

11/06/2012 by **Hoyt Hilsman** Journalist, screenwriter, critic, former candidate for Congress

## Theater Review: *You Can't Take It With You* at Antaeus

Kaufman and Hart's comedy about the eccentric Sycamore family opened in 1936 during the depths of the Depression and won the Pulitzer Prize for that year. While it has long been regarded as an old chesnut in the theater world, there is a refreshing contemporary resonance in the revival at the Antaeus Company under the thoughtful direction of Gigi Bermingham.

One of the social consequences of the Depression was the cramming of people -- family, friends and boarders -- under a single roof. While this was a matter of economic necessity, often with a single breadwinner supporting many in the household, it also brought a kind of forced intimacy, both good and bad, to the American family scene. For those who grew up during those hard times, it was not all bleak -- there were often happy memories of fun times spent amusing themselves with games, hobbies and song.

For the millions of people who had more time than money, the Depression provided an opportunity to form relationships and explore their hidden talents rather than devote their lives to the pursuit of wealth and status. It was a time when ordinary people questioned the values of materialism, and cast a cynical eye on the Wall Street profiteers and the other "one-percenters" who seemed to be profiting from the misery of the many.

Underneath its light comic exterior, this is the message of Kaufman and Hart's play. While much is made of the eccentricities of the Sycamore family, at its heart is a fairly radical philosophy that is espoused by Grandpa Vanderhof (played in this production by Lawrence Pressman), who gave up the rat race at the height of his success. "Life's pretty simple," says Grandpa, "if you just relax." When he is challenged by the question "How can you relax in times like these?" his response is "If they'd relax there wouldn't be times like these."

While she is faithful to the comedic tone of the play, director Bermingham focuses correctly on this deeper message -- one that is often lost in productions of the play. With an excellent cast, including dynamite performances by Pressman, Julia Fletcher as the Sycamore mom, Kate Maher as the beleaguered daughter, John Apicella as the buttoned-up Wall Street banker and Shannon Holt in dual roles as the society wife and Russian Duchess, Bermingham brings both a comedic and dramatic punch to the play. The rest of the ensemble is excellent, and the set by Tom Buderwitz provides a naturalistic backdrop.

As we read about families who have been crushed -- or at least hard pressed -- by our own Great Recession, it is inspiring to take a fresh look at the Depression generation, and hope that Kaufman and Hart's tale of the Sycamore family will once again find resonance.