

MORTON EUSTIS

In the 1920s, no one saw a conflict of interest in writing for the theatre while writing about it. George S. Kaufman worked on the drama desk of the New York *Tribune* and was dramatic editor of *The New York Times* at the same time that he was establishing himself as a comic dramatist with an uncanny skill at getting laughs. He invariably worked with a collaborator—Ring Lardner, Morrie Ryskind, Edna Ferber and, most successfully, Moss Hart—with Kaufman contributing the one-liners and surefire climaxes. Kaufman usually staged the plays himself, reshaping moments to deliver the greatest punch. Depression audiences welcomed the political satire of *Of Thee I Sing* (with Ryskind and George and Ira Gershwin, 1931), the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize, and *You Can't Take It with You* (with Hart, 1936), a paean to taking life easy. *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939) was meant as topical fooling, with characters based on Alexander Woollcott, Noël Coward, and Harpo Marx; yet it has remained a perennial favorite. A valuable account of Kaufman molding the play was provided by Morton Eustis (1905–1944). A newspaperman from an old Virginia family, who grew up on a historic estate in Loudon County, Eustis joined the editorial staff of *Theatre Arts Monthly* in 1933. His series on the actor's work on his part, on the director, and on the business of theatre helped to promote it from a coterie journal to a widely read organ of opinion. In 1941, he left to serve in the army and was killed in August 1944 in Normandy where he was serving with the 2d Armored Division.

The Man Who Came to Dinner With George Kaufman Directing

‘ALL right, Mr. Kaufman?’ the stage manager asks. . . . ‘Yes, any time you’re ready.’ . . . George S. Kaufman has a whispered colloquy with Monty Woolley. He stands centre stage surveying the green living-room-hall in Mesalia, Ohio, which Donald Oenslager has designed for *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. He marks the spot where he wants Woolley’s wheelchair to rest, opens and closes the big doors leading to the library on the left to see that they slide smoothly, and rubs the

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edge of the stair bannisters in the centre to see that they are smooth enough for someone to slide down. Then he walks down the ramp which connects stage and auditorium during rehearsals and flops in an orchestra seat with his legs dangling over two of the chairs.

The scene is the Music Box Theatre. The time, 2 P.M., one Tuesday afternoon eight days after the Kaufman-Hart comedy has been in rehearsal. The first four days were passed sitting around a table, reading. Today a run-through of the entire play is to be attempted. Although the actors are still fumbling for their lines, none of them carry their 'sides', except Monty Woolley, who, in the Woollcottian role of Sheridan Whiteside—litterateur, lecturer, radio commentator, 'intimate friend of the great and near-great'—has a part which is almost as long as Hamlet's.

It is a little unusual in theatre practice to have the set in place so early. But Kaufman is such a stickler for assurance in detail that, when the play is not an elaborate, many-scened affair, he likes his actors to get the feel of the set as soon as they walk on in their parts. The stage manager sits at a prompt table on the right. A brilliant work-light hangs centre stage illuminating the set and the dark and empty theatre in a garish manner.

'On stage for the end of the third act,' the stage manager calls out. Kaufman, a script in his hand, walks up the aisle to talk with his collaborator, Moss Hart. 'You may be right,' he says, 'but let's run through it this way and see how it plays.'

To see a play backwards—the final curtain first, then the last act, then the second and the first—is a curious and somewhat frightening experience to anyone who has ever tried to write a play. It shows—at any rate, this farce-comedy shows—that a play can be put together so that each scene is not only self-explanatory but a revelation of what has gone before. The last act of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is just as funny, and just as clear, even if you have not seen the acts which preceded it and have but the haziest advance notion of what the play is about. Kaufman, in all the rehearsals of the show except the complete run-throughs, starts with the last act and works backward. Whether he does this deliberately because he thinks that it is one way to catch the dead spots—that each act, in other

words, should be able to stand on its own feet as an entity—this writer cannot tell. But to see a backward run of a play that is as expertly constructed as the present Kaufman-Hart script is an object lesson in what William Archer calls ‘playmaking’.

‘All right, ready.’ They start to run through the scene in which Sheridan Whiteside takes his sarcastic leave of the Middle Western family on whom he has imposed himself for over a month. Kaufman slumps in a seat next to Hart as the action commences.

Whiteside, the bewhiskered ‘Big Lord Fauntleroy’, as his secretary calls him in a moment of anger, bids farewell, in his graciously ungracious style, to his long suffering host and starts to make his exit.

‘Merry Christmas, everybody,’ he says as his parting thrust, puts his hat on with a flourish and walks out of the house.

‘Wait a minute,’ Kaufman says. ‘The gesture with the hat is fine, Monty, but make it after the line. You’ll hold the line that way and sustain it.’ The exit is repeated and Kaufman proves to be right. The ‘Merry Christmas’ is funny in itself—after all that has occurred—and the gesture holds and builds the laugh.

‘Now let’s get this sound right,’ says Kaufman, as he ambles up on stage and walks over to the stage manager’s desk. Whiteside, in leaving the house, is supposed to slip on the icy stoop, emitting a loud groan. ‘I want to try dropping a sand bag for the first sound. Then your groan, Monty, must be a long, agonized wail.’ . . . ‘How’s this?’ says Woolley, moaning eloquently. ‘A little too sharp, I think,’ Kaufman tells him. ‘But try it once.’

‘Merry Christmas, everybody,’ Woolley flourishes his hat and goes out. A thud is heard, then Woolley’s anguished groan. ‘No, Monty,’ Kaufman calls out, ‘I get the feeling that you’re standing right outside. Remember, the door is shut! All right, now key it down a little—*there*, that’s just right.’

They run through this exit several times as Kaufman stands watching it, his long arms dangling loosely by his side, his shock of black hair standing up in disarray.

Kaufman, the director, is the complete antithesis of Kaufman, the playwright. The pungent, volatile drive, the sheer exuberance and vitality that illuminates almost every Kaufman

script, is completely lacking in Kaufman, the man. He is not, like Noel Coward, a whole show in himself at rehearsals. He is quiet, unobtrusive; he never raises his voice, even at the most exasperating moments; he is kindly, sympathetic, quizzical. There is nothing of the human dynamo hammering the beat of a speedy, perfectly timed charade. On the other hand, he gives almost immediately the impression that the jobs of playwriting and directing are two parts of the same thing; that gesture, and the movement of the actors, singly and together, are as much a part of the play as the words. This accounts for the way he rewrites as he goes along, shifting a phrase, a line, sometimes a whole speech to suit the tempo and the rhythm of movement he wants to secure. He is nothing if not thorough. And as you see him standing, his head tilted a little to one side, his forefinger cocked or in the corner of his mouth, listening to the sound of a play that will be as quickly paced as any in New York, you realize that his genius for direction lies as much in the infinite capacity for taking pains as in a natural theatre flair.

The new Kaufman-Hart opus is a kind of *You Can't Take It With You*, Algonquin style. Kaufman and Hart strand their Woollcottian prototype in Mesalia, Ohio, while on a lecture tour. The portly, quixotic 'road company Nero', as he describes himself in one bashful moment, breaks his hip (or is supposed to) when he slips on the ice on the doorstep of Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Stanley's home and he is obliged to spend a month in a wheel-chair in their house. He disrupts completely the life of every one in the establishment. He takes charge, arrogantly, of the living quarters; relegates the Stanleys to the service entrance; sends their children away from home and generally makes an alluring beast of himself. The thread of the play is hung on his thoroughly outrageous attempt to thwart his secretary's desire to marry a young reporter from the local gazette—an attempt which involves the kidnapping of an English actress he lures to Mesalia to entrap the young reporter. Like a good opus, it ends on the key in which it started—an exit and a fall on the ice.

'Hold it, Monty,' Kaufman calls out, 'I want to fill in here with a few little lines before you come in.' Whiteside's groan,

on his final curtain fall, brings all the family and servants rushing into the room, down the stairs and from the doors to the left. After a moment's thought, as he scratches the edge of his steel-rimmed glasses, Kaufman gets the line he wants Whiteside's secretary to say: "Bert, something's happened to Mr. Whiteside"—No, I beg your pardon. Bert's got to run out. I forgot. Turn to the doctor and say "Doctor—doctor". On that, you people run downstairs (the son and daughter and Mrs. Stanley). Not too highly keyed, please, you people on the stairs—*You* say (to the son) "What's the matter? What's wrong!"—*You* (to the girl) "Has something happened? What is it?"—*You* (to the mother) "What's the matter? What's the matter, Barbara!" . . . All right, try it.'

They run through it. 'Now a little faster,' Kaufman requests. 'You needn't wait for dead cues on this. You can overlap them. . . . "What's the matter? What's the matter?" sounds wrong. Let's see. Change that to "Oh dear! Oh dear!"'

Kaufman watches with Hart as they work out this scene. 'The group on the stairs a little stronger vocally, please,' he calls out. 'And Doctor, your entrance is too casual. You've got to come in with a good deal of eagerness.'

Back on stage he spends five minutes working out the cues with the stage manager so that each sound and movement is timed to create the right effect. The scene is played again and again. Whiteside is carried in for the final curtain, shouting for his nurse—whom he detested—and promising that he will sue the Stanley family for \$350,000.

'We'll have to wait until we get this before an audience, Monty,' Kaufman says to Woolley, 'to see whether your line "I want Miss Preen, Miss Preen!" (the nurse) gets such a laugh that it will drown out the next one, or whether we can get the laugh and then build it again on "\$350,000".'

'All right, let's try the third act from the beginning of the kidnap.' This is (or was) the scene in which a Harpo Marx character, named Banjo, and a crazy surrealist painter, named Miguel Santos, save the day for Whiteside by kidnapping the actress (played by Carol Goodner, the English actress). This is worked out very slowly, to get the mechanics of it exact. Binding the girl's legs and arms, and gagging her, require considerable

routine work. Woolley also has a fast and continuous speech at this point and it is essential to have the kidnapping take no longer than Woolley's lines.

'All right, let's do this routine again,' Kaufman says, 'and time it.' It takes exactly twenty-seven seconds. 'We'll allow thirty seconds,' Kaufman says, 'in case of a slip.' They play it through again, first with the business alone, then with the lines. Kaufman calls: 'Put it together a few times, business and lines.' And he adds: 'Maybe in about two days, after this is better set, I'll fill it in a little more, but let's let it go as it is, now.'

Kaufman comes down into the house and has a long talk with Hart. Then he asks the stage manager to run through the third act.

Whiteside, looking intently at the picture of Mr. Stanley's sister, suddenly discovers that she is none other than Lizzie Borden, or as the dramatists choose to call her, Harriet Sedley. He looks at the picture, registers recognition, but that is all. Hart stands up. 'I think we've got to build this, George,' he tells Kaufman. 'I'd like to have him snap his fingers as he looks at the picture—and I'd even go so far as to have him say: "I knew I'd seen that face before." . . . You've got to let the audience realize the significance of what he's discovered and I don't think the facial expression is enough.'

Kaufman is a little uncertain. 'It may be too obvious,' he says, 'but O.K., let's try it.' Woolley does try it and it is much better. The slight confusion that was evident before is gone.

'I'd like you to run through the second act, Bernie,' Kaufman tells the stage manager. 'Then we'll try one little change.' And he and Hart retire to Sam Harris' office in the mezzanine to do some rewriting.

The second act runs fairly smoothly and without interruption, as its mentors are not present. There is a definite dead spot, however, in the middle where the Stanley son and daughter ask Whiteside to help them in their troubles. The son wants to become a professional photographer, 'but Dad won't hear of it'. The daughter has fallen in love with a young labor organizer and 'Dad won't hear of that' either. Each asks Whiteside's help, and of course he gives it, advising them to do

exactly what their parents think they should not do. The two short scenes are nicely written. The son gives quite an eloquent speech, but somehow the interest lags the moment they start their pleas.

The run-through completed—to the tune of a typewriter pounding busily upstairs—Kaufman and Hart make their appearance with the new material. The sheets of paper are passed out to the company, Kaufman sits down on the sofa and asks them to read through the new scene, which is, needless to say, the dead spot of the second act. What Kaufman and Hart have done is quite simple. They have transposed, rearranged and cut the scene severely, giving to Whiteside the burden of the lines which the son and daughter formerly spoke. The net result is to keep Whiteside in the dominant position. He is now the one who suggests that the son should leave his family and follow his own bent; he is the one to tell the daughter that she must run away with her boyfriend. Even in a reading, the scene picks up. The sympathy of the audience is enlisted just as strongly on behalf of the children, but the fact that Whiteside, the supreme meddler, is the *deus ex machina* of the occasion, gives it a point and a breadth of humor lacking before.

‘That’s better, don’t you think?’ Kaufman says to the writer, as he strolls up the aisle. ‘An audience always listens more to a lead than to a juvenile, and I think the shift has pulled up the scene. It’s amazing, you know,’ he says as he sits down. ‘You think you have a script just as tight as possible. Then you get it on the stage and dead chunks appear all through it. When you get it in front of an audience, a whole new set of dead spots turn up. And three weeks after the New York opening you still find places you can cut.’

This, from a man of Kaufman’s experience both as a playwright and a director, should be more than illuminating to young and earnest playwrights who feel that a script is an inviolable thing which cannot be desecrated by the change of even a word or a semi-colon. If anyone in our theatre should be able to write a ‘tight’ script, it is George Kaufman and Moss Hart. And yet you see these two glittering dramatic jitterbugs rewriting whole scenes, filling in others, and cutting, cutting, cutting all along the line.

You see them also writing almost as they go along, taking a

well-rounded script, not a skeleton by any means, and giving it a three-dimensional quality in terms of the complex medium in which it is expressed. Kaufman's method as a director is utterly different from that of Noel Coward or the Lunts, all three of whom are more dynamic in their approach than he is. Yet Kaufman, in his own way, produces a dynamic effect as well as anyone in our theatre. And he can mold a rollicking script like *The Man Who Came to Dinner* just as well as a sombre play like *Of Mice and Men*, and with equal variety.

'All right! Stand by for a complete run-through this time.'

'Four props came today, and one was right,' Kaufman tells Hart with a wry smile two days later, but he does not let this disturb his equanimity. He paces up and down, in front of the orchestra pit, as the company runs through the play—backwards again. Now he is concentrating upon cueing the action to the word, upon the thousand and one details that an audience is never aware of. Fully ten minutes is spent gauging the exact moment at which the slam of a door should be heard at a certain exit. All the spots where the props may hold up the action are studiously worked over. The opening of a package, for instance, is timed so that the actual work of undoing the string is at a minimum. One realizes as never before how important little details are; how the opening of a letter, say, can slow up the whole action of a play unless someone is given a line to fill in the pause.

'Keep perfectly serious,' Kaufman adjures the doctor, who enters disguised as Santa Claus. 'The moment you smile, the moment *you* think you're funny, it's gone!' . . . 'In the line "four telephones crying", don't lose the word "crying",' he tells the actor impersonating Banjo. 'You've got to heighten "crying", or you get the laugh on "telephones".'

He and Woolley work out little details of the characterization. Woolley will tell him, for example: 'I think I would be delighted, George, when she says that.' Kaufman agrees and suggests a way to register that delight. He rarely plays out a part for the actor, though sometimes he will illustrate a bit of business. He works mostly by a kind of suggestion; an encouragement of the actor's own feeling.

'That line is killed by having the radio men come in,' John

Hoysradt (the Beverly Carlton-Noel Coward of the play) tells Kaufman, which is quite true. So Kaufman has the men come in a beat later after the laugh is registered. But if an actor sees a line or a situation in a way that is out of key with the idea, Kaufman will tell him at once that that is not the way he wants the speech read, or the gesture made, and will explain his reasons.

One of the radio men has to enter a little later, to plug a cord into a light socket. 'Wait a minute,' Kaufman calls, after the actor has made his exit, 'I think we can get a laugh on that if you come in in a perfectly matter-of-fact manner, plug in, and then suddenly notice Miss Goodner standing there and retire in astonishment and confusion.' The actor tries it, looks up with a 'My-God-what's-this!' expression at the actress, turns quickly to run out and just before he exits casts another amazed glance over his shoulders at the siren. 'That's fine,' Kaufman says, 'particularly that last look.' And the point is proved emphatically at the first showing before an audience when the business gets a loud, spontaneous laugh—a perfect illustration of how a dull but essential bit of business can be transformed into a living part of the play by astute direction.

'Monty, I can't quite tell whether you're unsure of the lines or it's part of the characterization,' Kaufman says to Woolley after a run through of the first scene. 'That's bad.' Woolley *is* unsure of the lines, as is evidenced by his performance a few days later. His part is extremely difficult; he is on stage, seated in a wheel-chair, almost all the time, and he must dominate the scene even when he is not talking. Any actor knows how hard it is to get variety into a performance when he cannot move about the stage. And it is not until the lines and business are completely set that Woolley is able to incorporate the expressions and subtle gestures which enable him to dominate the show in eloquent fashion.

'If that's a laugh, take the door slam after the laugh,' Kaufman says to the stage manager, as he paces up and down, his right forefinger in the corner of his mouth.

He has an uncanny sense of rhythm—this playwright-director—even when he appears to be paying no attention to the goings-on. And he can tell instantly if, by accident, an actor

inserts a word into his lines. His sense of timing is so acute that it may lead him, occasionally, to overlook details of characterization, providing only the time clock is clicking as he wants it to. People who have worked with him claim that sometimes he lets his ear control his mind. But there is only one scene in this play where there is evidence of that—a scene which, to these eyes, is badly overplayed by one of the actors, but which does not appear to bother Kaufman—perhaps because he knows that it is bad and that it can easily be remedied before the opening.

‘Monty, when you say: “Two years ago I was in a diving suit with William Beebe, but she got me”’ (*she* referring to Gertrude Stein who always calls up Whiteside on Christmas Eve to let him hear the bells of Notre Dame), ‘Don’t break the line on “Beebe”. The laugh will come then, and kill it. The really funny part is not that you were in the diving suit, but that she got you by telephone there.’

Woolley has a line that he cannot remember. Every time he tries it, he loses it. It is simple enough, something to the effect: ‘What kind of skullduggery have you been up to?’ The line follows one in which he promises to give an iron toothpick as a wedding present to an English Lord whose teeth, he says, always remind him of Roquefort cheese. ‘Think from the teeth to the skull and you’ll get it,’ Kaufman suggests—and Woolley does.

So it goes, day in, day out, for three weeks; heightening here, keying it down there, building it up, tearing it down, and cutting, cutting, cutting. Once the play opens before an audience it will have to be retimed, reset, because as Kaufman says, ‘you can never be sure where the laugh will come,’ and a long laugh requires re-spacing and lengthening of all the business that surrounds the words. For although the action of a comedy must never seem to stop to give the audience a chance to catch up, it must, in practice, take account of laughter or applause. The first dress rehearsal before an invited audience was almost wrecked by the prolonged laughter that greeted Monty Woolley’s first speech and by the unexpected (though not unwarranted) applause that followed his ‘Merry Christmas’ exit. But Kaufman’s imagination went to work at once to fill, with

new business, the gaps which seemed to hold the play suspended.

‘Dress parade at 8 P.M., please,’ the stage manager calls out. ‘Yes. Everyone except the choir boys,’ Kaufman says, strolling up on stage. ‘Oh, and Bernie, ask the three men who carry in the totem pole to come half an hour earlier; I want them to get the movements exactly; when they’re set, we’ll see whether we need to fill in there with any extra dialogue.’

Note from Hartford, after the out-of-town opening: ‘You may want to make some slight changes in the article to fit changes that we are making in the play. We are re-writing Act Three, eliminating the character of the surrealist, who turned out not to be funny. The kidnapping remains but will be managed differently. The lady will not be tied up. Instead of a totem pole, the final gift will be a mummy case, and Miss Goodner will be carried out in it. . . . That’s all—to date.’

G. S. K.

1939