

ROUNDAABOUT THEATRE COMPANY

American Airlines Theatre

THE Man WHO CAME TO Dinner



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THE Man WHO CAME TO Dinner

by Moss Hart & George S. Kaufman
directed by Jerry Zaks

WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

Traditionally, we don't think of the situation comedy as a vehicle for deep meaning. That honor is generally reserved for the melodrama and the tragedy. In fact, beginning with the Greeks, comedy was defined as "an episode of everyday life involving no serious dangers." So, on those grounds it would be easy to dismiss *The Man Who Came to Dinner*--the 1939 comedy by George S. Kaufman & Moss Hart--as a mere bauble, just an evening's entertainment. And given the energy and freneticism that inform the play, a staple of the Kaufman & Hart style, any attempt to uncover a more profound reading could easily be obscured by the sheer breakneck hilarity of the proceedings. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* reveals itself as something richer: it is a surprising meditation on modern celebrity and the illusion of the "glamorous lifestyle."

The action is set in the small, bucolic town of Mesalia, Ohio. Sheridan Whiteside--reportedly modeled on the real-life *New York Times* drama critic Alexander Woollcott--is himself a famous journalist and radio personality. But as such, he is a man of impossible dimensions: he is stunningly rude, demanding, egotistical, meddlesome, self-absorbed, and manipulative. A shameless name-dropper, he even refers to Mahatma Gandhi as "Boo Boo." Because of a mishap that results in a broken hip, he finds himself the unwilling houseguest of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley. But, Mr. Whiteside is not the type of character to have his lifestyle interrupted, and he proceeds to wreak havoc, upending the Stanleys' middle-class life. It is here that Kaufman & Hart harness the energy of the screwball comedy to delicious effect.

Baggage, books, penguins, cockroaches, choirboys, octopi, and a queue of strange personalities--all friends of Whiteside, of course--descend on the Stanley household. He commandeers the entire first floor of their house. He convinces their son to run off on a freighter, and the daughter to elope with an anarchist.

And at his most selfish turn, he attempts to thwart the love life of his own secretary, Maggie Cutler. She has fallen in love with a local reporter and aspiring playwright, and she threatens to leave Whiteside to pursue her romance.

To be sure, the character of Whiteside (or "Sherry" as his friends call him) brings with him a certain glamour and excitement. For the Stanleys, an ordinary Ohio

family, and for Maggie as well, he represents the welter of the outside world--a world of creativity and action, ideas, achievement, connections and, not least, sensuality. The Stanleys are awed by Sheridan Whiteside's sheer worldliness.

But if Whiteside provides those not in his sphere with excitement and a glimpse of glamour, his particular brand of glamour brings instability and, ultimately, an untenable loneliness. "Sherry" is a man lavished with gifts but not with intimacy. He is forever being visited by friends, but never by lovers. And when friends do stop by, it is only for a moment, generally to talk about themselves, and then they're off again. Even so, he is blinded to his condition by his own arrogance. When Maggie announces her plans to marry Jefferson, the news reporter, he tells her: "I cannot believe that a girl who for the past ten years has had the greats of the world served up on a platter before her--I cannot believe that it is anything but temporary insanity when you are swept off your feet by a second-rate, small-town newspaper man."

In the end, average as they are, the Stanleys possess something that Whiteside does not--the emotional closeness of family and home.

Whatever his other numerous faults, Whiteside's central and most romantic flaw is this: he believes that he's actually better than most people are simply because he's more interesting. It is no small coincidence that this is the very malady that we suffer from in our own media-crazed era: that celebrity automatically equals a better life. For as Kaufman & Hart see it--the truth is that "the glamorous life" may be thrilling, but by itself it is emotionally empty. Why else is Whiteside so eager to insinuate himself into the personal lives of other people? It is because he has no personal life of his own. In the play's final moments, he realizes that he must let go of Maggie and allow her to have her personal happiness or else risk losing her friendship altogether.

In what could otherwise be taken as just a dusty old comedy, Kaufman & Hart illustrate for us a very vital lesson, one that in our own fame--obsessed era we would do well to remember: in the end, it's not whom you knew, but whom you loved that matters.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Sheridan Whiteside (played by *Nathan Lane*) A pompous critic, lecturer, radio personality, and "friend of the great and near great."

Maggie Cutler (played by *Harriet Harris*) Sheridan Whiteside's secretary of 10 years.

Lorraine Sheldon (played by *Jean Smart*) A glamorous actress known for her chic wardrobe.

Bert Jefferson (played by *Hank Stratton*) Editor for the local newspaper, the *Mesalia Journal*.

Mr. Stanley (played by *Terry Beaver*) A factory owner that finds himself threatened by Sheridan Whiteside.

Mrs. Stanley (played by *Linda Stephens*) The lady of the house who tries to accommodate both her guest and her husband.

Richard (played by *Zach Shaffer*) The Stanleys' son who has hopes of his own.

June (played by *Mary Catherine Garrison*) The Stanleys' daughter who has dreams of her own.

Harriet (played by *Ruby Holbrook*) Mr. Stanley's sister who possesses a mysterious past.

Sandy (played by *Ryan Shively*) a union organizer.

Miss Preen (played by *Mary Catherine Wright*) Sheridan Whiteside's nurse.

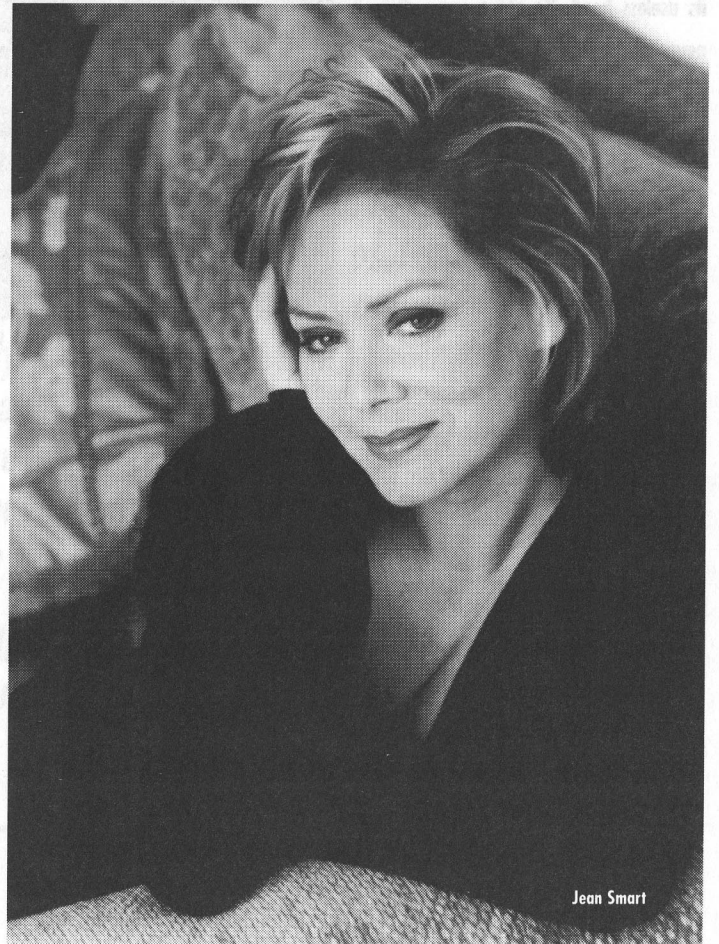
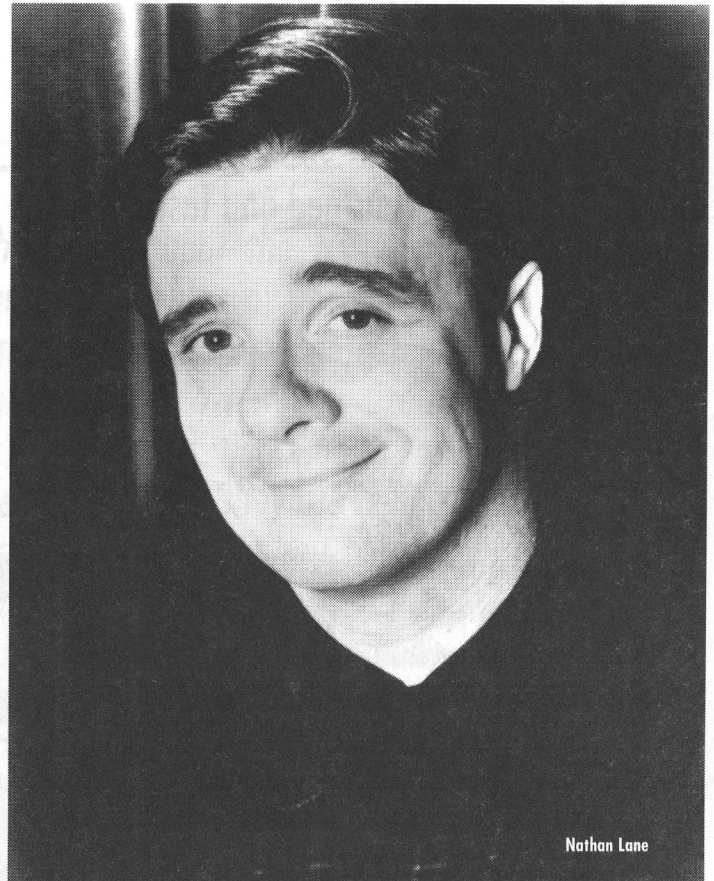
Dr. Bradley (played by *William Duell*) A doctor with lofty aspirations.

Adolph Metz (played by *Stephen De Rosa*) A German friend of Sheridan's who is the world's greatest authority on insect life.

Beverly Carlson (played by *Byron Jennings*) A sophisticated English playwright, songwriter, actor and world traveler.

Banjo (played by *Lewis J. Stadlen*) A charismatic movie actor.

The cast also includes servants, townspeople, prisoners, choirboys, deputy sheriffs, etc.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George S. Kaufman (1889-1961)

Moss Hart (1904-1961)

"Pray for me, for I'm off on the second act of a new play. I am still charmed and fascinated by the amusement racket."

-Signed [Moss] Huckleberry Hart

Time magazine once described George S. Kaufman--*The New York Times* drama critic, playwright, and director--as "a rumpled man with hair like boxwood and a permanent expression of bereavement." And, although he was held in the greatest respect professionally, in person he could be cold, cantankerous and distant even to his friends. Possessing the sharpest of wits, his comments were known to terrify waiters, barbers, taxi drivers, stage managers, and actors alike--anywhere incompetence reared its useless head. He ate a spare diet, never traveled by plane, and disdained what he called "modern gadgetry" and modern life in general.

By contrast, Moss Hart--Kaufman's writing partner for nearly ten years--was held in enormous affection by his showbiz peers. He utterly adored luxury and took great pleasure in his success. He loved offering his guests cigarettes from a gold case, often bought lavish gifts on a whim, and was known to be an impeccable dresser. Hart was also one of the first prominent writers to undertake psychoanalysis, a most modern extravagance.

Yet together, and perhaps ironically, the cantankerous Mr. Kaufman and the extravagant Mr. Hart comprised one of the wittiest, most influential, and most successful writing teams in American theatre history. Throughout the 1930's, they dominated the Broadway stage, together producing eight hilarious comedies. Among their most popular titles were: *Merrily We Roll Along* (1934), which in 1981 was adapted into a musical by Stephen Sondheim; *You Can't Take It With You* (1936), which won them the Pulitzer Prize; and *George Washington Slept Here* (1940).



Moss Hart (standing) and George S. Kaufman

George S. Kaufman was born in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1889, and later moved with his family to Paterson, NJ. Despite his aspirations to become a writer, Kaufman began his working life in New York as a wholesale ribbon salesman. But contributions of quips and humorous verse to a notable newspaper column led to his being guided into the job of writing a column of his own. This in turn eventually led to his becoming drama editor of the *New York Times*, under the tutelage of Alexander Woollcott, then chief drama critic of the venerable newspaper.

Moss Hart was born in New York City in 1904 to poor parents who had immigrated from England just before he was born. In the early 1920's, one of Hart's first theatrical jobs was as a social director in the adult summer camps in upstate New York, then euphemistically known as the "borscht-belt." It was his job to put together musical revues every Saturday night to entertain the guests. This, as well as directing assignments in the winter months, would prove to be invaluable experience for his later efforts as a playwright.

By the late 1920's, George S. Kaufman was already an enormous success. Having scored his first hit in 1921 with the play *Dulcy*, he was forever in demand as a first-rate collaborator. He was equally skilled in almost all varieties of theatre: social satire, as in *Dinner at Eight* (written with Edna Ferber); musicals, as in *Of Thee I Sing* (written with Morrie Ryskind and George & Ira Gershwin)--the first musical ever to win the Pulitzer Prize, and *The Cocoanuts* (written with Irving Berlin). With Mr. Ryskind, he also wrote the screenplays for the Marx Brothers' films *The Cocoanuts*, *Animal Crackers* and *A Night at the Opera*.

Moss Hart was still a struggling writer, when he was introduced to Kaufman in 1929 by the highly reputed producer, Sam Harris. Hart had written a comedy--his sixth attempt--titled *Once In a Lifetime*. Mr. Harris had agreed to produce the play, if Hart would re-write it in collaboration with Kaufman. Hart accepted. By September of 1930, Kaufman & Hart had their first smash hit, and an historic theatrical partnership was born.

HART AND KAUFMAN: CLASSIC COLLABORATORS

"There can be no mystery, however, about the fact that collaboration is an infinitely more pleasurable way of working than working alone. Most human beings fear loneliness, and writing is the loneliest of the professions. Writers agonize a great deal about the loneliness of their craft, and though the wailing is apt to be a little deafening at times, they are telling the truth. . . . Collaboration cuts this loneliness in half. When one is at a low point of discouragement, the very presence in the room of another human being, even though he too may be sunk in the same state of gloom, very often gives that dash of valor to the spirit that allows confidence to return and work to resume."

- Moss Hart, from his autobiography Act One, 1959

"A thought on collaboration: It is marriage without sex, and subject to many vexations. But pay no attention to them, because in one respect at least it is wonderful. The total result is frequently far more than the combined abilities of two people might give you - one person feeds the other, and in some way something absolutely great comes out of it - much better than the two talents added together. It is like a geometrical progression, if you ever got that far in school. The two people often fly far above their talents, and if I don't know about collaboration, who the hell does?"

- George S. Kaufman, in a letter to writer and Kaufman collaborator Howard Teichman, 1955

RADIO DAYS



Alexander Woollcott, the inspiration for Hart and Kaufman's Sheridan Whiteside, the eccentric critic and radio personality in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.

By the time Kaufman & Hart had created *The Man Who Came To Dinner* in 1939, America had experienced its first full flowering of mass media. It serves as testament to Kaufman & Hart's instinctive understanding of Americans that they would choose a person such as Sheridan Whiteside--a renowned radio raconteur--as the central character of their play. The impact of radio on the imagination of ordinary Americans like the Stanleys was quite profound. Radio, advertising, and the mass circulation of magazines and the tabloid press all arrived in the 1920's and proceeded to explode during the ensuing decade. But with that explosion, a very 20th century brand of fame and our own complex responses to it were born.

No doubt, it is hard for contemporary Americans to imagine. Inundated as we are by 24-hour cable, film, video, DVD's, CD's, Walkmans, and now the open possibility of the Internet--the comings and goings of the famous and the infamous seem part of the cultural wallpaper. But for Americans of the 1930's, radio was truly a stunning innovation. For the first time in history, it was now possible for one to get news, entertainment, world events, advice, gossip and information, and never have to leave one's home. Americans were spellbound. A new, surprisingly dangerous and thrilling world was coming into the nation's living rooms. Never before had the world been so populated with the doings and un-doings of so many famous people. Kaufman & Hart, no doubt, understood this phenomenon. It would be only natural for a mid-western family like the Stanleys to be awed by a character like Whiteside.

In September of 1930, approximately 12 million homes were equipped with radio receiving sets. As radio's technology improved, the price of a receiver became ever more affordable. The lower-cost table models, as opposed to the bulky "console" sets, exploded in popularity. By 1935, even after several years of depression, the number of radios in the home had leaped to 22 million--or approximately two-thirds of all homes in the United States. By September of 1941, over 29.5 million, or roughly 87 per cent of all homes in the United States were glued to their radio sets.

Networks and national advertisers--such as Chesterfield Cigarettes, Texaco Oil, Coca-Cola, and Ivory Soap--poured enormous sums of money into creating new programs. Soap operas such as *The Guiding Light* on NBC, dramas such as *The Lone Ranger* and *The Shadow*, and comedies such the controversial *Amos & Andy* and *Fibber McGee & Molly* filled the airwaves. The radio made instant celebrities out of such performers as Jack Benny, Orson Welles, Abbott & Costello, and musicians such as Duke Ellington. It turned sportsmen such as Joe Louis into folk heroes, and made national symbols of such outlaws as Al Capone and John Dillinger.

Media transformed America by changing how we saw ourselves, and what we knew about each other and our world. In this regard, radio led the way, marking the beginning of what we now call "The Information Age." Kaufman & Hart knew it. And now, we know it. But if, at the beginning of the 21st century, we are overwhelmed by presidential scandals, wearied by confessional TV and 24-hour news, and feel we know far more about one another than we care to, then we have only ourselves to blame. It is not our technology, but our own fascination that is the culprit.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS continued from page 3

After an astonishing string of successes, each man decided to strike out on his own, and subsequently had distinguished solo careers as both Broadway directors as well as playwrights. Mr. Kaufman went on to direct such legendary works as *The Front Page*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Guys and Dolls*. Highlights of Mr. Hart's solo career included the screenplay of *Gentleman's Agreement*, which won the Academy Award for best picture in 1947, as well as directing the original Broadway productions of *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*.

Moss Hart died in 1961 at the age of 57, just eight months after his illustrious partner, George S. Kaufman, had passed away at the age of 72. Together and separately, they left a witty and inspiring legacy, leaving the theatre and us the richer for it.

PRODUCTION GUIDE FOR

The Man Who Came To Dinner

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Activities

Before the Play

We all find ourselves in situations where we have to spend time with people we don't want to be around, such as boring relatives at family gatherings, rude co-workers at the coffee machine, or obnoxious acquaintances we see at friends' parties. Somehow we manage to get through such encounters without telling the other people what we really feel about them. Try to think of a time when you faced a similar situation and how you dealt with it. These questions might help you:

- What did you say to the other person? What did she or he say to you?
- Did you face any obstacles (for example, a physical barrier or the presence of an influential person) that prevented you from leaving the situation? If so, were you able to overcome those obstacles?
- Were there any subtle, or not-so-subtle, things that you did to let the other person know you didn't want to speak with them?

During the Play

The characters in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* are forced to spend time with people they don't particularly want to be around. As you watch the play, see how the different characters adapt to this dilemma in various ways. Some characters try to hide their animosity with polite conversation, while others make no bones about openly sharing their distaste for the other people. While you watch the performance, keep the following questions in mind:

- Do the character's words and the character's actions (especially tone of voice and body language) match? In other words, do you get different messages from what the character says vs. how the character says it?
- How does the audience learn the characters' true feelings?
- Do the other characters sense the true feeling of the character, or are they oblivious?

After the Play

Write a dialogue about characters who are forced to spend time with other people they normally wouldn't be around. You might want to put your characters in a confined space, such as an elevator that's stuck between floors. You also could borrow a technique used by Kaufman and Hart and create a character who has difficulty moving around and therefore can't escape from characters that annoy him or her. As you write your dialogue, think about the following ideas:

- How do the characters communicate with each other? Are they polite or rude?
- Are the characters aware of each others' true feelings?
- Do they face a problem that all of the characters need to help with? If so, how do they resolve their differences?

When you're finished, send your complete dialogue to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the people who worked on *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. Send it to:

Margaret Salvante, Education Director

Roundabout Theatre Company

231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200

New York, NY 10018

Or send an email to: MargieS@roundabouttheatre.org

Sources

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www.roundabouttheatre.org

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

What To Look For

The lobby of the American Airlines Theatre has a number of resources for your convenience. There is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you.

Ticket Policy

As a student participant in **Page To Stage** or **Theatre Access**, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

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