

## Richmond Hill's Latest Is All (Kaufman &) Hart

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Moss Hart & George S. Kaufman's 1938 comedy *You Can't Take It With You* is so sturdy and reliably entertaining that it doesn't take much more than a mediocre version of it to make audiences happy. The current production at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre is significantly better than mediocre – vibrantly played and almost consistently pleasurable – but what's completely surprising is the cleverness and skill behind Vicki Deusinger's staging of it.

Truth be told: There was reason to worry. This screwball farce, which revolves around the dotty, live-for-the-moment Sycamore family, features an enormous cast and is set in the outsized living room of a gloriously unkempt home; not only are there already more than enough characters on stage at any given time, but the house itself is generally so vibrant as to practically be a character. The Richmond Hill Players are working in an intimately scaled theatre-in-the-round, with the Sycamore living room only suggested via minimal set pieces, and the mind boggles at how overly crowded and – worse – impersonal the production might have been.

Yet Vicki Deusinger is a smart, astute director. Instead of a set, she has designed a series of eight focal points – four doorways and four prominent set pieces, shaped octagonally – that creates all sorts of clever traffic patterns for her actors, and remarkably, the staging is never clumsy, no one ever gets lost in the shuffle, and you never feel you're catching the reactions of some at the expense of others. Deusinger's compositions are alive and beautifully thought-out, and she obviously adores actors.

Because the heart of *You Can't Take It With You*, of course, is forever in its performers. One of the reasons this play has endured is that it's practically foolproof: How often are you treated to a non-musical cast of 19, 16 of whom are allowed to be funny? Consequently, in any production of this work, there's almost always someone guaranteed to make you laugh. (The characters in Hart & Kaufman's comedy pop out like the show's oft-referenced fireworks; they make some noise and glow, and are best enjoyed when lots of them do it simultaneously.) And what's lovely about Richmond Hill's production is that even the performers who seem unpolished and even awkward are at least engaged in their material, and have a sweetness of spirit that fits with the show's lazy-Sunday-afternoon appeal. Somehow, Richmond Hill has managed to snag a cast of 19 absolutely charming actors.

Chief among equals is David Rash as the Sycamore patrician, Grandpa. In the wrong hands, Grandpa can be a pain, a cuddly sage who tosses off his gags and pearls of wisdom with a grating, aren't-I-adorable? insufferability. But David Rash, thank God, is no cuddly sage. Rash is a polished comedian and knows it, giving his every punchline a burst of comic force, and Deusinger directs his stage business shrewdly; Rash's Scene II exit, featuring the ingénues admiring Grandpa's "new" hat, is masterfully timed.

Diane Greenwood is so appropriately eccentric and good-natured that you can't imagine she'll sustain her energy for the entire performance, yet she does; her Penny becomes a classic screwball caricature. Playing her husband, Paul, Chris Browne carries an air of easygoing comfort that plays well off the other characters' occasional hysteria, and Ashley Hopkins, as daughter Alice, is a vision of unadulterated sweetness, yet comically stylized enough to not come across as a whiny party pooper overly concerned about her family's high jinks.

Spiro Bruska and Carla Stevens are delightfully robust as two Russian émigrés, Jalayne Riewerts and Cal Taylor deliver goofily over-the-top cameos, and Dan Enz, who substituted last-minute for regular cast member Reggie Jarrell, was the recipient of great audience goodwill and delivered on it. Most enjoyable of all is Ryan Mosher-Ohr as the hapless dancer Essie, the hopelessly dim wannabe ballerina. Essie has always been a one-joke creation, but Mosher-Ohr plays that joke terrifically well, responding to the other characters as if she only half heard them, caught up in some deliriously happy conversation in her head. As Essie, Mosher-Ohr proves to be something theatre could always use more of – a truly inspired comedienne.

Like its characters, Richmond Hill's *You Can't Take It With You* exudes a warm, friendly appeal – it's like an old sweater you'd forgotten was so comfortable – and has been impressively staged, to boot, further proof that sincerity and style can make even the most familiar of theatrical standards feel unexpectedly fresh.

## **Richmond Hill upholds classic comedy tradition**

**Quad City Times – June 9, 2005 - by Ruby Nancy**

The stage at Richmond Hill is a relatively small one, and a cast as large as the one for "You Can't Take It With You" takes up quite a bit of space. By the time almost all of them are on stage at once for what has to be called a pivotal — if slightly Keystone Kops-influenced — scene, the space is jam-packed with strange characters caught in a carnival of confusion.

For those familiar with the Pulitzer Prize-winning script or the Oscar-winning Frank Capra movie version, this diverse group of personalities is not a new thing, but for those who do not already know the show, these roles are the ones that truly deserve the label "characters."

The Depression-era fable centers on the Sycamores, who define the word family more generously than most. There are two daughters who couldn't be more different — one, who thinks she's a dancer, is chipper and statuesque; the other is a whining, self-involved secretary — a pithy grandfather, parents and a son-in-law who all are preoccupied with their own interests, plus the maid, her gentleman friend, and another man who simply moved in quite some time ago. The list of regular and new visitors to the home is just as long and just as eccentric, including a theater has-been and a just-as-theatrical ballet instructor.

These freewheeling characters (plus a few who are a bit more uptight) interact in ways that range from sentimental to simply goofy to hilarious, with a heavy emphasis on the hilarity. The situation, if it can be called that, is that the "normal" daughter (Alice, played by Ashley Hoskins) has accepted the proposal of a young man (played with sweet, romantic intensity by Ken Ohr) whose parents are a snotty pair of society types, and the families are set to meet for the first time.

The plot may have its predictable moments, but the personal oddities of so many of the characters featured here keep things interesting. Likewise, in a cast this size it is likely that a few of the actors may not turn in performances that are quite up to par, but enough of them do to make the show more than enjoyable.

Ohr is particularly excellent, showcasing his ability to play romantic roles with what — even at close range — looks like genuine, if subtly displayed, emotion. Ryan Mosher-Ohr, who plays the dancing sister, is not afraid to stretch for the big laughs in this over-the-top role, and she turns in some great physical comedy here. Archie Williams, who plays Mr. DePinna (the man who moved in and became something of a family mascot), also turns in a fine comic performance. Newcomer Cal Taylor is pretty amusing as an IRS agent — more accustomed to making taxpayers sweat — who matches wits with the grandfather and comes away lacking.

Chronic crowd-pleasers David Rash (as Grandpa) and Jalayne Riewerts (as Gay Wellington, an "actress" you have to see to believe) are in fine form here, too. Rash (whose father once played the same role on the same stage) gets to play a wise and loving patriarch who also seems to get all the show's best one-liners — earning him huge laughs (and a standing ovation at the performance I saw). Riewerts makes up what her role lacks in actual lines with a stage presence that is unforgettably funny.

Overall, "You Can't Take It With You" is outlandish, old-fashioned entertainment with just a hint of a moral, and it's a period romp with plenty of lighthearted fun to offer audiences of all ages. Don't miss it.