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Review: You Can't Take It With You James Earl Jones Shines

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 1st, 2014



Rose Byrne and James Earl Jones. Photo: Joan Marcus

Though it's nearly 80 years old and the leading man is even older than that, the new Broadway revival of that favorite of high-school and community theater, *You Can't Take It With You*, packs quite a kick. The comic template is familiar through variations from *The Munsters* TV series to *La Cage Aux Folles*. When the "normal" offspring of an outrageously eccentric family brings home the conventional parents of his/her beloved, all hell breaks loose. But the Pulitzer winning 1936 script by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart holds up admirably while director Scott Ellis and a delightful cast of Broadway vets run the mad antics like comic clockwork.

Written during the Depression, *You Can't Take It With You* fulfills a fantasy of pursuing your passion, however frivolous, in spite of economic necessity and government interference. The Sycamore clan practice their outlandish hobbies, including playwriting, snake collecting, ballet dancing, manufacturing fireworks, xylophone playing, and throwing darts in David Rockwell's wonderful knick-knack-stuffed set. Their only visible means of substantial support are provided by property income from retired Grandpa (a jovial James Earl Jones) and the salary earned by the practical daughter Alice (a sparkling Rose Byrne) as a Wall Street secretary who sets the comedy in motion when she falls in love with the boss's son, Tony Kirby, Jr. (a dashing Fran Kranz). The inevitable clash between the fun-loving Sycamores and the stuffy Kirbys provides the plot, but the main action is watching an enormous—by contemporary Broadway standards—company expertly cut up.

Best known for his dramatic turns, Jones displays a bubbly humor as the warm-hearted Grandpa, particularly when convincing the ulcer-ridden broker Kirby Senior (the expert Byron Jennings) to relax a little and stop obsessing over wealth. In what could have been a drab ingénue role, Byrne gives Alice her own slight madness, showing she is truly a part of the same family as her nuttier relations. As Alice's mother Penny, Kristine Nielsen, who has made a career of playing daffy mothers, sisters, and aunts, gives her expected brilliant turn, adding just the right inflection or gesture to accentuate Penny's goofy observations. She even manages to make uttering the word "potato" hilarious. Reg Rogers draws guffaws as the Russian ballet master Kalenkhov, stretching out his lines and loping around the stage like a Slavic Snagglepuss. Even the tiniest cameos shine brightly here, with Johanna Day adding subtext to the snobbish Mrs. Kirby, Elizabeth Ashley imperially imposing as an exiled Russian duchess working as a waitress, and Julie Halston drunkenly lurching up the stairs as an alcoholic visitor.

But even in this glittering company, there are two standouts: Annaleigh Ashford and Will Brill as

Alice's kooky sister and brother-in-law, Essie and Ed. Essie studies ballet with Kalenkhov while Ed accompanies them on the xylophone and usually that's all we see them do. But Ashford and Brill give this crazy pair such a full, zany life, you can't take your eyes off them even they are standing to the side and watching the main action. Ashford invents wild dance moves for Essie, creating a brilliantly funny portrait of a woman with two left feet who thinks she's Pavlova. Likewise Brill endows Ed with a pretended sophistication manifesting itself in riotously weird gestures and behavior. They are a perfect pair of lovable loons, happy in their own world, just like all the Sycamores and theatergoers lucky enough to catch them.

Opened Sept. 28 for an open run. Longacre Theatre, 220 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed. and Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including two intermissions. \$37-\$152. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

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