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THEATER

## THEATER; Caretakers of a Treasury Filled With Theatrical Wit

By BARRY SINGER

Kaufman and Hart, you might say, were back at the Algonquin, where there wasn't a round table to be found for the moment, or, for that matter, even a chair. Drop cloths were flung like shrouds in the Algonquin Hotel lobby, and the restaurant where wit once reigned was sealed off for renovations.

And so, Anne Kaufman Schneider, daughter of George S., and Kitty Carlisle Hart, widow of Moss, threaded their way cautiously across once familiar terrain.

A freight elevator took them to a second-floor suite where framed photographs of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's friends in the theater peered down from the walls. Mrs. Kaufman Schneider could only shrug. "My father never understood the luncheon mystique here," she admitted. "I mean, 'We just had lunch,' he used to say. 'Some of us ate. Some of us talked.' "

The Algonquin is not the only construction site in the vicinity. To the west, throughout the theater district, demolition is a constant these days, with new foundations being poured relentlessly. Amid such frantic change, it is easy to overlook the resurgence of two important playwrights from a Broadway that is no more.

Yet, some distance off Broadway, new young theater companies are rediscovering Kaufman and Hart. A critically acclaimed revival by the Drama Dept. of "June Moon," George Kaufman's 1929 Tin Pan Alley satire written with Ring Lardner, has enjoyed a run at the Variety Arts Theater that only now appears to be tapering off. Though a closing notice may soon be posted, this droll shaggy-dog tale of an aspiring songwriter, wide-eyed and innocent, abroad in the big city, is a good introduction to Kaufman's work. Directed by Mark Nelson, the cast includes Becky Ann Baker, Cynthia Nixon, Robert Joy and Justin Kirk.

A new Drama Dept. mounting of Moss Hart and Irving Berlin's topical 1933 musical revue "As Thousands Cheer" is planned for May. And Kaufman and Hart's maiden 1930 collaboration, the delicious Hollywood sendup "Once in a Lifetime," will be revisited in June by David Mamet's Atlantic Theater Company, a stark departure from the troupe's signature excursions into raucous modern works like the recent "Mojo."

Kaufman and Hart's heirs have seen it happen before but never quite like this. "We've had big revivals on Broadway," Mrs. Kaufman Schneider acknowledged, taking a seat beside Mrs. Hart, who laid a beringed hand, welcoming and familiar, against the younger woman's wrist.

They are a study in contrast: Kitty Hart, ebullient and sophisticated, is a society photograph come to life. Anne Kaufman, plain-spoken, even acid-tongued on occasion, is passionately earnest beneath the clever asides, content however, even delighted, to reflect Mrs. Hart's timeless glow. "Just two girls with six names," said Mrs. Kaufman Schneider drily. They have known each other for more than 50 years.

"After my father and Moss died -- both in 1961," Mrs. Kaufman Schneider continued, "very little happened at all until Ellis Rabb revived 'You Can't Take It With You' for the A.P.A./Phoenix Theater in 1965. Ellis proved that these are classic American plays. And since then, Kitty and I have seen 'The Man Who Came to Dinner' and 'You Can't Take It With You' return to Broadway, and 'The Royal Family,' which George wrote with Edna Ferber. But this is the most we've had at once -- widespread and overlapping."

The most commercially successful playwrights of their generation, George Kaufman and Moss Hart were a playwriting team -- a now nearly extinct dramaturgical sub-species, at least on the American stage. Together they wrote 8 shows in 10 years, nearly all of them hits, with "You Can't Take It With You" earning the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1937.

Born in 1881, George S. Kaufman was Broadway's consummate theatrical wit, a former drama critic for The New York Times and a playwright and director who preferred the company of collaborators when he wrote. Over his long career he staged original productions of just about everything, from "The Front Page" to "Guys and Dolls."

Lanky, taciturn, curmudgeonly, he was 15 years senior to the engaging, preternaturally talented Hart, who came to him a 26-year-old theatrical neophyte in 1930, fresh from the Bronx at the behest of a Broadway producer named Sam Harris. Harris believed that Hart's play "Once in a Lifetime" could be worth producing if Kaufman would deign to polish it. Hart's account of this turning point in his creative life became the centerpiece of "Act One," his seminal memoir of adolescent theatrical aspiration.

"He shies at the slightest display of emotion," Hart later wrote of Kaufman, "as most men flee from smallpox. At our first meeting, I was wide-eyed with hero worship; he recoiled in horror. Later, however, everything turned out fine; we married and had several beautiful children."

Mrs. Kaufman Schneider confirmed this fondness. "I think they were very much mentor and apprentice, even father and son," she said.

Mrs. Hart was even more emphatic: "They did love each other. George cared desperately about Moss. It was always exciting to be around George because you had the feeling of being close to some kind of force. But he was very difficult. Moss was easier, much easier. One always trod on eggs with George. Even Moss. He was a little afraid of him."

Everybody was a little afraid of him, Mrs. Kaufman Schneider agreed. "Though not just because of his tongue. Because the tongue was not really used against people, it was not at people's expense. He was just highly principled. Very severe sometimes. But also terribly funny. And so terribly quick."

Mrs. Hart looked pointedly at her friend. "Moss was also terribly funny," she said. "He was fun to live with."

Mrs. Kaufman Schneider grinned somewhat ruefully. "He was fun. George wasn't terribly fun."

Yet, an examination of the sketches that make up "As Thousands Cheer" reveals Hart's satirical wit to be quite as lacerating as Kaufman's more renowned venomous humor. Conversely, "Some Like 'Em Cold," the wickedly unforgiving Lardner short story from which "June Moon" was adapted, proves far less sentimental than the Kaufman-supervised stage play.

"We never knew who wrote what exactly," Mrs. Kaufman Schneider said.

"No," Mrs. Hart added, "we never found out."

Mrs. Kaufman Schneider went on: "The structure of almost any of the plays was clearly my father's. Moss, I believe, did bring more heart to the writing -- no pun intended. Lucille, though, the wife in 'June Moon,' is very much a Kaufman heroine; the wise-cracking woman who is smarter than all the men -- very much a product of my father. Which in some ways is what I modeled myself after -- I hope unconsciously. That's the kind of woman he admired."

Mrs. Hart recalled encountering her future husband in 1935. "I met Moss on the set of the Marx Brothers' 'A Night at the Opera,' which George wrote," she said. "And we then went our separate ways for almost eight years. I had other beaux. He had other girls. The war intervened. But I kept thinking about him. It would be so suitable, I thought. He's never been married. I've never been married. We're both Jewish. It would be so perfect! Why doesn't he think of me? And then finally he got the seeing eye. It was at Lillian Hellman's, a party. 'Are you surprised?' he asked, when he called me the next morning. And I said, 'No. I knew you'd call.' "

Mrs. Kaufman Schneider nodded. "You and I also met on the set of 'A Night at the Opera,'" she reminded Mrs. Hart. "I was 10. And then we didn't really meet again until your wedding in 1946. But we have been inseparable ever since. True?"

True, Mrs. Hart said. "I remember hearing about you, though, through the years. You were a bit difficult."

Mrs. Kaufman Schneider didn't flinch. "Headstrong girls are difficult," she muttered, adding, "but that was the source of my good relationship with my father. And it started early. Because there wasn't any baby talk. We went to the theater together starting when I was 4." She paused. "Now I have made his work my agenda in life."

Mrs. Hart, whose 1988 memoir, "Kitty," chronicles her many professional lives -- singer, actress,

television personality and, for 20 years, chairwoman of the New York State Council on the Arts -- gripped Mrs. Kaufman Schneider's hand more tightly. "I am very grateful to Anne," she said. "Anne has taken on the major burden of the plays, their second life."

Both women were silent for a moment, staring at the photographs around them. "We complement each other's strong suit," said Mrs. Kaufman Schneider finally. "I'm humor and she's charm."

"Like Moss and George?" asked Mrs. Hart.

"I don't know," replied Mrs. Kaufman Schneider. "What do you think?"

Kaufman's Bull's-Eye Retorts: A Sampling

On reviewing a new Broadway comedy:

"There was laughter in the back of the theater, leading to the belief that someone was telling jokes back there."

On being informed by the author of a dreadful new play that, nevertheless, "When the box office opened, they were lined up around the block":

"Good, now all you have to do is stop the word of mouth."

On being introduced to the latest wealthy lover of a notoriously promiscuous leading lady, with the words, "Charles, here, is in cotton":

"And them that plants 'em is soon forgotten."

On adapting something by Gilbert and Sullivan:

"It's wonderful working with dead composers."

On the Marx Brothers -- a mid-performance aside to the writer Heywood Brown during the Broadway production of "The Cocoanuts," which Kaufman had written:

"I'm sorry, I thought I heard one of my original lines."

On a writing genre that he nevertheless excelled at:

"Satire is what closes on Saturday night."

On his collaborator Moss Hart's extravagant new estate in Bucks County, Pennsylvania:

"It just goes to show what God could do if He only had money."

Photos: CALL THE TUNE: Kitty Carlisle Hart, above left, and Anne Kaufman Schneider keep watch over literary legacies; at left, the Drama Dept. production of "June Moon," with Jessica Stone and

Albert Macklin, at the Variety Arts. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times; Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times) (pg. 5); OLD TIMES: Philip Loeb and Marguerite Lee in "June Moon" in 1929. (Culver Pictures) (pg. 26)

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