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THEATER

THEATER; A Daughter's Footnotes to a Classic Comedy

By BARRY SINGER

ANNE KAUFMAN SCHNEIDER may be the last person in New York City with a set of the works of Edna Ferber on her bookshelves. As the daughter of Ferber's friend and playwriting collaborator, George S. Kaufman, Ms. Kaufman Schneider, at 77, very much remembers this once-famous author. Few today can say as much.

"She was awfully popular," Ms. Kaufman Schneider recalled recently over lunch at her apartment in the East 60's. "She won the Pulitzer Prize" -- for the novel "So Big" in 1925. "She wrote 'Showboat,' which Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein turned into that musical. She was smart and tough, very opinionated and quite the spinster. She was a regular, alongside my father, at the Algonquin Round Table. And absolutely no one reads her anymore."

Ferber, who died in 1968 at the age of 82, also wrote plays, six of them with Kaufman, including "The Royal Family," "Stage Door" and "Dinner at Eight." The latter is a comic drama about a Depression-era dinner party in which most of the guests are linked by either scandal or intrigue. The play is being revived on Broadway for only the second time since its 1932 premiere. Produced by Lincoln Center Theater, it opens on Thursday at the Vivian Beaumont Theater, directed by Gerald Gutierrez, with a cast that includes Christine Ebersole, Byron Jennings, Kevin Conway and Marian Seldes replacing, at the last minute, an ailing Dorothy Loudon.

"I think the ideas for those three plays were probably Edna's," said Ms. Kaufman Schneider. "I just have a feeling that the overall picture was hers. Just as I'm sure that every line of construction was Daddy's."

Ms. Kaufman Schneider knows about aspects of "Dinner at Eight" that most people do not: "I know that Charvet -- the shop that Millicent Jordan sends her chauffeur to in the first scene -- was where my father used to get his shirts and ties, a very swanky place in the East 50's. I'm certain that the Hotel Versailles, where the washed-up actor, Larry Renault, stays, was suggested by the Hotel Elysée on East 54th Street. Everyone knows that Renault was based on

John Barrymore, but I also know that the character Carlotta Vance was modeled on Maxine Elliot, a great actress of an earlier day, whom Eva Le Gallienne told me was the most beautiful woman she ever saw.

"And, best of all, I know that when Carlotta mentions having just seen Julie Cavendish, another aging grand dame, she's referring to one of Daddy and Edna's lead characters in 'The Royal Family.' It was their little inside joke."

Of course, it's impossible to watch "Dinner at Eight" today without thinking about the movie version, released in 1933, and viewed ever after as the quintessence of Golden Age Hollywood glamour and star power, with a cast that included Jean Harlow, Wallace Beery, Marie Dressler and both Lionel and John Barrymore, the latter basically playing himself. The film possessed a final curtain line that the play did not, a line that has since passed into legend, uttered by the dowager Dressler to the bombshell Harlow as they enter the dining room for dinner at 8.

"I was reading a book the other day," remarks Harlow, "a nutty kind of a book. Do you know that the guy said that machinery is going to take the place of every profession?"

"Oh, my dear," murmurs Dressler, "that's something you need never worry about."

The lines were written by neither Kaufman nor Ferber. "Herman Mankiewicz and Frances Marion wrote the screenplay," Ms. Kaufman Schneider said, "with additional dialogue by Donald Ogden Stewart. I don't know that any one of them took direct credit for those lines." Though there was talk early on of interpolating the exchange into the current production, Ms. Kaufman Schneider scotched it. "It's not in the play," she said simply. "And Daddy absolutely was disinterested in the movies made of his plays. 'Just take the money and run for the train,' he used to say about Hollywood."

For a comedy classic, "Dinner at Eight" is surprisingly dark, a piece about pampered New Yorkers on the eve of their own destruction. The authors' view of wealth, fame and power is withering: all such attainments are fleeting, doomed.

"It's about impending disaster," acknowledged Ms. Kaufman Schneider, "just before Hitler, in the heart of the Depression. A time not unlike our time, actually, before Iraq and in the heart of Enron."

The books that sit on Ms. Kaufman Schneider's shelves were given to her by Ms. Ferber four years after "Dinner at Eight" opened. Each is inscribed, the inscription continuing from book to book, an extended monologue broken with seeming impulsiveness and underlying craftiness by Ferber to draw the 11-year-old Anne Kaufman in.

"Dear Anne," it begins, in the volume "Fanny Herself," the novel that put Ferber on the literary

map in 1917, "I really don't think you'll like these books very much."

The inscription continues in "The Girls" (1921): "To tell you the flat truth -- I hope you won't, because

"they weren't written for young ladies of eleven. ("Gigolo," 1922)

"Even if they happened to be extremely interesting young ("So Big")

"ladies of eleven, like you. I'd much rather have ("Showboat," 1926)

"you like them five years from now -- or even ("Mother Knows Best," 1927)

"ten! Because they are quite good, and all about ("Cimarron," 1929)

"people in the United States. Still, if you should accidentally ("American Beauty," 1931)

"happen to like 'Fanny Herself,' (the first half, that is), or 'So Big,' or ("They Brought Their Women," 1933)

" 'Showboat' or 'Cimarron,' why, I'll love you just as well." ("Come and Get It," 1935).

This final volume is signed: "Edna Ferber. Christmas 1936. New York."

"She always knew how to tell a story," Ms. Kaufman Schneider said, taking the last book and closing it.

Dinner at Eight

Vivian Beaumont Theater, Lincoln Center.

In previews; opens Thursday; closes Jan. 26.

Photos: Byron Jennings and Marian Seldes in "Dinner at Eight." Below left, Anne Kaufman Schneider, George S. Kaufman's daughter. (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)