

## *You Can't Take it With You* Synopsis (compliments of Dramatist's Play Service, Inc.)

**THE STORY:** At first the Sycamores seem mad, but it is not long before we realize that if they are mad, the rest of the world is madder. In contrast to these delightful people are the unhappy Kirbys. The plot shows how Tony, attractive young son of the Kirbys, falls in love with Alice Sycamore and brings his parents to dine at the Sycamore home on the wrong evening. The shock sustained by the Kirbys, who are invited to eat cheap food, shows Alice that marriage with Tony is out of the question. The Sycamores, however, though sympathetic to Alice, find it hard to realize her point of view. Meantime, Tony, who knows the Sycamores are right and his own people wrong, will not give her up, and in the end Mr. Kirby is converted to the happy madness of the Sycamores, particularly since he happens in during a visit by an ex-Grand Duchess, earning her living as a waitress. No mention has as yet been made of the strange activities of certain members of the household engaged in the manufacture of fireworks; nor of the printing press set up in the parlor; nor of Rheba the maid and her friend Donald; nor of Grandpa's interview with the tax collector when he tells him he doesn't believe in the income tax.

## *You Can't Take it With You* Character Descriptions (in order of appearance)

**Penelope or "Penny" Sycamore (F):** The matriarch of the household, Penelope is described as being "a round little woman in her early fifties." The playwrights go on to describe her as appearing "comfortable looking, gentle, homey. One would not suspect that under that placid exterior there surges the Divine Urge—but it does." Penelope's greatest vehicle for self-expression takes form in her alternating work writing various plays. The subject matter of each of her plays is simple, yet bold. She has a war play, a religious play, a sex play, etc. Why playwriting? A typewriter was delivered to the house years earlier by mistake. That was that. Her foray into the world of authoring dramatic literature took root. Her father's daughter, Penelope is a simple woman who displays a genuinely good-nature and a willingness to approach life with a frankness that is a bit off-putting to others at times. Like any mother, she wishes the very best for her children, and she is all too pre-occupied in seeing her youngest daughter off and married. Upon meeting Penelope most anyone would recognize her genuine kindness, vivid zest, and love of life. In audition I would like to see those who read for Penelope display a bold character who brings warmth and energy to every room she enters.

**Essie Carmichael (F):** The eldest daughter of Paul & Penelope, Essie is described as "A girl of about twenty-nine, very slight, a curious air of the pixie about her." Essie's a free-spirit who gains pleasure taking lessons in ballet and candy making. Most seem to enjoy her talents for crafting sweets, but she seems significantly less accomplished in her second arena of interest. As her dance instructor comments, "She stinks." Like her family, Essie is very comfortable in her skin. She transparently blends with the rest of the household's eccentric residents. And, true to her family, she displays a sense of simplicity, kindness, and love of life. As frank in conversation as her mother, Essie finds no hesitation in discussing whether or not she and husband Ed should endeavor to have a baby in the presence of unfamiliar company. Ladies, during auditions show me your understanding of Essie's free spirit. She wears dance slippers throughout the play. She loves to dance through life. She flows freely with energy at all times, and evokes a sense of exuberance. Show us!

**Rheba (F):** Maid to the Sycamore clan, Rheba feels more like just another member of the family. She goes about her daily tasks with a casual manner, chit-chatting with the family nonstop. She offers some wonderful insights about the family, and hesitates not at all to share them, following the lead displayed by her employers. Although not married, Rheba does have a long-time boyfriend by the name of Donald, who is also warmly welcomed by and frequently visiting with the Sycamore household. In audition I would like to see Rheba displayed as a simply woman with a sharp wit. She's certainly likable, but she's not entirely a mirror-image of

the family. Despite the family's genuinely warm connection with her, perhaps this separation is simply the function of her role as an employee.

**Paul Sycamore (M):** Paul is in his mid-fifties. He is described as having a "youthful air." The playwrights go on to say his "quiet charm and mild manner are distinctly engaging." I have a sense of this man. In a somewhat unique arrangement, Paul has married into a family and assumed its value system and social customs. He is an inventive worker who crafts fireworks to earn a bit of income. However, as with everyone else residing in the home, he is not driven to surrender his life to his work. One has the sense that, although good-natured and intelligent, Paul was probably a bit impressionable in his youth. Rather than determining a path for himself and leading his family, Paul is willing to instead align himself with the ideals practiced by his wife's family patriarch. In audition I would like to see Paul's easy-going nature. I would not call him passive, per say, but he does display anything close to a robust drive. He's calm, collected, and content.

**Mr. De Pinna (M):** The ice man turned practitioner of crafting colorful fire, Mr. De Pinna is one of many additions to the Sycamore household. While visiting the home eight years earlier to deliver ice, Mr. De Pinna struck up a conversation with Paul and never left. "A baldheaded little man with a serious nature," Mr. De Pinna exists as another satellite entity that has been drawn in by the gravitational force that attracts so many to the Sycamore residence. The playwrights do not offer us much insight into this man. In audition show me some ideas you have about who he is as an individual. I would say that he follows most closely the lead of Paul Sycamore. Beyond that, I'm open for suggestions.

**Ed Carmichael (M):** Essie's husband and son-in-law to Paul & Penny, Ed is a bit of a quirky figure. The playwrights define him as "A nondescript man in his mid-thirties," Ed seems to have many interests. He plays the xylophone, enjoys crafting masks, and is an amateur printer. Perhaps the latter interest provides the greatest insight into the man. He prints dinner menus for the family, which is odd but not necessarily interesting. He also enjoys printing quotes that he finds interesting and places them in the boxes of candy that Essie sells. Unfortunately, his innocent practice leads to a climatic event. Fortunately, the climatic event leads to a better path forward for all those who live inside the world of this play. Ed embodies an innocent who freely expresses larger ideas than he can fully appreciate. I don't have much definition to offer for this character at present. Show me your thoughts in audition, gentlemen.

**Donald (M):** Rheba's longtime boyfriend, Donald is one of many visitors who frequents the Sycamore residence. He seems to offer handyman services to the family and often lends a hand to Paul & Mr. De Pinna with the minor sideline business of selling fireworks during the peak season. Again, we're not given much insight into Donald. His speech patterns suggest a lesser-educated man than others in the play. Nonetheless, he is equally good-natured, and he offers commentary and insights about the family that evidence his natural talents for reading people.

**Martin Vanderhof (M):** Ever meet that unusual kind of person? You try to define him or her, but you struggle. Martin is a singular personality. Arguably an eccentric in the minds of most, he is a man who boldly chooses to break his own path through life. Still, things didn't start out that way. He was once a man of business, much like Mr. Kirby. He concerned himself with things that society said should warrant his attention. He was driven. He was passionate. He was successful. But... he wasn't happy. He stopped. He reflected. He chose a new course of direction. He chose to do as he wished. He chose happiness. I do not wish to ignore certain realities and embellish Martin Vanderhof's life's course as correct or practical for all to follow. He was uniquely positioned to change directions in life. Financially secure, Martin had the freedom to spend his days indulging his interests and pursuing sources of happiness, a life most of us would certainly envy were it possible. Even so, he's almost a mild-mannered prophet; he quietly preaches a better direction for others to travel. He knows people, and he shares his philosophies with them. On some level, his message that "tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free" makes sense. As a result, others gravitate towards him. Where his daughter unconsciously delivers his philosophies with a robust voice, Martin's delivery of truth is quietly thunderous. He's the key to the show, guys. I'll know the right approach when I see it. Show me.

**Alice Sycamore (F):** I must begin my descriptions of Alice with a long quote of the playwrights' descriptions. "A lovely, fresh young girl of about twenty-two, she is plainly grandpa's granddaughter, but there is something that sets her apart from the rest of the family. For one thing, she is in daily contact with the world; in addition, she seems to have escaped the tinge of mild insanity that pervades the rest of them. But she is a Sycamore for all that, and her devotion and love for them are plainly apparent." The intermediary of the family, Alice is the linking force that connects the Sycamores to reality. She is beautiful. She is a hybrid. She embodies the best of her family, while at the same time retaining a firm foot on the ground that is the rest of the world. I think it makes sense that the playwrights identify her as grandfather's favorite. An island of eccentrics remains unto themselves. Whereas a ship from the island that visits the mainland experiences the whole, and is exposed to a balanced understanding. For all their good qualities, most within the Sycamore household remain on the island. Alice, like her grandfather in his past, does not. She's a wonderful young woman, ladies. It might be all too easy to write her off. She is utterly embarrassed by her family and goes through great trouble to hide their natural state in order to retain the affections of the love of her life. Even so, she is willing to lose him in order to retain her family. Amazing character. Complex. She's a wonderfully intelligent figure. Show me her depth.

**Wilbur C. Henderson (M):** An investigator with the IRS, Mr. Henderson is an absolute alien to the world of the Sycamores. He is a man of black and white. His understanding of the world is sound and based on logic and reason. He is mechanical and, as such, he cannot remotely function in a fluid manner with members of the Sycamore clan. Show me a prototypical man of government efficiency, but don't stop there. Show me that he is also a real human being, albeit built entirely differently from the majority of those from the world of our play.

**Esther Peters (F):** IRS field partner to Wilbur Henderson, Ester is not quite as mechanical in nature as her partner. However, she executes the duties of her job with utter precision. She also is particularly suspicious of others. Meticulous in her investigations, where her partner leads most of the questioning of those they investigate, Esther makes it her business to subtly survey the environment. In audition show me this behavior to a tee.

**Tony Kirby (M):** Heir apparent to a vacuum cleaner empire, Tony has positioned himself to transport the family's business forward at astonishing speed. Identifying problems within the company's early structure, Tony worked to develop "continuous improvements and refinements" to the "Kirby home care system." Little knownst to him at the time, Tony's aggressive pursuit of Alice's hand in marriage would, 50 years into the future, serve as the model to define the heavy-handed sales approach used by the company's door-to-door salesmen hocking their overpriced sweeping machines. Alright, I've had my fun. It's time to be serious. Tony is genuinely a good guy. He's a product of his environment, as we all tend to be. He's actually a pretty modest guy, as revealed by a few casual statements. And, of course, he's highly attracted to Alice. She represents something far removed from the ordinary and supremely close to a comfortable truth. He may not be able to exactly articulate just why he is so utterly attracted to Alice, but he realizes he will find a way to be with her no matter what. Guys, in audition show me Tony's genuinely decent nature. At the same time, show me the reflexive behavior of someone who has been born and raised within the privileged life he's enjoyed.

**Boris Kolenkhov (M):** Can you say character role? First and foremost, how decent are you at replicating a heavy Russian accent? Yup, that's important. Boris is an immigrant to America. He escaped his homeland of Russia just prior to the Russian Revolution. Essie's dance instructor, Boris is a consummate deep thinker who is utterly consumed by his interest of world affairs and the deteriorating realities playing out in his homeland. Such preoccupations might, at first glance, place him at odds with Martin's ideals. However, he shares a common life philosophy; he does as he pleases in pursuit of happiness. He also serves as a balancing character. Mr. Kirby senior accuses Martin of being a communist, however, Kolenkhov paints the miserable failure that communism has been in his homeland. His political ideology and close association with the Sycamores help to provide a "safer" understanding of Martin Vanderhof's ideals. Martin is *not* a communist. He is an advocate for pushing people towards pursuing their passions in order to be happy and fulfilled. Okay, back to Boris. He's a GREAT character, gents. He has the ability to steal the show. Trust me. Performed well, Kolenkhov

will be one of the characters who remains in the minds of our audience members. Be big. Be bold. Be animated. And, yeah, *spend some time polishing your delivery of an authentic Russian accent.*

**Gay Wellington (F):** Wow, she doesn't have the largest role in the show. Still, what a part! She is a professional actress, although we clearly are led to question just how much professional experience she has in theatre. A friend of Penny's, Gay's occasional visits serve as opportunities to offer "professional" feedback on Penny's plays. Gay is a drinker. Scratch that. Gay is a *heavy* drinker. Again, herein is a role that offers the potential of stealing the show. Ladies, in audition, I want to see you perform an intoxicated woman. Don't be clichéd in your approach. Additionally, you have to be comfortable in your skin. We may add some moments in the show that illustrate Gay's earthiness. You must be comfortable with these directional choices. Let's see what you present!

**Mr. Kirby (M):** He's a pretty prototypical business man. He is driven. He is passionate. He is successful. But the source of his passion has little to do with happiness or fulfillment. He's a hamster in a wheel, and he's been conditioned to believe that if he only runs a bit faster all of life's rewards will be gained. Problem is, it's a fallacy. No matter how successful he becomes within his business, he remains a prisoner to stress, which binds him to unhappiness. In his mind, if he can endeavor to boost profitability by 28% and cut costs by 9.4% over the next four years, he will reach a state of unparalleled bliss. But it's a fallacy. Such results may genuinely create exuberance for others, but they do not yield these results for Mr. Kirby.

Okay, I'll just put this out there. Several years ago I heard of a study conducted by several European nations that began gathering data towards identifying trends on "happiness" indexes within their populations. Fairly uniformly the data suggested that money does, in fact, buy happiness. However, that's not the end of the story. A certain threshold of income must be reached that provides adequate housing, food, clothing, and a certain level of discretionary spending. However, once people move beyond that baseline threshold and progress steadily upward in wealth accumulation, no discernable increase in happiness or fulfillment is evident. I think the play demonstrates this data wonderfully. Mr. Kirby struggles against accepting the reality that Martin Vanderhof proposes because it runs in utterly stark contrast to the understanding of the world that has been the basis of his life. Still, he slowly begins to open his mind to a new understanding. By the end of the play, we are lead to believe Mr. Kirby's years forward will be happier and more fulfilling.

**Mrs. Kirby (F):** Wife of the business savvy Mr. Kirby, Mrs. Kirby is a woman who exemplifies refinement and the physical embodiment of the upper crust of society. Like so many others, whether hailing from households of limited or plentiful means, she displays pride and dignity. She is, in many ways, a very guarded individual. She is respectful of the Sycamores during the limited interactions she has with them. However, her disconnection, and moreover revulsion, towards certain aspects of their life cannot be hidden where body language is concerned. Ladies, show me her depth. It's something I repeat frequently, but it is important. She's not a one-dimensional character. Once Penny Sycamore's game is in full swing, Mrs. Kirby becomes all too real for audiences. All pretences are dropped, and the Sycamore clan and friends are given a ringside glimpse into the utterly fractured world that is the Kirby's marriage.

**3-5 Men/Women (M/F):** We know little about them. We do know they want to arrest people. They're from the Justice Department, presumably feds. We don't have much information about these individuals, which means that we have a great deal of leeway in shaping them. In audition give me some specific, distinct choices that suggest who these individuals are people. The more vividly you can color them, the more we'll want to test you in other roles as well. Give it your all, even if reading for one of our three men!

**The Grand Duchess Olga Katrina (F):** Prior to the revolution back home, Olga was once a Grand Duchess in Russia. However, nowadays, she spends her time waiting tables at a local restaurant. One might presume that such a transition in life would be a recipe for misery, self-pity, and anger. Not so. Despite her recent challenges, Olga retains a buoyant sense of well-being and happiness. She takes lumps with strides and continues to love life. A casual acquaintance of Boris Kolenkhov, Olga should exhume passion and a love of

life. Her portrayal should both hint at her current life situation while at the same time evidence a core regality that remains from her former existence. It's a role that does not come into play until the end of play, but it's a really nice character role, ladies. As with those seeking to be cast as Kolenkhov, I want you to *polish up on your Russian accent when reading for Olga*.

**The Grand Duchess Natasha (F):** Sister to The Grand Duchess Olga Katrina, Natasha also demonstrates a powerful sense of stoicism in dealing with her present life circumstances. She is a bit more reserved than her sister, but no less bullish in her love of life. As with the previous two Russian characters, practice a solid accent when preparing for auditions, ladies.