. It is a real send-up of actors and acting. It is a revelation that, to quote Shakespeare, “all the world’s a state,” that actors are only actors, and that we are all, in a very real sense, acting all the time.

The Royal Family is a play to be enjoyed as pure play—a literary excursion through the frivolities of theatrical family life. And yet it is no less serious a play than Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, which on the surface seems fluff but which has lurking beneath that fluff some real-life and very serious commentary on who and what we are. Beneath the surface of The Royal Family are some pretty interesting problems: how seriously do we take ourselves and how seriously ought we to; how much of life is an act and how do we know when we are “on stage”; how often ought we to laugh and at what.

There is no denying that The Royal Family is funny, a play which invites us again and again to laugh at literary pretensions. But this go round it serves another purpose as well: in a theatre season featuring such disturbing and disquieting plays as Timon of Athens, Richard II, and Our Town, The Royal Family is just what we need—comic relief. So sit back and enjoy and laugh to your heart’s content.
Delicious and Successful
From Insights, 1993

The Royal Family has been called a joyous and spontaneous comedy, a producer's and director's
delight, a delicious script. It has also been a rousing success for over fifty years. However, something
a bit less known is that, in its opening production, it was a perfect example of a garish misadven-
ture in how not to cast a play.

It started one simple day in 1927 when Jed Harris, legendary Broadway director and producer,
spoke casually with George S. Kaufman about a play Kaufman and Edna Ferber, by now a well-
established writing team, were just finishing. It wasn't to be a conventional comedy, but a series of
sketches about a family of actors, held together, Kaufman hoped, by connective tissue that the writ-
ers were then in the process of working out. It was obvious that the play was intended to be a fond
spoof on the more legendary aspects of the then reigning stage family in America—the Barrymores.

An agreement was soon reached for Harris to produce The Royal Family, the writing was fin-
ished—and then the trouble began.

Ferber had intended that Ethel Barrymore play the role of Julie Cavendish, the leading lady;
and the first shock came from Barrymore. She regarded the play as a deliberate insult, threatened
to sue, and even went so far as to consult noted criminal lawyer, Max Struer, about enjoining all
parties from producing the play. This, in turn, shocked Ferber. (The Marx Brothers announced,
tongue in cheek, that if the Barrymores sued, so would they. After all, where could anyone find a
more royally theatrical family than the Marxes?) The end result was that, under threat of a lawsuit,
everyone was faced with the task of finding an actress with the charm and distinction of a great star
to play the role. As Harris wrote years later: “There was, of course, no such actress.”

It also became apparent that both authors were obsessed with having Haidee Wright play Fanny
Cavendish, grande dame of the Cavendish clan. Yet, whatever she was, Wright, an elderly English
actress, was distinctly not a comedienne and wrong for the part; nevertheless, she was hired. Otto
Krueger, who was to play Anthony—the “John Barrymore” role—was hired because there was no one
else available.

On the ninth day of rehearsal, the first uninterrupted run-through took place. The mechanics
worked perfectly, but the quality of performances was a disaster. One scene in The Royal Family,
in which different members of the family are lunching at separate tables strewn about the stage,
proved to be the breaking point for Harris. After one particularly horrendous line, Harris fired the
cast and had his office pay each member two weeks salary as they were dismissed.

Five days later, however, everyone had forgiven everyone else, the cast was re-hired, and rehears-
als were back on.

The out-of-town opening in Atlantic City soon followed and was as good as the Harris office
hoped for under the circumstances. That the audience failed to respond didn't surprise him: “I
knew we were playing to a lot of mummies,” Harris later said. But Ferber was convinced something
was dreadfully wrong, and Kaufman was silent and gloomy.

Harris then reminded the authors that only two weeks before he had fired the entire com-
pany and that they were not giving the performance they might have gotten from Ethel and Jack
Barrymore, but “tonight it came to life, a life of its own.” Harris concluded by saying that if it were
possible, he would open tomorrow night in New York—no re-writing, no cutting and no more
rehearsals. The show then rolled into New York.

The Royal Family premiered at the Selwyn Theatre on Dec. 28, 1927, and the production ran
so smoothly that Alexander Woollcott—“viper of the critics”—was ecstatic: “The Royal Family gave
me the most thoroughly enjoyable first night I had experienced in many and many a week. . . . The
play does shine with the ancient and still un tarnished glamour of the stage.”
In the theatre season of 1927, *The Royal Family* had stiff competition from *A Connecticut Yankee*, *The Doctor’s Dilemma*, and *Paris Bound*, among other popular shows of the period, most of which have been forgotten; but, the play weathered well and ran up a more-than-respectable 345 performances.

It was subsequently revived, with much success, in 1951, at New York’s City Center, featuring Ethel Griffies as Fanny, John Emery as Anthony, and Ruth Hussey as Julie. An even more triumphant revival, in celebration of the Bicentennial, was presented at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts by the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., starring Eva LeGallienne as Fanny, George Grizzard as Anthony, and Rosemary Harris as Julie, brilliantly directed by Ellis Rabb (who won a Tony for Best Director in 1976). The Bicentennial production ran up an impressive total of 233 performances.

The play was filmed in 1930, under the title, *The Royal Family* of Broadway, with Ina Claire as Julie and a memorable performance by Frederich March as Anthony. A London production in 1934, titled Theatre Royal, was directed by Noel Coward and featured a young actor who would go on to greater fame—Laurence Olivier.

British film critic, James Agate, held that the Paramount film, with Ina Claire, was “delicious” and said that he couldn’t imagine that Ethel Barrymore was fuming about. But Barrymore remained unrelenting to the end. In 1943, Kaufman asked her to appear in a Red Cross benefit he was staging in Madison Square Garden—he thought it would be fun to present a vaudeville act called, “The Three Ethels,” with Barrymore, Merman, and Waters.

“When is it to be,” she asked.

Kaufman told her.

“I’m sorry,” Miss Barrymore replied, “but I’m going to have laryngitis that night.”

It took Kaufman a moment to figure out why the line had such a familiar ring to it, until the irony of the situation hit him and he realized Barrymore was quoting from *The Royal Family.*