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YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU * 1/2 out of ****
LONGACRE THEATRE

They're setting off fireworks at the Longacre Theatre, but unfortunately I only mean that literally. The excuse is Moss Hart and George Kaufman's Pulitzer Prize-winning comedy *You Can't Take It With You*, in which fireworks prove a key plot point and an excuse for lighting up the stage in the middle and the end of the show. You can even see the fireworks in the commercial for this talent-stuffed revival.

But there are no artistic fireworks to be found, just a few "pops!" and "pows!" here and there, the inevitable result of allowing a lot of very good actors to do what they can to elicit laughs. Hart immortalized his collaboration with Kaufman on an earlier comedy with the classic autobiography *Act One*, a work superior to anything they did together, in my opinion. Buy it immediately if you have any love for theater or just good writing. Their theatrical peak came with *The Man Who Came To Dinner* and right before that, *You Can't Take It With You*, which enjoyed their longest run on Broadway. It also snagged the Pulitzer and went on to become a smash hit movie directed by Frank Capra and starring Jimmy Stewart that won Best Picture and Best Director.

You Can't... is a very particular forced bit of whimsy that flourished for a while in the theater. In its worldview, eccentricity is the true hallmark of democracy and only the oddest sorts are genuinely free spirits that deserve our respect. That point is made over and over again via the romance between a young woman named Alice and the wealthy young man Tony. Alice's family is hyper-eccentric and thus honest and good and true. Her sister Essie (Annaleigh Ashford) makes candy to bring in some money but yearns to be a ballet dancer. Essie's husband Ed (Will Brill) is a nervous nelly who loves to print off catchy phrases on his printer when not awkwardly standing around or pointing fingers like a cowboy with a gun at everyone he meets. Alice's mother Penelope (Kristine Nielsen) is forever typing away at melodramas for the stage with lurid titles. Her father Paul (Mark Linn-Baker) spends all his time in the basement crafting illegal fireworks.

But Grandpa (James Earl Jones) is the craziest of all in the eyes of the world: he was a successful businessman before suddenly deciding it wasn't any fun and just quitting. Quitting! Now he likes to collect pet snakes, go to the zoo and attend commencement speeches. What kind of life is that? Well, a happy one as Hart and Kaufman tell us, over and over again.

When the suitor Tony's parents show up, you can be sure the nuttiness will be on full display: her sister will be twirling about, her father will be setting off explosions while he tests new bottle rockets, her mother will drag home drunken actresses (Julie Halston), her sister's tutor (a crazy Russian revolutionary) will bring home a supposed Countess Olga (Elizabeth Ashley) related to the late Tzar and at any moment the authorities will pop in and make trouble over some "misunderstanding" like unpaid taxes, dangerous munitions and the like.

A little whimsy goes a very long way and unfortunately *You Can't Take It With You* has enough to last a lifetime. This is the fourth Broadway revival and it's unlikely to do any better than the last three. (Jason Robards starred in the 1983 stab at this creaky war horse, which lasted an okay 312 performances.) There's a reason the film isn't mentioned as a key work in the career of Capra or Stewart and the show hasn't been mounted in 30 years. It's archaic, stodgy and just not very good, right down to the fussy two intermissions for a show that could be over in under two hours without them.

The scenic design by David Rockwell is sadly appropriate: it's a cluttered home where every inch of wall space is filled with photos and artwork and masks and bric-a-brac of every sort. This captures the nature of the family but in a way so literal and obvious that it unintentionally typifies the flat, heavy-handed nature of the play itself. The costumes of Jane Greenwood avoid jokiness for the most part and the lighting and sound design do what they must with off-screen explosions for punchline effect and onstage whiz-bangs for the finale. Subtlety is not called for. Jason Robert Brown perhaps does the best job on the tech side by capturing the playful exuberance of the music of the 1930s without catering to humorous underlining of the material.

Scott Ellis has a large cast and lets them loose to make the most of what's at hand. In truth, most everyone has a moment of silliness, though it's all so fitful that no real momentum can be sustained and each of them must often labor through other bits of business that are less successful. Typically, Rose Byrne is fine as the voice of sanity in her home (she gets it from her dad, apparently, since Linn-Baker keeps his part relatively toned down and real). She's less good when throwing herself at the feet of her love's snobbish mother (Johanna Day). Ashford on the other hand, is somehow very funny when putting on a ballet pose while resting on the floor near that same woman. But Ashford must also twirl around non-stop, a joke that gets old even when it's new. The same is true up and down the line, with the lone exception of Jones.

That lion of the stage never roars here: James Earl Jones plays Grandpa as an eminently reasonable man, benignly smiling and indulging his happy brood. Ellis gracefully showcases Jones as the center of this thin comedy, often seated in a chair literally at the heart of the action swirling around him, with just enough movement (coming in or standing up at a key moment) to disguise the fact that Jones is seated almost more than the biting critic waylaid in *The Man Who Came To Dinner*. Believe me, Hart and Kaufman's ode to the joys of not working for a living is music to my ears. And I enjoy eccentricity as much as the next person. It's just not the ultimate peak of life and a lot more fun in small doses -- or at least with some humor or insight beyond the mere fact of its existence.

Still, while everyone around him is working their bums off to get some laughs, Jones is wise and sweet and an actual, identifiable real person. That makes him the craziest character of all in this strained story. When Jones pauses at the beginning and end to pray and the rest of the cast bows their head and the lights dim and he turns to address us simply and directly, it's beautiful and funny and a little moving. If only Hart and Kaufman had shown similar restraint in the rest of the show.

Here's a trailer for the Oscar-winning film version.