

# ReACT's "You Can't Take It With You" keeps ethnic diversity as backdrop

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What happens when an ordinary young woman begins dating the son of her boss at work? In Repertory Actors Theatre's production of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's Pulitzer Prize-winning comedy "You Can't Take It With You," this play becomes much more than the typical "meet the parents" laugh-riot. The play centers on the family of Alice Sycamore, a Wall Street secretary. When she invites her new boyfriend, Tony Kirby, over for dinner, and he shows up a day early with his parents in tow, the two families clash uproariously. Previous productions have been both praised and criticized for offering immediate enjoyment without much substantive analysis of American culture.

But director David Hsieh has added a twist to the play's basic dramatic structure. By casting Alice's family with Asian American actors, Hsieh strives to create a "color-sensitive multiethnic color-blind cast version" of this play in which ethnic culture is used to "augment the differences between the two families."

Hsieh's production also seeks to explore theatrical racial stereotypes from the past. Kaufman and Hart's play is set in 1938, but Hsieh says he tried to place "the scripted 'colored' servant characters in more politically-correct light." To do this, he created an ensemble of actors that is ethnically diverse than he had seen in previous traditional stagings.

This created directorial challenges not usually associated with Kaufman and Hart's play.

"Instead of being the family maid, we've tried to present the character of Rheba more as a family guest who happens to love to cook, and her boyfriend Donald more as a family friend who enjoys helping out," Hsieh says. As a result, Hsieh continued, "it was interesting to figure out changes in staging to get Rheba into the room to explain why she was always answering the door even though she was no longer a servant."

Other aspects of the production have proved challenging as well. "As most 'period' pieces are, this show was a big challenge for us on our shoestring budget," Hsieh says. "It is extremely prop heavy with a large cast of 19 characters, dance elements, live music, foreign accents, and onstage fireworks."

Many of the artists working on this production of "You Can't Take It With You" have previously graced ReACT's stages before. "We do strive to have a core company of artists to work with, as well as recruit new talent for every production," says Hsieh. He emphasizes the importance of having fun, as well as fulfilling the ReACT company mission to increase opportunities for artists by employing multiethnic and non-traditional casting. "We hope that this is a good way of keeping the ReAct family growing. I personally would hope that the artists we employ have a good time with each production, and understand what we are trying to accomplish so that they are eager to return to work with us again as schedules permit."

In addition to these organizational and cultural goals, Hsieh hopes to showcase a classic but sometimes ignored piece of America's dramatic history: "It is surprising, in spite of how often this beloved show has been done historically, that many folks out there have never seen it," Hsieh says. "They don't make plays like this anymore."

*"You Can't Take It With You" runs through May 20 at Richard Hugo House Theatre, 1634 11th Ave., Seattle.*