You can’t take it with you - Royal Exchange

Reviewed by Helen Nugent

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You know you’re in for something a little bit different when the only character on stage at the beginning of a play is a tortoise. In a spotlight. A tortoise in a spotlight. Yes this, as Mancunians would have it, was going to be proper different.
The omens were good from the start. The largest theatre in the round in Britain housed in what was once the largest room for commerce in the world; the Royal Exchange’s Christmas show, rarely, if ever, a let-down; and a collaboration with Told by an Idiot, a company renowned for fusing comedy with tragedy, theatricality with nuance.

And the choice of show? A production written by the celebrated comedy writing double act, George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart who, when they created YOU CAN’T TAKE IT WITH YOU, engendered a Broadway hit, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play and an Oscar-laden film. And, more than 70 years after its first season, it was still drawing the crowds on a windswept winter evening in Manchester.

But enough of the hyperbole. Screwball comedies are notoriously tough to get right on stage, even without the space limitations of the intimate Exchange auditorium. And a play that literally whirls around a serious philosophical point risks losing its anchor. Meticulously-timed mayhem is central to the show’s success and yet the performers must never lose sight of the overarching message that taking time to be happy is life’s goal.

The large cast make it all look so easy. Furniture on wheels transforms the stage into a virtual carousel as the actors circle each other, barely pausing for breath as they spin themselves, sofas, chairs and tables around the room. Character traits take on immense appeal, from the wife who longs to be a ballet dancer and so never stops practising clumsily to the mother who takes up playwriting after a typewriter is delivered to the wrong address. A father makes fireworks in the attic while a son bangs out Beethoven on his xylophone.
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During the course of the play, the audience is introduced to a family who seem mad and then to another whose conventionality weighs heavy on their hearts and faces. Will true love break down both social and emotional barriers? Whatever happens, it is clear to see whose side the audience are on.

Although the play was written at the tail end of the Great Depression, its relevance to today's practical and philosophical questions is unnerving. It could almost be positioned as a play for the recession: stocks and bonds don't make people happy so do nothing and find time for everything.

It seems churlish to single out individual actors for praise in what is so clearly an ensemble performance. But if this critic had to mention anyone it would be Sophie Russell as Essie, the candy-making, pirouette-twirling heart of the offbeat Carmichael house. She may not have the most to say but she certainly gets the most laughs. And her sweets, the "Love Dreams", are quite possibly the best metaphors for a play that is proper good.

YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU, running in The Theatre from Wednesday 7 December 2011 to Saturday 14 January 2012. The production – which continues the Exchange's commitment to working with exciting creative people and companies - sees the RET collaborating for the first time with Told by an Idiot to bring Kaufmann and Hart's classic 1930s Broadway hit to life.