

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 24
You Can't Take it With You Part 3

Hello everyone, welcome to today's session. We are continuing to discuss Kaufman and Hart's joint play, *You Can't Take it With You*. It debuted in 1936 and was again produced in 1938. It was also made into an adapted into a number of other forms.

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→ The original play opened in 1936 and ran on Broadway for two years for 837 performances, and was sold out months in advance.

→ The play won the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and was adapted for the screen in 1938. The film won the Academy Award for Best Picture and Best Director.

→ The play was still running on Broadway when the film was released. It marked the first time in history that a Broadway play and a film based on the same play ran simultaneously.

Theatrical release poster

This was one of the most successful runs in Broadway. The setting of the play and some of the characters and how the tone of the play has been set are also looked at. We will quickly take a look at some details about *You Cannot Take It With You* and the reasons for its continuing relevance. The original play opened in 1936 and it had a very impressive run in Broadway.

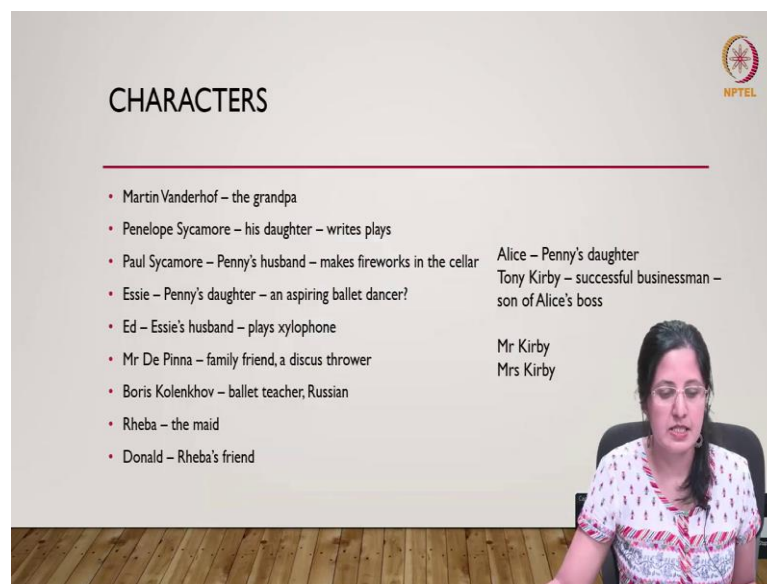
It ran for two years for about 837 performances. It is said that the tickets were all always sold out months in advance. In 1937 went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and it was adapted into a screen in 1938 adapted into a film in 1938 and also win the Academy Award for the Best Picture and Best Director.

This is a kind of background, this is a kind of reception that it had in popular culture. So, what is immensely important about this place that this was perhaps the only play in the history of Broadway and this is the only time in the history of this theatrical and cinematic performance that a Broadway play and a film based on the same play ran simultaneously in the 1930s.

The reasons for this the huge success that this play reaped we all we can sense it from the kind of dialogue delivery and the kind of setting and the situational farce that this play is able to pull off. We have already taken a look at a couple of acts which gives us an insight into the ironical presentation with the same fine humour.

It is very neatly weaved into the situation and the characters are perfectly fitting in into the very unconditional background in the very unconventional setting.

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The slide is titled "CHARACTERS" and features a list of characters and their roles. In the top right corner, there is an NPTEL logo. A video inset in the bottom right corner shows a woman with glasses and a patterned shirt speaking.

CHARACTERS

- Martin Vanderhof – the grandpa
- Penelope Sycamore – his daughter – writes plays
- Paul Sycamore – Penny's husband – makes fireworks in the cellar
- Essie – Penny's daughter – an aspiring ballet dancer?
- Ed – Essie's husband – plays xylophone
- Mr De Pinna – family friend, a discus thrower
- Boris Kolenkhov – ballet teacher, Russian
- Rheba – the maid
- Donald – Rheba's friend

Alice – Penny's daughter
Tony Kirby – successful businessman – son of Alice's boss

Mr Kirby
Mrs Kirby

If a quick recap of the characters whom we have already met. There is Martin Vanderhof. The play opens in his house yeah in New York and he is the grandfather he is the patriarch of the family. There is Penelope Sycamore and Penelope's Martins daughter. She writes plays; she loves to write plays, but there is no evidence of anyone getting published in any of the plays getting published.

She has been writing plays close to eighth plays and she started writing plays because a typewriter was accidentally delivered to their apartment. Paul Sycamore is when his very

husband and he enjoys manufacturing fireworks in the cellar. It is also an activity which very soon gets them into trouble.

Essie is Penny's daughter, she is an aspiring ballet dancer, but again none of these characters none of these characters have any goals set in their mind. There is no destination that they need to reach they just practice dance. They write play never with the intention of making money or aspiring to become famous.

Ed, Essie's husband, he in the same way he loves to play xylophone and it is also the background as we have already said it's always chaotic. There is ballet there is play writing. There are fireworks and there are these different musical things not necessarily in a very synchronized or in a harmonious way.

Mr. De Pinna is a family friend and he is a Greek discus a thrower. Boris Kolenkhov's Essie's ballet teacher, he is Russian. We also have some very peripheral cursory discussions about Russian politics and the relation between America and Russian not necessarily in a very discursive political manner.

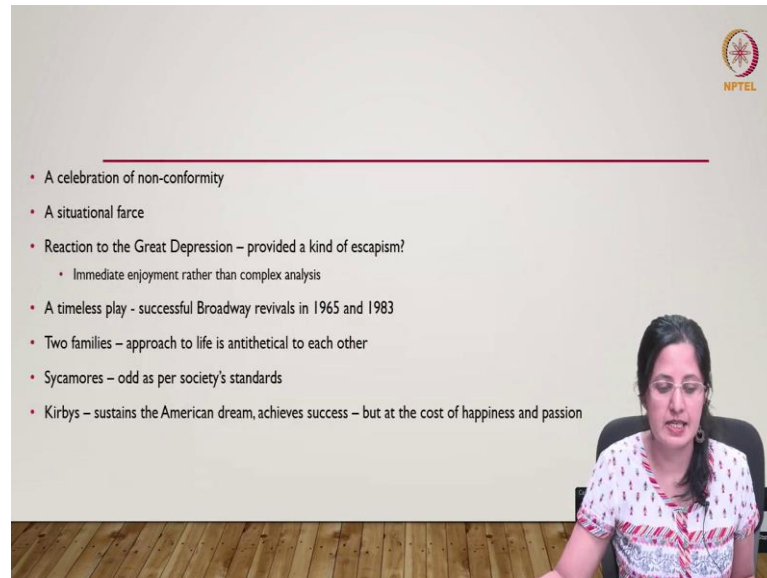
Rheba she is a colored maid. Donald is a Rheba's friend and this is this combination is seen as the most eccentric. They are seen as a formidable combination which produces humor from situations. There is also an eccentricity which becomes quite unpalatable to the world outside.

In between we find that there are a set of characters who enter this. Alice is there. Alice is Penny's daughter, she is also a Sycamore, but we find that she is more on the saner side. She is the only one whose in touch with the world outside, she is the only one who holds regular employment who is able to negotiate with the world outside who also realizes that her family is very eccentric that anyone from outside will struggle to even communicate with them.

She brings in Tony Kirby with whom she has a romantic relationship. Tony Kirby is a successful businessman and he is also the son of Alice's boss Mr. Kirby. We know that we realize that there is a clear dichotomy over here with Alice functioning as a sort of mediator.

Tony Kirby is this young man who is almost like an idealist despite the fact that she he is inheriting his father's business and Mr. Kirby and Mrs. Kirby whom we shall be meeting in the scene that we will be discussing today.

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The slide contains the following text:

- A celebration of non-conformity
- A situational farce
- Reaction to the Great Depression – provided a kind of escapism?
 - Immediate enjoyment rather than complex analysis
- A timeless play - successful Broadway revivals in 1965 and 1983
- Two families – approach to life is antithetical to each other
- Sycamores – odd as per society's standards
- Kirbys – sustains the American dream, achieves success – but at the cost of happiness and passion

The slide also features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner and a video inset of a woman with glasses and a patterned shirt in the bottom right corner.

Some of the broad elements that are important to this play and which continue to be significant even in the contemporary. This is an absolute celebration of non-conformity which is very important given that some of the ideals of twentieth century some of the tenants of twentieth century they defined success they defined material success they defined the foundations of capitalist economy they were being founded in the early twentieth century.

By the 19630s, there is this great depression which happens which challenges a lot of such notions and this is also the time when people would love or would want to use some kind of an escapism to at least momentarily turn away from this reality of depression from this realities that things are perhaps not really working out well.

This is a tone that we will continue to see in some of the later plays to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, which is also a play that we will be reading right after this. We find that this disillusionment goes really deep, it is not just out there in the society. It gets very psychological, it gets very emotional too.

Here is a play which focuses on providing immediate engagement rather than getting into a complex analysis, but the roots of this run really deep and which is why the timelessness of this theme is getting celebrated over and over again. The situational farce continues to be relevant even when it is taken outside of its immediate context outside of its immediate historical context as well.

If *You Can't Take It With You* had a successful Broadway revivals in 1965 as well as in 1983 is indicative of the way in which the broad themes that this play is addressing and also be that the situationality is getting foregrounded.

It is quite relatable across decades and even in the present situation when we read through the play we realized that the humor is very striking. There is something very relatable very they were able to connect with the sentiments of the characters.

There is two families who are placed on either side of the spectrum they have very different approaches to life their philosophy towards life is very different. It is antithetical to each other. On the one hand there are these Sycamores, Vanderhof Sycamore family whose approach to life whose even responses to the normal routine circumstances its seen as very odd as per society's standards.

This claim is made very admirable, the characterization and the setting is also extremely admirable, the fact that even in the current circumstance even from the point of view the twenty first century it does look odd.

There is a family who is engaging in a number of things which are not really acceptable as per any society's standards. There is a family where they are they have snakes there is a snake solarium and not an aquarium with fish and no one really goes to work. They are just doing things which will bring them personal fulfillment.

There is a patriarch who takes pride in the fact that he is not paying taxes and this is not to evade taxes, it is not to challenge the law, but he is simply not convinced that the government is getting giving him anything in return for what he is doing and here is a man there are all of them we get to know.

The Vanderhof the patriarch Martin Vanderhof the grandpa, he had quit his job his business 35 years ago because he realized that if he gets continues with it he will not

have time to enjoy the smaller pleasures of life. There is Penny's father who also realizes that perhaps who also had given up halfway through and never became an architect, but instead chose to pursue his what according to him was giving him personal fulfillment and happiness.

Here is a family who is not afraid of same they are not afraid of pursuing their dreams and they are also quite confident they are also quite confident about the kind of fears individualistic stances that they have taken. Alice perhaps she is always caught in this dilemma, but she does not fail to see the nobility in the choices that her family has made.

There are certain moments when especially when during the when things go entirely wrong in during their interaction with Kirby's which is understandably true. But despite that she entirely understands she is entirely able to comprehend and analyze the point of view from where the Vanderhof Sycamore family comes.


She is perhaps not able to pursue that with the same sort of frozen passion that the rest of her family does, but there is an ability there is she arrives at this point when she as well as Tony Kirby later on they are able to strike a balance about defining this American Dream redefining the notion of American Dream.

In complete antithetical existence to the Kirby to the Sycamores, we have the Kirby's who are who embody the American Dream yeah, who are these perfect examples of how to live the American Dream how to sustain the American Dream and achieve material success as well as fame. But it is another thing that it comes at the cost of happiness and passion.

So, what so, what also strikes is very interesting at the end of the play is that this is not a play which is trying to override capitalism. It is not rejecting capitalism in a as a blanket thing, but it is trying to foreground the fact that there should be a balance between the pursuit of material success and how that pursuit should not compromise should not be at the cost of the happiness and individual passions.


These are some of the details that we will see getting foregrounded when we get back to closely reading the play.

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AMERICAN DREAM

- Different perceptions and definitions of the American Dream
 - Multiple pathways to self-fulfillment and happiness
- Doing what one loves – the central philosophy
- Productivity vs. following one's dream/desire
- A comical attack on capitalism?
- Prompting an evaluation of the American Dream – to include both material success and personal fulfillment
- "Tony is too nice a boy to wake up twenty years from now with nothing in his life but stocks and bonds"



Let us also spend some time to talk about the notion of the American Dream and how that is being unpacked in display not in a very philosophical sense in very raw terms. This is not a play which would lend itself to a lot of theoretical readings. It is actually does not try to make the situation complex, it is there to ease the tension and; it has worked well almost throughout the century that is how we that is what we get to know from the many the adaptations and the revivals that the play has seen.

It is not entirely been critical of the American Dream, the notion of the American Dream, but it is also trying to foreground an alternative an alternate world view which should also ideally fit within the notion of the American Dream. This is a play which celebrates different perceptions and definitions of the American Dream and a non conformity of the Sycamore family is a perfect entry point into this discourse.

It is also Martin Vanderhof. Towards the end of the play the brief advice that he gives to the Kirby's it also showcases this possibility of having multiple ways to self fulfillment and happiness. There are of course, a set of people who are made to fit into a wall street wall street kind of life.

It is also important to know whether this is the kind of life with the kind of choice which will leave us with little regrets towards the end of one's life because that is the one theme which is encapsulated. In the title itself *You Can't Take It With You* at the end of it all

there is none of this; the material success, the fame and whatever one has achieved by sacrificing one's dreams and one's ambitions none of this could be taken with you.

So, with the pointlessness of it all, but this pointlessness it is not nihilistic in any way either. It is not a rejection of the self, it is not a rejection of reality, and on the other hand it is this deliberate choice of trying to lead life according to one's own desires. This does not come at the cost of harming others. There are certain choices. These are the kind of choices.

Here we find that this entire family is able to make this choice making the family space a very happy and very fulfilling space in spite of the kind of things that they together land into even including that as we will see in the final act they are they even end up in jail and, they get out of it too.

This is doing what one loves seems to be the central philosophy that is being foregrounded in this play. This kind of love doing what one loves the act of the doing aspect or the aspect of passion. It need not fit into the standards already set by the society. If we look at them they are all doing something or the other, it is not necessarily productive quote unquote productive.

Virginia Woolf's short story *Solid Objects* explores a similar theme in a British setting in a British political setting. That short fiction solid object is also about the making the right kind of choices and how those choices are sometimes seen as sometimes delegitimized because they are not productive choices.

It is about as mentioned before as mentioned before it is about a character going after solid objects because those objects suddenly begin to fascinate him. He begins to have an obsession with those objects and he begins to collect them from the roadside from the seaside yeah from almost everywhere.

He is getting in the eyes of his friends and in the eyes of this society he has just thrown away a career, a brilliant career promising career in politics. He is just picking up stones and picking up rags which does not make any sense to the world outside.

This also needs to be contrasted with certain kinds of fashionable hobbies that people take up, certain kind of rewarding hobbies materially rewarding hobbies that people take

up. We ultimately one understands that it is not entirely about doing something useful. It is also about fitting into certain templates which is very clearly see shown in this play as well where the Kirby's they have certain fashionable hobbies too one raising orchids which is it is a very expensive hobby.

Mrs. Kirby is into spiritualism which is dismissed as a fad by Penny and even Alice realizes that it Mrs. Kirby is pursuing spiritualism because that seems to be the end thing to do that is a statement. All of these pursuits are a statement of one's identity. It is a statement to fit into something, which is where this family the Sycamore family comes across as being very different.

They are playing xylophone or writing plays or manufacturing firecrackers or staying fascinated with the printing press. They are not doing it for anything per se and that becomes an activity that becomes something is doing something without a destination without a particular goal without aspiring to make money or get fame that does not have a place in the modern economic system in the modern way in which systems have been formulated.

On the one hand we have these dominant discourses about productivity, what kind of work one should do in order to give back something to the nation in order to get the system going. On the other hand there is a set of people who have the courage and sometimes maybe one could afford to do that too about following one stream or desire.

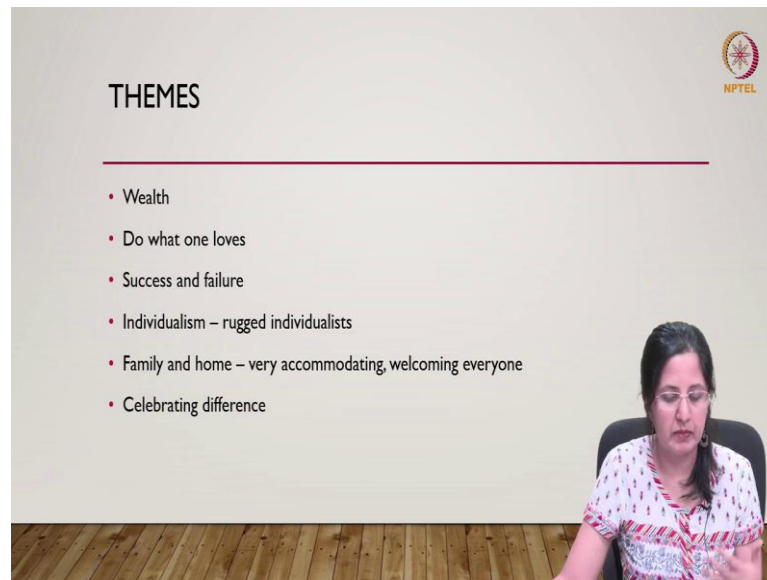
It is possible to see this play as a comical attack on capitalism. It had a prompter and evaluation of the American Dream, where this balance becomes important to include both material success as well as personal fulfillment which comes out in various forms. Though the play does not get into a philosophical discussion of it, but it gets foregrounded it gets articulated various forms throughout this play.

For instance, this statement that grandpa Vanderhof makes about Tony Kirby. Tony is too nice a boy to wake up twenty years from now with nothing in his life, but stocks and bonds. It is a very radical view about Wall Street and it also sums up his philosophy sums up the argument of the play in so many ways.

It is important here to notice that the play does not reject what comes out of Wall Street. Play does not reject the capitalist philosophy altogether. It is all about understanding the

kind of individual that each one is and the choices that one is capable of making. All of them, all these characters they made a choice at some point in their life to pursue what they want to do and that choice is the factor which gets highlighted over here.

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THEMES

- Wealth
- Do what one loves
- Success and failure
- Individualism – rugged individualists
- Family and home – very accommodating, welcoming everyone
- Celebrating difference

We begin to look at the sum total of the themes which are woven into this play despite the situational far and the comic dialogues and the many eccentric things in it, it encourages us to talk about wealth, about economy in slightly different ways and it foregrounds this aspect the philosophy that one should be doing what one loves, but not in a very nihilistic hedonistic sense either.

It also blurs this line between success and failure. It shows that there is no single definition but it is a very individualized personalized choice. The individualism that we see over here it is about a rugged kind of individualism. All of those characters from Martin Vanderhof till, his daughter and other sons-in-law they all come across this as such people.

Even the Kolenkhov who was the Russian, who the ballet dancer sorry the ballet dance teacher and Olga the former Duchess they all are fierce and rugged individualists who just keep doing what they like doing without regretting without thinking about how is how things could have been better if the political circumstance or the economic circumstance is very different yeah.

If you look at the American characters here they going through this very stark depressing faced economic depression. And if we look at those Russian characters who come more as the one accentuate the comic element over here they are also not lamenting the change in the political situation in a very a political way that is a critique that we will not get into at the moment.

In a very a political way they are also trying to make most of these situation and trying to do what ones heart desires to do despite the million other things going wrong. This family space, the home space is very important over here. It also challenges the notion of privacy which modernity was also trying to bringing the notions of private and the public.

We find that it is getting increasingly challenged in the space of this family which the Vanderhof family perfectly represents. There is no there is no clear division between the activities over there. There is no clear division between what could be discussed and what could not be discussed. There is a certain political incorrectness about this entire play which also makes it very endearing.

This political incorrectness also takes one to the core of the some of the issues that this play is dealing with. For instance the game the little game that they have at the Kirby's are visiting. It's only by staying politically incorrect that they are able to some of the uncomfortable secrets some of the uncomfortable discussions also get foregrounded though in very inadvertent ways.

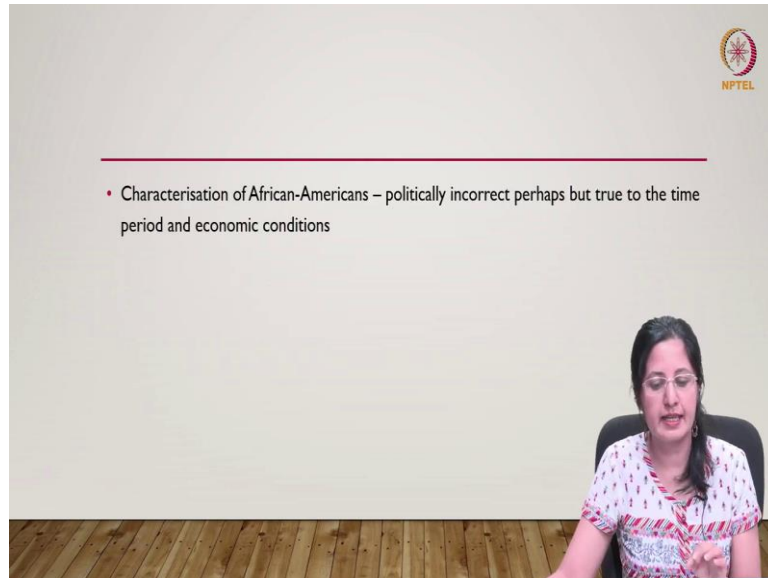
It is largely about celebrating difference regardless of the many external superficial differences which would be there. This family the Vanderhof Sycamore family they are eccentric they have snakes at home and they have firecrackers at home, so, and they could be seen as a very odd yeah very eccentric very difficult to deal with.

But from the Sycamores point of view yeah they welcome everyone. They do accept that people are different and they do not expect people to just blend in. For instance when the Kirby's come in when Mrs. Kirby gets; scared of the snakes over there they do remove it from the living room and they take the solarium to the to the kitchen.

They are accommodating they do understand that they do not expect the rest of the world to blend in, but they are open to accommodating. They are open to celebrating this

difference which makes this play all the more a very welcoming change during the 1930s.

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The political correctness of the play has also been discussed in some contexts. There is a characterization of the African-Americans which could be seen as politically incorrect in terms of their representation Rheba and Donald.

They are staying true to the time and the economic conditions of those times and the way in which the Rheba is being made part of the family there is a certain inclusiveness about it just the way Kolenkhov and later the former Duchess Russian Duchess Olga. There is a way in which a very Utopian kind of inclusiveness is being celebrated without getting without really spelling it out.

The political incorrectness in some of the representations which were pointed out at a much later time in the play at a much later time in history that also needs to be addressed given that the time also allowed these sort of representations and it is also staying true to the conditions which of those times.