



YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU AT SPOTLIGHTERS THEATRE

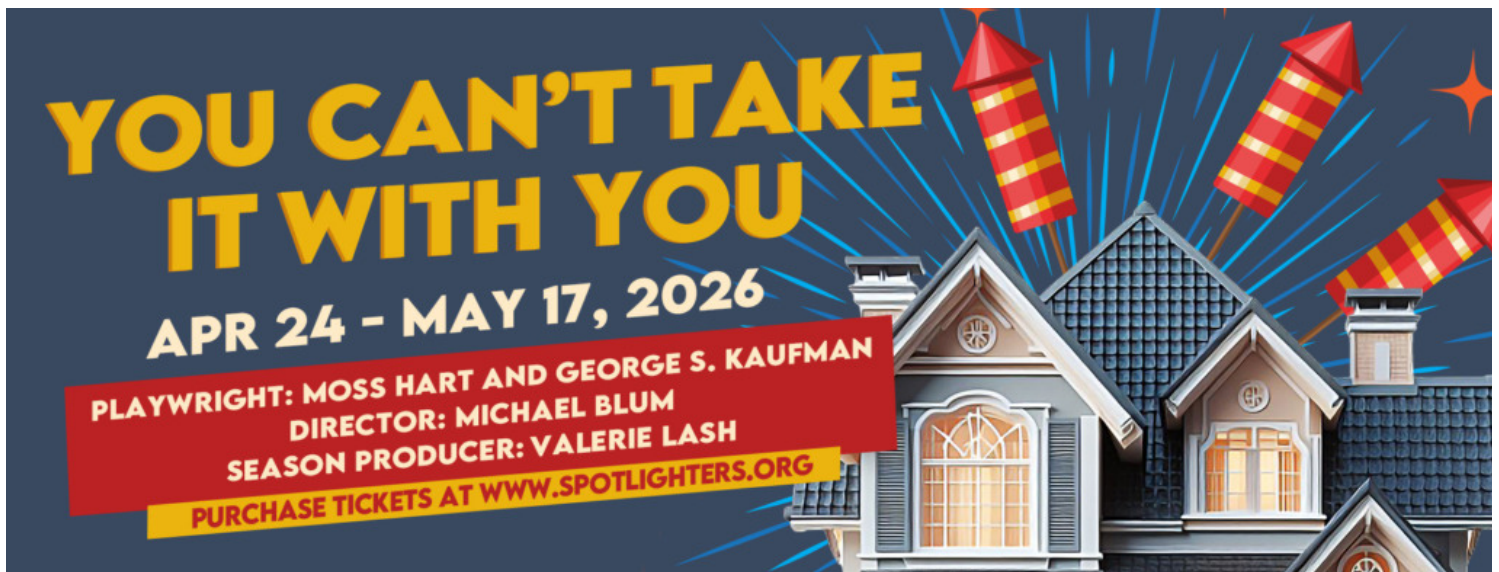
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Do Not Be Stingy With The Blintzes: You Can't Take It With You at Spotlighters Theatre

Now, stop me if you've heard this one: What do you get when you cross a tax-evading retiree, a wannabe playwright, a fireworks-obsessed husband and his best friend, a dancer, a xylophonist, a jealous housekeeper, a drunken actor, two Russians, a Scot, a Wall Street bigwig and his wife, some star-crossed lovers, and a bunch of FBI agents? You get either the worst episode of America's Got Talent anyone could imagine, or you get a family comedy nuttier than a squirrel's outhouse! Spotlighters Theatre presents, in all its chaos, Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's classic farce *You Can't Take It With You*, a night of family, fireworks, snakes, and hilarity.



A riotous romp of epic proportions, *You Can't Take It With You* follows the family of Martin Vanderhof, a retired family man in 1930s New York. Martin's family is what some would call "unconventional." In fact, it's crazier than a snake's armpit! This motley crew of wacky relations bands together to handle the wildest situations imaginable, from fanatical FBI agents to former Russian royalty, ill-fitting in-laws, and everything in between, reminding us that nothing is more important than family. Premiering in 1936, *You Can't Take It With You* paired Marx Brothers humorist George S. Kaufman with playwright and librettist Moss Hart, winning the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play was adapted for the screen in 1938, featuring an all-star cast, including Lionel Barrymore, Jimmy Stewart, Edward Arnold, and Ann Miller. The play remains one of the top ten most produced school plays every year since amateur production rights became available in 1939.

Director Michael Blum heads the production for Spotlighters, embracing the lunacy like Groucho embraced his cigars. The cast members are larger-than-life cartoons, feeling like they just fell out of *Duck Soup*. Blum's sound effects, operated by Daniel Freeman, add to the hilarity, just realistic enough to get the point across, but still goofy enough to hold comedic seltzer water. Katie Bennett's props follow suit, offering garish, cartoonish fireworks, along with slapstick smudges on Paul and De Pinna's faces following an accidental explosion early in the show. Julia Golbey's costuming is period appropriate, with authentic yet distinctive garb that absolutely matches each character's personality.

Set Designer Justin Nepomuceno welcomes the audience into the Vanderhof home with period-appropriate music, as well as a well-furnished stage. An antique chandelier, a desk, a table and chairs, a settee, some shelves, and a fireplace adorn the set, giving it a busy yet cozy feel. The set is a little cramped, but this adds to the charm of the production, using every inch of the auditorium to immerse the audience in the lives of the various members of the Vanderhof clan. Jen Sizer's lighting design wraps it all up in a neat little bow, adding emphasis to particularly chaotic moments. When FBI agents come to the house to arrest the family for suspicion of some dastardly deeds, Sizer sets off metaphorical fireworks, with various multicolor lights going wild while the cast scrambles to evade the feds. Said Director Blum, he wanted instead to have a rocket flying across the auditorium, but they just couldn't swing it. From this point of view, thank goodness that didn't happen, because the finished scene was much more comical. Between Sizer's lights, Nepomuceno's staging, and Blum's sound effects, the audience could barely understand Boris Kolenkhov's Russian accented shouts, warning the house of an inadvertent fireworks explosion. The audience was dumbfounded during the short act break immediately following, asking each other, "What the hell just happened," howling in hysterics at one of the show's most memorable moments.

Sitting at the head of the family table is Martin Vanderhof (Grandpa), played by Frank Mancino. The family patriarch, Vanderhof doesn't believe in income tax, landing himself in hot water with the feds. Regardless, Mancino's Vanderhof is a laid back, 35-year retiree who spends his time hunting for snakes, playing darts, reading a newspaper, and offering warm, practical advice, such as "You can't take it with you" (Oh, that's why they named the show that...). Mancino pulls no punches when it comes to sarcasm, though it's clear it comes from the right place when it comes to his family. Grandpa always leads the family in prayer before dinner, giving Mancino a few moments of poignancy as he asks the Almighty simply for the health of his family, letting the rest of the chips fall as they may.

Penelope Sycamore, Martin's daughter, played by Evangeline Ridgaway, is a young mother trying to find herself. She's a woman whose interests in her family always come first, leading her to frequently abandon her own interests, such as writing and painting. Ridgaway's Penny shows the hobbyist in all of us, with sky-high dreams and her feet firmly planted on the ground. Paul Sycamore, Penny's husband (Paul Norfolk) manages to reach the sky, via his obsession with fireworks. Rather eccentric in that oh-so-likable way, Norfolk gives off a Jackie Coogan "Uncle Fester" vibe, dipping his toes into Trotsky as he tries (somewhat unsuccessfully) to create the perfect pyrotechnics show while not burning down the house.

Essie Carmichael (Jenna Sharples), the eldest of Paul and Penny's two daughters, is an aspiring dancer and candymaker whose elevator doesn't quite make it to the top floor. She's rather childlike, floating around the set like a leaf caught in a light spring gust. Sharples' physicality and delivery is top notch, knowing just when to get in the way to get the laughs before gliding away to let the others shine. Ed Carmichael, Essie's husband (Russell Sorbello) is her exact equal, eager to support Essie's whims with his own xylophonic renditions of Beethoven, as well as accidentally including Communistic fliers he absentmindedly printed with Essie's candy deliveries. Sharples and Sorbello are perfectly matched as Essie and Ed, working off of each other to portray the happily married couple.

Alice Sycamore (Allison Chen), Paul and Penny's youngest daughter, is new to the game of love, yet she's already snagged a catch with Anthony 'Tony' Kirby Jr. (Paul Mancano), the Vice President (and boss' son) of a Wall Street firm. As a couple, Chen and Mancano are hopelessly in love, adorable to the point of causing cavities. The two are quintessential couple, exactly what Oscar Hammerstein was thinking of when he wrote "Hello, Young Lovers." Chen's Alice, sporting a cute little beauty mark on lower left cheek, understands her family is a little on the odd side, yet happily invites Tony's parents over to meet them, begging her family to act "normal" for once. Chen seems to channel Beverly Owen's Marilyn Muster, the most conventional member of the group. Tony, the everyman of the performance, much like

Cary Grant in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, can't help but fall for Alice, forgiving her every oddity in exchange for her affection. When the time comes to defend his fiancé's honor, Tony stands firm, reminding his father that love is more than just a convenient business arrangement.

As Tony's parents, Miriam, and Anthony Kirby Sr., Kellie Santos-DeJesus and Chevell Thomas bring the show down to earth with great contrast to the silliness of the Vanderhof family. The Kirby's are proper, up-standing elites who are outraged when they learn about the family into which their son intends to marry. Santos-DeJesus as Miriam just screams the typical "Well, I never" type of embarrassed elitist, presenting insincere politeness from the start, and quickly finding as much fault as she can with her son's intended in-laws. Chevell, as Kirby Sr., does his best to be proper and accommodating, but just can't allow himself to give in to the family's weirdness. During their visit to the Vanderhof home, the Kirby's learn much more about each other than they would've ever wanted, when a word association parlor game goes wrong, leading them to question each other, eliciting giggles and "oohs" from the audience.

Adding to the absurdity are some household members who may not be blood, but they're definitely family. The first is Mr. De Pinna (Glen Charlow) an iceman who came inside to speak to Paul some years ago, and never left. De Pinna is Paul's cohort in his fireworks experiments, as well as Penny's model when she decides to take up painting again. Charlow is fearless as De Pinna, nailing every laugh line from the three-point zone. His comedic timing with Paul helps to accentuate Paul's kookiness, and his physicality when he poses in his boxers for Penny's portrait is something out of Harpo Marx's playbook. Special shoutout to Jace Baranowski, who created the unfinished portrait of Charlow as De Pinna.

Another honorary member of the Vanderhof family is Russian expatriate Boris Kolenkhov, played by Daniel Duek. Kolenkhov is Essie's dance teacher, as well as grumpy, politically savvy, and painfully truthful when it comes to his opinions on the others. What else is there to say about Duek as Kolenkhov other than "He STINKS!" Just kidding. 😊 Duek plays Kolenkhov with an accent borrowed from Boris Badenov, barely intelligible at points, leading him to rely more on passion and movement to give his character life. He's that piece of the puzzle that doesn't look like it will fit, but somehow, fits like a glove.

Rheba (Brooke Sing), Vanderhof's cook and housekeeper, does her best to bring some sanity to the madness of the house, trying to keep things straight as they all fall apart. Her boyfriend, Donald (Richard Culp Robinson), is a kilt-clad Scotsman who's wrapped around Rheba's little finger. Together, Sing and Robinson are the older couple of the group, Rheba getting jealous when Gay Wellington flirts with Donald, leaving him chasing after Rheba asking, "What did I do?". Rheba's exasperation at the family's demands reaches new heights as she sends Donald racing through the auditorium with multiple shopping lists for the Kirbys' arrival. The couple's little spats show the younger couple that love isn't always sunshine and roses, but it still feels good to have someone at your side.

Visitors to Martin's home are no less bizarre than the family itself, as evidenced by drunken actor Gay Wellington (Kay-Megan Washington). Washington presents Wellington as a self-absorbed lush, as though she were from the golden age of Eartha Kitt, complete with gaudy turban and vast overacting. Had Washington started rolling her R's, I'd have expected to see her playing Catwoman next. Her boozy stumbling and flirtatious nature leave the audience in stitches. As a late addition to the house, Grand Dutchess Olga Katrina (Suzanne Young) appears to be another friend who's not leaving any time soon. A cousin of the Czar, the Grand Duchess was forced to flee Russia before the Revolution, finding her place in America as a waitress at a local restaurant chain. Similarly, her entire family has also been forced into working class jobs in America. Young enters as Olga with a stern, stereotypical czarina disposition, which quickly melts as she shares her woes with the family. Feeling accepted, Olga gleefully hops into the kitchen to help Rheba prepare blintzes. Young's mastery of the character changes her from imposing ex-royalty into just another one of the family.

Rounding out the cast are a force of federal agents who make the audience quake in their seats (well, quake with laughter, anyway). It seems that, in his carelessness toward income taxes, Martin now owes the federal government 24 years of back taxes. Enter Wilbur C. Henderson, Internal Revenue Agent (Andrew Syropoulos). While not a central figure to the plot, Syropoulos makes nerdy, overzealous Henderson unforgettable, with impassioned speeches on the merits of fiscal policy. His exit as Henderson leaves the audience in guffaws as he jumps and flees from the sight of Martin's pet snakes. Syropoulos' Henderson feels like a day in the life of Rod of Avenue Q fame. Along with Syropoulos are "The Man" (James Pope), G-Man Mac (Hossein Parvizian), and G-Man Jim (Daniel Freeman), who Bogart the stage like they're all auditioning for The Maltese Falcon. Just threatening enough to set the mood, the agents march into the scene to announce they've (inaccurately) pieced together a family plot against the government. Chaos ensues, sending the crowd into hysterics as the family goes to jail on ridiculous, unsustainable charges.

If you thought your family was nuts, you ought to see the Vanderhofs! A comedic exploit worthy of the Marx Brothers, Moss and Hart's *You Can't Take It With You* at Spotlighters Theatre leaves the audience rolling in the aisles, and thanking their lucky stars for the love, warmth, and pure insanity that comes from being part of a family.

Running Time: Approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes with one intermission

You Can't Take It With You plays through May 17th 2026 at The Audrey Herman Spotlighters Theatre— 817 Saint Paul Street, Baltimore MD. For tickets call the box office at (410) 752-1225 or purchase them online.