

Written by Mike Schulz

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There are wonderfully fresh, unexpected grace notes all throughout the Timber Lake Playhouse's presentation of *You Can't Take It with You*, but you have to be quick to catch them. Then again, for much of the show's length, you have to be quick to catch just about *anything*.

As someone who's now seen seven separate stage versions of Kaufman & Hart's beloved Depression-era family comedy, I'm impressed, and more than a little grateful, that director Brad Lyons has managed to clock the thing in at a zippy two hours. Yet while Timber Lake's latest is paced within an inch of its life, what's gained in tempo is oftentimes lost in meaning. The playwrights' moral can be succinctly boiled down to "Stop and smell the roses," but the characters here seem nearly *incapable* of stopping; for a play that espouses the simple pleasures of kicking back and relaxing, there's not much about the show that's actually relaxed. *You Can't Take It with You*

is one of those theatrical chestnuts that actors can breeze through without much effort (or inspiration), and happily, no one in Lyons' almost alarmingly well-cast presentation appears to be working on autopilot. Working on fast-forward, though, comes with its own hazards.

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As most of you are no doubt aware, the show opens with an introduction to the big-hearted yet eccentric Sycamore clan, led by the family's sage, quick-witted grandfather, Martin Vanderhof (played here by Robert Maher). His spacious New York dwelling - a stunningly beautiful piece of Joseph C. Heitman set design - is home to numerous family members and drop-ins, and the play's first act is an extended getting-to-know-you with these friendly flakes, leading to a climax in which the gang is forced to throw an impromptu dinner party for the Kirbys (the excellent John Knight and Sarah A. Ruden), the in-laws-to-be of the lone "normal" Sycamore, Alice (Heather Herkelman).

By *You Can't Take It with You's* halfway point, the audience is primed to expect comedic Act II fireworks - including *literal* fireworks - between the goofy Sycamores and the repressed Kirbys, and in Timber Lake's presentation, they certainly do come. It's just that Act I is so relentlessly orchestrated that by the time the Kirbys finally enter, we've barely had the chance to get to know the Sycamores *ourselves*

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This isn't necessarily damaging for some characters; Essie (Kelli Koloszar), the determinedly untalented wannabe ballerina, and Ed (Justin Banta), her pleasantly vacant husband, are pretty thin (albeit enjoyable) comedic constructions to begin with, so the quicker their shtick moves along, the better. But *everyone* here seems directed to perform at top speed, and consequently, there's little opportunity for the characters to emerge as individuals. (Not much separates one endearing nutjob from the rest.) Samantha Dubina's aspiring-playwright Penny suffers the worst in these early scenes; at Thursday's performance, this spirited, fearless comic actress rattled off her dialogue with such inhuman perkiness that she began to resemble a wind-up doll. But even Alice and her beau, Tony (Nick Toussaint), fall victim to the tempo, as their late-night rendezvous - which should be the act's one sequence of unadulterated *calm*

- is as breathlessly paced as any of the act's manic encounters. Herkelman and Toussaint are incredibly charming, yet their characters' romance is all but thrown away here, and without it, *You Can't Take It with You* is merely a collection of engagingly outsize comic turns.

Thankfully, with an ensemble this gifted, that "merely" is nothing to sniff at. There are absolutely first-rate portrayals by Matthew Griffin, whose hanger-on Donald is a fantastically unapologetic loafer, and by Jeremy Day, whose Russian dance instructor is a marvel of vainglorious confidence. (Notice how the actor stands, as if ready to plié at a moment's notice.) Nathan Grant, Shannon Boland, and Brandon Ford provide vibrant bursts of personality. And nearly

Grandfather Knows Best: "You Can't Take It with You," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through June 28

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every cast member is allowed, at one point or another, to come through with touches so randomly, refreshingly *human* that their seemingly spontaneous bits wind up amusing you even more than their dialogue does: Michael J. Yarnell's Paul, attempting to pull on pants without first removing his shoes; Banta's Ed gently smoothing down Tony's mussed-up hair; Herkelman's Alice kissing her fiancé with a curt politeness that shows just how much she wants to strangle him.

And the best of the lot is Maher's grandpa, partly because this stage veteran is such a polished, supremely agreeable performer, and partly because he subtly alters the play's rhythms by casually tossing off his punchlines from under his breath; despite much fine work from his co-stars, Maher is the one performer here who doesn't feel continually *on*, and his readings have an ease and tranquility that I wished had permeated more of *You Can't Take It with You*

. I applaud Timber Lake's participants for not (as they easily could have) merely going through the motions with this venerable crowd favorite, but giving the material more of a chance to breathe might've revealed why it's a crowd favorite to begin with.

For tickets, call (815) 244-2035.