The Royal Family

by GEORGE S. KAUFMAN and EDNA FERBER

directed by RACHEL CHAVKIN
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The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world.
In 1924, Edna Ferber was among the most successful writers in America. She had published three novels, several collections of short stories, and had co-written a play featuring her popular character Emma McChesney, in which Ethel Barrymore starred. Her most recent novel, *So Big*, had just received the Pulitzer Prize. While she had only a passing acquaintance with playwright/critic George S. Kaufman, when he suggested they turn her short story “Old Man Minick” into a play, one of the great collaborations in American theater was launched.

Both were disciplined writers, and they moved quickly, completing the adaptation within three weeks of starting. Winthrop Ames agreed to produce, and the play, now called *Minick*, opened to moderate success in September 1924. While the play itself may not be remarkable or even remembered, it did lead to the musical *Show Boat* (a passing comment by producer Ames about the floating theaters caught Ferber’s attention) and to *The Royal Family*.

Before work on the latter commenced, Ferber learned all she could about river theatricals and two years later published her novel, *Show Boat*, which composer Jerome Kern wanted to turn into a musical play. Kaufman, meanwhile, had a dalliance with the Marx Brothers and Irving Berlin that resulted in the stage musical *The Cocoanuts*.

In 1926, Ferber and Kaufman started on their second project, about a theatrical family. They claimed from the beginning that the play was not based on the famous Barrymore-Drew family, but even Ferber admitted “we succeeded in convincing no one, including possibly ourselves.” The work wasn’t quite so swift this time, taking eight months to write, which Ferber thought an embarrassingly long time for “just a comedy,” but they didn’t need to do any rewrites, so polished was the rehearsal draft. After some difficulty with casting – they offered the lead role to Ethel Barrymore, who emphatically turned it down and held a grudge, while other actresses didn’t want to either cross or promote Miss Barrymore by appearing in the play – *The Royal Family* opened on December 28, 1927. It was a busy month for Ferber, as the musical *Show Boat* opened the day before.

*The Royal Family* played for 10 months, became a film and was staged in London in 1935 as *Theatre Royal* (the British have their own royal family, after all), directed by Noël Coward. Over the next 20 years, Ferber and Kaufman collaborated on four more plays, including *Dinner at Eight* and *Stage Door*. *The Royal Family* wasn’t done with Ferber, however. In 1940, she realized her childhood dream of being an actor, when she performed the role of Fanny Cavendish in a week-long run in Maplewood, N.J. Alas, she discovered she did not enjoy acting as much as she thought she would, finding herself bored with the repetition the craft required.

Kaufman wrote more than 40 plays in total, and his best-known collaborations may be those with Moss Hart in the 1930s. Like Ferber, Kaufman received the Pulitzer Prize, twice in fact, for *Of Thee I Sing* and *You Can’t Take It With You*. He died in 1961 at age 71.

Ferber’s body of writing captured the surprising variety of American life – from the land rush in Oklahoma to the gold rush in Alaska – and explored challenging topics and themes including single motherhood, miscegenation laws and struggling farms as well as examining American values and the American Dream. Ferber died at age 82 in 1968.
# Selected Chronology on the Life and Times of George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>GEORGE S. KAUFMAN</th>
<th>EDNA FERBER</th>
<th>WORLD EVENTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ethel Barrymore (d. 1959) is born into a family of actors. In addition to her parents and grandparents her brothers Lionel and John were also actors.</td>
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<td>1885</td>
<td></td>
<td>Edna Jessica Ferber is born August 15 in Kalamazoo, Mich.</td>
<td>Grover Cleveland inaugurated as 22nd President of the United States.</td>
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<td>1889</td>
<td>George Simon Kaufman is born November 16 in Pittsburgh, Pa.</td>
<td>Mark Twain publishes <em>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court</em>.</td>
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<td>1890</td>
<td>The Ferber family moves to Ottumwa, Iowa, where Ferber endures anti-Semitism.</td>
<td>Julius “Groucho” Marx is born October 2.</td>
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<td>1897</td>
<td>The Ferber family moves to Appleton, Wis., where Ferber completes her formal schooling.</td>
<td>Queen Victoria celebrates her Diamond Jubilee.</td>
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<td>1902</td>
<td>For 18 months, Ferber works as a reporter for the <em>Appleton Crescent</em> at age 17. She later takes a job with the Milwaukee Journal until 1905, when she returns to Appleton. She begins to write her first novel and short stories.</td>
<td>The United States gains control of the project that will eventually become the Panama Canal.</td>
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<td>1907</td>
<td>Kaufman graduates from Pittsburgh Central High School. Enrolls at Western University of Pennsylvania to study law, but withdraws within the first year due to illness.</td>
<td>Robert Baden-Powell founds what would become the Boy Scouting and Girl Guiding movements in Dorset, England.</td>
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<td>1910</td>
<td>Kaufman moves to Passaic, N.J., where he works as a salesman. He takes classes at the Alveine School of Drama in New York City.</td>
<td>Ferber moves to Chicago with her mother and sisters after her father’s death.</td>
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<td>1911</td>
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<td>Halley’s Comet passes near the earth.</td>
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<td>1912</td>
<td>Kaufman works as a columnist for the <em>Washington Times</em>.</td>
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<td>Irving Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” becomes an international sensation.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><em>Personality Plus: Some Experiences of Emma McChesney and Her Son</em>, a collection of stories, is published.</td>
<td>World War I begins in Europe.</td>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>Kaufman and Connelly write <em>Beggar on Horseback</em> and <em>Be Yourself</em>. Kaufman collaborates with Ferber for the first time to write the play <em>Minick</em>.</td>
<td>Ferber is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her novel <em>So Big</em>. In her first collaboration with George S. Kaufman, she adapts her short story “Old Man Minick” for the stage. The play, called <em>Minick</em>, opens on Broadway in September. With Kaufman, writes the film script <em>Welcome Home</em>.</td>
<td>Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Columbia Pictures studios are founded in Hollywood. J. Edgar Hoover becomes the director of the F.B.I. The first Winter Olympics are held, in Chamonix, France.</td>
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<td>1925</td>
<td>Kaufman and Irving Berlin write the stage musical <em>The Cocoanuts</em> for the Marx Brothers. Writes <em>Butter and Egg Man</em>. Kaufman and his wife adopt a baby girl and name her Anne.</td>
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<td>The Norwegian capital, Christiania, is renamed Oslo. Sinclair Lewis receives the Pulitzer Prize for <em>Arrowsmith</em>.</td>
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<td>1926</td>
<td></td>
<td>Her novel <em>Show Boat</em> is published.</td>
<td>Chiang Kai-Shek becomes head of the Chinese Revolutionary Party.</td>
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<td>1927</td>
<td>The Royal Family, written with Edna Ferber, opens on Broadway on December 28.</td>
<td>The Royal Family, written with George S. Kaufman, opens on Broadway on December 28. The musical adapted from her novel Show Boat opens the day before, on December 27. Mother Knows Best: A Fiction Book, a collection of stories, is published.</td>
<td>Charles Lindbergh flies solo nonstop in The Spirit of St. Louis from New York to Paris.</td>
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<td>1929</td>
<td>Kaufman and Alexander Woollcott write The Channel Road. Writes June Moon with Ring Lardner.</td>
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<td>The Academy Awards are established to honor the best films in Hollywood. The U.S. Stock Market crashes and the country is plunged into the Great Depression.</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>Kaufman and Moss Hart collaborate on Once in a Lifetime. Kaufman plays the role of Lawrence Vail. Resigns from The New York Times.</td>
<td>Her novel Cimarron is published. The Royal Family of Broadway, a film adapted from the The Royal Family, is released with Ina Claire as Julie and Fredric March as Tony.</td>
<td>Grant Wood exhibits his painting American Gothic.</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>Kaufman, Ryskind and George and Ira Gershwin write the musical Of Thee I Sing. It is the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize.</td>
<td>Her novel American Beauty is published.</td>
<td>Nine young African-American men are falsely accused of raping a white woman in Scottsboro, Ala., tried and convicted. Several civil rights groups work for decades to get the conviction overturned and the men freed from prison.</td>
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<td>1932</td>
<td>Kaufman and Ferber write Dinner at Eight. Directs Face the Music, with music and lyrics by Irving Berlin and book by Moss Hart.</td>
<td>Dinner at Eight is produced on Broadway in October.</td>
<td>John and Lionel Barrymore appear together in the film The Grand Hotel, alongside Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford.</td>
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<td>1933</td>
<td>Kaufman and Woollcott write The Dark Tower.</td>
<td>They Brought Their Women: A Book of Short Stories is published.</td>
<td>The Marx Brothers’ film Duck Soup is released.</td>
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<td>1934</td>
<td>Kaufman and Hart write Merrily We Roll Along. (Fifty years later it becomes the source for Stephen Sondheim’s musical.)</td>
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<td>Outlaws Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow are gunned down in Texas.</td>
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<td>1935</td>
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<td>Her novel Come and Get It is published. The Royal Family is produced in London as Theatre Royal.</td>
<td>Mussolini invades Abyssinia, beginning the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>Kaufman and Hart collaborate on <em>You Can't Take it With You</em>. The play earns a Pulitzer Prize. Kaufman and Ferber write <em>Stage Door</em>.</td>
<td><em>Stage Door</em> is produced on Broadway in October.</td>
<td>Jesse Owens wins four gold medals at the Olympics in Berlin.</td>
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<td>1937</td>
<td>Kaufman and Moss Hart write <em>I'd Rather be Right</em>, a musical with Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart.</td>
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<td>Disney releases <em>Snow White</em>, the first feature-length animated film. Amelia Earhart is lost at sea while attempting an around-the-world flight.</td>
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<td>1938</td>
<td>Kaufman and Hart write <em>The Fabulous Invalid</em>.</td>
<td><em>Nobody's in Town</em> and <em>Trees Die at the Top</em>, two novellas, are published.</td>
<td>Britain and France assent to Adolf Hitler’s claims to the Sudetenland.</td>
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<td>1940</td>
<td>Kaufman and Hart write <em>George Washington Slept Here</em>.</td>
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<td>1941</td>
<td>Kaufman and Ferber write <em>The Land is Bright</em>.</td>
<td>Her novel <em>Saratoga Trunk</em> is published. <em>No Room at the Inn</em>, a collection of stories, is published. <em>The Land is Bright</em> is produced on Broadway in October.</td>
<td>The U.S. enters World War II after the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor.</td>
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<td>1944</td>
<td>Kaufman and John P. Marquand write <em>The Late George Apley</em>.</td>
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<td>On June 6, a day that will become known as D-Day, United States forces successfully invaded a series of beaches in Normandy, France.</td>
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<td>1945</td>
<td>Kaufman’s wife Beatrice dies.</td>
<td>Her novel <em>Great Son</em> is published.</td>
<td>World War II ends with the surrender of European forces in May and Japanese forces in August.</td>
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<td>1948</td>
<td>Kaufman and Ferber write <em>Bravo!</em></td>
<td><em>Bravo!</em> is produced on Broadway in November.</td>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi is assassinated.</td>
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<td>1949</td>
<td>Appears as a regular guest on the television show “This Is My Business.” Marries the actress Leueen MacGrath.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arthur Miller’s <em>Death of a Salesman</em> opens on Broadway.</td>
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<td>1950</td>
<td>Directs the musical <em>Guys and Dolls</em>, for which he wins a Tony Award.</td>
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<td>Groucho Marx’s “You Bet Your Life” is broadcast on television as well as radio (-1961).</td>
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<td>1951</td>
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<td><em>The Royal Family</em> is revived on Broadway. It will have two subsequent revivals, in 1975 and 2009.</td>
<td>The U.S. draft age is lowered to 18.</td>
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<td>1952</td>
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<td>Her novel <em>Giant</em> is published.</td>
<td>George VI, king of England, passes away and is succeeded by his daughter Elizabeth II.</td>
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<td>1955</td>
<td>Kaufman collaborates with Leueen McGrath and Abe Burrows on the book of the musical <em>Silk Stockings</em>, with music and lyrics by Cole Porter.</td>
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<td>Rosa Parks is arrested in Montgomery, Ala., for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, an act of civil disobedience that sparked the Civil Rights Movement.</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>Edna Ferber dies at age 82 on April 16 in New York City.</td>
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<td>Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy are assassinated in separate shootings.</td>
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[George Kaufman’s] method of conserving his strength is carefully thought out, and it works. He concentrates. Aside from bridge (he is one of the most brilliant amateur bridge players in America) his interests are practically nonexistent outside the theater. The theater is his life. If there is a couch in the room – any room – he stretches out on it. He doesn’t stay there long, but very few people know the refreshment that comes to muscles, heart and arteries in five minutes of repose, repeated at frequent intervals. During tough rehearsal sessions, when he is directing, you are likely to miss him for a few minutes. He’s in a second box or at the back of the house or somewhere in a side aisle, stretched full length on the floor, relaxed and resting. He does almost no walking. From the Astor to the Music Box is a day’s jaunt for him. He eats prodigious quantities of chocolate candy and pastry, which gives him energy. He smokes and drinks almost not at all. He talks little. He hates to be interrupted or forestalled when he does talk. His wit is devastating but rarely cruel. He is one of the most considerate of men. He rarely praises. In the years of our work together he has never paid me anything that could faintly be construed as a compliment. This makes me very cross indeed. He himself likes praise. I never have known any very successful man who hadn’t the encouragement of a brilliant and understanding woman. Anyone who knows Beatrice Kaufman will admit that this is true, too, of George.

Most of George Kaufman’s collaborators have written articles about him. I don’t recall any article that he has ever written about a collaborator. These have included Marc Connelly, Ring Lardner, Katharine Dayton, Moss Hart, Laurence Stallings.

Edna Ferber, A Peculiar Treasure, New York: The Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1939

Let us take, for example, the case of George S. Kaufman. To most people outside the theatre as well as those inside it, he is the symbol of the successful playwright. For about twenty years he has been collaborating in the authorship of shrewd comedies, most of them popular, some of them fabulously so. His wit is legendary. His taut, expertly timed direction has had a quickening effect all through the modern American theatre. … But long-continued success breeds resistance and suspicion. There is a disposition in many quarters now to regard the writing of successful and popular comedies as a mean and unworthy achievement.

The point is raised here because Joseph Wood Krutch states the case for the dissenters with more cogency than usual in his new book, “The American Drama Since 1918.” … [I]t seems to me that Mr. Krutch does considerably less than justice to Mr. Kaufman’s professional integrity. Out of Mr. Krutch’s pages Mr. Kaufman emerges as almost a charlatan. Mr. Krutch suggests that Mr. Kaufman deliberately conceals his culture as a way of flattering the box office. …

When a man is sensationally successful as a popular writer there is a disposition to urge him on to nobler things. But Mr. Kaufman has had an excellent understanding of his abilities and has generally stuck to his last. His excursions outside his familiar bailiwick have not encouraged him much. …

Although Mr. Kaufman’s personal integrity makes it impossible for him to overestimate his talents and prevents him from claiming mastery of the whole field on the basis of his hilarious victories in one part of it, it would also be reckless to underestimate the importance of his accomplishments. He has been largely influential in establishing the brand of mordant satire that has sharpened post-war thinking.
in the theatre. ...He is the foremost stage craftsman, both as writer and director. He is the master of the wisecrack, which has become a fundamental part of the American vernacular. For twenty years he has also worked in the theatre honestly. Not the least of his virtues is that he has stuck to his last. ... The fact of chief importance is that it has helped produce some of the most hilarious and caustic plays of our century and his long-enduring success should not start to count against him now.


Edna Ferber is the latest American writer to take to the stage. For her debut – and, she insists, her farewell appearance – she chose a part that would make a veteran professional blanch. ... This is the role of Fanny Cavendish in “The Royal Family,” written by Miss Ferber and George Kaufman sixteen years ago.

It is a credit to Miss Ferber’s intelligence and adaptability that in this role she was not at all bad. At no time did she slow up the precise timing of the direction, or make a hole in the expert construction of the play. She got her laughs, she even got her tears, and no one except the company, Miss Ferber and a group of ribald friends who were out front feeling for her, knew that she hated every minute of it. ...

Right from the start of the one week of rehearsal Miss Ferber was bored and exasperated. The endless repetition of lines, the standing around, the apparently unprogressive business of doing the same thing over and over again, was maddening to one used to going ahead, however slowly, unhampered by coordinating with other people, and under her own steam. Beginning with the opening night another factor was added: embarrassment at being out there showing off in front of so many people. What exhibitionism she may once have had – a necessary part, she thinks, of an actor’s equipment – seemed to have died quite some time before Miss Ferber got to Maplewood, N.J. ...

Convinced as she is that the whole thing, as far as she is concerned, was a debacle – and no one can dislodge that idea – she had quite a lot to say about why writers can’t be actors. Writers are spectators, she thinks. They are people who watch and weigh and churn things over and then go home and grind out a record. If occasionally they do wade in and join the fray, long years of habit and training see to it that a part of them still looks with the head cocked a little to one side. A good actor, on the other hand, is a person who can immerse himself in a part, literally be that character, and only use his accumulated knowledge of people and things to add to his current picture of himself. Either one of these approaches automatically cancels the other.


In the last ten years of his life George S. Kaufman found himself as obsolete as a Smithsonian exhibit. He was a practitioner of irony and satire, with a side line of bon mots. The USA, hell-bent on making the whole world as noble as itself, had no welcome mat out for tricky-minded fellows poking fun at it.

Ben Hecht, remembering George S. Kaufman in the Saturday Review, June 24, 1961
How can it be denied that the vast majority of women in the United States have failed to claim their legal rights; to use their inherent power; and to fulfill in any degree at all their great potentialities?

By this I do not mean that she can play better football; or more expertly hammer down all those nails about which the jokes used to be made; or kill more people in a war; or compose a grander opera or write a better book, paint a finer picture, run a faster mile. This she has not done. I mean that women are inherently tougher than men; they know this; and potentially they could rule the world if they wanted to. They may even have to, eventually.


With a love and enthusiasm that gained her world fame, Miss Ferber wrote about the United States for four decades. Her novels became minor classics and earned her a fortune as well as many honors. So Big, among the earliest of her 12 larger-than-life portrayals of the national scene, sold more than 300,000 copies on publication in 1924 and became required reading in schools and universities.

So Big, the story of a woman on a truck farm outside Chicago, was a part of a drama of America from shore to shore. Miss Ferber depicted show business life on the Mississippi in Show Boat, frontier Oklahoma in Cimarron, Connecticut in American Beauty, New York in Saratoga Trunk, Texas in Giant, and Alaska in Ice Palace.

Her books were not profound, but they were vivid and had a sound sociological basis. She was among the best-read novelists in the nation, and critics of the 1920s and 30s did not hesitate to call her the greatest American woman novelist of her day.


[George S. Kaufman] was a tall, lean, melancholy man with a thick crop of bushy black hair, and he wore rimless glasses. He was one of the most disciplined men on Broadway. He turned out a prodigious amount of work, because he was thoroughly organized. Despite his fabulous success, he lacked self-confidence. Long after he had come to occupy a conspicuous and envied place in the Broadway hierarchy, he clung to his eighty-dollar-a-week job as drama editor of The New York Times (and conscientiously performed his duties), because he trusted the stability of the Times but not that of his career in the theater. A skeptic by nature, he needed to be surrounded by things he trusted. Although the theater is basically an emotional medium, he lacked personal warmth; and that may be why he wrote only one script without a collaborator. Although he was uneasy about it, The Butter and Egg Man was one of his best. In writing a play, he could supply the discipline – the organization of the script, the dramatic situations, and the wording of the dialogue – but he felt insecure in the elements that involved emotion. He was so famous and his laconic style was so familiar that he was generally credited with anything particularly brilliant in the dialogue of the plays of which he was co-author. Kaufman was constantly embarrassed by this inequality of recognition; he was forever trying to set the record straight to the advantage of his collaborators.


To the Drama Editor:
I wonder if you would let me use the columns of The Times to correct what seems to be a prevailing journalistic misapprehension, even though The Times itself has been less guilty in the matter than have other newspapers and magazines. Miss Edna Ferber and I have written four plays together. For some fantastic reason, and despite the simple assurance of the programs, there has been a tendency on the part of reviewers to assume that Miss Ferber is some sort of cook’s assistant in the preparation of these little dishes, and that I dash them off single-handed, while Miss Ferber sharpens the pencils. Also, they seem to have the idea that Miss Ferber is then sent to the Orient or some place while I attend to casting.

Certainly Miss Ferber needs no championing from me or anybody else at this stage of her career. It seems incredible that it should be necessary to remind reviewers that these plays have been written with Edna Ferber, not with Lottie Whifflepoor. But obviously it is necessary.

My collaborations with Miss Ferber have been collaborations in the fullest sense of the word, from beginning to end.


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Walk around the reservoir any morning – any reservoir, for that matter – and it’s an even bet that you will run into Edna Ferber. Miss Ferber is a walker. That daily walk, she says is essential her physical and mental well-being. Me, I’m different. In the words of Ring Lardner, the only exercise I get is when I take the studs out of one shirt and put them in another. …

We had a great idea for a play. Refugees. Not just ordinary refugees, mind you, but the great figures of the artistic and scientific world. …

So we went to White Sulphur. … A splendid cold rain greeted us as we came down the steps. … It was at the precise moment that the refugee idea began to slip. As days passed it was destined to get worse and worse, but I should say that the instant of our descent of those car steps was when it first started to go. …

The first day’s session started in businesslike fashion. … For the first hour we interrupted each other in our excitement – the ideas came thick and fast. Then they began to slow up. What did they do in the second act? What did they do in the first, for that matter? …

I’ll tell you what! Maybe if we knocked off and didn’t work tonight – first day and everything. We’d be much fresher in the morning – afternoon, I mean. I notice they show a movie here at 9 o’clock every night – we could drop in on that … All right. It wouldn’t hurt – one evening. Might be good for us, as a matter of fact.

The next day we started off very brightly … Say! Have you been around the place – looked the hotel over? Quite interesting. They’ve got a lot of photographs back there … Oh, look! Douglas Fairbanks. … Mrs. Harrison Williams … C. Bascom Slemp …

It was when we started looking at photographs of C. Bascom Slemp that we realized the refugee idea was in a bad way. We had touched bottom. But this was only the second day, and neither of us was willing to face the other and utter the dread words. We had no play, that was the simple truth of it. But for nine days out of ten we kept pretending that we had. …

On the tenth day we faced each other and had it out. Each started out to convince the other, but it was evident in two seconds that neither needed any convincing. … The only person we know in the whole play is that American woman who comes in – you know, old New York family. … Yes, we could write her. …

Peculiarly enough, I have no recollection of the actual writing. That seems to be true with most plays, so far as I am concerned. The whole business of getting ready to write, finding the actors, rehearsals, out of town – bits and pieces of all that linger in the mind. But all I can tell you about the weeks of writing is that the meals at Ferber’s house were elegant. I can remember the food in detail, but none of the work.

George S. Kaufman, “Notes of a Co-Author: In Which Mr. Kaufman Tells All About ‘The Land Is Bright,”’ The New York Times, November 2, 1941

No two people could have been more unlike in temperament, style, habit, taste, emotional and physical reactions. Yet our collaboration in the writing of plays was pleasant and productive. Two or three traits or habits we had in common, and they were important in this relation. Both were work worshipers; both stage-struck; were punctual; were politically and humanely liberal; were neat to the point of fussiness. If George said, “I’ll see you at eleven tomorrow morning,” he appeared at eleven, shoes polished but not glittering, tie handsome but restrained; shaved pink; spectacles sparkling. He would glance hungrily at the outer covering of my morning mail which I cannily had thrust back into the envelopes. He then would sit down, untie his shoelaces, and tie them again, neatly. To any psychoanalyst who is interested in this last detail I know state that I make him a present of it. There, too, was I, with two hands practically poised above the typewriter keys. If a fleck of white paper, a tiny bit of thread, appeared on the workroom carpet we both pounced on it. George disliked food, sentiment, walking (or any form of exercise); any expression of emotion; declarative and purposeful women (like myself); sauces, travel; being interrupted while speaking. Myself, I was more or less given to all these things. Added to all this, George was at his liveliest at night, having been trained on a New York morning paper. I was crisp as celery in the morning, my newspaper background having been an afternoon paper.

We worked mornings and into the afternoon.

Almost every play, of course, is rewritten in some degree during its tryout tour. This is inevitable. In the first place, there is no play in the world that cannot be improved by additional work. And in the second and much bigger place, it is well known that plays have a way of fooling you. No matter how careful your labors, there is an unpredictable factor. Somewhere in the transition from typewriter to stage there is an almost chemical element that intrudes itself between the play and the audience. Sometimes this works to the playwright’s advantage, and a simple scene of which little had been expected suddenly throws the audience into stitches, or moves it to tears, as the case may be. This is a good deal like having your bank account gone over and finding that you have two hundred dollars more than you figured. But more frequently, of course, it goes the other way. At a key moment in the play the audience remains sublimely disinterested, or else starts coughing its head off, and that’s why all those playwrights are locked up in hotel rooms.

And that, children, is why plays are tried out on the road, instead of opening cold on Broadway, as the theatrical phrase has it. “But I don’t see why you can’t tell, just by reading it. Either it’s good or it’s bad. The thing to do is just produce the good ones and then you won’t have all that trouble.” Well, of course, the answer is that you can’t just tell. Billy Rose recently said to me that he “wouldn’t open a can of sardines cold,” and that seems to be the consensus of show business (Mr. Rose intends to violate this rule by opening “Henry VIII” here without benefits of tryout, but of course, Shakespeare is not sardines.) But whether the play is good or bad, promising or unpromising, the playwright will retire to his bedroom typewriter with one phrase ringing in his ear. “It needs work.” …

There is no one in the world who cannot tell an author how to fix his play, and the poor guy has to stand there and listen courteously. And at the end he must say, “Thank you very much. You are absolutely right,” instead of what he wants to say, which is, “What the hell do you know about it?”

The Play

Synopsis

Three generations of actors in the famed Cavendish family slog through their daily routine of matinees, new play readings, rehearsals, revivals and tabloid gossip. Julie is the current family star, and prima donna in the New York theater world. Her career has always come first, a sacrifice abetted by her mother, Fanny, who dissuaded her from marrying a businessman named Gilbert Marshall 19 years ago so that she would stay in the industry and realize the fame and fortune due her.

Fanny is a widow in her 70s, recently recovered from a lingering illness, gamely planning to resume her career and recapture the years spent touring with her husband, Aubrey.

Tony is Julie’s brother, a handsome and talented actor with the energy of a lunatic – perfect for Hollywood – until he shows up at the Cavendish house after breaking his film contract and punching his director.

Julie’s independent 19-year-old daughter, Gwen, is beginning her own acting career, but she is troubled by an argument with her boyfriend, Perry Stewart, over the time commitments required by her career. Faced with giving up a life with Perry to continue acting, Gwen shocks the entire family by declaring she is quitting theater altogether. This outburst – combined with a visit from the now-wealthy Gilbert Marshall – makes Julie realize that her daughter is at the same crossroads she was 19 years ago, and prompts her to question her own decision all those years ago.

Setting

New York, 1927.
The duplex apartment of the Cavendish family.

Characters

Fanny Cavendish, age 72, the family matriarch, “rather magnificent”

Julie Cavendish, 39, Fanny’s daughter, the star of Broadway

Gwen Cavendish, 19, Julie’s daughter

Tony Cavendish, late 30s, Fanny’s son, late of Hollywood

Herbert Dean, 57, Fanny’s brother, “an excellent actor beginning to show his age”

Kitty Lemoyne Dean, 48, Herbert’s wife, a mediocre actress

Oscar Wolfe, the Cavendishes’ long-time theater manager, “a figure of authority”

Perry Stewart, 28, Gwen’s love interest and a “personable young fellow”

Gilbert Marshall, 47, a successful business man and former suitor to Julie

Della, the Cavendishes’ maid

Jo, the Cavendishes’ houseman

McDermott, a boxer who trains with Julie

Miss Peake, a nurse

Hallboy

Chauffeur

Michelle O’Neill as Julie Cavendish and Shawn Hamilton as Oscar Wolfe in The Royal Family

PHOTO: HEIDI BOHNENKAMP

GUTHRIE THEATER
George Kaufman and I had decided to write a play about a glamorous theatrical family – no particular theatrical family, I hastily add – but an imaginary one that might be any family wedded to the stage. We did, however, plan to use one member of the Barrymore family – John; not as a whole, but bits of him. He was, of course, too improbable to copy from life. This family of ours was to have been in the theater for generations. It was to be the kind of stage family that thinks, talks, lives, breathes only theater. …

Considering that *The Royal Family*, is, after all, just a comedy, it is rather embarrassing to confess that eight months of work went into its writing. The wonder is that we weren’t at each other’s throats after that long grind. We actually emerged good friends. Gallons of coffee had been drunk, tons of sandwiches consumed, miles of floor had been walked, typewriter ribbons had been worn to rags, Jed Harris had come into the scene as producer – and still we two collaborators remained friends. …

*The Royal Family*, begun in November, was finished the end of June. When I say finished I mean that, except for perhaps twenty minutes spent in doing some additional off-stage dialogue in a scene that needed extra clamor, we never rewrote a line or a word of the play. At least our eight months had served that purpose.


Charles Brackett, “Compliments of the Season,” The New Yorker, January 7, 1928

After viewing the theatrical profession sentimentally in “Show Boat” Miss Ferber has executed an about-face by viewing it ironically in “The Royal Family,” written in collaboration with George S. Kaufman. Their play is one of the most enjoyable of the season. Nothing could make for completer exploitation of its theme than this collaboration of a fiction writer, primarily concerned with plot and characters, and a satirist remarkable for his neat, critical dialogue and his skill in play technique. After completing a play and seeing it quiver through the maul of casting and rehearsing even the collaborator is never quite sure how much of the work is his; and the untutored playgoer, of course can only guess blindly. Whatever the sources of its capital humors may be, “The Royal Family” melds them perfectly into rounded characters, illuminating plot, visual action, tickling dialogue. …

In writing a domestic comedy about a family of brilliant actors an author can lean perilously close to farce without betraying the spirit of comedy. No one will be dull enough to judge the Cavendishes by the standards of ordinary men. If their life inside a crowded duplex apartment appears to be a bedlam of absurdities it is because that is the sort of life they lead. They have come to think of themselves as gods because every dazzled playgoer does, and their long-suffering manager obligingly compromises between
what he knows and what every one else believes by humoring their outrageous vanities. If an actor were philosophical, tolerant and modest he would be no actor: he would be philosophical, tolerant and modest.


It is a play that does not happen to be about anything. It is conceived on the idea of a piranha-jawed, dedicated and addicted, American theatrical family – it could be the Barrymores, the Skinners or almost anyone – and the limits to which it will go to remain in the spotlight of the footlights. This is a play that merely means to make amusement out of that fortune-cookie message, “There’s no Business Like Show Business.” The play achieves so well because it is written so well. It is the kind of play that makes a craft into an art, and crafty itself becomes artistic. It has not got a thought in its head except the sincere desire to make money and to offer fun – in that order. But one so admires the honest financial success over the dishonest artistic disaster!


The script has great wit and dash. It also has real curtain lines, and it occurred to me that perhaps the reason that so many dramatists write one-acters today is that they just can’t think of curtain line; it also occurred to me that ringing doorbells and phones are the twentieth-century replacement for the opening and slamming doors of nineteenth-century farce.

Victoria Janicki as Gwen Cavendish and David Darrow as Perry Stewart in The Royal Family

PHOTO: HEIDI BÖHNKENKAMP

Edith Oliver, “Off-Broadway,” The New Yorker, December 29, 1975

“The Royal Family” is a treasure-trove of sparkling wit. “I can give you the names of actors and actresses of 300 years ago – dozens of them! Name me two 17th century stockbrokers!” Gwen demands during a fight with Perry, while Fanny, given to an asp-tongued wit wonderfully suited for an older woman, remarks, “Marriage isn’t a career. It’s an incident.”

With their coterie of servants and lavish lifestyle, the Cavendishes occupy a rarefied universe. But the miracle of these characters is, that for all their hoity-toity ways, the Cavendishes are a family who deeply love and generously provide for each other. Julie bails out her brother without blinking, tries to help out the Deans (no matter how much it vexes her) and dotes on Fanny.

The other aspect of “The Royal Family” is how classily Kaufman and Ferber make a case for artists as being of a higher order. Actors liken theater to a calling, something they surrender to heart and soul. The play touches on the sacred aspects of theater without pretentiousness. ...

The Cavendish clan may be annoyingly larger than life, but “The Royal Family” leaves you wishing they were your family.


A satire notoriously inspired by the Barrymore clan, “The Royal Family” has always been a favorite of theater folk, for obvious reasons.


Like Noël Coward’s “Hay Fever” and the musical “Kiss Me Kate,” other larky portraits of people who live and die by the theater, “The Royal Family” allows performers to caricature the narcissism, self-dramatizing and infantile craving for attention that were once said to characterize their profession (and of course have nothing to do with actors as we know them today). It also pulses with the door-slamming farcical sound and fury found in the liveliest of Kaufman’s collaborations.
The Barrymores: The (Real) Royal Family of Broadway

Ferber and Kaufman claimed they did not base the Cavendishes in The Royal Family on the Barrymore family, but the authors succeeded in convincing no one, including, Ferber admitted, even themselves. The Barrymore-Drew family was indeed the first family of theater at the time of the play’s writing. Louisa Lane Drew, the inspiration for Fanny, was the child of a long-established acting family, the Drews, and for many years ran the Arch Street Theater in Philadelphia. Her children, John Drew Jr. (a model for Herbert Dean) and Georgiana Drew, followed her into the profession. Georgiana married an Englishman named Herbert Blythe who protected his family’s name when he became an actor by changing his to Maurice Barrymore. The Barrymore children joined the family business as much out of need and practicality—what they knew best—as any great desire to be on the stage. Ethel became the toast of Broadway and her younger brother John gained a reputation as a matinee idol when he made the transition to film. In the play we know them as Julie and Tony Cavendish. Eventually Ethel’s daughter, like Gwen in play, also joined the family business, as Ethel Barrymore Colt. Ethel and John Barrymore each wrote memoirs, from which excerpts appear below.

Though I came of an acting family and I have the heritage of an actor, I do not feel I am disloyal when I set forth my reasons for not caring too much for the theater as a medium in which to work. I don’t believe when I was a boy I thought overmuch about what I should do when I grew up. In my grandmother’s house there was often a discussion going on about acting, but it never seemed to mean anything to me or that I was part of it. ...

I am by nature and by the grace of God a very indolent person. Acting is a profession that requires infinite and intensive labor and patience, particularly in the creation of a character and the projection of a play. Because of my virtue of laziness, I have had to work doubly hard whenever I have accomplished anything at all in the theater. I have had to fight my own tendency to loaf as well as go through the very serious business of putting a play on. It isn’t that I do not like rehearsal.

I enjoyed every minute of the long rehearsals in London, but then I usually have liked the rehearsals of any play. There is creation in the rehearsal period. Ever since I was a boy and wanted to be a painter I have had the urge to be a creative artist. In spite of the handicap of my laziness, that still holds. But when a production gets set and one must go to the theater six nights and two afternoons a week to repeat the same part, there is danger that after a certain time, even with the best intentions in the world, and with the most loyal and encouraging support of an audience, one may become stale. ...

In other arts people strip their souls naked in mean attics year after year, but in the theater one may win recognition overnight. But then in the theater one is never safe. At any minute one may show himself up. It is easier to get on and up in the theater than to stay put. ...

God help anyone after his first success in the theater! There is always the fear and the dread that it may be different next time. If one yields to the temptation to do again what he has succeeded in, there is the certainty that sooner or later his equipment will become exhausted. Some actors never exhaust their equipment till they are dead. Irving never did, but then, there are few Irvings.

John Barrymore, Confessions of an Actor, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1926
Nobody in our family ever taught me anything about acting except by absorption, but in our family absorption was a good way to learn. I remembered by grandmother; I remembered, without having realized it until now, the naturalness of my mother’s acting, twenty-five years ahead of her time. I had played for three years with Uncle Jack, who acted to naturally that he never seemed to be acting, so naturally that he never let anyone see a wheel going around.

On the opening night [of Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines in 1901] I had for the first time the terrible sense of responsibility which, ever since, has made every first night a king of little dying, an agony of terror that never failed to make me physically sick. While I had been playing small parts, and even in His Excellency, I hadn’t been important enough to have that terrific feeling of responsibility. Even in Captain Jinks in Philadelphia and on tour afterward, I had barely begun to feel it. It was only on the opening night in New York that I really felt the full weight of it and began to suffer as I have every first night. I think I have always managed to hide it from the audience but I don’t know how I’ve lived through it. …

The summer [of 1930] was a heavenly one for all of us. I was relaxed because I had a settled on my play for the next season. It was Scarlet Sister Mary. I had the manuscript with me and would occasionally look it over, studying it, and Sister [Ethel’s daughter, Ethel Barrymore Colt] would read it, too.

One night in our stateroom on the Berengaria, coming back to New York, when I thought Sister was asleep, she suddenly said, “Mother, I don’t want to come out.”

I said, “Why not?”

“I want to go on the stage. I want to play Seraphine in Scarlet Sister Mary.”

“Are you sure?” I said. I wasn’t prepared for this at all. I had never thought she wanted to go on the stage, and everything had been arranged for her debut – orchestra, room at the Colony Club, everything.

She said, “Oh, yes, I’m sure. I’ve thought about it a lot.” …

It was lovely having Sister in the company with me. There was a very special king of happiness in seeing her so charming, so sure of her part. When she first came on the stage, smiling, it always seemed to radiate a glow to every corner of the theater.

They say that any success I've had is just due to my personality, or my appearance, or anything but what I really feel they should say. "See to it that they never say anything else."

I have italicized that phrase, because of all the phrases that have ever echoed in my life, that is the one which has most affected me. It has helped me through the years. Perhaps I had better give you its context.

I was twenty then, and already, for good or evil, I was what they call a "star" — a word whose meaning has always rather puzzled me. I was acting in a play called "Cousin Kate." It was at the time when [Henry] Irving was making his last American tour, and he was playing in the same town. I had enjoyed the supreme privilege, four years before, of playing a whole season with him in London, but it was not only for this reason that, when my own play was over, I hurried across to his theater. For I should be just in time for the death-bed scene of "Louis XI."

They put me behind some curtains. The play was drawing to its close. On a stone bench Irving was dying. Dying, with the majesty of an Irving and of a King. And when death had come, and the curtain had fallen, he saw me. I went and sat by his side.

"They tell me you're a great star these days."

"Do they?"

"Yes. Extra matinees — wonderful receptions. Aren't you happy?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

I looked at him. I expect I must have seemed incredibly earnest then. I said, "The critics never give me any credit for what I do — or try to do. It's always my personality — not my art — and my looks — anything but —"

And it was then that the lean, strong old arm darted out and took mine in his, while he said: "See to it that they never say anything else!" I tell this story at the beginning not only because, as I say, those words have been a perpetual comfort to me, but because for years the only appreciation I ever had was from foreigners, and Irving was, I suppose, a technical foreigner. You may accuse me of patting myself on the back when I say that, reminding me that a prophet has never any honor in his own country. But I don't happen to be in the mood to pat myself on the back. I am merely stating a fact which still puzzles me, and used to hurt me, though now, heaven knows, I have ceased to worry about it.

However, I might give an example of what I mean. Some of you may have seen me in Somerset Maugham's play, "The Constant Wife."

At the end of that play, I began to cry. It was intentional, because I felt the situation demanded it. Then the spirit of comedy took hold of me again, and it was in this note that
the play ended.

Max Reinhardt saw me play it. He came up to me afterwards and said, "Can you do that every night?" I told him that I could and did.

"How amazing," he said.

Now Reinhardt saw and understood. He understood all that lay behind those few swift tears. Who else understood? Of the public, many, but of the critics? Perhaps I may best illustrate the attitude of certain of the critics by a quotation from the recondite Mr. Percy Hammond, whose delicate prose is a source of such constant delight to all theatergoers. He phrased it far more exquisitely than poor ignorant Max Reinhardt. He merely observed that I indulged in a few vaudeville tricks in the last act.

So that, you see, is how others see me! At least the critics in this country. Of the public I say nothing, because they have already said to me far more wonderful things than I could ever answer. But the critics! Well, here is another little example. When I was playing "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," Bourdet, whose delicate prose is a source of such constant delight to all theatergoers. He phrased it far more exquisitely than poor ignorant Max Reinhardt. He merely observed that I indulged in a few vaudeville tricks in the last act.

What is the explanation of it all? I don't know. Sometimes I have been told of some criticism which has been delivered of me, and it has made me feel that I must have given the impression of a poseuse, a poor, stagey creature. And then, after looking into my own mind, I have wondered if perhaps the accusations might not be laid to the critic himself. For always I have tried to leave my authors alone. You don't have to be bewildered by Shakespeare. There he is. Leave him alone. Say what he said, and thank your God that he has given you a trumpet through which you may blow so sweetly. You don't have to be bewildered by Ibsen. There he is. Leave him alone. He will tell a woman's life in three lines, and there, before you, like a golden gift are those three lines. Thank your God for them, because, if you are true to yourself, the very saying of them will make you an artist. That at least is what I feel about my own work. I say my lessons and have done. I want no mystery, no green lights, no Czecho-Slovakian producers or early Metro-Goldwyn wind machines. I want to speak and feel what I am speaking. And that is all I know.

However, this is supposed to be an article about myself as I think others see me and I must stick to the point. How do others see me? I do not wish to waste the time either of myself or my readers in attempting to discredit those parodies of my family which certain writers — being devoid of any creative impulse — have seen fit to foist upon the public. It is better to leave vulgarity to itself, to allow little minds to burn themselves out, and little voices to chatter themselves into the silence of the Great Inane. But if you throw enough mud, some of it will stick. And some of the mud which has been thrown by — well, we need name no names — has stuck, not only to me, but to others who are perhaps less willing to defend themselves. And it is on their behalf that I would speak.

The legend has it that we artists are wild, careless, tousled and immoral. We breakfast at midnight on a caviar sandwich and an absinthe cocktail. We live en famille — and such a famille! An organization of idiots — chaotic, arty, self-conscious, thinking theater, breathing theater, smelling theater. To these half-baked intelligences, a theatrical family is only a theatrical family — it is not an association of normal, healthy, human beings. I want to record my protest against this libel, not on my own behalf, but on behalf of other less robust and hard-bitten artists, who may be intimidated by such criticism. Take it from me, any artist who makes even a small mark on the pages of contemporary theatrical history must be a human being first, and an artist second. What you applaud, as you sit back in your stalls, is not only our art but our life. We are what we have been, not only on the stage but off it.

Look upon that picture — the picture of the parodists, and on this the true picture of my own childhood. It is a picture as formal, as quaintly conventional, as a late Victorian print. It shows a house-hold conducted with a regularity and decorum that seemed as though it were ordained by Nature. For fifty years my grandmother had the same theater, in which she ruled alone. That theater was something fixed and stable in a bewildering universe, and round it life rotated in ordered ceremony. Every day at twelve o'clock, the light brougham would draw up under the trees in our quiet Philadelphia street to bear my grandmother to the theater. And when the theater was reached, she was supreme. They called her the Duchess, not in any spirit of parody, but because she was a Duchess. She tolerated
nothing that was slovenly. If she heard any unfortunate creature using words which offended her, that creature would soon be seen slinking into obscurity through the stage door.

In the shadow of that spirit I have lived. It was a great spirit, but it was not only a theatrical spirit. For anybody who imagines that the people of the theater live and have their being only in the theater is a fool.

When I’m not in the theater, I don’t think of the theater. Of course, if I am doing a new play which absorbs me, if I am trying to interpret a character which fascinates me, for a few days I become that character, in my waking and sleeping moments. She is always with me, prompting me, pointing out little things which I hadn’t noticed before, showing me life through her eyes. But otherwise [its] the normal run of existence.

The theater is the theater, and life is life, and never do the twain meet, except between the hours of eight and eleven, when both I hope are intensified. Apart from that, life stretches before one, endlessly diverse, to be seized and savored from a thousand points of view, the pictorial, the poetical, the personal, and since we must be alliterative, even the political.

The idea that an actress goes through the world with the smell of grease-paint ever in her nostrils is an idea which, one had hoped, had died in the early Victorian era. A period, by the way, in which the most eminent of my parodists seems naturally to belong. Well, there it is. Have I told too little or too much? I leave it for you to decide. Somebody said to me the other day, “You ought to be supremely happy. You have everything that anybody could want — physical, mental, material. Yet you don’t give the impression of radiant happiness. You’re not like some of these other actresses who look as if God had climbed into His heaven solely for their benefit in order to prove to them — and to their press agent — that all was right with the world.”

He was speaking the truth. After all, who IS happy? Am I? Sometimes, yes. I am not an author — only an actress — and perhaps I am violating all the laws of prose, when I insert into this otherwise wordy article a note of pure sentiment — the sentiment which comes to me when I think of my three children — the three separate and adorable justifications of my existence. To me those children sometimes appear as the only excuse for my life. Forgive me this momentary lapse of an untutored pen.

Otherwise, is one happy? Well — one has all the materials. One could take a ticket to any part of the world. One could turn on the sunshine at will, one could play the tunes which were most beautiful, saturate oneself in all the lovely things of the earth, and then what? The play would still be a tragedy — or, if that’s too strong a word — it would still be a problem play whose meaning always eluded one. And one could still be sitting in an empty theater, the occupant of a solitary stall, bitterly conscious of the emptiness of the gallery and the boxes and seats around one.

I seem by accident to have hit upon the secret of the whole thing — the loneliness of all those of us who are trying to create You can’t escape it. You are alone. Bitterly and inevitably alone. Why — God alone knows. And if I ever find the answer, I know that it will not be on Broadway, but on the stage of life.

“You don’t have to be bewildered by Shakespeare. There he is. Leave him alone. Say what he said, and thank your God that he has given you a trumpet through which you may blow so sweetly. You don’t have to be bewildered by Ibsen. There he is. Leave him alone. He will tell a woman’s life in three lines, and there, before you, like a golden gift are those three lines. Thank your God for them, because, if you are true to yourself, the very saying of them will make you an artist. That at least is what I feel about my own work.”
The Lingo of the Stage

Editor’s note: The Cavendish family, in the words of Edna Ferber, is “the kind of stage family that thinks, talks, lives, breathes only theater,” which means their language and conversation it peppered with references to their profession: plays, actors, terms and quotations. Below is a selection of the jargon the characters use.

PLAYS

**Castlemaine**: a fictional play about the Countess of Castlemaine, Barbara Palmer (1641-1709), who was one of the royal mistresses of Charles II of England.

**Camille**: stage play adapted in 1852 from Alexandre Dumas fils’ novel The Lady of the Camellias.

**A Scrap of Paper**: comedy written by Victorien Sardou in 1860.

**She Stoops to Conquer**: Restoration comedy by Anglo-Irish playwright Oliver Goldsmith that debuted in London in 1773.

**Two Orphans**: an 1874 play by the French writers Adolphe d’Ennery and Eugène Cormon set in the 1770s.

TERMS

**blank verse**: verse without rhyme, especially that which uses iambic pentameter.

**call boy**: stagehand that informs actors of their upcoming cues during a show.

**grease paint**: part of an actor’s makeup routine starting in the 1890s after electric lighting became commonplace in theaters.

**ham**: used to describe acting styles starting in the late 19th century and devolved into a more negative term for over-acting by the 1930s.

**histrionism**: theatrical practice; play-acting; any exaggerated theatrical behavior. A compliment, as the style of acting during Aubrey’s time encouraged histrionism.

**motif**: recurrent melodic theme.

**pink lights**: soft, pastel colors in theater soften the lines of both scenery and people on stage.

**prima donna**: originally referred to the lead female singer in an opera company.

**rings down**: signal given to drop the curtain at the end of a performance.

**shouts and murmurs off**: sound effects heard offstage. The stagehand who produced these sounds was often attributed with the title of “shouts and murmurs” in a show’s playbill.

**trouper**: traveling performer or actor, from late 19th century American speech.

**upstage**: standing away from the action and diverting attention from the proceedings.

QUOTES AND REFERENCES

And now, thou cur, … At the last line, I hit.  
A reference to Cyrano de Bergerac, where Cyrano duels Valvert and composes a poem on the spot: “I’ll make one while we fight; / And strike you at the final line.”
**ACTORS AND DIRECTORS**

**Herbert Beerbohm Tree**: (1853-1917) one of the great figures of the English theater during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A successful actor-manager of his time, he also founded what became the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 1904.

**Sarah Bernhardt**: (1844-1923) the greatest French actress of the later 19th century. She was a long-time company member with Comédie-Française and ran a number of her own theaters in her career. During the siege of Paris in 1870, she turned the Odeon theater into a hospital and during World War I helped raise funds for the wounded.

**Eleonora Duse**: (1858-1924) Italian actress-manager born into a family of performers. Her career is often divided into three parts: realistic roles, then a phase when she was in a relationship with playwright Gabriele D’Annunzio, and a later religious or mystical phase. She was on a U.S. tour in 1924 when she died.

**Henry Irving**: (1838-1905) one of the most famous British actor-managers of his time and the first actor to be knighted for his theatrical work. He made his debut in 1856, performed across the U.K. as well as in Paris, the U.S. and Canada, making his farewell tour to the British provinces in 1904-05.

**Wilton Lackaye**: (1862-1932) an American stage and film actor who successfully played almost everything - villains, leading roles, character parts. Ill health forced him to retire in 1927.

**Mary Mannering**: (1876-1953) an English actress who in 1896 moved to New York where she appeared on Broadway in 19 productions. In 1911-12 she portrayed Domini Enfilden in The Garden of Allah, adapted by Robert Hichens and Mary Anderson from Hichens’ novel.

**Richard Mansfield**: (1857-1907) an English actor-manager best known for his Shakespeare roles, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and portrayal of both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

**Helena Modjeska**: (1840-1909) a Polish-American actress renowned in the U.S. for her specialization in Shakespeare. She left Poland for political reasons in 1876, and hoped to establish an international career to rival Bernhardt’s. She began to learn English, moved to the U.S. and made her English-speaking debut in 1877 in San Francisco.

**Georges Pitoëff**: (1884-1939) a Russian-born theater director and producer who popularized the works of contemporary playwrights like Pirandello, Shaw, Chekhov, Schnitzler, Ibsen and O’Neill in French performance.

**Max Reinhardt**: (1873-1943) an Austrian-born theater and film director and theatrical producer. He is now regarded as a prominent director of early-20th century German-language theater because of his innovative stage productions.

**Fannie Ward**: (1872/5-1952) an American stage and film actress whose career was built around appearing perpetually young. She got more than her share of publicity for her marriage, divorce, night club patronage and appears to have been famous for being famous.
Sir Charles Wyndham: (1837-1919) an English actor-manager in the early 20th century and founder of London’s Wyndham’s Theatre in 1899 and the New Theatre in 1903. He was also manager of the Criterion Theatre in London.

Lambs’ Club: America’s first professional theatrical club. Founded in 1874 by a group of actors and theater enthusiasts, the club took its name from a similar club established in 1869 in London which was named in honor of drama critic and essayist Charles Lamb and his sister Mary. The Club had a six-story clubhouse on 44th Street with a banquet hall, billiard room and small-scale theater, in addition to offices and sleeping quarters for members.

Theatre Guild: theatrical society founded in 1918 in New York City by Lawrence Langner. The Guild produced high-quality, non-commercial American and foreign plays. The entire board of directors shared responsibility for play selection, management and subsequent production of each show; some famous plays produced under its patronage were Shaw’s Heartbreak House, Gershwin and Heyward’s Porgy and Bess and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma!

Century Theatre: Located on 62nd Street and Central Park West, the theater opened in 1909 as the largest playhouse in New York. It was funded by a number of millionaires who hoped to create a theater immune from commercial pressures, similar to state-supported theaters in Europe. The size of the theater proved too unwieldy for the producers’ hopes, and the theater was during the 1800s, the theater settled on the name the Old Vic at the end of the century.

Theatre Royale: now known as the Bristol Old Vic, the theater is located in Bristol, England, and is the longest continuously-running theater in the English-speaking world.

Daly’s Theatre: Broadway theater built in 1867, renamed when purchased in 1879 by Augustin Daly, a theater impresario who created a company and produced there for 20 years.

Wallack’s Theatre: name of a series of theaters that opened in New York starting in the mid-19th century. Dean refers to the one at 30th Street and Broadway, which was built in 1882 and torn down in 1915.

Macauley’s in Louisville: leading theater in Louisville, Kentucky, from the late 19th to early 20th century. Actors like Sarah Bernhardt and Edwin Booth performed there during their careers.

Old Vic: London theater that opened in 1818 under the name Royal Coburg Theatre. After changing names several times
People and Things of the Period

**People**

*Leonem Ascher:* (1880-1942) an Austrian composer who wrote several successful operas. His work spanned from 1909 to 1936, including a couple film scores. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1938 after the German annexation of Austria.

> “Give me two years in Munich with my violin under Ascher, and I’ll show you what the stage means to me!” (Tony, act two)

*Otto Kahn:* (1867-1934) New York banker who specialized in reorganizing American railroad systems. He was also a prominent supporter of the arts.

> “Sunday he’s out at Otto Kahn’s. I tell you there is no other time for it.” (Wolfe, p.34)

*John D. Rockefeller:* (1839-1937) American oil tycoon and philanthropist considered to be the wealthiest American of all time.

> “With Julie a millionaire’s bride, and Gwen a society matron, all I need is you should marry John D. Rockefeller and my season is over.” (Wolfe, act three)

*Jiddu Krishnamurti:* (1895-1986) an Indian guru who was proclaimed by theosophists to be the world’s foremost mystical teacher. John Barrymore met Krishnamurti in 1926 and struck up a mutual friendship.

> “Or I may go away into India, with Krishnamurti and study Hindu philosophy!” (Tony, act two)

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*Baron vom Stein:* (1757-1831) a Prussian statesman who was the model for a character of the same name in the late 19th-century drama Diplomacy, the English

*Henri Bendel:* (1868-1936) an American fashion designer who specialized in custom-made dresses and provided exclusive imports from Paris. Starting in 1913, he operated an eight-story women’s department store on West 57th St in New York.

> “No, come at eleven — No — Bendel!” (Julie, act one)

*David Wark Griffith:* (1875-1948), more commonly known as D.W. Griffith, was an American film director, writer and producer. Griffith pioneered modern filmmaking techniques and produced significant films like The Birth of a Nation and Intolerance.

*Jack Delaney:* (1900-1948) Canadian-American boxer who was the world lightweight champion in 1926. In 1927, he tried to move up to the heavyweight division and at the Garden fought a 10-round bout against Jimmy Maloney in front of a capacity crowd (he lost). The fight set an indoor gate sales record that stood for many years.

> “Say, do you think you could get me into the Garden Friday night? I’ve never seen this Delaney.” (Jo, act one)

*20th Century Limited:* an express passenger train on the New York Central Railroad that operated from 1902 to 1967. It traveled between Grand Central Terminal in New York City and LaSalle Street Station in Chicago.

> “That means he got to Chicago this morning. Naturally he got on the Century.” (Wolfe, act one)
version of Victorien Sardou’s play Dora, written by B.C. Stephenson and Clement Scott.

“In a couple more years he'll own six toupees, and be playing Baron Stein in an all-star revival of Diplomacy.” (Wolfe, act two)

**THINGS**

**aeroplane**: Flight was fairly new technology in the 1920s. In fact, 1927 was the year of the first nonstop solo flight across the Atlantic by American aviator Charles Lindbergh. General travel by airplane did not start until the creation of commercial airliners in 1933.

“I flew, of course. Came by aeroplane from Chicago.”

(Tony, act one)

**Aquitania**: a British cruise liner operated by Cunard Lines known for its luxury interiors. Nicknamed “Ship Beautiful,” the boat had Palladian lounges and Louis XVI-style first class dining rooms. Mauretania: British luxury liner built for speed and owned by the Cunard Line. Built for speed, the ship won the prize for fastest Atlantic crossing of the time and boasted the first steam-turbine engines on a passenger liner.

“Europe, of course. Tomorrow on the Aquitania ...” (Tony, act one)

“They've been laying for him ever since that Mauretania thing.”

(Julie, act one)

**Bowling Green ten-five-one-six**: Telephone numbers in the earlier part of the 20th century used a combination of letters and numbers instead of just the numerals people use today. To place a call, one would give the operator an exchange name (Bowling Green) and the number (10516) in order to be connected.

“I thought she'd get tired of moping in her room like Elsie Dinsmore.” (Fanny, act two)

**Elsie Dinsmore**: main character in a children's book series written by Martha Finley between 1867 and 1905.

“The Graphic**: The New York Evening Graphic was a sensationalist tabloid published from September 1924 to July 1932 by Bernarr Adolphus Macfadden. The Graphic was founded to as an alternative health paper, but evolved toward first-person “news” accounts and crime stories, and included a Broadway gossip column “Your Broadway and Mine” written by Walter Winchell until 1929.

“No, he isn’t expected...Who is it, please? ... The Graphic?” (Della, act one)

**Isotta Fraschini**: high-end Italian motors brand known for its production of cars, trucks and engines for naval and aeronautical use.

“... an Isotta Fraschini for twenty thousand and an Hispano Suiza for twenty-five, a camp in the Sierras for another fifty —”

(Julie, act two)

**Junior League**: national women’s organization aimed at improving the community through volunteer work and building civic leadership skills through training. During the 1920s, the Junior League of Chicago pioneered the way for children’s theater, an idea that was subsequently taken up by more than 100 other Leagues across the country.

“I say, you couldn’t marry a good Junior League actress, huh? Instead of my Gwen.” (Wolfe, act three)

**process server**: a person who executes the “service of process” which notifies a defendant about a lawsuit against him or her. Personal service, in which a process server hands it to a defendant, was preferred because it was difficult to claim that notice wasn’t given and traditionally was the only way to serve process.

“It’s that God damned process server she’s got after me!” (Tony, act one)

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**Hispano Suiza**: Spanish automotive/engineering company best known for its luxury cars and aviation engines pre-World War I.

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~ Research by Stephanie Engel~
I had never been offered the opportunity to direct anything like this play. So when Joe Haj wrote to ask if I was interested, I had to reread it because I hadn’t read it since college. My first thought was “I just don’t know that this will be it.” Then I read it again and I thought, “This is so beautiful.”

I feel very deeply and personally the central action of this play, which is three generations of women being together on stage and talking about whether you can actually be an artist and have a family and what that really means. That’s where my heart lies in this production. And I promised Joe it’ll be funny.

I also think of this play through the lens of Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard, and that’s where our design conversations began. This is a family whose way of life is being challenged and altered by the changing economy of performance. There’s a significant death center stage at the end of the show, and I find that mad and devastating. It’s about the future crushing in on this family and the question as to how they’re all going to meet it. We will watch the family change itself over the course of the show. What starts very firmly in period ends up by the third act becoming contemporary, with Julie suddenly appearing like a Wall Street banker’s wife in Act 3, having made this adjustment and amputated herself to fit the vision of stability and efficiency that Gil brings in. I love Gil, and I hate him. When he walks into this Cavendish space, I think he will feel like cool water on what has been an insane picture, and he actually will be the first person in modern dress to hit the stage. That’s just who he is against this sort of Vaudevillian world.

The set will function in this way as well: I want people to feel like that it’s a realistic space to start. Then slowly we peel back more and more of the artifice. We have some very beautiful lights on rolling stands that will get introduced to the apartment towards the end of Kaufman and Ferber’s Act 1. It will feel like the world is beginning to crack a little bit. A large part of that is the feeling of impending change and future unsustainability that is also very much about underscoring Julie’s emotional journey as a deeply identifiable modern woman who is just trying to keep her family together.

There will be a number of streams of life in this show, and the house servants Della and Jo are going to be holding a huge amount of that together. The feeling is that Della and Jo in particular, but also our full servants corps, are quiet witnesses - almost like a film shoot where the family and associates are the leads of the film of their lives, but the servants are witnessing that and helping it along. The artifice is removed entirely for Act 3.

Edited from comments made to the cast and staff on the first day of rehearsal.
From the Costume Designer: Brenda Abbandadolo

The Cherry Orchard was a main theme for us, in the sense of this family being stuck and never quite arriving despite how far they get. We do start the clothes relatively firmly in the ’20s (’20s-lite, is what I would call it, but it’s definitely period). As we progress through the play we get to different decades, but they never fully arrive.

The servants are some of the few characters that never change. They are the rock and the stability, so they anchor the family and take care of the space. And they look like very classic 1920s servants.

Gwen, the young Cavendish ingénue, is in love, and she’s going to represent an archetype of young love, with clothes that will keep her young and light. She will always be in pink.

The other idea we’re playing with is that these are actors, they’re theatrical, and they have costumes at their house, and they often wear those costumes. There’s a stage direction that describes Gwen as having the look of an Ophelia about her, and we decided she should actually be in an Ophelia costume. Gwen and Perry make a jump in Act 3 to the early ’60s. It’s like they made it to the Kennedy era but not any further. She has a very traditional dress: the mom who’s not quite the mom, she’s probably more in Saks or Bergdorf’s.

The matriarch Fanny definitely exudes splendor and theatricality. She’s very grand the first time we see her. Julie is actually very simple because she’s the stability, the breadwinner. She’s quite modern, in pants. Her Act 3 look is very modern, as she fills the shoes of a banker’s wife.

Tony is the most playful, and he acts out a lot. So he arrives in this absurd animal-like fur from Hollywood, covering his white suit. And he just keeps changing through the play, including wearing his father’s Lear robe, which we think he just puts on to help his mother. And in Act 3, because he’s been to Germany, he returns as a German Expressionist.

I don’t think of Herbert and Kitty Dean as too comical in their clothes: they’re just fighting for their relevance in an industry where they’re becoming obsolete.

Edited from comments made to the cast and staff on the first day of rehearsal.
EDITIONS OF THE PLAY

The Royal Family by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, New York: Samuel French, 1927

This is the acting edition of the play. The version published after 1976 includes suggested alterations to the playing text based on the 1975 Broadway revival of the play.


Maslon takes the text for this reading edition from the version published by Doubleday in 1928, which includes a few lines that were cut before it opened in 1927.

ALSO BY KAUFMAN AND FERBER


Dinner at Eight, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1932

The Land is Bright, New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1946

Minick, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924

This volume includes the Edna Ferber short story “Old Man Minick” from which the play is adapted.

Stage Door, New York; Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1936

ABOUT EDNA FERBER

Ferber, Edna, A Peculiar Treasure, New York: The Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1939


Ferber’s autobiography, in two parts

ABOUT GEORGE S. KAUFMAN


Meredith, Scott, George S. Kaufman and His Friends, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974


THEATER, BROADWAY AND THE BARRYMORES


Includes a chapter on the Barrymores called “The Royal Family of Actors”

Barrymore, John, Confessions of an Actor, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1926

Barrymore, Lionel, We Barrymores, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951


