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A study of George S. Kaufman's metatheatrics

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A STUDY OF GEORGE S. KAUFMAN'S METATHEATRICS

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ABSTRACT

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A STUDY OF GEORGE S. KAUFMAN'S METATHEATRICS
2003/04
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Known for his comedic plays, George S. Kaufman became one of the most successful playwrights in American theatre history. Part of his success stems from his metatheatrical writing techniques, which he used by incorporating people from his life into his plays and by writing about the business he experienced first hand. To date, no sources link Kaufman and the metatheatrics of his work. Therefore, this thesis highlights these links and explores how far Kaufman took his metatheatrical viewpoints, why he chose to use this method, and what statements he made by using these techniques. In order to prove this thesis, three Kaufman plays are examined: *The Man Who Came To Dinner* (with Moss Hart), *The Butter and Egg Man* (solo), and *The Royal Family* (with Edna Ferber). Primary research includes analysis of theatrical reviews and extractions from biographies about Kaufman. The study provides an analysis of Kaufman's metatheatrical writing style based on the three plays listed above.

MINI-ABSTRACT

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This thesis highlights the links between George S. Kaufman and the metatheatrics of his work by studying three Kaufman plays, *The Man Who Came To Dinner*, *The Royal Family*, and *The Butter and Egg Man*. The study provides an analysis of Kaufman's metatheatrical writing techniques based on these plays.

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Chapter One

Introduction

One of the most renowned American playwrights, George S. Kaufman, spent the majority of his life working in theatre, surrounded by the most famous theatre artists and literary intellectuals of his day. For many years, Kaufman created hit after hit on Broadway, making him one of the biggest moneymakers in American Theatre history.[1] More than fifteen of his plays ran for two hundred or more performances when they first appeared on Broadway and many are still produced today.[2] But what led to Kaufman's success? Was he simply in the right place at the right time? Did he merely surround himself with the right people? Or, was he truly a gifted writer? Reading the following study about Kaufman and his writing style will allow the reader to answer these and other questions. The researcher believes a key to Kaufman's success sprang from his use of metatheatrics when writing plays and the extent to which he used it.

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[1] "George S. Kaufman." World Authors. The H.W. Wilson Company. 5 April 2003. <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results_single.jhtml?nn=15>, 2.

[2] "George S. Kaufman." Current Biography. The H.W. Wilson Company. 5 April 2003. <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results_single.jhtml?nn=7>, 4.

Methodology

Searching for a clear and concise definition of metatheatre proves difficult. Different sources view the term in diverse ways and often limit the depth of study. Nevertheless, one source provides an excellent explanation of the term and defines its many facets. In his book *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Richard Hornby briefly defines metatheatre as "drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself."[3] When a playwright creates a play that causes an audience to further investigate the playwright's intentions as they relate to both the moment on stage and in real life, metatheatre has occurred.

Professor Shirley Huston-Findley defines metatheatre as "a form of antitheatre, where the dividing line between play and real life is erased."[4] She goes on to claim that metatheatre "is a term used to describe plays that self-consciously comment on the process of theatre, and so treat the relationship between theatre and life."[5] It also denotes moments when the audience member is reminded that he or she is watching a constructed piece designed to comment on a contemporary issue. Throughout his career, Kaufman employed metatheatrical writing techniques. On many occasions he chose to highlight the fine line between his life and his work.

As a metatheatrical writer, Kaufman turned his friends and foes into characters in his plays. He drew on the various personalities he encountered in life,

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[3] Hornby, Richard. Drama, Metadrama, and Perception. Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1986, 31.

[4] "Metatheatre." A Metatheatrical Approach to Human Behavior. Wooster University. 6 August 2003. <http://www.wooster.edu/programinwriting/mathapproach.html>, 2.

[5] Ibid. 1.

including his boyhood family and friends. Often times he combined strong personality traits of different people to construct the perfect character for a play. Only in the later part of his career did Kaufman admit to incorporating these personalities. Even though Kaufman did not confess to creating characters from real people in his early work, some obvious correlations exist. When studying both the people in his life and the characters in his plays, one can see the dynamic interplay among them. Kaufman definitely took advantage of writing about *who* he knew. However, metatheatre only occurred when he created characters drawn from well-known public personalities.[6] It proves unlikely that an audience would universally recognize a depiction of Kaufman's mother in one of his plays and understand the statement he makes by using her as a model. However, when Kaufman includes famous celebrities in his plays, audiences identify them immediately and understand the public and private references he makes.

Above, metatheatric works are described as "plays that self-consciously comment on the process of theatre," a description that fits many of the plays Kaufman had a hand in writing. The stories he created often revolved around a theatre company, and/or the production of a theatrical work. As a playwright and drama critic, Kaufman knew plenty about the business; therefore, it was an obvious choice as a play topic. Being so involved in show business, Kaufman used his writing as a forum to express his complex views on theatre. When watching certain Kaufman plays, audience members step out of the story of the play to realize what message Kaufman really presents. Often, this metatheatrical effect does not happen during the

[6] Hornby 95.

play, but much later. Part of Kaufman's genius came from his ability to conjure a metatheatrical reaction that was almost unconsciously transferred to audience members. Perhaps he achieved this by presenting truths about theatre and public personalities with a special blend of humor and wit.

Kaufman's plays often comment on how theatre is produced and they depict various aspects of its faults. Even though Kaufman only sought to entertain audiences, he often provided them with a new view of theatre and the people involved. Writing about what and who he knew proved a successful formula for Kaufman.

Structure

Kaufman used metatheatrical writing techniques by incorporating people from his life into his plays and by writing about the business he knew most about. To date, no written sources link Kaufman and the metatheatrics of his work. Therefore, this thesis highlights these links and explores exactly how far Kaufman took his metatheatrical viewpoints, why he chose to use this method, and what statements he made by using these techniques.

To prove this thesis, the researcher closely examined the metatheatrics of three Kaufman plays: *The Man Who Came To Dinner* (with Moss Hart), *The Royal Family* (with Edna Ferber), and *The Butter and Egg Man* (solo). In examining the first and second plays listed, the writer focuses on the characters portrayed in these stories and compares them to the actual people in Kaufman's life. To make these correlations, the researcher takes an in depth look at the people surrounding Kaufman

and studies their relationship with the great writer. By examining the second and third play listed above, the observer offers suggestions as to what Kaufman thought of the contemporary theatre business and the people surrounding it. Additionally, by studying Kaufman's life, conclusions are drawn as to *why* he held these opinions about theatre and *why* he chose to write about certain people.

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter one introduces the topic and states the argument. It also informs the reader of the importance and significance of the topic. Additionally, chapter one includes biographical information on Kaufman to assist the reader in understanding the statements made throughout the remaining chapters. The only play in which Kaufman admits to creating characters from people in his life, *The Man Who Came To Dinner,* serves as the topic for chapter two. Chapter three explores *The Butter and Egg Man* and discusses how this play speaks volumes about Kaufman's thoughts on the theatre business. Chapter four investigates *The Royal Family* and explores the metatheatrics of both the characters and the reflection of the theatre world on stage. Chapter five draws conclusions about all three plays and the available research.

Survey of Literature

Research for this thesis comes from several sources. First and foremost the actual plays themselves and the researcher's interpretations of the work serve as the primary avenues of investigation. The writer also uses a wide variety of New York reviews of the three selected plays to gain historic insights from other's viewpoints. The researcher initially looked at reviews of the original productions and then looked

for reviews of productions from more contemporary, notable theatre companies. By using the *New York Times* collection on microfilm in the Rowan Library and online, the writer found appropriate reviews. Additional reviews from other publications found on microfilm at the Rowan Library and the New York City Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection inform the thesis. Biographies on Kaufman and the people in his life provide a prominent source of helpful information about the life of the writer and the people close to him. Certain journals also offer important information relevant to the thesis. These journals include *Theatre Arts Magazine*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, and *Saturday Review of Literature*. Books and articles related to metatheatre offered the researcher a base knowledge of the topic and offer an avenue to explore Kaufman's writing style. After carefully studying the resources, the researcher draws personal conclusions about Kaufman and the metatheatrics of his writing.

Justification

Kaufman belongs on the list of great American playwrights. His intelligence and wit carried him a long distance in the theatre world, making him legendary to many theatergoers and performers. Audiences loved his work because of the entertainment value he brought to the stage. Performers enjoyed slipping into one of the many wonderful, well-conceived characters Kaufman created over his long career. At the beginning of this chapter, the researcher asked what led to Kaufman's success. Was he in the right place at the right time? Did he simply surround himself with the right people? Or, was he truly a gifted writer? The writer believes that the answer to all three questions is a resounding "yes." Born into a generation and society that

would appreciate his intellectual and sometimes caustic wit, Kaufman enjoyed a guaranteed success. By surrounding himself with other famous wits of his day, Kaufman could observe a variety of strong, theatrical personalities that would aid in his creation of rich characters. Kaufman was truly a gifted writer because he translated his observations of people and everyday experiences into wonderful scripts the American public would come to love.

This study has relevance to any student or professional beginning work on a Kaufman piece. By looking at his metatheatrics, one can get a clearer idea of what Kaufman's message meant and/or why he made certain character choices. Understanding these elements will help an actor make more thoughtful character choices. By considering Kaufman's train of thought, a performer will then know how to tie his character to a person in Kaufman's life. This would provide substantial character research and development opportunities for the actor.

Kaufman's metatheatrical works have also left us with a clear imprint of what the theatre business encompassed during his day and age. Although these plays fall into the category of fiction, a lot of factual information can be gleaned from them. When directing a play about show business that takes place during Kaufman's era, directors can look to Kaufman's work to provide historical information on the way the business ran during that period. Congruently, actors portraying celebrities of the time can also seek more understanding of character and the environment in which they live from Kaufman's plays.

After studying ten plays written by Kaufman, the researcher began to see a pattern in his writing style that appeared in a majority of his work. His use of

metatheatrics fascinated the observer and influenced a research on this technique and Kaufman's use of it. Throughout the research process, the researcher has not found any sources with information linking Kaufman to metatheatrical writing. In this study, the writer explores these links and provides solid evidence of the quality in Kaufman's writing techniques.

Kaufman's Life: Growing Up

Born in 1889, Kaufman grew up in a relatively wealthy German-Jewish community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with his parents and surrounded by his extended family. Kaufman had one older sister, Helen, and one younger sister, Ruth. Unfortunately, he did not have the chance to know his older brother, Richard, who died at the age of two, one year before Kaufman's birth.[7] Kaufman's parents, Joseph and Nettie, had a huge influence on their son's development as a writer.

Despite only a few years of schooling, Joseph Kaufman became an avid reader. Throughout his life, he kept many books on hand for his reading pleasure. Since he had a fondness for theatre, Joseph always went to see a show whenever he went to New York City. Upon returning home from the trip, he would tell his children about the play he saw and thereby instilled in them a sense of excitement about live theatre.[8] Joseph passed on his love of literature and theatre to his only son.

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[7] Goldstein, Malcolm. George S. Kaufman: his life, his theatre. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 8-9.

[8] Ibid. 10.

Nettie Kaufman did not drive her son's education or career as profoundly as her husband. Instead, she inspired some of Kaufman's personality traits. Kaufman grew up watching and learning from a deeply neurotic woman who constantly battled physical illnesses, both imaginary and real. Nettie's overprotection of Kaufman stemmed from the death of her first son. Because of Richard's early death, any minor aliment Kaufman contracted was treated as a major illness.[9] Nettie taught her son to avoid physical contact with others. She asked him to think twice about handshaking, since he might contract germs or a major disease.[10] Kaufman's older sister Helen remembers, "He was the kind of baby who was never taken out when it rained or when the wind blew or when the clouds were low or when the sun was hot."[11] Because his mother kept Kaufman consistently indoors, he rarely played with other children. As a result, he grew into an extremely shy and introverted child. These personality characteristics haunted Kaufman throughout his life.

Once Kaufman reached his teens, his father unhappily noticed his son's picky eating habits, lack of exercise, and objection to fresh air. Hoping to correct these problems, Joseph sent Kaufman to a ranch out West where he could learn to ride a horse, work outdoors with his hands, and eat the meal placed before him. After mounting a horse the first morning, Kaufman refused to ever do it again. He spent

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[9] Goldstein 10-11.

[10] Ibid. 15.

[11] Teichmann, Howard. George S. Kaufman: An Intimate Portrait. New York: Antheneum, 1972, 26-27.

the rest of his summer reading *Argosy* magazine in a hammock, and surviving on chocolate candy (his favorite) and biscuits.[12]

His father influenced, Kaufman's strong passion for reading and writing at a very young age. Mark Twain topped the list of his favorite writers.[13] Kaufman's passion for writing merged with his fondness for the stage at age fourteen when he wrote his first play, a melodrama called *The Failure*. The story included a conflict between a young artist and his businessman father. The climax of the play involved the father slashing the canvas of his son's artistic masterpiece. Although this play did not contain comedy, it initiated a trend Kaufman would continue later in life, writing with a partner. Kaufman wrote this play in collaboration with Irving Pichel, who later became a noted actor and Hollywood director.[14] However, at age fourteen, Kaufman had little inkling that his writing hobby would later become his career.

From College Dropout to Successful Newspaperman

After graduating from Pittsburgh Central High School in the spring of 1907, Kaufman chose to enter law school that fall at The University of Pittsburgh. Unfortunately, an illness diagnosed as pleurisy overtook him before the end of his first semester. He reluctantly withdrew from the University on the advice of his family physician.[15] For several years, Kaufman held a series of random jobs that did

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[12] Teichmann 29.

[13] Goldstein 13.

[14] Ibid. 13-14.

[15] Ibid. 16.

not fulfill his intellectual or artistic ambitions. To "exercise" his creativity, Kaufman started sending contributions to Franklin P. Adams' column at the *Evening Mail.*[16] Adams found much of Kaufman's work enjoyable and extremely witty, so he began printing some of the entries. Seeing his writing in a New York newspaper excited Kaufman and inspired him to send even more articles to Adams. Finally, Adams asked for a meeting with the great wit whose work he had printed. After their first meeting, the eighteen-year-old Kaufman made it a personal goal to take all of Adams' advice.[17] So, when Adams got Kaufman his first job as a newspaperman at the *Washington Times*, Kaufman quickly accepted. In 1913 Kaufman packed his bags and moved to Washington, DC where he wrote a column called "This and That and a Little of the Other."

Kaufman's column at the *Washington Times* included jokes, puns, light verse, and poetry, mirroring Adams' column at the *Evening Mail.* As time went on, Kaufman's column slowly began to turn away from simple jokes and poems. He started poking at world politics and society. Examples of items that began appearing in his column were,

> Of the President of the United States: "Mr. Wilson's mind, as has been the custom, will be closed all day Sunday."
> Of the United States Senate: "Office hours are from 12 to 1 with an hour off for lunch."[18]

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[16] "George S. Kaufman." Current Biography. 1.

[17] Teichmann 17-18.

[18] Ibid. 20.

Only one year after it began, the religious intolerance of his supervisor, Frank P. Munsey, became increasingly apparent and Kaufman lost his first newspaper job because of his Jewish religion.[19] Munsey had not visited the plant in over a year, however, upon first sight of Kaufman, he fired him immediately. When Kaufman returned to the city of fourteen daily newspapers, Adams once again helped him get a job, this time at the *Evening Mail.* Kaufman's new column, named "Be That As It May," appeared from 1914 to 1915.[20]

Kaufman's next step up came when he began writing as a drama reviewer for the *New York Herald.* Recognizing his talents, the *New York Times* hired him as a theatre critic and kept him on for the next thirteen years. During his thirteen-year reign, Kaufman also became a member of the Algonquin Round Table, a group of witty social elitists who met daily for lunch during the 1920s at the Algonquin Hotel. The group consisted mostly of newspaper writers and playwrights, but also included an occasional actor or artist. Kaufman felt comfortable around this group of friends and continued to stay in close touch with several members throughout his life.

Still Writing, Different Form

While at the *Times*, Kaufman began to experiment with playwriting. After a few attempts at fixing writing problems in unsuccessful plays, his first great hit came when he collaborated with Marc Connelly in 1921 to write the comedy *Dulcy.* The playwrights borrowed the title character of the play from Franklin P. Adams' column

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[19] Teichmann 24.

[20] "George S. Kaufman." Current Biography. 1.

at the *Evening Mail*.[21] This proved yet another instance when Adams helped Kaufman's career.

Dulcy is a story about the title character and her husband, Gordon Smith, who plan to have guests at their country home for the weekend. The main guests invited for the weekend include Mr. and Mrs. Forbes and their daughter, Angela. At the start of the play, Gordon plans to go into business with Mr. Forbes, who owns a pearl manufacturing company. However, Gordon will only receive sixteen and two-thirds percent of the company. Thinking the business agreement unfair, Dulcy believes that, over the weekend, she can arrange for her husband to receive a larger share. She has also invited other guests to appease Angela and Mrs. Forbes. Dulcy quickly tries to resolve everyone's issues when everything turns upside-down. Mr. Forbes pulls out of the business deal and Angela runs away to marry Vincent Leach, a Hollywood star. Gordon finds out that the man he has decided to go into business with instead of Mr. Forbes is an escaped mental patient who likes to lie about having money he does not really have. By quick thinking and quick talking, Dulcy successfully un-does all the trouble she has created without anyone blaming her for the initial problems. By the end of the play, all the characters get what they want and the audience gets a night full of laughs.

Since *Dulcy* became such a success, the team continued to work together for the next three years. When Kaufman and Connelly began to work on a new play, they would first meet to talk about the structure and then go their separate ways to write different scenes. When they came back together, they would examine each

[21] "George S. Kaufman." Current Biography. 2.

scene, and proceed to argue about what should go and what should stay. Re-written scenes would result from long meetings and persistent discussions.[22] In the process, Kaufman and Connelly became the most famous playwriting team of the 1920s, and created eight plays together.[23]

In 1924, the two amiably separated and went on to individual writing careers. In the next two years, Kaufman wrote two comic plays on his own, however found that he did not like working alone. So, in 1926, he went back to collaboration. From that point on, Kaufman always served as a member of a two-person team, with only one exception. Joseph Wood Krutch explains this need to collaborate by saying that,

> Kaufman is mainly a wit and skillful builder of character without much ability in creating plots, and Kaufman himself has said he doesn't think his work alone is particularly good. With someone else he is an ideal collaborator.[24]

Some of Kaufman's collaborators included Edna Ferber, Morrie Ryskind, Ring Lardner, and Howard Dietz. With these and other partners, he wrote both plays and musicals for over 30 years.

Perhaps his most successful works came with partner Moss Hart and included *Once In a Lifetime*, *You Can't Take It With You*, and *The Man Who Came to Dinner.* The two proved an unlikely of pair, since Kaufman had fifteen years advantage over Hart. About his younger partner, Kaufman said, "I have always been smart enough as I grew older to attach to myself the most promising lad that came along in the

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[22] Teichmann 84-85.

[23] "George S. Kaufman." Current Biography. 2.

[24] Ibid. 2.

theatre."[25] Thankful to work with the great Kaufman, Hart endured the difficult writing process his partner insisted in upholding. Hart nicknamed his first job with Kaufman "the days of the terror" because of Kaufman's rigorous writing practices. He recalls working from ten in the morning until exhausted. Kaufman would often spend two hours shaping one short sentence or a whole day discussing an exit. Kaufman became an extreme perfectionist when he wrote.[26]

Throughout his career, Kaufman established his technique of offering "smart" dialogue and wise characters.[27] In his plays, Kaufman responded to nearly everything in American life, and almost consistently made sport of it. Nevertheless, his gift of making audiences laugh at themselves rarely sent an offensive message. By reading Kaufman's plays, one can see his motives for writing were not rooted in bringing about social change, but simply in amusing audiences.

Theatre Jobs Other Than Writing

In 1928, Kaufman began yet another career in the theatre, directing. Kaufman's friend and producer, Jed Harris, took an option on *The Front Page* by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, two newspapermen from Chicago. Harris liked the play, but thought it needed cutting and rewriting. And, of course, Kaufman was the

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[25] "George S. Kaufman." Current Biography. 3.

[26] Ibid. 3.

[27] Ibid. 1-2.

man for the job. After the play's revisions, Harris convinced Kaufman to direct the play as his first directorial assignment.[28]

The Front Page successfully played for two hundred seventy-six performances on Broadway. Kaufman's popularity as a director began to grow as actors in his first production started telling friends about his method. Because he has an uncanny sense of timing, he always knew when the audience would laugh and he coached his actors into punching those moments.[29]

His shy personality came though in his directing when working with actors. At the start of his directing career, he would correct actors by giving them advice on a piece of paper. He handed it to them at the conclusion of rehearsal, so as to not draw attention to himself. Later he moved from writing notes to whispering the idea in the actor's ear. A kind director, Kaufman never tried to embarrass an actor and dealt with all unforeseen problems in a calm manner.[30]

Saint Subber, a successful producer of comedies in the United States, recalls about Kaufman,

> I used to watch George direct with his back to the audience, and his great thing was timing. He would keep clicking his fingers. Pace, tempo, were the important things. Actors adored working with George. He never gave readings. He was quick. He knew what he wanted. He was disciplined.[31]

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[28] Teichmann 130-131.

[29] Goldstein 149.

[30] Teichmann 133.

[31] Ibid. 137.

Kaufman began to direct many of the plays he wrote because it used to drive him crazy to see other directors mar his lines and twist his meanings. When directing, Kaufman usually began with the last act and worked backward to the beginning of the play. Not surprisingly, he became one of the best directors in the business.[32]

Not until the age of forty-one did Kaufman feel comfortable enough to step on stage in front of an audience. Adventures in acting seemed strange coming from a very introverted individual; however, Kaufman proved a successful actor. His comfort on stage came from hearing laughs, which signifyed the right choices. Kaufman's characters had a quick tongue and a sarcastic look on life. His performance as the main character, Sheridan Whiteside, in *The Man Who Came To Dinner,* has become one of his most famous roles. This 1941 summer stock production ran for ten performances at the Bucks County Playhouse in Pennsylvania. When asked why he wanted to play the lead role of the play, Kaufman responded, "Pure exhibitionism. I'm just making a spectacle of myself."[33]

Kaufman continued to write and direct for theatre well into the late 1950s until poor health began to slow him down.[34] His legacy as a brilliant writer continued after his death in 1961. Many revivals of his plays became successful, keeping George S. Kaufman a name to remember.

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[32] "George S. Kaufman." Current Biography. 4.

[33] *Time*, August 11, 1941, p. 31.

[34] "George S. Kaufman." World Authors. 2.

Kaufman's Women

Often times, the women in Kaufman's life aided his career efforts in the form of support, encouragement, and inspiration. Understanding his relationships with various women allows researchers to make connections to scenes and characters in his plays. Many of Kaufman's collaborators commented on his inability and dislike for writing romantic scenes. By looking at his past, one can infer where this fear comes from.

Fourteen-year-old Kaufman became a member of the "Black and White Club" in 1905 with six other boys. Created because of disgust in behavior of other boys and girls their age, the club strived for and rewarded virtuous behavior. The members signed contracts stating they would remain virgins until their wedding night and uphold honorable actions. All seven members of the club upheld their promise, waiting for that special moment.[35] Kaufman waited fourteen more years until the age of twenty-eight to fulfill his part of the contract.

Kaufman's younger sister Ruth married a man from Rochester, NY in 1916 and the two offered Kaufman a chance to vacation with them on their honeymoon. Not wanting to spend his summer alone, Kaufman jumped at the chance and went with the married couple to Rochester. At a party given by the newlyweds, the shy but intelligent Kaufman met his match, Beatrice Bakrow. Others did not consider Beatrice attractive, but she seemed to make up for this in other ways. That night, Kaufman fell in love with this bright, warm, ambitious, stylish, and charming girl. The next day, Kaufman and Beatrice went with Ruth and her husband to Niagara

[35] Teichmann 39.

Falls and, upon return, announced their plans for marriage. The wedding followed one year later on March 15, 1917.[36]

Only three weeks later, on April 2, 1917, the United States entered the First World War. Kaufman was restricted from duty because of his poor eyesight, his meager weight, and his record of suffering from a chest condition in his college years.[37] As the country began its battles, Kaufman and Beatrice began their life together in New York City.

Beatrice clearly controlled the relationship, which Kaufman apparently did not mind. She became responsible for constantly moving the couple from place to place into better conditions as salaries increased. Beatrice provided Kaufman the needed encouragement, drive, time, and advice to finally begin his steps toward full-time playwriting. As an intelligent woman, she knew exactly what her husband needed. During the early stages of their marriage, Beatrice lit a fire under Kaufman that would burn for the rest of his life.[38]

As Kaufman's popularity grew among the social elite of the literary world, so did Beatrice's. Her wit matched her husband's, making them the perfect couple. Perfect only until Beatrice's pregnancy in their first year of marriage. Well into her term, Beatrice miscarried her son, causing an emotional gap between her husband and herself. From that point on, Kaufman found himself physically unable to have sexual

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[36] Teichmann 40-44.

[37] Goldstein 39.

[38] Teichmann 46.

intercourse with Beatrice.[39] Instead of giving up on the relationship, Beatrice decided to stay with Kaufman and to continue to support his dreams and ideas. As time went on, the two simply pursued other sources to satisfy their sexual desires, however, held to each other to satisfy their emotional desires.[40] The two had an understanding about their relationship no outsider would ever understand.

In pursuing a sexual partner, Kaufman seemed very shy and didn't know what to do. As a result, in the second or third year of his marriage, Kaufman opened an account with Polly Adler, the literary Madame. He would phone the service for a girl to meet him in the park. At the meeting, Kaufman would invite the girl to a place he kept separate from his home and seduce her there. Different girls reported the "meetings" as romantic and sweet. In order to make the scene more respectable, Kaufman paid a bill to Polly Adler at the end of each month, instead of paying each girl directly.[41]

As time went on, Kaufman realized he did not have to pay for sex since he was famous enough to enjoy this luxury merely on account of his name and position. Chorus girls of the day eagerly slept with directors, producers, and writers in an attempt to gain better roles. They made themselves available by sitting one seat in from the aisle during rehearsals.[42] This sitting arrangement signaled to the men in the house they wanted company. To talk with a girl, a man would simply sink down into

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[39] Teichmann 45.

[40] Ibid. 45.

[41] Ibid. 45.

[42] Ibid. 159.

the aisle seat beside the girl of his choice. Once Kaufman learned of this practice, he took full advantage. Many of his affairs started one seat in from the aisle.[43]

Many of the women Kaufman seduced differed dramatically from his wife Beatrice. They were attractive, but vapid, unlike his smart but plain wife. One exception was Mary Astor, a west coast actress Kaufman met in 1933. Little did he know when he entered this relationship that he would come out labeled the sex symbol of the thirties. Wanting to become a writer, Mary kept a diary of her life events. When things turned foul between her and her husband, Dr. Franklyn Thorpe, he exposed her diary entries to win his court case. Newspapers printed entry after entry about her amazing love affair with Kaufman, quoting directly from her diary. The entire world now knew about Kaufman's extramarital affairs. Vacationing in London when the story broke, Beatrice extended her stay until waters calmed. Upon her return, she and Kaufman immediately discussed the incident and began working on moving past what had happened. Beatrice stood by her husband, which caused Kaufman to idealize her even more. Eventually the scandal blew over, however Kaufman would never let go of the embarrassment he brought Beatrice.[44]

Longing for motherhood, Beatrice convinced Kaufman to adopt a child. This child, Anne, became another woman of great significance in Kaufman's life. Anne grew up in an environment with both her mother and father busily working and entertaining famous people of the day. Raised mostly by nurses, Anne became shy around children her own age but seemed comfortable around adults. She had her

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[43] Teichmann 159.

[44] Ibid. 164-177.

father's intelligence and wit. Upon noticing her quick sense of humor, Kaufman realized he had raised her just the way he wanted. As Anne grew up she attended rehearsals and performances with her father, and learned all about the theatre world. At a young age, Anne married and moved out of her parent's home. However, as time went by she continued to stay in close contact with her parents.[45]

After Beatrice's death in 1945, Anne began to spend more time with her father. She cherished the moments with him, as she had not done before. The two became extremely close after Anne's second divorce. At that time, Anne took on her mother's role by functioning as her father's official hostess, traveling companion, and confidante. However, this solo act became a duet too soon for Anne. Kaufman remarried in 1949 to the British Actress Leueen MacGrath. At first jealous of her new stepmother, Anne soon came to like Leueen.[46] Both women were equally important to Kaufman until he passed in 1961.

The Famous Table

Another influence on Kaufman was his affiliation with one of the most famous literary groups in American history, the Algonquin Round Table. This group of intellectual wits met daily for lunch at New York's Algonquin Hotel to discuss their lives and the world they danced around. The group included actors, magazine

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[45] Teichmann 181-190.

[46] Ibid. 190-191.

editors, playwrights, newspaper writers, and critics.[47] In his book The Algonquin Wits, Robert E. Drennan paints a picture of who belonged to this prestigious group by stating,

> The men and women who eventually made up the "Round Table" – or "Vicious Circle" as they preferred calling themselves – came together, as any in-group must, because of mutual interests. To begin with, each possessed, or was possessed by, the spirit of his times, and each, as if touched by a common muse, found natural direction in the urge to record that spirit under the elusive mask of comedy. On the one hand, they embraced the "Roaring Twenties" for the fun-loving hell of it, setting the pace, telling the jokes, pulling the pranks, ignoring the future.[48]

In this spirit of comedy, it was actually a prank that pulled the group together. In June of 1919, two press agents wanted revenge against famous theatre critic Alexander Woollcott. The two planned a luncheon in his honor, purposefully spelling his name incorrectly on the invitations, banners, and programs. They invited all of New York's theatre critics and newspaper editors to the lunch and, of course, any additional guests Woollcott requested. Unfortunately for the press agents, the joke they attempted failed. Woollcott thoroughly enjoyed himself at the luncheon and suggested that they meet for lunch again the next day.[49] So they did. Once again enjoying each other's company, they decided to make the lunch a permanent date for daily meetings.

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[47] "Algonquin Round Table." Art and Culture Network. 26 March 2003.<http://www.artandculture.com/arts/movement?movementId=454>.

[48] Drennan, Robert E., ed. The Algonquin Wits. New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1985.

[49] Musial, Robert. "New York's Algonquin Hotel Celebrates Round Table's 75th Anniversary." Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, 17 June 1994, K38.

Throughout the ten years the group met, many people dined with the sophisticated wits; however, several members lunched almost every day. The "leads" in this "play of intelligence" included Alexander Woollcott, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Harold Ross, Franklin P. Adams, and George S. Kaufman. Among the "supporting characters" were Heywood Broun, Robert Sherwood, Marc Connelly, Edna Ferber, and Harpo Marx. This cast of characters helped to enrich Kaufman's life and provided many windows of opportunity for him. Throughout the decade, the Algonquin Round Table was perhaps one of the largest influences on Kaufman's successful career.

Kaufman's Style

Kaufman's life, as portrayed here, seems bittersweet at times. However, in his playwriting, he seems to focus on the positive and always makes the best of life situations. In his life, Kaufman was able to stay out of politics and also maintain friendships with somewhat volatile people. This reflects his overall outlook on life and plays a major role in his writing. Kaufman is intelligent enough to see the complexities and pitfalls that life, theatre, and business have to offer, yet he does not dwell on the negative. He transcends negativism by tempering everything with wit and panache. In essence, intelligence and smart choices allow him and his characters to not only get by, but to charm audiences.

Chapter Two

The Man Who Came to Dinner

Summary of the Play

This classic play opens in the living room of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley of Mesalia, Ohio as their household busily pampers the famous intellect and radio personality, Mr. Sheridan Whiteside. After meeting with the Stanleys for dinner while on his national book tour, Whiteside slipped on a piece of ice at the Stanley's front door and fractured his hip. The local doctor ordered bed rest to heal his injured hip, causing Whiteside to cancel the rest of his tour and to set up shop at the Stanley house. The play begins two weeks after the infamous fall, the first morning Whiteside will get out of bed and into his new wheelchair. All seem anxious as they wait for Whiteside's appearance, only to be rewarded with the invalid's simple statement, "I may vomit."

Whiteside goes on to explain to Mr. Stanley that he intends to sue him for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for stupidity and negligence and that he must remain there for another ten days, according to the doctor. During these ten days, Whiteside demands private use of the living room and library, that the Stanleys use only the back stairs to go to their rooms, that no one use the phone as he expects many calls, and that the house remain quiet until noon when he wakes for the day. Not knowing what to do, the Stanleys go quietly upstairs. As Whiteside and his

secretary Maggie are left alone, the audience begins to realize just how famous Whiteside is among celebrities of the world. He receives and sends telegrams to people such as Mahatma Ghandi and Arturo Toscanini. The plot line of the play develops as a local newspaperman, named Bert Jefferson, stops by to interview the famous personality. Taking a liking to him, Whiteside invites Jefferson to stay for lunch, along with other intended guests including three convicts, a prison guard, and a strange professor.

In the next scene, the playwrights reveal that Whiteside is not the only one who takes a liking to Jefferson. Indeed, Maggie falls in love with him and plans to stay in Mesalia after Whiteside leaves. Furious at this news (because he will have to "break-in" a new secretary), Whiteside comes up with a plan to overthrow Maggie's hopes and dreams. Before he can put his plan into motion, the local doctor pays him a visit to inform him that he has healed and is free to go. It seems the doctor previously looked at the wrong x-rays. Knowing he cannot leave yet because of Maggie, Whiteside makes a deal with the doctor to work on a book with him, but he must stay in Mesalia to do so. Whiteside tells the doctor that they must keep his improved health a secret, since his publishers would insist he continue his tour. The doctor agrees and Whiteside continues to put his plans into motion to separate Maggie from Jefferson. Whiteside places a call to Lorraine Sheldon, a famous stage and screen actress, and informs her of a new play written by a young newspaperman. He entices her to visit him to meet the author, so she can win him over and take the lead role. Lorraine willingly drops everything and rushes to Mesalia to meet this young, new playwright.

While Whiteside awaits the arrival of Lorraine, he manages to intrude in the Stanley's personal family business. He tells Richard, the son, that he has real talent as a photographer and that he should leave town to follow his dreams. Whiteside then counsels the daughter of the house, June, into running away and marrying the man of her choice, even if her parents don't approve. Harriet Stanley, Mr. Stanley's sister, makes a strange appearance with a Christmas present for Whiteside. Soon after she enters, she disappears again.

Lorraine finally arrives to visit her "poor, sweet Sherry." She is a star with the glow and sparkle of a five-karat diamond. After she catches Whiteside up on all the gossip of her recent trip to London, he tells her of a wonderful play he has come across. He tells her that he will deliver the playwright to her, but the rest depends on her. Before Lorraine has a chance to leave, Jefferson enters with Maggie. Lorraine immediately begins to charm the newspaperman and gets him to ride with her to the hotel. After the two leave, Maggie becomes angered at this unannounced arrival and tries to talk to Whiteside. The arrival of another visiting star, Beverly Carlton, interrupts their conversation. Beverly can only visit a few short minutes, but he entertains the two during that time. Before he leaves, Maggie gets an idea that will save her from Whiteside's plans. After wheeling Whiteside out of the room, Maggie asks Beverly for help, as he often impersonates Lord Bottomly, the very rich man Lorraine wants to marry. She suggests her simple plan in his ear. He leaves and soon after Lorraine returns in her evening frock. As Lorraine waits for Whiteside to come out, she receives a phone call from Lord Bottomly, who asks her to marry him. She joyfully accepts. Lorraine then calls for Whiteside to tell him the good news. Of

course, this news saddens Whiteside because his plan has gone sour. Lorraine enlists Maggie's help in making plans to leave immediately for New York so she may return to London on the next boat. Jefferson then returns to hear the good news and gives a little of his own. He has just returned from interviewing Beverly Carlton and was quite impressed with him. Jefferson then tells everyone that he barely got a chance to interview him, since Beverly was in a phone booth most of the time, making funny faces. Whiteside puts two and two together and realizes that Beverly was actually impersonating Lord Bottomly. To prove this to Lorraine, he calls the operator and asks if any calls from London had come in to the house in the last thirty minutes. The operator confirmed his suspicions and said there were no calls from London in the last three days. Lorraine, upset by this news, goes into hysterics and tries to figure out why Beverly would do such a thing. Suddenly, it hits her that Maggie felt jealous and did not want Lorraine to become involved with Jefferson. After this realization, Lorraine pours her affection on Jefferson even thicker when he re-enters with drinks for all. She tells him she wants him to read her his play that night. Jefferson is excited and thanks Maggie. Upset, Maggie storms off.

Act three begins on Christmas morning. Maggie comes downstairs with her suitcase and informs Whiteside that she plans to leave on the one o'clock train. Whiteside begs her to stay. Jefferson comes in drunk from a long night with Lorraine and tells them how Lorraine loved his play. She only thought it needed a little work, which she and Jefferson could do at her private place on Lake Placid. Whiteside sees that this information hurts Maggie and suggests Jefferson get some breakfast to sober him up. After Jefferson leaves, Maggie retreats into the library to tie up loose ends

for Whiteside. Left alone, Whiteside receives another visit from the strange Harriet. She gives him a Christmas present; a picture of herself at the age of twenty-two. After she leaves, Banjo, a Hollywood star, enters to visit Whiteside. This crazy character comes in just in time to help Whiteside conjure up a plan to get rid of Lorraine. Before they come up with a plan, Banjo disappears into the kitchen to fill his empty stomach. Mr. Stanley then comes down to inform Whiteside that the police have retained his children and will bring them back to the house. He also announces that Whiteside has to pack and leave in fifteen minutes, as he has put a warrant out on him. Now Whiteside only has fifteen minutes to come up with a plan to get Lorraine out.

Lorraine floats in to wish Whiteside a Merry Christmas and to tell him of her successful evening with Jefferson. As she gloats about the play, Banjo comes back in and quickly turns her joyous mood around. Then, Whiteside receives a present from the Khedive of Egypt, a mummy case. As Lorraine plays the part of a departed Egyptian woman, standing in the mummy case, Banjo closes the door on her. Now the two try to come up with a way to get the case out of the house and far away from Mesalia. As Whiteside's fifteen minutes run out, he realizes why Harriet Stanley looks so familiar to him. He then informs Mr. Stanley that he knows his sister, the murderous Harriet Sedley, had gained notoriety by killing her parents. Whiteside blackmails Mr. Stanley into getting rid of the mummy case as well as the warrant for his eviction. Banjo leaves with the mummy case and alludes to Maggie that all her problems are solved. Whiteside has a special moment with Maggie and he tells her he has fixed everything. Jefferson returns just in time to hear that Lorraine had to

unexpectedly leave, but that Whiteside said he would give the play to Katherine Cornell. Whiteside takes Maggie's train ticket and leaves before he finds himself in any more trouble. Just then, a loud crash is heard accompanied by a yell from Whiteside. Maggie and Jefferson rush out to see what happened and return carrying the newly injured Whiteside. The curtain falls as the house once again suffers an uproar over Whiteside.

Production History

By studying the production history of a play, researchers can gain more insights about the play and the time period in which it is produced. Often, social culture shapes the success or failure of a production. Understanding a play's impact on a particular audience aids researchers in play analysis and comprehension of the playwright's intentions.

Before it opened in New York, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* previewed in Boston at the Plymouth Theatre on September 25, 1939. During its short run, critics loved what they saw and only sent positive notes to reviewers in New York. One article, printed in *The New York Times* from a Boston reporter, stated, "Whatever the rest of the season may bring forth, it is hardly likely to equal *The Man Who Came to Dinner*." [50] The unknown writer of this article also commented that, "It is satirical in its characterization and farcical in its situations." This complimented the playwrights who had already succeeded in writing the perfect comedy *You Can't Take It With You* earlier in their career. They seemed to again find the right combination for a second

[50] "Boston's Dinner Guest." New York Times 1 Oct. 1939:138.

chance at perfection. Boston critics felt sure the New York audiences and critics would love this new work from the famous duo.

The Man Who Came to Dinner, directed by Kaufman, first appeared on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre on October 16, 1939 and continued to run for seven hundred thirty-nine performances. As Boston critics predicted, New York reviewers liked the new show. They commended the two writers on their ability to create comical work time and time again. Brooks Atkinson printed in his article for *The New York Times*, "Mr. Hart and Mr. Kaufman have put together a fantastic piece of nonsense, with enough plot to serve and a succession of witty rejoinders to keep it hilarious."[51]

But how exactly did the story of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* come about? Moss Hart answered that question in *The New York Times* on October 29, 1939. He told a story of how Alexander Woollcott, famed critic, lecturer, and radio personality came to visit him at his Bucks County home while he was performing for two weeks in Philadelphia. Upon arriving at Hart's house,

> Woollcott immediately demanded Hart's bedroom, asked that all the heat in the house be turned off, requested a frosted milkshake and a large tray of chocolate cakes to be placed at his elbow, and embarked on a loud and unprintable discourse on the obvious dishonesty of Hart's servants.[52]

During this visit, Woollcott demanded that Hart and Kaufman write a play for him to perform in. As Mr. Woollcott could make life difficult for the gentlemen, Hart dared

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[51] Atkinson, Brooks. "The Man Who Came to Dinner." The New York Times 17 Oct. 1939: 31.

[52] Hart, Moss. "How A.W. Came To Dinner, and Other Stories." The New York Times 29 Oct. 1939: IX, p. 1.

not say no. The next day he discussed the idea with Kaufman and told him of the way in which Woollcott had behaved at his house. Hart talked about how, "the prospect of having Woollcott as one's guest for more than one day was something to make the blood run cold."[53] This statement produced the seed for the play. The two excited gentlemen pitched their idea to Woollcott and two years later the play premiered on Broadway.

When the play went into production, Woollcott declined the lead role, claiming a busy schedule. Later, however, it would come out that Woollcott decided not to perform in the original production for other reasons. It seems he felt the public would no longer admire him and would not find him irresistible, if he appeared as the unpleasant Whiteside.[54] (Although the public acknowledged Woollcott's obnoxious side, they also adored him for his intelligence and zest for life.) Rude comments made in public by Woollcott often produced laugher in his audience. His prey learned to laugh at his comments as well, hoping he would soon find another victim. Personal insecurities probably prompted most of Woollcott's impolite comments. He attacked others before they had a chance to look at him and his imperfections. As an obese man, Woollcott relied on his sharp wit to make him attractive to others. These personal insecurities also probably played a part in his decision not to play the role of Whiteside for the first production. Woollcott was likely unsure of how audiences would accept this depiction of his character in the play. By playing the role, he would set himself up for twofold criticism, audiences may find both the character and the

[53] Hart "How A.W. Came To Dinner."

[54] Atkinson, Brooks. "Town Crier On Stage" The New York Times 23 Mar. 1941: X1.

inexperienced performer of the role equally unattractive and uncivilized. If they did not like the character of Whiteside and someone else portrayed the role, the audience would be less likely to link Woollcott to their negative feelings. However, if Woollcott played the role, the audience could possibly carry over the dislike of the fictional Whiteside to the actual Woollcott, harming his precious public reputation. For a man who constantly appeared in the public eye, Woollcott had to consider his career and reputation before agreeing to play the role of Whiteside.

Monty Woolley, a Yale Professor, played the lead character for the premiere show in New York. Critics enjoyed his performance and commented, "Monty Woolley is an excellent choice for the Whiteside part. He suggests both the character and the class of the popular lecturer and wit."[55] Sidney Whipple of the *New York World-Telegram* also praised Woolley's performance by saying,

> There is a glitter in his eye and venom on his tongue. And when you consider that three-fourths of his lines are delivered from a wheel chair, and yet his work is never static, you realize that this is one of the truly great comic performances of our time.[56]

Several critics mentioned their relief at finding Woolley playing the lead role instead of Woollcott. Possibly, they feared it would be difficult to critically look at and comment on the part of Whiteside when watching Woollcott perform it himself. By viewing Woollcott in the role, critics would parallel the way Woollcott perceived himself and the way the play portrayed him, which would cause a distraction. Also,

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[55] Mantle, Burns. "The Man Who Came to Dinner Rocks Music Box with Laughter." New York Daily News 17 Oct. 1939.

[56] Whipple, Sidney B. "Man Who Came to Dinner Will Stay a Long Time." New York World-Telegram 17 Oct. 1939.

watching someone else depict Woollcott's nastiness seemed more theatrical, therefore, easier to accept and appreciate. From Woollcott himself, the lines and the character would seem more acidic and less enjoyable. The public needed to experience and enjoy the play text first before they could take pleasure in Woollcott playing the lead role.

Early in 1940, Kaufman went to California to direct another production of his new success, this time with Woollcott playing the role he inspired. Since the show proved successful in New York, Woollcott now felt secure in portraying the famous role. The play once again opened to rave reviews and curious viewers. One critic's compliment included a point about the Los Angeles audience. He stated,

> For once in this town the people who came to the theatre actually seemed more interested in what was happening on the stage than in who had come with whom and what they all were wearing. Since a greater tribute than this could not be paid to any play, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* must be good.[57]

In the same article, the writer mentions Woollcott's performance. Even though he was greeted with an "echo" of applause during curtain call, Woollcott's review declared,

> Woollcott gave a vastly entertaining performance, though a few captious folk who had seen the New York production were heard to say that he seemed less like Alexander Woollcott, somehow, than Monty Woolley does.[58]

This comment shows that Woollcott's perception of himself differed from what the public saw and/or imagined. Woolley was able to depict the Woollcott that the public

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[57] "Dinner on the West Coast." Special to *The New York Times*. The New York Times 18 Feb. 1940: X3.

[58] "Dinner on the West Coast."

knew and loved because the actor viewed him from a theatrical and fictitious side. Woollcott probably put more of his true self into the character of Whiteside, exposing a side unknown to the curious public. This new image confused the audiences, causing them to reference back to Woolley's portrayal of the great character. As theatre and reality merged, audiences must have questioned what they really knew about Woollcott. Therefore, the Broadway actor allowed them to imagine that his representation was more accurate with what they knew of Woollcott. However, despite the conflicted audience, Woollcott still received praise for his performance.

Enjoying the attention he received on stage, Woollcott agreed to do another tour of the show the following year, this time on the East Coast. When the show stopped in Washington, DC, President Roosevelt attended the show. Because of his busy schedule, Roosevelt rarely attended the theatre during his term and had only seen three shows. Consequently, Woollcott stayed at the White House for the two week run in the Nation's Capital.[59]

When the East Coast tour arrived in Philadelphia, Brooks Atkinson from *The New York Times* hopped on a train to once again view this brilliant comedy. His review complimented Woollcott's performance and reflected upon the genius of the work. About Woollcott he wrote,

> As an amateur actor, the Town Crier (Woollcott) is America's best. Keep him in a recumbent position and he is thoroughly entertaining. Mr. Woollcott reads his lines very well indeed, speaking the words distinctly, throwing the emphasis where it will do the most good and timing the retorts sagaciously.[60]

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[59] "Roosevelt Attends Play." The New York Times 26 Feb. 1941: 17.

[60] Atkinson "Town Crier On Stage."

In this review, Atkinson goes on to explain that Woollcott's portrayal of Whiteside entertains audiences now, however it would have caused problems had he performed in the original production. Atkinson believes a reason for the success Woollcott enjoys pertains to the writers of the play, as he admires them for their work in creating the comedy.

> *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is an infernally good comedy quite apart from its blistering and brilliant dialogue. The basic situation is a good one to begin with. And the undercurrents of intrigue that run through the comedy keep it in taut motion; the plot crackles almost as much as the dialogue.[61]

The Man Who Came to Dinner has become one of Kaufman and Hart's greatest plays and has stood the test of time. The Circle on the Square Theatre in New York revived the play in 1980. Stephen Porter directed this production, casting Ellis Rabb as the lead character. The play opened to mixed reviews, however. One consistent opinion stated by the critics alluded to the brilliance of the plot and dialogue. Douglas Watt of *The Daily News* commented,

> It's a fiendishly well-built play. And most interestingly, the dialogue and the comic invention as a whole are so joyously sustained that it doesn't matter a hoot if you've never heard of half the once-famous names dropped.[62]

Another revival of note opened at the Roundabout Theatre Company on July 27, 2000 with Nathan Lane playing the lead role. Theatre critic Thomas Burke reviewed the show on opening night and gave glowing compliments to the director

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[61] Atkinson "Town Crier On Stage."

[62] Watt, Douglas. "Dinner is at Eight, and Don't be Late." The Daily News 27 June 1980.

and cast. He mentioned the amazing performances of Nathan Lane (Whiteside) and Harriet Harris (Maggie). He went on to say,

> To watch actors the caliber of Nathan Lane and Harriet Harris navigate and negotiate the treacherous dialogue and situations with such self-assurance and calm mastery of their craft is the unexpected delight of the evening.[63]

This production of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* appeared in a PBS series called *From Stage to Screen,* an attempt to televise live Broadway shows. During intermissions, special interviews aired and information on the history of the play was given. Interviewed for the broadcast, Anne Kaufman Sneider (Kaufman's daughter) had this to say about her father's play, "I think that *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is probably the most humorous, and the sharpest, and the most sophisticated of any of the plays they [Kaufman and Hart] wrote."[64] She went on to talk about her enjoyment of the show and gave praise to Nathan Lane's portrayal of the title role. She remembered first seeing him in *A Common Pursuit* by Simon Grey in 1984 and liking him very much. After the play, she went backstage to meet him and told him that one day he would be able to play Sheridan Whiteside. And she was right.

Three actors who portrayed the role of Whiteside over time have stood out among the others, Monty Woolley from the first production, Alexander Woollcott from the touring production, and Nathan Lane from the latest Broadway production. These three men have brought life to the character and entertained audiences for

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[63] Burke, Thomas. "The Man Who Came To Dinner." Talkin' Broadway Review 2 Feb. 2002 <http://www.talkinbroadway.com/world/mandinner.html>.

[64] Sneider, Anne Kaufman. Interview. From Stage to Screen: The Man Who Came To Dinner. DVD, 2000.

numerous performances. It seems to me, however, that Woolley's interpretation of Whiteside received the most praise and most accurately depicted the character the writers created. The fact that Woolley viewed Woollcott from the same contemporary and critical standpoint as the audience and writers did, probably contributed to his success. When playing Whiteside, Woollcott was criticized for being an amateur and Lane was criticized for being too funny. It seems that audiences have a hard time extracting the real person playing the part of Whiteside from the actual celebrity of Woollcott. Instead of seeing Whiteside, they see the actor. Because Woolley did not have a reputation with the public, they could watch him play the role and see only the character, not Woolley. When audiences watched Woollcott, they expected the same sardonic tone he carried in public and when they watched Lane, they expected humor because of his acting career and reputation. Also, original audiences already carried notions about the public character of Woollcott into the theatre. Later audiences would not have that intimacy to the character. Woollcott himself would have a hard time defining the public persona written by others from his own sense of private self. Truly, Kaufman made an excellent choice when casting the original role of Whiteside.

Countless other productions of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* have appeared on numerous stages across the world, delighting audiences and challenging actors. For sixty-six years, people have been enthralled by Sheridan Whiteside, a.k.a. Alexander Woollcott, and his friends, thanks to Kaufman and Hart. But who exactly were Kaufman and Hart writing about? Was Alexander Woollcott the only person they molded characters after? The answer is no. They actually used several real

personalities to create characters for their comedy, some of which were obvious and others a bit more elusive.

Who's Who Among the Characters

As previously stated, the story for *The Man Who Came to Dinner* grew out of a visit from Alexander Woollcott to Moss Hart. When Woollcott asked for Hart and Kaufman to write him a play, he did not necessarily have in mind a play which would directly reveal his personal habits and parody his own public character. He simply wanted a play in which he could perform a fictitious role. Woollcott had caught the acting bug and wanted a new project on which to focus his efforts. He knew he could not perform among the ranks of professional actors, so the only way he could get into a successful play was to have the two most famous playwrights of the time, and consequently his friends, write a play specifically suited for him. When the writers pitched their script to Woollcott, he initially seemed delighted and eager for completion of the script.

With the famed personality of Woollcott at the center of the play, Kaufman and Hart knew they had a potential success on their hands. The question now was how much the lead character Whiteside would resemble Woollcott. Would they stay true to the actual personality of Woollcott or change him a bit for the audience? The writers decided to create the character out of the Woollcott known to the public, which differed from the Woollcott known to his close friends. They probably chose this view based on the friendship they shared with the great personality. Even though it seems they were somewhat coerced into writing the play, the writers adored

Woollcott and enjoyed spending time with him. Their friendship was something they did not want to damage or jeopardize during the process of writing and performing the play. The writers knew they needed to keep controversial or highly unattractive things about his personal life out of the play, so as not to over expose Woollcott. Even though the writers created a mostly vicious monster in Whiteside, the public already knew the basic qualities conveyed in the character. Aspects the writers clearly chose to keep out of the play included Woollcott's known alcoholism and his probable sexual preference. Including these characteristics would have insulted Woollcott because these were things he chose to keep private in his life. Had the writers alluded to these qualities, the character of Whiteside would possibly not have been as well received and Woollcott's popularity may have suffered irreparable damage. When explaining the choice of using the public image of Woollcott, Hart stated,

> We decided to use only public aspects of his character. That is, to be guided in the plot by his lecture tours, his broadcasts, his charm, his acidulousness, his interest in murders, and all of this had to be worked into the plot of the play. Those things were the core of the play, and the plot was something that had to be worked around them.[65]

And the play does just that. At the top of Act One, we learn that Whiteside has been touring the country, performing lectures to various literary groups. Lecture tours became a common practice for Woollcott during the 1930s. The Whiteside character also talks of his radio broadcasts. Throughout Act Two, conversation ensues about his Christmas Eve broadcast made from the Stanley's living room. The end of Act Two features that broadcast and the craziness associated with it. Possibly one of

[65] Goldstein 320.

Woollcott's most famed public presentations were his radio broadcasts. He would discuss his favorite books or stories of his favorite murders on the air.[66] Woollcott's interest in murders also played a part in the plot of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. The character of Whiteside talks about going to visit the Crockfield Home for Paroled Convicts and how he has raised over half a million dollars for the home. He even has famous murderers come from the home to visit for lunch at the Stanley house. Whiteside's knowledge of famous murders also plays a part in Act Three.

Woollcott's acid tongue is probably the most recognizable attribute given to Sheridan Whiteside. Listed below are quotes from Woollcott and matching sentiments from Whiteside.

> At a Hamilton college class reunion Alex was approached by a man who said to him: "Hello, Alex! You remember me, don't you?"
> "I can't remember your name," said Woollcott, "but don't tell me."[67]

> JEFFERSON: How about an interview, Mr. Whiteside?
> WHITESIDE: I never give them. Go away.
> JEFFERSON: Mr. Whiteside, if I don't get this interview, I lose my job.
> WHITESIDE: That would be quite all right with me.

> On his first visit to Moss Hart's Bucks County estate, Woollcott wrote in the guest book: "This is to certify that on my first visit to Moss Hart's house I had one of the most unpleasant times I ever spent."[68]

> WHITESIDE: Since this corner druggist at my elbow tells me that I shall be confined to this moldy mortuary for at least another ten days, due entirely to your stupidity and negligence, I shall have to carry on

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[66] "Alexander Woollcott." Word Authors. The H.W. Wilson Company. 5 April 2003. <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results_single.jhtml?nn=7108>, 2.

[67] Drennan, Robert E., ed. The Algonquin Wits. New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1985, 134.

[68] Drennan 141.

> my activities as best I can. I shall require the exclusive use of this room, as well as that drafty sewer which you call the library.
>
> "All the things I really like to do are either immoral, illegal, or fattening."[69]
>
> WHITESIDE: M-m, pecan butternut fudge.
> MISS PREEN: Oh, my! You mustn't eat candy, Mr. Whiteside. It's very bad for you.
> WHITESIDE: My Great-aunt Jennifer ate a whole box of candy every day of her life. She lived to be a hundred and two, and when she had been dead three days she looked better than you do now.

Kaufman and Hart truly paid tribute to their great friend by writing the character of Whiteside the way they did. By putting him at the center of the play, they did not ridicule him, but gave praise to his strange and unique personality. When analyzing the character as a whole, one can see that Whiteside does not only think of himself. He also occasionally puts others first. In general he comes off as cantankerous and quirky, but also deeply compassionate and intelligent. The writers must have viewed this same quality in Woollcott and wanted to share it with the public. In the play, the writers commented not only on what the public perceived as the characteristics of Woollcott, but also on the softer side the public did not know. By looking at the character, one opinion about Woollcott comes through. Although he can reflect rudeness, his character remains lovable. Despite the harsh words Woollcott could give to the writers, they still found him irresistible and constantly spent time with him. So, it seems as though the play reflects just as many good qualities found in Woollcott as bad. Clearly the play helped to further Woollcott's career and created more public respect for him.

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[69] Drennan 145.

Another character created from the writers' personal circle of friends reflected the role of Banjo. Harpo Marx, an adored member of the Algonquin Round Table, served as the model for this character. As a member of the Marx Brothers, Harpo had performed in vaudeville since 1910. His name came from his trademark of playing the harp in Marx Brothers films. By simply changing the instrument from a harp to a banjo, the writers loosely disguised his character. His character first appears in the play via a telephone call to Whiteside in Act One. During the conversation, Whiteside is clearly very fond of Banjo, staying true to the real friendship between Woollcott and Harpo. One source states, "Woollcott clearly cherished Harpo – for his lack of inhibition, his unselfconsciously playful personality, the very lack of politesse that made Woollcott nervous."[70] Harpo's mannerisms also came through in the script. When Banjo finally enters in Act Three, he carries in the nurse, Miss Preen, over his shoulder, professes his love to her, and then asks Whiteside to sign for the package. He also brings Whiteside a Christmas present, Hedy Lamarr's bra. Banjo is full of energy and offers plenty of sight gags. He makes a comedy out of every situation. The part of Banjo so resembles Harpo Marx that it creates an acting challenge for any actor taking on the role. When an actor prepares for the part of Banjo, he must keep Harpo Marx in mind at all times.

By including this depiction of Harpo Marx in the play, the writers suggested certain ideas about his personality to the audience. The way they wrote the character of Banjo commented on Harpo's wacky persona. The writers enjoyed laughing, and

[70] Gaines, James R. Wit's End: Days and Nights of the Algonquin Round Table. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, 189.

Harpo always provided humorous entertainment for their group. The writers also commented on Harpo's inability to focus on one thing for an extended amount of time. In the play, Banjo constantly moves from one topic to the next, barely giving the audience a chance to catch up. Kaufman and Hart probably perceived Harpo in this same manner, unable to keep up with his shenanigans. By writing into the script that the other characters love and adore Banjo, the playwrights create a character the audience also loves and adores. This clearly signifies parallels to Harpo and his fan base. Above all else, the researcher believes the writers wanted to portray Harpo's dynamic personality. From the moment Banjo steps on stage, the audience revels in his actions and cannot wait for his return after his exit. Banjo is fun to watch and lifts the spirits, much like Harpo must have often done around Kaufman and Hart. This friendly depiction of Harpo serves as a compliment from the writers.

The very British character Beverly Carlton mirrors Noel Coward, a famous British actor, playwright, and composer. Coward became an icon of the 1920s in England as a sophisticated and brilliant young artist, who high society idolized.[71] Coward became a friend of Kaufman's early in his career when actor Alfred Lunt introduced them. As playwrights, Kaufman and Coward had things in common to discuss. However, it was Beatrice Kaufman who noticed Coward's talent and introduced him to Woollcott. Upon this introduction, Woollcott and Coward

[71] "Noel Coward." PeoplePlay UK. 12 Mar. 2004. <http://www.peopleplayuk.org.uk/guided_tours/musicals_tour/musicals_stars/coward.php>, 1.

immediately became friends and kept in touch for years.[72] From that point on, Woollcott promoted Coward's work whenever possible.

The information in the lines about Beverly Carlton make obvious references to Noel Coward. In Act One, Whiteside receives a telegram from "Destiny's Tot," the nickname bestowed upon Coward at an early age.[73] The telegram references his trip to Hawaii and his new masterpiece he completed while vacationing. At a young age, Coward's doctor forced him to take relaxing vacations to rest his weary body. He took the advice and spent time in Hawaii.[74] After his initial trip, he continued to return to the island to spend relaxing vacations. Upon Beverly Carlton's arrival in the play, his character immediately speaks of the volumes of work he completed and how he will only play his new revue for eight weeks in London and six weeks in New York, then vacation in the Grecian Islands. After Coward's early breakdown, he only played minimal shows, despite the public wanting more. To top off the already noticeable Coward character, Kaufman and Hart had Cole Porter write a song for Beverly Carlton to sing, a successful parody of Coward's style.[75]

By including this replication of Coward in their play, the writers bring information about this celebrity to the audience. The overriding theme conveyed about Coward relates to his brilliance and charm as an artistic creator. The writers

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[72] Meredith, Scott. George S. Kaufman and His Friends. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1974, 180.

[73] "Noel Coward." Musicals101.com. 12 Mar. 2004. <http://www.musicals101.com/noelbio.htm>, 1.

[74] Ibid. 2.

[75] Goldstein 324.

admired Coward and his ability to effortlessly create pieces of work. This adoration shines through in their writing of Beverly Carlton. Beverly's very charming, charismatic, and elegant character, allows the audience to enjoy his time on stage. Similarly, the writers must have been charmed by Coward and enjoyed spending time with him. The writers also believed in Coward's talent. This shows up in Beverly's character when he and other characters talk about his greatness and his many successes in England. Kaufman and Hart truly respected Coward as an artist and wanted to pay tribute to him and his efforts in their play. They successfully accomplish this goal with the creation of Beverly Carlton.

The character of Lorraine Sheldon is another role from *The Man Who Came to Dinner* that references a real person. The writers molded this character after Gertrude Lawrence, one of Great Britain's brightest theatrical stars of the 1930s. After hitting it big in London, Lawrence made her way to the New York stage and became a smashing success in the US as well. Opinions varied on whether or not Lawrence could act, however, she always managed to get whatever part she wanted.[76] Her lifelong friendship with Noel Coward helped her get involved with more theatrical circles, including the famous Algonquin Round Table. As a successful actress on Broadway, Lawrence became well known by Kaufman and Hart.

The depiction of Lawrence as the character of Lorraine Sheldon comes in more subtle hints than the other characters previously discussed. First, the writers mention in the play that Lorraine Sheldon has moved from rags to riches to become

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[76] "Gertrude Lawrence." 12 Mar. 2004. <http://www.maurice-abravanel.com/lawrence_gertrude.html>,1.

one of the most famous actresses on the stage. Lawrence also had a famous rags to riches story of how she became an actress. However, her struggles paid off when she became one of the most famous stars during her time. She was able to travel anywhere and do anything, as did the character of Lorraine Sheldon.

In *The Man Who Came to Dinner* the writers allude to Lorraine's method of getting parts. Whiteside initially invites Lorraine to see him so that she can seduce the local newspaperman who likes Whiteside's secretary Maggie. In one line, the writers suggest a shady past for the character when Whiteside says to Lorraine, "Get him to take you to dinner, and work around to the play. Good God, I don't have to tell you how to do these things. *How did you get all those other parts?"* This line suggests that the character did not necessarily earn her parts because of her talent, but possibly in other ways. Lawrence similarly was not known as the most talented actress, however she somehow got the parts and truly lived the lifestyle of a star.

The picture painted by the writers about Lawrence does not necessarily praise her for her efforts. Pictured as a beautiful star who slithers her way into roles, the character of Lorraine does not help Lawrence's public image. Critics also seemed to understand that this portrayal did not make Lawrence shine as she often did. At the time of the play's opening on Broadway, very few references were made correlating Lorraine and Lawrence. From this not so delightful depiction of Lawrence, several things can be assumed. First, it seems as though the writers did not like Lawrence. But why? It is likely that Kaufman had a sexual relationship with Lawrence that turned sour and this character offered an avenue to get back at her. The researcher forms this idea from knowing Kaufman's frequent affairs with actresses and from

another source, Lawrence herself. In *The Sketch* magazine, Lawrence tells a story about Spanish shawls, and references "George" in the article. As she talks to her interviewer, she opens a gift she received and exclaims, "Look what darling George has sent me."[77] When Kaufman was involved with a woman, he often sent gifts to her to show his fondness. This gift to Lawrence could represent a relationship the two had in 1934. At some point after that the relationship turned unpleasant, causing a bitter taste in Kaufman's mouth. After viewing *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, the researcher feels confident that Lawrence walked away with a tart taste in her mouth.

The relationship between the characters of Lorraine Sheldon and Beverly Carlton also makes a slight reference to Lawrence and Coward. Lorraine speaks of working with Beverly on several acting projects in the past. Lawrence and Coward also worked together on stage and screen. However, the writers decided to make the relationship a little different from the real life situation. The two characters disliked each other very much and could not stand working together. However, several sources state that Lawrence and Coward enjoyed working together on projects. The two met at a young age on the stage in England and formed a bond that would never break. Throughout their careers, they provided one another a friendly shoulder to lean on.[78]

Critics of the time knew all the characters corresponding to the true celebrities discussed above. Kaufman and Hart also publicly wrote about creating these

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[77] Butcher, Cyril. "The Worst Moment of My Life. No. VII. Gertrude Lawrence." The Sketch 14 Mar. 1934: 460.

[78] "Gertrude Lawrence." 1.

characters to portray some of their friends. It was no secret that these characters represented real celebrities. However, there are several characters in the play that also emulate real people that have not been paralleled before.

The most obvious character correlation is found in the character of Harriet Stanley, Mr. Stanley's live-in sister. Harriet is portrayed as a strange person who lurks around and disappears when others are present. After his first meeting with the deranged sister, Whiteside mentions the familiarity of her face. He does not put his finger on it until the end of the play when he names her as Harriet Sedley, the famous murderer who killed her mother and father with an axe in Massachusetts. The character of Harriet obviously parodies Lizzie Borden, the famous murderer who committed these very crimes. Whiteside also recites the popular jingle about the murder case, inserting Harriet Sedley for Lizzie Borden,

> Harriet Sedley took an axe
> And gave her mother forty whacks,
> And when the job was nicely done,
> She gave her father forty-one.

Although this seems an obvious character parallel, no researchers have mentioned the similarity between the character and Lizzie Borden. It is an important correlation because it once again shows Kaufman's ability to draw off of common contemporary themes to entertain his audiences.

The character of Bert Jefferson somewhat resembles a young George S. Kaufman. Bert, an eager newspaperman, loves to write. At a younger age, Kaufman had similar ambitions. Both Bert and Kaufman wanted to inform people of local happenings and shared a side hobby of playwriting. Bert is also determined to

accomplish his goals. For example, when Bert first arrives at the Stanley house to meet Whiteside, the celebrity brushes him off and turns him down for an interview. Bert refuses to take no for an answer and continues to pry into the situation until Whiteside begins to admire him and allows him to stay. Similarly, at a young age, Kaufman sent in piece after piece to newspaper columns until he was finally printed. He was determined to be a writer, and a good one at that. The writers also made Bert a fierce card player, which parallels Kaufman. The witty dialogue written for Bert also alludes to a Kaufman resemblance. The following passage from Act One, Scene One shows an example of Bert's determination to succeed and his witty thoughts.

> MAGGIE: I'm sorry – Mr. Whiteside is seeing no one.
> BERT: Really?
> MAGGIE: So will you please excuse us? Good day.
> BERT: Mr. Whiteside seems to be sitting up and taking notice.
> MAGGIE: I'm afraid he's not taking notice of the Mesalia Journal. Do you mind?
> BERT: You know, if I'm going to be insulted I'd like it to be by Mr. Whiteside himself. I never did like carbon copies.

Kaufman probably chose to include himself in the play for several different reasons. For one, he needed a counterbalance for the other characters he created to resemble his friends. He may have been nervous about the reaction his friends would have after viewing the play, therefore, by including himself, he would have something to trade off in conversation. If his friends complained about his caricatures of them, he could simply refer to the character of Bert and inform them that he even mocks himself in the play. Kaufman felt that even he was not above ridicule and included this idea in the play.

By including himself as a character in the play, Kaufman made a couple of statements about who he was and what he was like. The positive statement he made about himself included his drive and determination to never give up. Kaufman worked very hard numerous hours a day and never lost sight of his dreams of becoming the most successful writer of all time. Similarly, Bert always worked hard to better himself and always thought like a writer throughout the play.

Another statement he made about himself did not show his brighter side. When Bert goes to a bar with Lorraine to discuss his play, he does not realize the hurt he inflicts on Maggie, his true love. Show business and the great things it can bring blind him. This statement can also apply to Kaufman. He often allowed himself to court other women; all the while he did not realize the hurt he likely created for his wife and true love, Beatrice. When examining Bert's character, one realizes that he does not intentionally hurt the one he loves. Kaufman wanted Beatrice to realize the same thing about him. He never intentionally wanted to hurt her; he just lost sight of what was important to him. Bert Jefferson, as a young George S. Kaufman, offers a bittersweet image.

Dorothy Parker became a close friend of Kaufman's and traveled in mostly the same circles he did. Their close friendship is a good reason to trace signs of Parker in the main female character of Maggie Cutler. There are more differences between the character and the person than similarities; however, similarities are undeniable. Maggie is the secretary to the obnoxious Whiteside, and has put up with him for over ten years. Dorothy Parker did not serve as Woollcott's secretary, but she was his closest female friend. The two seemed to understand and provide a support

system for each other. Despite his rudeness, Parker would not let Woollcott's sadistic nature affect her personally, as she let his rude comments roll off her shoulder. In the play, Maggie understands Whiteside's discourteous nature in the same manner and brushes it off by not letting it offend her. The following dialogue from the play shows how Maggie did not give Whiteside the pleasure of landing an insult.

> WHITESIDE: Don't look at me with those great cow-eyes, you sex-ridden hag. Where have you been all afternoon? Alley-catting around with Bert Jefferson?
> MAGGIE: Sherry, Bert read his play to me this afternoon. It's superb. It isn't just that play written by a newspaperman. It's superb. I want you to read it tonight. It just cries out for Cornell. Will you send it to her, Sherry? And will you read it tonight?
> WHITESIDE: No, I will not read it tonight or any other time. And while we're on the subject of Mr. Jefferson, you might ask him if he would like to pay your salary, since he takes up all your time.
> MAGGIE: Oh, come now Sherry. It isn't as bad as that.
> WHITESIDE: I have not even been able to reach you, not knowing what haylofts you frequent.
> MAGGIE: Oh, stop behaving like a spoiled child, Sherry.

As one of the only central female members of the Algonquin Round Table, Dorothy Parker was constantly surrounded by witty men. However, they were not the only ones with a sharp tongue. Parker could likewise dispatch a good dose of clever remarks. The character of Maggie also offers up her wit against others, especially characters she does not like. For example, when left alone with Lorraine Sheldon, the character she despises, the following dialogue takes place.

> LORRAINE: Who does your hair, Maggie?
> MAGGIE: A little Frenchwoman named Maggie Cutler comes in every morning.
> LORRAINE: You know, every time I see you I keep thinking your hair could be so lovely. I always wanted to get my hands on it.
> MAGGIE: I've always wanted to get mine on yours, Lorraine.

Kaufman chose to include hints of Parker in the character of Maggie to show others that Parker does have a softer side, a side able to fall in love. Parker always tended to project an image of despair and depression. By having the character of Maggie fall in love with Bert, Kaufman allows his character to let her emotions show for the "first time in ten years." Perhaps Kaufman wanted Parker to know that she should give in to her emotions and allow herself to enjoy life. By depicting Parker in the character of Maggie, Kaufman also suggests that she can run with the big boys. Throughout the play, Maggie's wit competes with that of all the male characters in the play. Meanwhile, the other female characters seem dominated by the men's intelligence. Maggie is a big girl who can hold her own against the greats of their time. This characterization of Parker served as a compliment from Kaufman to Parker. He admired her for her wit, but wished she would allow herself the pleasures of falling in love.

These character adaptations show firsthand how Kaufman used influences from his life when writing plays. And what a better source to pull from? He was surrounded by some of the most interesting and famous people in his day. Letting his audience in on this secret world was truly a gift he gave.

Chapter Three

The Butter and Egg Man

Summary of the Play

The play opens in the office of Lehmac Productions Incorporated of New York City. As the lights go up, Jack McClure, also known as Mac, and Joe Lehman discuss their current theatrical production. Because their previous investor had been incarceration for bootlegging alcohol, the two toss about names of possible new investors for the show. They must find a new money source because the show has gone into rehearsal and they need to pay salaries. As Joe and Mac discuss different ideas, Fanny Lehman, Joe's wife, enters the office. From the onset, we see that Fanny and Joe do not have a good relationship. The two constantly criticize one another. We learn that, though Fanny has money in properties she has bought, she is unwilling to help her husband. She refuses to sink her money into the "junk show" as she calls it. Mac leaves the couple alone to work things out, while he goes to meet a potential investor. As Joe and Fanny discuss the show, the lead actress, Mary Martin, enters to speak with Joe. At Joe's request, Fanny leaves so as not to cause trouble. Mary visits Joe to discuss her paycheck, which has returned to the bank for the third time. She threatens to turn him into the Equity office for nonpayment, when Mac calls on the phone to tell Joe about a millionaire investor he has found. In response to this information, Joe asks Mary to leave and to return in thirty minutes to receive the

money owed to her. Joe seems confident that this new guest will surely invest in the show. Before the "butter and egg man" arrives, Joe asks his secretary, Jane Weston, to clean up the place and to make it look busy when the investor comes. Mac comes into the office to introduce Peter Jones, the very young investor, who wants to get into show business. As the scene unfolds, we learn that Peter is from Ohio and has just come to New York with money that his grandfather left him. He wants to get involved with a safe project. Of course, Joe and Mac explain exactly how his money would remain safe if he invests with them. The two put on a sort of show explaining the story of the play so that Peter will get hooked and sign over a check. After getting Peter excited about the production, Joe offers forty-nine percent of the stock to Peter for a bargain price of thirty thousand dollars. Peter turns down the offer. After a bit of haggling, the deal is made at twenty thousand dollars for forty-nine percent. After they receive the check, Joe and Mac head to the bank to cash the check. Peter stays alone in the office with Jane. As the two talk, Jane learns that Peter does not have millions of dollars at all and that he invested virtually all of his inheritance in the show, hoping to make a quick profit. Peter wants to turn his twenty thousand dollars into fifty thousand so he can go back to his hometown in Ohio and buy the hotel where he worked. As Peter and Jane talk, Mary interrupts them to retrieve her pay from Joe. When she realizes that Peter is the man who Joe and Mac were talking about with money to invest, she turns on her star charm and asks for money. Excited to be a part of the firm, Peter kindly writes Mary a check for one hundred dollars. Since Peter now produces the show, Mary invites him to rehearsal so he can share his important opinions. After Mary leaves, Peter goes to Joe's desk, sits back, puts his

feet on the desk, and feels confident about his decision. The lights then go down on Act One.

Act Two, Scene One opens on a hotel room in Syracuse, New York. It is opening night, just before the curtain rises on *Her Lesson*, the play in which Peter invested all his money. Joe enters Peter's hotel room to talk to him before the show. At the beginning of their conversation, Peter asks Joe if he will get some of his money back after the first week run of the show. Joe tells Peter that it will cost some money to keep the show running the first few weeks, so profits will not accrue until a few weeks later. Joe then asks Peter if his room can serve as the meeting place after the play to discuss needed changes. Peter is confused because he thought that after an opening, a celebration party took place, not a meeting. Joe tells him that the meeting can take on a celebratory mood and informs him he should order food and champagne just in case. Jane then enters the room upon Joe's request. He informs her that she should sit beside him at the show to take the notes he dictates. Joe exits the room to get Fanny so they can go to the theatre. Peter invites Jane to come back to the party after the show and gives her a box of roses. Peter then professes his love to Jane and speaks of how he hopes to someday marry her. Joe reenters at that moment to hurry the group to the theatre. As the group leaves for the theatre, they speak of the great hit they have on their hands.

Scene Two of Act Two takes place in the same hotel room, after the show on opening night. Joe and Mac enter in a very different mood than when they left for the show. They are obviously unhappy with the opening and eager to start tearing it apart in discussion. They call for the director and a critic friend to come up to the room to

discuss the needed changes. Meanwhile, Peter tries to offer his suggestions, but the group ignores him. The waiter begins to bring in the food and champagne and announces that the hotel assistant manager, Mr. Fritchie, will stop by later to congratulate the team on the opening. As Cecil Benham, the play's director, enters the room, Joe immediately starts barking complaints about the scenery and the lines the lead actress missed. In the middle of this conversation, Bernie Sampson enters. Bernie, a critic the producers invited to help with corrections on the show, enters and brings a young chorus girl named Peggy, who behaves like a spoiled brat throughout the scene. Bernie has a self-righteous attitude and believes he is the only one with the right ideas. Bernie begins to make suggestions for changes, while Cecil disagrees with them. All the while, Peter tries to get his opinions heard, but no one listens. During the heated discussion, Mary Martin enters and immediately begins to make excuses for her performance and makes suggestions as to how to make the play better. The hotel telephone operator, Kitty, enters and the room erupts in arguments. Joe finally gets everyone under control and tries to restart the discussion in a more controlled manner. When Peter once more offers his suggestions, Joe angrily tells him to keep his ideas to himself. Joe goes on to tell Peter that he only served as a money source and does not have the right to talk. Jane finally has enough and stands up to Joe about his unfair treatment of Peter. This action prompts Joe to fire Jane. In her defense, Peter says he will not let anyone speak to Jane in that manner. He then offers to buy out both Joe and Mac and they agree on the bargain price of ten thousand dollars. After completion of the deal, all exit except Peter and Jane. The two discuss how Peter will come up with the money. Not a moment too soon, the

assistant hotel manager, Oscar Fritchie, enters to congratulate them on the show opening. As Peter and Jane speak to Oscar, they find out that he wants to be a producer. Peter gets an idea and Jane follows his lead. They convince Oscar to invest fifteen thousand dollars with them and to leave the hotel business. Peter, having taken a lesson for his previous experiences, pressures Oscar into a decision. The scene ends with Peter and Jane telling Oscar what a great hit they have on their hands.

Act Three begins a few weeks later in the offices of Lehmac Productions, although this time it does not belong to Joe and Mac. Peter and Oscar now own the company. It is the morning after the New York opening and the play proved a huge success. Peter enters on cloud nine and begins speaking of the great things in theatre he can accomplish. Because of his one success, he feels he can succeed from then on. Oscar comes in and asks Peter to buy him out, so he can return to the hotel business. Peter agrees, thinking that he will now make more money by himself. A visitor named AJ Patterson, an attorney-at-law, interrupts the conversation. He informs Peter and Oscar, owners of the play *Her Lesson,* that his client will take them to court for plagiarism unless they turn over sixty-six and two-thirds *per centum* of all profits. It seems the plot of the play appeared in a magazine several years before and no one inquired about rights to produce the story as a play. After AJ delivers the bad news, Peter asks for a little time to make a decision. AJ agrees to give them fifteen minutes. After he leaves, the three discuss the bad turn of events, until Fanny knocks on the door. Fanny enters ahead of her husband to warn Peter that Joe wants to get the play back. She tells them how Joe has an inside scoop that the play will be even bigger

than they think, and that he wants to buy it back immediately. Sure enough, Joe enters, and offers them fifty thousand dollars to get out of the play, at which time Mac rushes in, wanting to buy the play himself. He also offers fifty thousand. Jane comes up with the idea that the two should put their money together and buy the play for one hundred thousand dollars. The two seem nervous, but give in under pressure and hand over their checks to Peter. At that time, AJ returns and Peter explains to Joe and Mac the situation and turns the troubles over to them. They exit the office, leaving Peter, Oscar, and Jane to discuss what had just happened. Peter then convinces Oscar to go back into the hotel business with him and Jane in Ohio. He wants to buy a hotel for fifty thousand dollars and, with Oscar's forty-nine thousand dollars, they could build an addition and make it the greatest hotel ever. The curtain closes on Peter's sales pitch.

Production History

Writing a play alone seemed a daunting task to Kaufman. When writing with a partner as he had done before, Kaufman had the opportunity to bounce ideas off of someone else. In creating *The Butter and Egg Man,* Kaufman had no one to confer with, scaring the successful writer. A common trait of his, Kaufman wanted every line and idea to appear perfect. Achievement of perfection took lots of time and numerous rewrites on Kaufman's part. The first two acts of the play took him three months to complete. At this point in time, in order to inspire a quick finish to the play, Kaufman took his idea to a producer to seek financial backing to mount the show. He chose Crosby Gaige because he knew him fairly well. Even with the

uncompleted play, Gaige eagerly accepted Kaufman's offer and supported Kaufman every step of the way.[79]

Gaige even suggested that Kaufman direct the play himself. Had Kaufman followed through, this would have been his first directorial experience. However, after the first few days of rehearsal, Kaufman withdrew from the position and requested a new director. Gaige and Kaufman agreed on James Gleason, an actor from the touring production of *Dulcy*, to take over the show.[80] The show opened on June 11, 1925 in Stamford, Connecticut and ran for three days. Washington, DC, the city chosen for the second trial run, hosted the show for only one week. Gaige then closed down the production for the remainder of the summer to prepare for a New York debut.[81]

The Butter and Egg Man opened on Broadway September 23, 1925 at the Longacre Theatre. As Kaufman's only solo straight play venture, the play proved successful and ran for two hundred forty-three performances. Much to Kaufman's surprise, critics praised the play. An opening night review in *The New York Times* on September 24, 1925 stated, "The amusement that Mr. Kaufman's play affords comes as much from dialogue as from invention. The structure of the play is quite as full of surprises and entertainment."[82] A friend of Kaufman's, Robert Benchley, reviewed the show for *Life* and wrote,

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[79] Meredith 262.

[80] Ibid. 264-265.

[81] Goldstein 123.

[82] "Showing Up the Show Business." The New York Times 24 Sept. 1925: 28.

> There is no reason that we can see why the play shouldn't be a success. It is an evening full of snappy retorts in that most humorous of all jargons, the language of Broadway, and a sure and skilful handling of business tactics.[83]

Selecting the right cast serves an integral part of producing a successful show. If the actors fail, the show often fails. Fortunately for Kaufman, the actors did not let him down in the first production of *The Butter and Egg Man*. Critics praised the acting ensemble's ability to create the different characters.

> As Joseph Lehman, Robert Middlemass enacted a bully as well as a businessman, overbearing, irritable, and blunt. As Joe Lehman's cynical, bland wife, Lucille Webster was derisive and maddening. Sylvia Field gave depth and gentleness to the part of the stenographer. Gregory Kelly did not overplay either the stupidity or the exhilaration in the part of Peter Jones.[84]

Glowing reviews of the actors in the play also reflects positively on Kaufman. In the researcher's opinion, because of the way Kaufman wrote each character, these capable actors were able to create amusing, in-depth personalities on stage. Within the text of the play, Kaufman creates very colorful characters and gives many hints to actors as to how to portray them. To create a comical scene in *The Butter and Egg Man,* Kaufman provided many different personality types that appear on stage at the same time, with each character's objective working against the others. When reading the play, the researcher can imagine the specific characters Kaufman wanted to appear on stage. When the actors that portray the characters also understand Kaufman's ideas, performances erupt with success. Therefore, because of Kaufman's clever caricatures, the play triumphs on the stage.

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[83] Benchley, Robert C. "The Butter and Egg Man." Life 15 Oct. 1925:18.

[84] "Showing Up the Show Business."

After the success of the original production, other companies formed to tour the show across the United States and in London. The London production, opening in August of 1927, provided more rave reviews. "George Kaufman's play was greeted by roars of laughter and a reception that augurs success despite the fact that much of its humor is too American for English comprehension."[85] An even bigger compliment came when his play appeared in a French magazine under the title of *Le Gentleman de I'Ohio*. This was Kaufman's first play translated into another language[86] and, even more importantly, the first American play ever published in book form in France. The success did not stop there because the play appeared on Burns Mantle's list of "The Best Plays of 1925-26" and was sold to the movies and made into four different films between 1928 and 1940.[87]

A revival of the show opened Off Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre on October 17, 1966 for thirty-two performances. The show did not obtain the same shining reviews as the first Broadway production; however, it garnered a kind reception. After viewing this 1966 revival, one critic wrote,

> Knowledgeable members of the audience at the Cherry Lane will readily see why Kaufman worked better with a collaborator than alone. He had a keen feeling for the comic or absurd, and a fairly steady hand for etching character, but he seems to have needed help in constructing a plausible plot.[88]

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[85] "Hail 'Butter and Egg Man'." The New York Times 31 Aug. 1927:19.

[86] Goldstein 124.

[87] Meredith 258.

[88] "The Butter and Egg Man." America 29 Oct. 1966: 524.

When Kaufman initially wrote the play, his playwriting career only spanned four years. His real genius as a writer did not surface until later in life. In 1925, *The Butter and Egg Man* provided Kaufman with praise and adornment. When critics like the one above compare the play to his other later works, they forget to look at where the play occurred in his career. Kaufman produced better work with time; therefore, critics that look back to his earlier plays and compare them to his later plays, could identify some structural weaknesses. The critics of the 1925 production did not have a long list of plays written by Kaufman to weigh *The Butter and Egg Man* against. Also, the social culture of the 1966 audience members differed greatly from the 1925 members. They had vastly different views on life, therefore producing diverse reactions to the play. Walter Kerr explains this in his review by stating, "The plot line is a great featherweight curlicue by today's slightly sturdier standards – or perhaps it has been borrowed from so often that it has lost weight in the process."[89]

The most recent New York revival of the show appeared at the Atlantic Theater Company in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City in October of 2002. The Atlantic Theater Company usually produces modern works; however, occasionally they revisit the classics. This production of *The Butter and Egg Man* received better reviews than the 1966 Off Broadway production. Bruce Weber for *The New York Times* complimented the show by stating,

> George S. Kaufman was known for his collaborations. But it must have been that he got lonely; he didn't really need the help. The show

[89] Kerr, Walter. "Theater: Kaufman's 'Butter and Egg Man' Revived." The New York Times 18 Oct. 1966:49.

> succeeds in reminding an intelligent audience of what used to be called good clean fun.[90]

Charles McNulty, reviewing for *The Village Voice*, leans toward the opinions of the critics from the 1966 production about the writing of the play; however, in a more favorable way. "Structurally the work is tidy, though lacking in surprise; the dialogue has rhythm but little punch. A crowd-pleaser for the undemanding, the play promises wit but delivers mere earnest fun."[91] However, McNulty does appreciate the production of the play and what the play stood for in Kaufman's career.

> The production wholeheartedly embraces the piece's nutty momentum. So much goes right: a uniformly strong cast, period sets, and costumes that capture 1920s New York, and a generous goodwill of the audience. Yet all these considerable assets cannot efface the fact that the play is merely a premonition of Kaufman's brilliant career to come.[92]

So much goes into the success of a show, the casting, the production elements, the target audience, and the direction. With poor production, critics focus more on the production elements, as opposed to the writing of the play. The poor elements draw a larger focus, and overshadow the playwright's efforts. From the reviews above, it seems as though the 1925 and 2002 productions of *The Butter and Egg Man* succeeded via the production elements, allowing critics to enjoy the story of the play more. However, the 1966 production lacked the same luster in its production, causing the critics to blame the weak show on the playwright. No matter what the critics have

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[90] Weber, Bruce. "George S. Kaufman's Jet-Paced Solo Flight." The New York Times 4 Oct. 2002: E.1:25.

[91] McNulty, Charles. "Kaufman's Solo Shot." The Village Voice 47.41 (2002): 56.

[92] Ibid. 56.

said about Kaufman's play, one thing remains unchanged: the play provides the audience with an inside look at show business in the 1920s.

Kaufman's Show Biz World

The Butter and Egg Man may not represent Kaufman's best play, however it still provides audiences with an inside look into the world of show business during the 1920s. The language in the play represents the very essence of theatre lingo in this time period. Even Kaufman's title for the play represents slang used in the business. A nightclub owner coined the term "butter and egg man" after a wealthy man from the west bought rounds for everyone in a bar one night. The wealthy man apparently worked in the butter and egg business out west. From then on, the term referenced an out-of-towner with a large sum of money who spent his money without care or concern. Dropping thousands of dollars into an unknown Broadway show qualified Kaufman's lead character as the genuine "butter and egg man."[93]

The opening scene sets the tone by introducing the audience to show biz lingo. The banter between the two producers is full of terms unfamiliar to the general public, but second nature to theatre professionals. The following passage from Act One exemplifies the code language utilized by countless insiders of the theatre.

> LEHMAN: Get me Sol David. He came through for that Jenny show last year.
> MAC: Never got a nickel back. I saw the statements.
> LEHMAN: Anybody comes in on this trick'll clean up. I can do it for fifteen thousand. I'd take twelve.
> MAC: You'd take one.

[93] Meredith 259.

> LEHMAN: You don't say? Let me tell you this, Sweetheart – there ain't going to be no bargains, not if I have to throw it in the ashcan. This show's a pipe, and any bird that comes in is going to make plenty.

Kaufman probably witnessed many conversations like the one above, as both a critic and a playwright. This conversation sets the mood for the entire play. Reading these lines takes one back to the days when Broadway turned out more than two hundred new plays each season, a time when everyone wanted to make a quick buck in the entertainment industry. Many people working in the theatre in the 1920s saw it as a business and not as an art form.[94] Because Kaufman wrote the characters in *The Butter and Egg Man* to have this philosophy, audiences gained this inside information and possibly began to look at theatre in a different way. Kaufman knew the power that plays held during the time period, so he decided to expose some Broadway secrets in *The Butter and Egg Man*.

Kaufman not only exposed information about the business in his play, but also about the people working in theatre. The term "Sweetheart" used by Lehman actually comes from Al H. Woods, a Broadway producer in the 1920s. Kaufman knew Woods from working on *The New York Times* and from Beatrice working under him a short while. Woods addressed everyone as "Sweetheart," regardless of sex or age. Kaufman drew several characteristics for Lehman from Woods. To those working in the business, Woods often times seemed tasteless and a bit of a scoundrel, however, he still remained likeable.[95] The same qualities apply to the character of Lehman. As

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[94] "1920s Broadway Producers." Musicals101.com. 21 April 2004. <http://www.musicals101.com/1900to10.htm>, 3.

[95] Goldstein 122.

Lehman explains the play he so passionately wants to produce to Peter, one becomes aware of the play's often times tasteless nature. As Lehman scrounges for money from Peter, he paints a rosy picture of this tacky play, making every scene seem bigger and better than the last. Even though Lehman tricks Peter out of his money, he does not seem an altogether horrible person. He does have some likeable qualities. These qualities lead Peter to invest in the play, creating a new business partnership. It is quite possible that this type of trickery was common in the 1920s between producers and investors.

Throughout the play, Kaufman drops other hints about what he experienced in show business, and thereby lets the outside world in on his private thoughts. Some of his ideas fall into a category about producers and their mindset. The first one comes from the character of Joe Lehman when he states that he is "legit" because of his producer status. From this statement, Kaufman suggests to his audience that not all producers are legitimate business people. But what qualifies a producer as legitimate? Kaufman possibly pokes fun at the core producers at that time with his "legit" comment. In the early 1920s, several big and ruthless producers ruled Broadway, George M. Cohan, Sam Harris, and the Shubert Brothers. Known for his fairness to actors and other theatre professionals, Sam Harris had the most business-like attitude among the producing circle.[96] Cohan and the Shuberts, however, became known as tyrants in the theatre world. Cohan's nickname, "the man who owned Broadway," developed because of his involvement in numerous productions as a

[96] "Sam Harris." Musicals101.com. 20 April 2004. <http://www.musicals101.com/who4b.htm>, 6.

producer, playwright, composer, lyricist, librettist, director, or actor. He had many talents and became well known by the public. However, his temper and ego became the source of many problems he encountered, causing his popularity in the theatre business to flounder.[97] The Shuberts, even more hotheaded than Cohan and having little practical artistic experience, always seemed to turn out successful work. Because of their scrupulous business ventures, by the mid 1920s, they controlled seventy-five percent of the professional theatre in America. Because of their success, others had to accept their crude business practices, despite their fame of suing actors, writers, and producers.[98] These top producers clearly do not exemplify the term legitimate. They operated their business unfairly and without concern for others. So, Kaufman's portrayal of producers being legitimate simply provides a sarcastic tone to the play. To add even more sarcasms, one of the producing characters in the play makes the comment. This implies that producers *thought* they provided reasonable treatment to others in the business, but the rest of the world saw differently. Kaufman's comment reflects on the blindness of producers and their inability to see the unfairness they provided to others. This blindness possibly contributed to the continued abuse of others working in the theatre.

But why did producers consistently abuse mostly actors? Did actors not perform their jobs properly? The writer found no research alluding to actor's poor professional ethics during the time period. However, the research does point to

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[97] "George M. Cohan." Musicals101.com. 20 April 2004. <http://www.musicals101.com/who2b.htm>, 1.

[98] "1920s Broadway Producers." 2.

producers. Their abusive treatment possibly spawned from their jealousy of actor popularity in society. Actors were seen on stage, therefore recognizable in public. Producers wanted this same fame, and found that when they mistreated others, they received attention and their reputation grew. At the top of the "food chain" in theatre, producers felt the need to attack their prey to display power over the business. Also, by attacking actors, producers reminded them of their status, therefore not allowing them full enjoyment of their fame.

Another parody about theatre Kaufman brings to light in *The Butter and Egg Man* insists that anyone with money had the potential to own theatre, whether or not they had taste or talent. In Kaufman's play, when *Her Lesson* fails on opening night, Mac and Joe insist on dropping the show instead of finding a way to fix the problems. The two producer characters do not understand the artistic side of theatre, nor do they harbor the talent and skill needed to overcome the challenge of fine-tuning the play. Their interests simply lie in moving on to the next money project. Many of the producers during Kaufman's era, much like the characters in his play, were not qualified to make judgments on theatre. As an insider, Kaufman recognized the humor in this situation and, despite the danger, was not afraid of showing this cynical parody of the business to his audience. It actually proves quite bold because he would need to work with producers and this show had the potential to expose and alienate them. However, Kaufman felt safe from producer retaliation because of his high status in the theatrical world.

Kaufman also depicts producers as money hungry individuals. They did not see the art form of theatre, but only the possible monetary outcomes it could provide.

Actually, many theatrical individuals during the time period saw theatre as a way to entertain the public, thereby making money, and not as a forum for social issues meant to bring about change. Kaufman fell into this category by devising plays with light subject matter and witty dialogue. But does this make him less of an artist? Did Kaufman feel that theatre provided artistic expression for him, or did it provide a way to make money? Because he kept his job as a newspaperman, one can deduce that Kaufman did not believe theatre would provide monetary success for him; therefore, fostering the belief that theatre was art to Kaufman. However, Kaufman could have possibly kept the "day job" because he knew the theatre business was a gamble. This would indicate that he viewed it as a business venture and not an art form. Kaufman consistently turned out play after play, not as an artist with something important to say, but as a businessman seeking success under constant self-implied deadlines. Whichever the case may be, the fact that Kaufman still remains one of the most successful American playwrights underscores his career and accomplishments.

The second secret Kaufman lets the audience in on deals with the meeting that takes place between producers and theatre insiders after opening night. Prior to watching *The Butter and Egg Man*, most theatregoers probably did not know about this hallowed meeting. However, Kaufman lets the cat out of the bag. Act Two, Scene Two showcases this very meeting for the audience through the eyes of Kaufman's theatre novice Peter Jones, who is likewise unaware of this common practice. In the scene, Kaufman shows how, immediately after the curtain falls on opening night, the producers and others gather to discuss the success or failure of the show. This scene must have a familiar tone to Kaufman as a playwright. Many

books and articles about Kaufman reference his shows opening for trial runs in different cities and the changes Kaufman made to the scripts each night after viewing it with a new audience. As an overly critical playwright, perhaps Kaufman makes fun of himself in this scene of the play. He would traditionally find a variety of reasons why his plays were not good enough to afford success, much like the motley crew in *The Butter and Egg Man*. However, he redeemed himself by having Peter Jones come up with ideas to help the show, much like Kaufman often did. At trial runs, Kaufman may have thought his show would not prove victorious, however he always found a way to fix the problems.

Kaufman also broaches the topic of the way theatre operates and the motivation of people who run it in *The Butter and Egg Man*. He clearly makes a statement when he writes about how Joe and Mac swindle Peter out of his money to produce their show. This situation comments on the absurdity of the way things happen in the theatre and the strange and/or greedy individuals involved. One critic for *The New York Times* observed this and incorporated it into his review of the show by stating,

> Finally, it now appears for the first time that the "show" business is not highly organized on intelligent bases, directed by experts who know what they are doing. The "show" business, one gathers, is something of a gamble.[99]

Perhaps this harsh view of theater as a financial gamble drove Kaufman to keep his newspaper job throughout the majority of playwriting career. He knew early on that the theatre business did not guarantee stability, so he kept his "day job" to provide

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[99] "Showing Up the Show Business."

that safe aspect of life for him. Kaufman's lead character Peter Jones takes risks and goes full steam ahead to unmask his own inner feelings. This character may have provided Kaufman enjoyment, as he wished he were daring enough to take the same risks. By writing this character, Kaufman secretly exercised his desire to take an all or nothing gamble on the theatre business.

Within the context of the play, Kaufman specifically wrote certain lines to mock show biz and its absurdity. At the end of Act Two, Scene Two, when Peter and Jane try to convince Oscar to invest in the play, they give him multiple reasons why he should go through with it. When Oscar talks about his hotel manager making him work twelve hours a day, Peter responds, "You don't have to work at all in the theatre." The comedy in this line comes from the fact that as a writer Kaufman probably worked over twelve hours a day in the theatre. Between writing his own plays, meeting with producers to get backing for shows, viewing the latest show on Broadway, and writing for the newspaper, Kaufman barely had time to come up for air. Yet, he made it look simple because of the quality in his work. For individuals involved or working in theatre, the line Peter gives Oscar becomes an even bigger joke. Everyone involved in theatre knows exactly how much work it takes to produce a show and that it never seems to get done. The researcher believes Kaufman included that line for two reasons. One, it offers an inside joke for theatre professionals seated in the audience. And two, it serves as a comment on the alienation between artists, who do all the work, and the producers, who do nothing but get all the money.

Kaufman offered another inside joke specifically for his colleagues – his fellow critics. At the beginning of Act Three, Peter and Jane discuss the notices in the paper about the New York opening of their show. The following passage undoubtedly brought joy to every critic seated in the audience.

> PETER: This fellow missed the whole idea of the play. And he thought the performance was only adequate. A lot they know about it – the critics. I'm thinking of not letting them come at *all* the next time.

This line becomes extremely funny for audience members who knew Kaufman. He basically claims that he doesn't know anything about theatre. This statement could not be farther from the truth. Evidently, Kaufman worried about his knowledge of the business and always second-guessed himself as a playwright. However, as a theatre critic, he felt confident in his abilities to judge productions. As a very tough critic, he often gave unfavorable reviews. Numerous producers and playwrights probably spoke the same line Peter speaks about critics in reference to Kaufman after he reviewed their show. Once again, Kaufman made fun of himself and his colleagues to please his audience.

The previously stated points show first hand how Kaufman used his life to influence his plays. And what a better source to pull from? He was entrenched in the business and knew more about it than anything else. In his first solo work, Kaufman set the scene of his play in a field so familiar that he could not go wrong. Does that make him less of a writer? No, it makes him smarter because he chose to build on his strengths. But why did Kaufman choose to write about the theatre business in *The Butter and Egg Man*? He could have easily created a story about any other business

entrepreneur seeking financial backing. He made this specific choice to enlighten his audience about what they were watching and to comment on the process of theatre.

Reasons For Writing

After reading *The Butter and Egg Man*, one would assume that Kaufman had bad experiences with producers in his life because of the message it puts forth. The play does not provide positive reflections on the producing profession. However, when studying Kaufman's life, the researcher did not find any references to trouble with producers. In fact, because of Kaufman's skill, producers showered him with overly kind treatment. Therefore, one can assume that the play was not specifically meant to bring harm or shame to producers, but in the larger picture, it comments on how dreamers can easily be drawn into the world of theatre based on their love for the art. In the play, Peter had monetary goals when he invested in the show, but he also loved the theatre and wanted to take part in its activities. This love of theatre drove him to New York City in the first place, and also guided him into investing in a play he had never read. The saying "love is blind" applies to Peter. His love is so great that he cannot even see the dangers and risks involved with the business. In reading one biography on Kaufman, the researcher noted a similar event that happened to Kaufman at an early age, which probably sparked the seed from which *The Butter and Egg Man* grew.

At approximately the age of nineteen, Kaufman took a course in acting at the Alveen Drama School. Upon completion, Kaufman replied to an advertisement in a trade paper from a theatre company in Troy, New York seeking a company manager

for the summer season. The ad stated that applicants without past experience could send in one hundred dollars to make up for the lack of skill and still gain employment. Because of Kaufman's desire for theatrics, he managed to scrounge up the money and took the job. Looking forward to a summer full of show business excitement, Kaufman headed to Troy. After only a week there, he realized that the business was not what he had expected and the company simply used him for his initial hundred dollars. At that time, he wired home for return fare to Paterson, New Jersey.[100] The wool had clearly been pulled over Kaufman's eyes. His visions of show business did not concur with those he experienced. His main character in *The Butter and Egg Man* also has the wool pulled over his eyes. Young and naïve, just like Kaufman, Peter invests his money in a business he thinks will provide him with fortune and fame. Even though both Kaufman and Peter had initial bad experiences with the business, it did not effect their determination to succeed.

Statements on Theatre

The success both Kaufman and Peter experience roots itself in their ability to make intelligent choices. Kaufman's choice of writing *The Butter and Egg Man*, allowed him to make specific comments on show business as a whole. Previously, the writer has discussed what statements Kaufman made on specific roles in the theatre business, but now the writer intends to draw conclusions on the bigger picture. The researcher concludes that Kaufman's overall message in the play invites the

[100] Teichmann 18.

audience to believe that show business is dangerous. You must be careful about who you trust in the business, because everyone always seeks to get ahead. Kaufman also reveals how show business can change a person. Peter comes into the story a very impressionable young man. As the story proceeds, the audience sees him turn into the same type of dishonest producer/con-artist that convinced him to get involved with the business. Peter takes on the same qualities, including the talk and mannerism. Show business creates a monster out of Peter and he momentarily forgets what is important to him. Towards the end of the play, Jane points out to him how he has changed. She tells him that he lost something precious about himself by getting involved in the theatre business. Possibly, Kaufman uses the play to warn young artists not to loose their sense of self when working in the business.

Drawing ideas from past experiences and the business he knew most about provided Kaufman with a successful formula when creating new plays. In *The Butter and Egg Man,* Kaufman uses this formula wisely to impart his extensive knowledge of the business to an adoring audience. It is likely that audiences do not walk away from the play consciously thinking about all the issues raised here. However, that is part of Kaufman's brilliance. The researcher believes they do perceive his thoughts, however, do not realize the implications of his work. His work comments on the negative aspects of the business but resists a thoroughly negative tone. He sees and loves the challenging business through rose-colored glasses and ultimately offers us hope and relief from a desperate situation. Truly, Kaufman is one of the best American playwrights.

Chapter Four

The Royal Family

Summary of the Play

The action of the play takes place in the duplex apartment of the very wealthy Cavendish family of New York City. All members of the Cavendish family, including those who do not live at the apartment, have extensive careers in acting. As the curtain rises, the two house employees, Della and Jo, busily move about the apartment, answer the phone and the door, bring in flowers, and deliver food to the rooms on the second floor. From the onset, the audience sees how important the residents of the apartment must be, due to the constant action. After a few moments, McDermott, a personal trainer, enters the stage via one of the rooms on the second level. Amid the constant telephone and doorbell ringing, he questions whether Della and Jo have seen Miss Julie's boxing gloves. They point him to the library, where he retrieves the gloves. As he exits upstairs, Jo asks him to take a telegram to Miss Julie on his way since the doorbell had begun to ring again. After McDermott's exit, Herbert Dean enters from the front door of the apartment. Dean, Julie's fifty-seven year old uncle, comes in with a script and looks for his family. Amazed, Dean questions why his relatives are still in bed at one-thirty in the afternoon. Only moments after Dean arrives his wife Kitty enters the stage looking for her husband. Della and Jo exit, leaving Kitty and Dean alone on stage, to unveil the argument that

brought them both to the apartment. Apparently, Dean wants to produce a play, but does not want Kitty to perform in it. He has someone else in mind for the leading female role. This, of course, enrages Kitty, and they go back and forth over the part. Jo's reentry interrupts their argument and the two immediately become civil, pretending as if no argument had happened. Gwen Cavendish, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Julie, then enters from the front door in riding clothes followed by Perry Stewart, her boyfriend from the upper rungs of the social class. Perry reminds Gwen not to waste time getting ready. They must arrive on time for tea at his mother's house, as Gwen will be the guest of honor. Perry says goodbye and tells Gwen he will return at half past two. Dean speaks to Gwen about her upcoming rehearsal on Monday. He tells her the show will be great because Gwen will appear with her mother Julie, a celebrated star. In the middle of his speech, Fanny Cavendish, the seventy-two year old sister of Dean, enters the stage from her room on the second floor. Gwen greets her grandmother and exits to get ready for her tea. Fanny comes slowly downstairs with her cane and Dean asks what the new doctor has said. She dismisses the question and moves on to another topic. However, the conversation comes back to her health and the audience finds out she has been ill for nearly two years. But, as a strong woman, Fanny refuses to let her health get her down, so she announces that she will soon begin rehearsal to revive an old play, which will tour across the states. As the three of them discuss this and other theatre topics, Oscar Wolfe enters from the front door. Wolfe, the family agent, has come to the apartment to speak with Julie. However, Fanny begins to talk to him about returning to work and Dean starts to talk to him about the new play he wants to have produced with him

as the star. Wolfe ignores Dean and goes to the piano to play a few bars. As he plays, Julie finally makes her grand appearance on the balcony. Julie, a beautiful woman of thirty-nine, descends the stairs talking to the group. McDermott follows behind her, trying to schedule their next session. After they achieve this, he leaves the apartment. Gwen starts to exit up the stairs but her mother stops her with news of a telegram. Julie gets everyone's attention by reading the telegram from her brother Tony, a film actor in Hollywood. The information contained within the note informs the family that he will arrive the next day from California, because he had to run from trouble after punching his latest director. He asks the family to keep his arrival a secret and to ignore anything they read in the paper. Apparently, Tony has a habit of getting himself into trouble, as no one finds this news amazing. After the announcement, Wolfe tells Julie that she and Gwen must convene in his office at three o'clock sharp to meet with the playwright of their new play. He has come in from England and wants to read his script to the cast. Julie puts up a fight about going, insisting it must take place on another day. However, Fanny reminds Julie what she owes Wolfe and that she must go to the meeting for him. Julie reluctantly gives in and promises to arrive at the office by three. After Wolfe leaves, Dean and Kitty begin to argue over the play again. Sick of the arguing, Julie pushes the two into the library. Fanny asks Julie why she put up such a fuss about meeting with the playwright. Julie informed her mother that Gil Marshall, her boyfriend from nineteen years ago, had sent her flowers announcing his arrival in town from South America and his desire to meet with her. Having not seen him in nineteen years, Julie wants to meet with him. At this time, Gwen comes downstairs, dressed for her date with

Perry. Julie informs Gwen she cannot go on her date because she must meet with the playwright, causing another argument to ensue. Tony interrupts the fuss and arrives at the apartment, a day early. Excited to see him and to hear his story of woe, everyone, with the exception of Gwen, follows him upstairs as he tells his story of a director's girlfriend falling for him and how he had to leave the picture. Tony plans to leave the country the next day and wants to sail to Europe. As Tony enters a bedroom, all follow him, leaving Gwen alone and pouting on stage. The doorbell rings and Gwen greets Perry at the door. Gwen informs Perry she cannot go to his mother's tea. These two then argue over the issue and what the future will bring with Gwen involved in the theatre. Perry protests how their marriage will not work unless she leaves the stage. Gwen informs him that she cannot act like a normal housewife and that theatre is in her blood. At the end of the argument, Perry angrily leaves without Gwen. After his exit, Gwen informs her mother that she will not meet with the playwright. In fact, she explains, that she wants out of the family business. She wants a normal life, which she cannot have in the theatre. This announcement causes another argument. As all talk at once, Gwen sits on the sofa crying and the curtain comes down on Act One.

Act Two begins around six o'clock in the evening the following day. Fanny enters from the library looking for Julie, but she remembers that Julie had planned to get a passport for Tony to sail to Europe. Just then, Tony enters fencing with McDermott. Fanny asks the gentlemen not to disturb Gwen, who had felt ill all day. After McDermott exits, Tony speaks to Fanny about his future trip to Europe. Julie then enters frazzled, because fans, reporters, and Wolfe bothered her all afternoon

about Tony. When Tony asks about his passport, Julie informs him that Wolfe promised to take care of it and bring it over. After a few moments, Dean enters the apartment via the front door looking for Wolfe and Julie again. Julie refuses to talk to him because she wants to go upstairs to see Gwen. Dean begs her to listen to him because he needs her help. Of course, Julie postpones her visit with Gwen when she sees his desperation. Dean explains that he needs his new play to be a success because he has not worked for quite a while. He believes that if Kitty gets a part in the play, it will plummet. To prevent this, Dean wants Julie to hire Kitty for a small part in her show. Julie contemplates the issue and finally agrees to help her uncle. When the doorbell rings, Julie finally reaches Gwen's room and goes in to visit her daughter. Wolfe then enters and Dean once again attacks him about his new play. Dean does not give Wolfe time to think about the play and informs he will stop by the office to discuss casting the next day. After Dean leaves, Wolfe talks to Fanny about her upcoming tour. Julie then enters from Gwen's room, stating that her daughter will finally come downstairs. When Julie sees Wolfe, she asks him about Tony's passport. He explains that he will get it after a brief hold. Julie insists he must retrieve the passport so her brother can get out of town, as he drives her crazy. Wolfe informs her he will let her know the moment he gets the passport. After his exit, Gwen comes downstairs to talk with her mother and grandmother. The three women talk about love and theatre. Fanny and Julie give advice to Gwen about marriage and tell her to not give up the theatre. They say she will regret it later in life and hold it against her husband. In the middle of the conversation, Fanny faints on stage. Frightened, Julie calls for help from everyone else in the house. After Fanny comes

to, they all try to take her upstairs to her bedroom, but she faints again on the stairs. After they have her in her room, the doorbell rings. Della answers it to find Gil Marshall, Julie's old boyfriend, asking for Miss Cavendish. Della tells him to come in to wait for Julie, who will return in a few moments. After hearing a commotion in the bedroom upstairs, Gil decides to leave, however Julie stops him just before he exits. They reunite in an embrace and quickly revert to their feelings of maddening love. In the middle of their conversation, Wolfe calls on the phone to say he cannot get a passport for Tony. After she hangs up, Julie breaks the bad news to her brother and he explodes in a whirlwind of emotions and sweeps up and out into a bedroom. Gil stands amazed by Tony's behavior and asks what he can do to help. As soon as she explains the passport situation, Gil immediately phones and makes arrangements to get one. Julie then tells Tony the good news and informs him he must leave in five minutes. Once he retreats into his room to get ready, Julie and Gil again begin to talk. Gil professes his love for Julie and tells her he will not leave her alone this time. He wants to take her away from the craziness that surrounds her world. Julie asks Gil for time to decide and informs him he must leave so she can get ready for her evening performance. Before Tony leaves, both Gwen and Fanny join Julie downstairs for his farewell. Dean and Kitty also enter the stage from the front door just in time to say goodbye to Tony. After he exits, Kitty attacks Julie, questioning her motives on giving her a part in the play. Everything that had happened throughout the past two days finally gets to Julie and she explodes in a crazy temperament. She informs Gwen that she will marry Perry so that she will not ruin her life by staying in the theatre and remaining a Cavendish. She also announces her intentions to leave the

theatre, marry Gil, and travel the world. As she exclaims that she will never have anything to do with theatre again, Jo informs her it is eight o'clock. She grabs her coat and rushes out to the theatre. The curtain falls on Act Two.

Act Three begins one year later. Jo and Della busily prepare the house for the visit of Gwen, her husband Perry, and her new baby boy. Della talks to Julie about her upcoming marriage to Gil, wanting to know if they plan to keep the apartment while traveling the world. After Fanny comes downstairs, Julie tries to convince her to not go on her tour. Julie wants her to stay in New York, where she can get more rest than on the road. Fanny will not hear a word of it and proclaims that she will not leave the stage until she dies. Dean and Kitty then enter with their spirits all aglow. As the family begins to talk, Dean unveils his and Kitty's next stage plans, acting in a vaudeville show. Just as Dean begins to tell the plot of the act, Wolfe enters from the front door. Small talk commences and they go into the library for tea. At this time, Julie pulls Wolfe aside to privately discuss her visit with Fanny's doctor on the previous day. The doctor informed Julie that if Fanny experienced the least bit of strain, she would probably die immediately. Julie continues to explain that Fanny could not go on the tour, and the two had to figure out a way to hide the real reason from Fanny. Wolfe says he will tell Fanny that the tour must be postponed until the spring, due to booking problems. Then in the spring, he will find a new excuse. This idea thrills Julie and she proclaims her adoration for Wolfe. Wolfe then asks if she will still travel the world with her mother so sick. Julie admits that she hopes Gil will take a house in New York during her mother's sickness. After Wolfe realizes Julie will stay in New York, he immediately tries to convince her to do the next show he

plans on producing, a new kind of show that will surly make history. Julie resists the opportunity in the best interest of her marriage. As the two go around and around about the play, Gwen and Perry enter from the front door. The others hear the voices and come out to greet the couple. Gwen tells the family of her plans to return to the stage for a short run in a play for the Theatre Guild. She convinces them that this will not interfere with motherhood since her nurse, Miss Peake, will only let her play with her son four minutes a day. Just then, Gil arrives in a dashing manner and all exchange pleasantries with him. As he tells a story, Fanny stands and exits into the library to finish her tea. The others pick up on the clue and take their exit into the library as well. Gil and Julie, left alone on stage, begin to talk about Gil's trip. Gil tells her about all the people she will meet in South America and how wonderful they are compared to the people she knows in the city. Gil's information seems to disappoint Julie, as she does not respond. Before he can go on, the doorbell rings. Della answers the door and Tony rushes in to surprise the family. He tells the family about how he had caused another girl to break up with her boyfriend and a war between two countries was going to break out on account of this. Tony also tells Wolfe he has bought a new play and wants to play the lead character. He explains this "new" type of theatre to the family, as Perry and Gil grow more disinterested in the story. Suddenly both Perry and Gil remember something else they need to accomplish, so they both exit the family reunion. As Tony continues talking about the play, the baby and nurse arrive. All gather around the baby and admire him. He is appropriately named Aubrey Cavendish Stewart, after Fanny's husband and great acting legend, and the entire family thinks he will go into the theatre. Wolfe suggests

that for his stage debut, little Aubrey should appear in his next play. Unsure of what Perry will say, Gwen does not immediately agree. Miss Peake insists that they take the baby into the library. Everyone crosses into the library, with the exception of Fanny, who remains in her chair. After she raises her glass to toast the picture on the wall of her late husband, she tries to stand. Suddenly she falls back into the chair, the glass falls onto the floor and her head falls forward. She remains motionless, and has passed away. When Julie enters to get her mother, she calls for the others in a shrill voice. As they reach Fanny, the curtain falls on the play.

Production History

After successfully producing a hit with their first collaboration on *Minick*, Kaufman and Edna Ferber decided to team up again and write a new play. Their efforts on *The Royal Family* began in November 1926 and lasted until June 1927. The writers worked countless hours to create the perfect play. Ferber actually conceived the idea for the play and invited Kaufman as a collaborator to inject his wit and writing skills.[101] The two sought out Broadway's newest and most promising producer, Jed Harris, to back their new play. Harris had a reputation for over-reacting and did not like what he saw in rehearsal during the summer of 1927, therefore, he sent the play to Newark, NJ for a trial run. Still uncertain that the play was ready to open in New York, Harris sent the play to Atlantic City, NJ for more trials. With the

[101] Goldstein 136.

show opening on the road, he had hoped the pacing problems would correct themselves before appearing on Broadway.[102]

Finally, on December 28, 1927, *The Royal Family* debuted at the Selwyn Theatre in New York City. Just hours after the closing curtain of opening night, rave reviews full of positive observations filled the pages of New York publications. It seems Kaufman and Ferber had done it again, this time with the show projecting an even bigger success than the one before. The following statements printed by various critics summed up the eventual triumph of the show.

> -*The Royal Family* is about as much fun as any play I have ever seen.[103]
> -George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber have toyed entertainingly and absorbingly with the madness of show folk and the fatal glamour of the footlights.[104]
> -*The Royal Family* was written to order for this town.[105]
> -The main thing is that the show itself, regardless of the affectionate, admiring takeoff, is extremely entertaining and races along with the greatest speed, variety and high spirits.[106]

As a whole, critics loved the new play and encouraged everyone to see it. They praised the plot and action within. Critics felt the play had just the right amount of sentimentality and humor to appeal to all audiences. It proved one of the biggest hits of the 1927 season and Kaufman's biggest hit to date, with a three hundred forty-

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[102] Meredith 245.

[103] Brackett, Charles. "The Royal Family." The New Yorker 7 Jan. 1928: 19.

[104] Atkinson, Brooks. "Mummers All." The New York Times 29 Dec. 1927: 26.

[105] Mantle, Burns. "*The Royal Family* Is Grand; 'Celebrity' A Socking Comedy." Daily News 29 Dec. 1927.

[106] Littell, Robert. "*The Royal Family* with Haidee Wright as the Queen of Them All." Kaufman's Scrapbook, New York Library, 14 Feb. 2004.

five performance run on Broadway. However, it seems that audiences flocked to the theatre to see the *story* of the play and not necessarily the *acting* of the play. As critic Brooks Atkinson noted, "Mr. Kaufman and Miss Ferber have written a more resilient play than the performance expresses; it implies more variety and depth of emotion than the even, sometimes flat, tone of the acting discloses."[107] Other critics also gave mixed reviews to the acting, but the love of the story overshadowed this aspect of the show.

After the New York sensation, a road company formed to take the great play to other cities around the county. Soon after, another company held a steady run in London, with an aspiring young actor named Laurence Olivier playing the role of Tony. Eventually Paramount Pictures bought the rights and premiered the movie under the title *The Royal Family of Broadway* on Christmas day, 1930. The film succeeded as well as the play.[108]

The City Center Theatre attempted a revival of the play on Broadway on January 10, 1951. However, due to mixed reviews, the show only lasted fifteen performances. Critics blamed the failure of the show on the director and actors, claiming that responsibility should not fall on Kaufman and Ferber. John Chapman, critic for the *Daily News,* summed it up nicely when he wrote,

> What with one thing and another the company at the City Center wasn't at its best last evening. Perhaps there hadn't been enough rehearsals, or perhaps it was just one of those nights. At any rate,

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[107] Atkinson "Mummers All."

[108] Goldstein 142.

> some of the players were blowing lines and giving other evidences of uncertainty.[109]

Reviews for the first two productions of *The Royal Family* likewise comment on how the acting missed the mark. But why did both productions fail to provide excellent character work for the audience? Perhaps the directors for both shows did not encourage their actors to study the play or Kaufman's writing style. Within the text of Kaufman's plays, he develops character nuances for each role. He uses the lines to brilliantly convey personality traits, making the actor's job easy. Actors do not have to dig deep to understand the characters. However, somehow the early performers of *The Royal Family* did not pick up on Kaufman's clues. Because the writer has studied several Kaufman plays, the researcher can look into the characters deeper and understand where Kaufman wants the comedy to come from. Another writing trick he employs to create comedy involves placing different personality types on stage at the same time. Good directors will pick up on this hint and guide their actors in creating opposite types. Kaufman's characters also often work against each other, making it difficult to accomplish their goals. This character opposition again generates comical moments for the audience. Another possible reason for failure with this play comes from the complexity of the script. Unlike other Kaufman plays, *The Royal Family* had elements of both a comedy and a tragedy. Some of the characters and situations seem funny, but the deeper meaning and ending to the play definitely attract more dramatic emotion. Perhaps the conflicting nature of the play

[109] Chapman, John. "*The Royal Family* Still a Grand Play About People of the Theatre." Daily News 11 Jan. 1951.

caused confusion for the artists. However, in 1975, both the director and actors picked up on these and other clues.

A second revival of *The Royal Family* fared much better when it opened during the 1975-1976 season. Selected as a part of the Bicentennial season of the Kennedy Center, the play toured to Princeton, NJ, then to Washington, DC, then to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. This Off-Broadway production premiered on December 17, 1975 and ran for fifteen performances. At that time, the play transferred to Broadway at the Helen Hayes Theatre, opening on December 30, 1975. This production of *The Royal Family*, lead by director Ellis Rabb, enjoyed a two hundred thirty-two performances run. The praises for this production out shined the comments from the original production. Critics hailed three significant elements of a good play in their reviews – the writing, the directing, and the acting. As for the writing of the play, one critic states,

> We may not be as familiar with matinee idols or grand dames but Kaufman and Ferber captured them with such affection that the art becomes life where once it was imitation. The play is virtually a teaching manual for the construction of plays that work.[110]

T.E. Kalem compliments the acting of the production by writing, "*The Royal Family* is graced with performances that are almost too good to be true."[111] The direction of this production seemed to get the most recognition. After all, it is the director's vision that carries a play. Clive Barnes for *The New York Times* reports about the directing, "Ellis Rabb's direction has more stylishness than style, and more stylization

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[110] Gottfried, Martin. "A Wonderful 'Family' Bows in Brooklyn." New York Post 18 Dec. 1975.

[111] Kalem, T.E. "Magnificent Obsession." Time 12 Jan. 1976.

than either. Yet it offers a perfect insight not only into a play, but also the period of the play."[112]

Since this 1975-1976 production of *The Royal Family*, another Broadway revival has not appeared. However, who knows what the future will hold? Educational institutions and community theatres continue to revive this classic. It is only a matter of time before Broadway will do the same.

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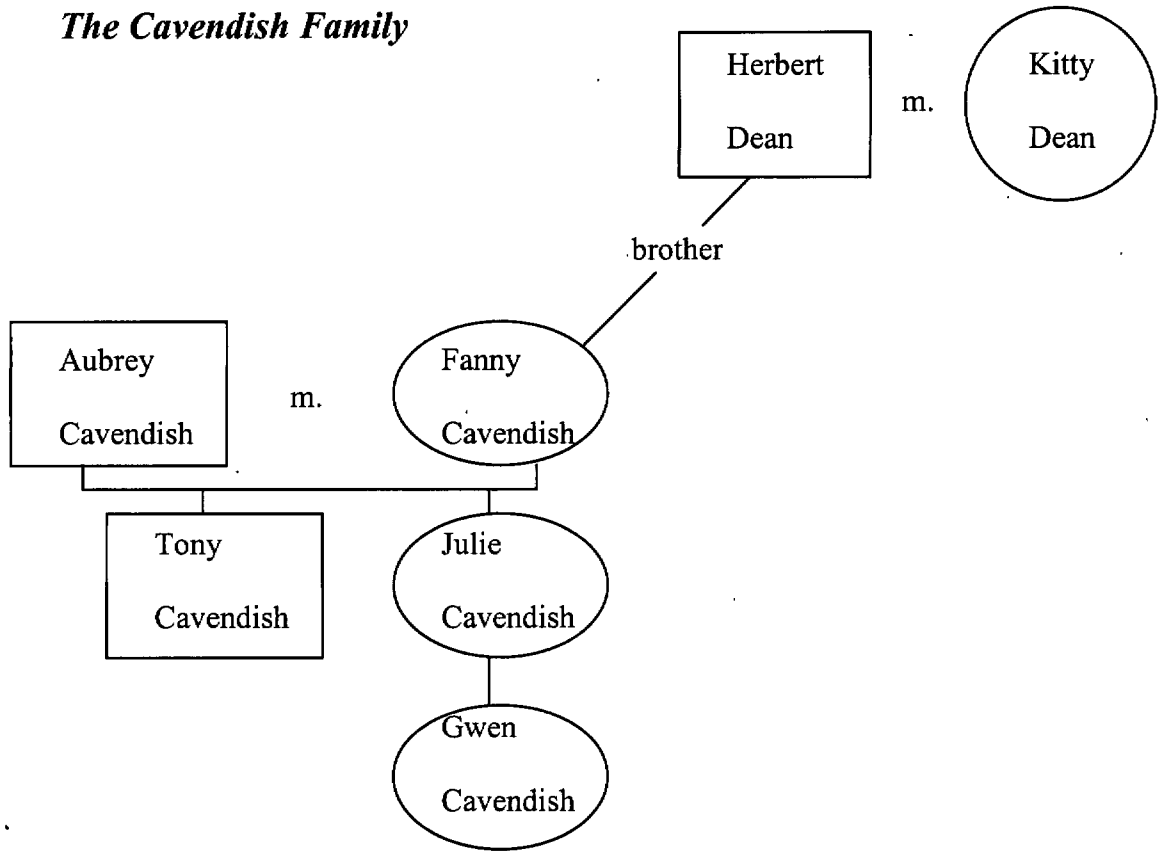
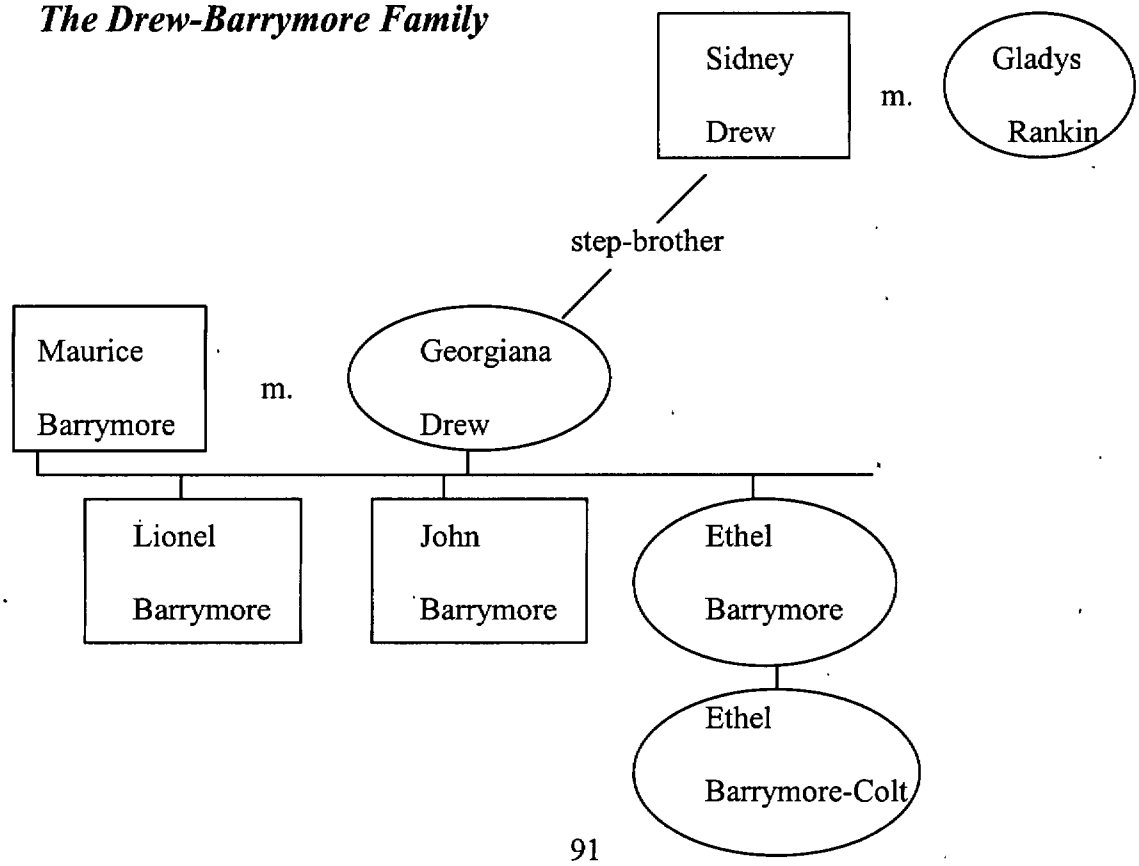
[112] Barnes, Clive. "*Royal Family* Is Revived." The New York Times 18 Dec. 1975:64.

The Cavendish Family



The Drew-Barrymore Family



Cavendish or Drew-Barrymore Family

When questioned which acting family they used as a model for *The Royal Family*, Kaufman and Ferber replied that they had no specific family in mind when writing the play. They went on to say that the character of Tony included traces of John Barrymore, but no others actors served as foundations for characters in their play. When studying the characters in *The Royal Family* and the great acting family of the Drew-Barrymores, one can see that this answer holds no water. In fact, as soon as the play premiered on stage, critics immediately noticed the similarities. Good friend of both playwrights, Alexander Woollcott wrote in his article,

> The house of Barrymore must have been cropping up again and again in the minds of the authors as *The Royal Family* took shape on paper. Certainly there is more than a faint resemblance surviving their stern efforts to banish their King Charles's head.[113]

But what exactly about the characters resemble the most noted acting family of the American stage? To start with, the Drew-Barrymore family received the nickname "the royal family" because of their rich careers on the stage. Surely, it is not by coincidence that their nickname became the title of the play. Similar to the Drew-Barrymores, the Cavendish family from the play also takes on this name because of their long stage reign.

Fanny, oldest living Cavendish family member, has an undying love of the stage and continues to plan her return to the stage once she recovers from her illness. The character of Fanny shows some similarities to Georgiana Drew (1856-93), daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Drew, of the famous acting family. Both the character

[113] Woollcott, Alexander. "The Deep Purple." New York World 29 Dec. 1927.

and the celebrity enjoyed acting careers from a very young age and were inspired by older family members. Research shows that Georgiana had a breezy manner and unique way of tossing lines like bundles of flowers to an audience, a technique that made her a popular comedienne. Fanny's character possesses these same qualities. She often holds the laugh lines, which she tosses out with no great effort. She does not have to work for the laugh; it comes to her easily.

Fanny's deceased husband, Aubrey Cavendish, mirrors the husband of Georgiana, Maurice Barrymore (1847-1905). Maurice, a fantastic new actor from England, met Georgiana when they played opposite one another in the play *Pique*. The couple enjoyed British success before moving to America to explore new stage ventures. In *The Royal Family*, Fanny talks about how she and Aubrey married in England, between a matinee and evening show. Described as a leading man and outstanding Shakespearean actor, Aubrey Cavendish truly mirrors Maurice Barrymore. Another point worth mentioning is Maurice's original name, Herbert Blyth. If Kaufman and Ferber studied this family, they could have chosen to use the name of Herbert for Fanny's brother on purpose.

Which brings us to Fanny's younger brother, Herbert Dean. Sidney Drew (1868-1919), Georgiana Drew-Barrymore's half-brother, possibly served as the image for the character of Herbert. Even though nothing states that Herbert was a half-brother to Fanny, his younger age could suggest this. Approximately fifteen years separate Fanny and Herbert in the play, and similarly twelve years separate Georgiana and Sidney, not a common age difference among siblings. Sidney became a noted stage and vaudeville comedian, which mirrors Herbert's decision at the end of the

play to enter vaudeville, as he cannot get work. Sidney also often appeared on the stage opposite his wife, as did Herbert with his wife Kitty. Not to mention that Sidney's mother-in-law was actress Kitty Blanchard. Another character naming coincidence? I think not.

Fanny's daughter, Julie Cavendish, most obviously displays features of Ethel Barrymore (1879-1959), daughter of Georgiana and Maurice. Brought up in a family of actors, Ethel's star status seemed inevitable. Ethel's title, the First Lady of the American Theatre, given to her because others considered her the greatest actress of her time, is mentioned in *The Royal Family*, in reference to Julie. References in the play also allude to Julie as the greatest actress of her time. Julie reveals the very image of "star quality," much like her counterpart Ethel. Coined for Ethel, the term "glamour girl" also applies to Julie with her first entrance onto the stage. She moves with grace and only dresses in the latest fashions. Before her first entrance, the audience learns that Julie exercises with her trainer by boxing, not necessarily the most popular form of exercise for women. When McDermott comes downstairs before Julie, he mentions her ability to box well. Coincidentally, Ethel's father Maurice was known as a boxing champion, a clue Kaufman and Ferber picked up on and passed onto Aubrey's child Julie. In the story of *The Royal Family*, an old boyfriend from the past has made millions in South America and courts Julie. At the end of the play, Julie plans to marry her long lost boyfriend, however, the play ends before the event occurs. At the end, Julie contemplates the marriage and whether or not it will work due to vast differences. The real life Julie – Ethel – did marry her millionaire, Russell Colt, and, due to differences in lifestyle, the two divorced. Her

daughter of that marriage, Ethel Barrymore Colt, did have some success in the theatre, much like Julie's daughter Gwen in the play.

The character of Tony, son of Fanny and Aubrey, provides the only character that Kaufman and Ferber publicly admitted to modeling after one of the Barrymores. Tony Cavendish represents John Barrymore (1882-1942), son of Georgiana and Maurice. At a young age, John resisted acting but had a small amount of success as a stage comedian. From the moment Tony enters the stage, the audience sees the jokester he portrays. From his wardrobe to his insane antics, Tony brings many laughs to the family and the audience. Another similarity between the two comes in the form of pursuing women. It seems both men constantly chased women, and not average women, but women of society or fame. Tony Cavendish consistently moves around because of women and the trouble he starts with them. One of the biggest clues that gives away Tony's true identity is his involvement with the film business. Tony moved to Hollywood to pursue his film career because he sought more money than Broadway could provide for him. Likewise, John left his stage career at its high point to make movies in California.[114]

So, why did Kaufman and Ferber deny writing the play about the Drew-Barrymore family? Did they think the rest of the world would not realize this obvious comparison? The answer may lie in a misunderstanding between the writers and Ethel Barrymore. After writing the play, they sent the actress the script and asked her to play the role of Julie. Upset by the play, Ethel vowed never to speak to

[114] Banham, Martin. The Cambridge Guide to Theatre. New York City: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 308-309.

either of the playwrights again and threatened a lawsuit.[115] It is unknown as to exactly why Ethel hated the play so much. Perhaps she did not feel comfortable with her and her family's personal lives exposed to general audience members. Also, she may not have liked her character depiction. Although Julie emerges glamorous, she also appears frantic, nervous, and non-committal. Or, perhaps the tragic ending to the play offended Ethel and hit too close to home with her. Despite the reason, Ethel caused trouble for the playwrights.

Quite possibly, lawyers for Kaufman and Ferber insisted that they deny any accusations that the play portrayed the Drew-Barrymore family, in order to avoid a messy court case. Or perhaps, the two simply denied the possible correlation because they wanted revenge on Ethel and her preposterous behavior. When Kaufman and Ferber said that the Cavendish family did not parallel the Drew-Barrymore family, Ethel looked ridiculous to the public because of her reactions to the play. The playwrights made her look like a spoiled child in the public eye. Unfortunately, we will never know exactly why Kaufman and Ferber chose to hide their inspiration for the characters in *The Royal Family*. But, by studying the situation, some deductions become apparent.

Because of Ethel's reaction to the play, Kaufman learned a valuable lesson. He learned that if he chose to include known celebrities in his play, he would need to focus on the nicer qualities of each person. Also, keeping to a public image, instead of private, would allow Kaufman less friendship strains. These learned tactics proved useful when he wrote *The Man Who Came To Dinner* more than ten years later.

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[115] Goldstein 141.

Show Business People

In *The Butter and Egg Man*, Kaufman wrote about the stage business. In *The Royal Family*, Kaufman and Ferber wrote about the other side of the business, the private life of stage stars. Within the dialogue certain inside jokes appear, simply to delight the stage folk in the audience. Robert Benchley picked up on these jokes and wrote about them in his review of the show. He stated, "It may very well be that, unless you are conversant with the peculiarities and shoptalk of theatrical people, some of the dialogue in *The Royal Family* will not send you into the guffaws it sent us."[116]

Overall thoughts about the business also came through in Kaufman and Ferber's writing. Several points the authors clearly made, relate to the thoughts and interests of many stage folk. The first message hidden in the script investigates an actor's necessity to give up everything for his art. Because of this, actors are unable to lead normal lives. This comes through in several of the characters. It appears in Fanny when she talks about having to give up her honeymoon to perform on the stage. Fanny also mentions how her husband Aubrey gave up his health in order to do what he loved most – perform. Julie lives up to this motto when she denies marrying several quality gentlemen in her younger years because they wanted to take her away from the stage. Even at the end of the play, when she plans to marry a millionaire, she contemplates her ability to stay away from her passion of the stage. Gwen's character also displays this sacrifice in the play. Initially resistant, she makes

[116] Benchley, Robert. "The Royal Family." Life 19 Jan. 1928:21.

the same choice of not letting anything come between her and the family's obsession of acting. After her baby's birth, she finds a way to make it okay for her to return to the stage. The Cavendish family cannot deny the blood that runs through their veins. Destined to appear on the stage, the Cavendishes will not allow anything, not even love, come between them and their fate.

The above references refer to the characters mostly giving up something they love in order to act. Throughout the play, other examples of things missed due to acting appear. However, suffering for love provides the common denominator among the characters. Why did Kaufman and Ferber choose to connect all the characters to love? Were they making a reference about all artists and their connection to their work? The researcher believes that both Kaufman and Ferber were also commenting on themselves as well when they included this aspect of the play. Ferber never married, possibly because she felt she could not give up her writing to become a housewife, much like when Julie states she cannot give up acting to live a boring life as a housewife. Kaufman did marry, however, as stated in chapter one, it was not the best marriage. Kaufman spent a lot of time away from Beatrice as he continued his career as a writer. Both writers could not deny the satisfaction they got from writing, therefore, it became easy for them to live without love, or at least less love, in order to fulfill their artistic spirit.

The second message deals with the thought that acting is everything, which Fanny explains to Gwen in Act Two. Fanny comments that your work as an artist does not feel like work, it only feels like fun and play. When you truly love something, as the Cavendish family loved acting, your work becomes enjoyable and

entertaining. This idea of "art is everything" carries through to other artistic professions, including playwriting. Kaufman spent the majority of his life writing for the stage and rarely felt like he was working. Kaufman's true love must have been writing, since he spent the majority of his day, everyday, in front of or near a typewriter. When Kaufman wrote he was able to become other people. In order to clearly write characters, he had to become them in the writing process. For Kaufman, even at an early age, writing became an escape. As a non-athletic, skinny, unattractive, and awkward child, Kaufman became self-conscious at an early age. In order to get away from this reality, Kaufman wrote stories and acted in plays at his church. This self-consciousness carried over into his adult life, as he always seemed nervous around others. However, without these feelings, he might never have written the amount of plays he completed, therefore, denying us the opportunity to enjoy his brilliance.

The third secret hidden by Kaufman and Ferber exemplifies the idea that outsiders to the arts do not understand artists and their passion. This idea clearly appears in two characters, Gil, who wants to marry Julie, and Perry, who marries Gwen. As businessmen, neither can understand why their love interests cannot give up the stage for a life of marriage. They do not see how important the stage has become to both women and what will happen if it is taken away from them. This blindness shows their inability to truly understand the arts. Perhaps Kaufman and Ferber included this aspect to warn other artists of this danger. The two probably witnessed many bad relationships between artists and non-artists. As artists themselves, they understood the importance of art and how difficult it is when

someone tries to come between an artist and their work. This subtle warning shows a compassionate side of both writers, a side not often seen.

The fourth and final message is lighter than the others, but just as important. Throughout the play, Oscar Wolfe, the family's manager, provides members of the family with whatever they need. From paying for a hat Julie has ordered, to producing a play Herbert wants to perform in, to arranging for Fanny's upcoming tour, Wolfe always does what the family wants, no matter how ridiculous the idea. The moral of this story suggests that a good manager will provide for their client and go to whatever lengths necessary to make them happy. Wolfe displays this quality the most when he agrees to help Julie not let Fanny go on the road for a tour, even though the tour would bring him money. Julie tells Wolfe about her mother's serious illness and asks for help. Wolfe comes up with different ideas to push the tour back, leaving Fanny at home for rest. The qualities in Wolfe as a manager equal the qualities all actors want their managers to possess. The manager takes care of a very needy actor, much like a mother takes care of her child. However, did Wolfe take care of the Cavendish family because he felt compassion for them, or because of the fame and monetary possibilities? Any actor playing this role will have to investigate this question and make character choices based on the answer they come up with. When writing the play, Kaufman and Ferber probably wished they had someone like Wolfe in their lives to help further their careers. What they possibly did not realize was that they did have someone like Wolfe. The writers' involvement with the Algonquin Round Table provided them with constant opportunities to further their careers. Outsiders to the Round Table felt that the group only existed to scratch each

other's backs. The circle allowed for many career advancements and opened doors for these social elitists. Consequently, the Round Table is how Kaufman and Ferber met, proving that it served as a vehicle for career development, much like a manager provides career expansion for actors.

Through the comical characters created by Kaufman and Ferber, based on the famous Drew-Barrymore family, audiences of *The Royal Family* get exposed to the wacky home life of actors. And what a wonderful and colorful world it appears as here. This bittersweet comedy remains one of Kaufman's finest and the story holds through the test of time. The play still works and keeps audiences entertained just as much as it did when it opened in 1927.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Summary

This study has offered information about George S. Kaufman and the metatheatrical writing techniques he employed. By providing a concentrated look at Kaufman's life, the researcher has brought to light a faded era and allowed the reader to understand more about Kaufman's motives when writing plays. Three plays written by Kaufman, *The Man Who Came To Dinner* (with Moss Hart), *The Butter and Egg Man,* and *The Royal Family* (with Edna Ferber), served as the main resources for discussing how and why Kaufman used metatheatre as a way to communicate with his audience.

The Man Who Came To Dinner offers metatheatrical links between the characters in his play and celebrities of the day. By including the public personas of his friends and foes in this play, Kaufman provided the audience with new views on celebrity personalities and a clearer understanding of their relationship. The main character, Sheridan Whiteside, provides the largest metatheatrical representation by referring to Alexander Woollcott, a close friend of Kaufman's. The metatheatrical elements of *The Man Who Came To Dinner* suggests reasons as to why Kaufman chose the people he included in the play, and what statements he made by using these people. Kaufman's metatheatrical writing skills proved an asset in writing this play.

The Butter and Egg Man allows audiences an inside look at the way theatre business ran in the 1920s. As the heyday of Broadway, the 1920s saw over two hundred new plays presented each season. Kaufman's solo play, *The Butter and Egg Man*, first premiered in 1925 and offered Kaufman's views on show business during this thriving time period. The play focuses mostly on the role of the producer and provides an enlightened viewpoint of this profession for the audience. Kaufman utilizes metatheatrical techniques by creating a play about theatre and making comments on the process of play production. One over-arching theme found in the play suggests that money and show business can change people into something they are not. Kaufman often witnessed this process and wanted to share his thoughts about it and expose the ridiculousness of the alteration. *The Butter and Egg Man* not only serves as a form of entertainment, but also as a warning of what can happen in the business.

In *The Royal Family*, Kaufman highlighted both character and subject through metatheatrical techniques. Even though he denies it, the play clearly portrays the home life of the famous Drew-Barrymore family. Within the study of this play, the researcher identifies how each character correlates to a significant celebrity of the Drew-Barrymore family. The researcher also offers suggestions as to why Kaufman denied using the famous family as a model for characters when writing the play. The play does not offer information about play production; however, it does offer the audience insight into the world of the actor. Kaufman explores issues dealt with by actors on a daily basis and exposes their private thoughts on how life relates to acting. One strong tone carried throughout the play suggests that actors will give up anything

for the stage. Kaufman paints a picture for his audience that includes all the sacrifices an actor has in order to work in theatre during his day and age. *The Royal Family* not only celebrates the great American acting family, but also all actors pursuing their dreams.

Study Relevance

The importance of this study to contemporary society falls into several different categories. First, and most basic, this study of Kaufman's work adds to what the reader currently understands about theatre history. Because of Kaufman's extensive involvement with theatre, he created a theatre history time capsule within his plays. He provides audiences with a look behind the scenes of show business in the 1920s and 30s. This "inside scoop" he offers parallels modern day TV shows such as "Entertainment Tonight" and "Access Hollywood." Just as our society enjoys learning about the making of movies and what celebrities are doing, Kaufman's society quested for information about the show business culture. Kaufman knew what the public wanted and he provided them with a clear picture. This same picture now provides us with a historic description of what theatre entailed during its heyday.

This study also provides modern readers with a look at Kaufman and his writing style within the social context of his day. When his plays are produced today, audiences compare his work to what they know of show business in a modern context. However, this study allows readers to begin to truly place his work in the correct time period. Contextual clues also provide inside information to modern audiences about Kaufman and his train of thought. As one of the biggest

moneymakers in American theatre history, Kaufman's life and style become important to a scholarly community.

Playwrights will find this study informative and revealing. Because of Kaufman's success, many theatre professionals look to him for inspiration. By surveying this study, a playwright can learn from Kaufman's techniques and try to reproduce the effort in their own work. The study identifies elements of metatheatre Kaufman used and how he applied them to his work. By understanding Kaufman's process, aspiring playwrights can model their skills after him.

The final relevance of this study provides insights to directors and actors. By studying the information offered, directors and actors can gain a clearer understanding of Kaufman's intentions when writing plays. By realizing his intentions for these three plays, directors and actors can begin to draw similar conclusions about his other work. This study provides the groundwork for individuals to make their own assessments of Kaufman's plays. Directors will realize that Kaufman's plays most often have an overall theme and will begin to focus on these ideas in rehearsals. Because this study explains how Kaufman often created characters from existing people in his life, actors will understand the importance of studying the lives of those surrounding Kaufman. This research will provide the actor with a stronger character in which to root his performance, therefore, allowing the audience a more enjoyable experience.

Further Applications

With additional time, the researcher could provide the reader with more information about Kaufman and his work. This study only focuses on three plays; however, a larger study might include several added plays. When examining more of Kaufman's work, the researcher could identify other uses of metatheatre and how it influences Kaufman's career. With a larger base of investigation, the researcher can begin to compare and contrast different plays and examine how Kaufman's views changed throughout time. Another avenue of research could focus on the different levels of metatheatre included in plays written with various collaborators. All these suggested studies provide a greater knowledge of one of the most successful playwrights in American theatre.

Final Thoughts

In the introduction to this study, the researcher posed questions regarding Kaufman's success. Was he simply in the right place at the right time, did he merely surround himself with the right people, or was he truly a gifted writer? In response to Kaufman being in the right place at the right time and surrounding himself with the right people, the researcher suggests that the social group Kaufman took part in provided him with observations that allowed him to create rich characters in his plays. Without these personalities to draw on, Kaufman may not have seen the same success. The influence of his professional world and society clearly comes through in all of his work.

As for being a truly gifted writer, the research set forth in this study provides evidence of his talent. Collaborators who worked with Kaufman spoke highly of his writing skills and work ethics. One of his most famous collaborators, Moss Hart, wrote about Kaufman in his autobiography, "His ear for a comedic line was faultless and his zeal for the precise effect he wanted boundless."[117] Evidence of his gifted writing also resides in the fact that his plays still frequent the stage today. Kaufman's ability to create plays that stand the test of time speaks volumes about his expertise in playwriting. With these things in mind, it is clear that George S. Kaufman is one of America's greatest – and most treasured - playwrights.

[117] Hart, Moss. Act One: An Autobiography. New York: Random House, 1959, 285.

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