

Richmond Hill's "You Can't Take It with You" Is All (Kaufman &) Hart

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

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

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

Because the heart of *You Can't Take It With You*, of course, is forever in its performers. One of the reasons this play has endured is that it's practically foolproof: How often are you treated to a non-musical cast of 19, 16 of whom are allowed to be

funny

? Consequently, in any production of this work, there's almost always

someone

guaranteed to make you laugh. (The characters in Hart & Kaufman's comedy pop out like the show's oft-referenced fireworks; they make some noise and glow, and are best enjoyed when lots of them do it simultaneously.) And what's lovely about Richmond Hill's production is that even the performers who seem unpolished and even awkward are at least engaged in their

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material, and have a sweetness of spirit that fits with the show's lazy-Sunday-afternoon appeal. Somehow, Richmond Hill has managed to snag a cast of 19 absolutely *charming* actors.

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

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

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

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

You Can't Take It with You continues at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through June 12, with performances at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and 4 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$8. For reservations, visit <http://www.rhplayers.com> or call (309)944-2244.