



## TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE

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presents

# ACT ONE

From the autobiography by  
**Moss Hart**

with (in alphabetical order)

**Bob Ari**   **Bill Army**   **Will Brill**   **Laurel Casillo**  
**Chuck Cooper**   **Santino Fontana**   **Steven Kaplan**   **Will LeBow**  
**Mimi Lieber**   **Charlotte Maier**   **Noah Marlowe**   **Andrea Martin**  
**Greg McFadden**   **Deborah Offner**   **Lance Roberts**   **Matthew Saldivar**  
**Matthew Schechter**   **Tony Shalhoub**   **Jonathan Spivey**  
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A Play Written and Directed by  
**James Lapine**

With special appreciation to Christopher Hart

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>THE PLAY</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Synopsis .....	3
The Characters .....	5
The Playwrights .....	7
Classroom Activity: The Rags to Riches Narrative .....	9
<b>BROADWAY IN THE 1920s</b> .....	<b>11</b>
A Snapshot of Broadway Then and Now .....	11
The Styles .....	12
The Roles .....	14
The Scene .....	15
Classroom Activity: A Close Read .....	18
<b>THE BACKDROP: THE PROSPEROUS YEARS</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Timeline: A Playwright of the Roaring Twenties .....	19
The Bronx in the 1920s .....	21
The Other Side of Prosperity .....	22
Classroom Activity: A Close Look .....	23
<b>BEHIND THE SCENES</b> .....	<b>26</b>
Telling Stories .....	26
Classroom Activity: Review, Revise, Rewrite .....	29
<b>RESOURCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>30</b>

# INTRODUCTION

“The only credential the city [New York] asked was boldness to dream. For those who did, it unlocked its gates and its treasures, not caring who they were or where they came from.” **MOSS HART, *ACT ONE***

Welcome to the teacher resource guide for *Act One*, James Lapine’s adaptation of Moss Hart’s 1959 memoir detailing his journey from struggling young immigrant with Broadway aspirations to celebrated Broadway playwright and director. *Act One* provides students with a glimpse into many facets of early 20th century life in New York: the challenges faced by immigrants trying to carve out a life for themselves amidst poverty, severe living conditions, and limited job opportunities; the bustling joy of Broadway during one of its most vibrant and prosperous periods; and the creative atmosphere in which Hart launched his theatrical career.

With theater, film, and television star Tony Shalhoub (“Monk”), Santino Fontana (the Tony-nominated Prince in Broadway’s *Cinderella*), and Tony award-winning director/playwright James Lapine at the helm, Lincoln Center Theater’s *Act One* promises to be an inspiring look at the obstacles that can be overcome with grit, determination, and optimism.

Broadway and Times Building (One Times Square), New York City.  
Source: Library of Congress.



*Act One* offers many learning opportunities for students in areas related to:

- playwrights Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman;
- Broadway during the 1920s;
- New York and the immigrant experience in the 1920s; and
- the historic, economic, cultural, and social influences on Hart's writing.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This resource guide has been created to provide you with background information to help prepare your students to see *Act One*. We also hope to direct you to resources that can further your classroom exploration of the play. We encourage you to photocopy and share pages of this guide with your students. In each section, look for resources, including links to materials and videos available online, as well as discussion questions and suggested classroom activities that you can use before or after seeing the production.

The overall goals of this guide are to:

- connect to your curriculum with standards-based information and activities;
- reinforce and encourage your students to exercise their critical and analytical thinking skills; and
- provide you with the tools to have an engaging and educational experience at the theater.



Santino Fontana as Moss Hart and Tony Shalhoub as George S. Kaufman in Lincoln Center Theater's production of *Act One*.

# THE PLAY

## SYNOPSIS

As the play begins we are thrust into a scene from Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* being performed on a Broadway stage in the early 20th century. We then transition to a Bronx tenement where a young Moss Hart eagerly listens to his Aunt Kate's dramatic retelling of the performance. Eager to see his first show, Hart skips out of school early and meets his Aunt Kate at the theater, beginning what will become a weekly ritual. His lifelong love of the theater takes seed, as does his ability to entertain the boys in the neighborhood with his storytelling talents. Hart's brother Bernie is born. Things are looking up for Hart, until his father forces Aunt Kate to move out.

With his family struggling to make ends meet, Hart drops out of school after the eighth grade and takes a job at a fur warehouse. He is miserable. Hart goes to visit his friend George, a young man who has an enviable position as an office boy to the theatrical producer, Augustus Pitou Jr., and his luck changes. George has just quit, and Hart gets hired on the spot.



Across the street from Mrs. Hochfield's tenement.  
Washington Avenue, Bronx, New York. Source: Library of Congress.

**“ I make no pretense about it and I never have—I have been extremely lucky. Such talent as I possess I have used well and industriously, but talent alone is not enough.” MOSS HART,**

### ACT ONE

It has been seven years since Aunt Kate was forced to leave the Hart family's home. Hart finds her staying at The Clara Hirsch Home for Working Girls and invites her to see a Broadway show with him. When Mr. Pitou is in desperate need of new plays for his touring company, Hart decides to write one. Using the name "Robert Arnold Conrad," Hart submits his play to Mr. Pitou, who loves it. Mr. Pitou passes it along to Mrs. Henry B. Harris, owner of the Hudson Theater, who wants to produce it on Broadway. Hart admits that he wrote it, and watches his first play get produced and quickly flop out-of-town. Despite the failure, Hart sees the very successful *Beggar on Horseback*, written by George S. Kaufman and Mark Connelly, and is inspired not to give up.

“*Beggar on Horseback* remains one of the landmarks of satirical writing for the American stage, and I sat rapt and bug-eyed with admiration in front of it. Its gifted approach to the satirical and the fantastic aspects of our national life and culture must have awakened some kinship to the satirical and the fantastic within me...” **MOSS HART, ACT ONE**



Set design model by Beowulf Boritt for Lincoln Center Theater's production of *Act One*.

Hart is fired by Mr. Pitou and decides to pursue an acting career. Thanks to another lucky break, he ends up with a role in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. But his luck doesn't last very long. Unable to secure another acting job, Hart joins his friend Eddie, a social director at a resort in the Catskills, as his associate. With steady summer jobs at resorts, and evening jobs directing amateur theater, Hart attempts to write plays again. Finally, a friend passes his latest script along to a producer who takes an interest in developing it, if Hart agrees to collaborate with the prominent playwright George S. Kaufman. Hart enthusiastically agrees, and the two begin to collaborate on *Once in a Lifetime*.

As the second act begins, we join Kaufman and Hart in the throes of writing. They complete their first draft and get ready to begin out-of-town tryouts in Atlantic City. The show does not go well, but they aren't giving up yet. They do a series of rewrites before the next stop: the Brighton Beach Theater. The show is getting better, but it still isn't quite right. Kaufman decides that he can't do any more rewrites and tries to abandon the project. Hart won't accept that. He barges into Kaufman's apartment and convinces him to finish what they started. Kaufman reluctantly agrees. Hart temporarily moves in with him and the two rewrite, night and day.

Next stop: Philadelphia. The show opens and the audience is entranced. That is, until the third act. Kaufman and Hart relentlessly rewrite until they think they have solved the problem. And when the actors perform that evening, the third act soars!

Last stop: the Music Box Theatre, in New York City. Kaufman and Hart's *Once in a Lifetime* opens on Broadway to critical acclaim. Moss gets in a cab and heads to his family's apartment where he tells them to leave everything behind and come with him: they are moving to Manhattan and saying good-bye to the grinding poverty of their former lives.

# THE CHARACTERS

Because *Act One* is a dramatization of Moss Hart's memoir, the majority of its characters are based on real people. Many of them were key figures in the theater, film, music, and literary scene during the first half of the 20th century.

**AUNT KATE**, Hart's middle-aged aunt who lives with his family when he is a child

**MOSSY**, Hart in his early childhood years; ages 10-13

**MOSS**, Hart in his teens and young adult years; ages 16-26

**HART**, Hart at the age he wrote his memoir, *Act One*; age 55

**LILLIE**, Hart's mother

**BARNETT**, Hart's father

**GEORGE**, Hart's neighborhood friend who works for a theatrical producer, Hart's dream job

**AUGUSTUS PITOU JR.**, a theatrical producer who gives Hart his first job.

**BELLE**, Augustus Pitou's secretary

**IRVING**, a friend of Hart's and fellow office boy in a theatrical producer's office

**EDDIE**, a friend of Hart's who hires him to direct amateur theater and assist him with the social activities at a resort in the Catskills

**PHYLLIS**, a worker at The Clara Hirsch Home for Working Girls where Aunt Kate lives

**BERNIE**, Hart's younger brother

**MRS. HENRY B. HARRIS**, owner of the Hudson Theater who develops an interest in Hart's first play, *The Beloved Bandit*.

**PRIESTLY MORRISON**, director of *The Beloved Bandit*

**JOSEPH REAGAN**, leading man in *The Beloved Bandit*

**DAVID ALLEN**, a secondary actor in *The Beloved Bandit* who aspires to a bigger part

## A CLOSER LOOK

**Augustus Pitou Jr.** and his father were known for producing plays that toured the country from September through May each year with multiple companies of actors.

**Mrs. Harris** survived the wreck of the Titanic in which her husband perished. After his death, she inherited the Hudson Theater and his theatrical business.



A scene from Lincoln Center Theater's production of *Act One*. Photo by Joan Marcus.



**CHARLES GILPIN**, an African-American actor who Hart plays opposite in Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones*.

**BASIL DEAN**, an egotistical British director who refuses to hire Hart for a small part in *The Constant Nymph*

**DORE SCHARY**, Eddie's friend who helps get Hart's play *Once in a Lifetime* to the producer Jed Harris.

**JED HARRIS**, a producer who takes an interest in Hart's *Once in a Lifetime*, but decides not to produce it.

**FRIEDA FISHBEIN**, a highly respected literary agent who connects Hart with the producer Sam Harris, and his colleague, Max Siegel

**SAM HARRIS**, a producer who champions Hart's *Once in a Lifetime*, introduces Hart to George S. Kaufman, and produces *Once in a Lifetime* on Broadway.

**MAX SIEGEL**, producer Sam Harris' general manager

**GEORGE S. KAUFMAN**, a very successful playwright and drama critic for the *New York Times* when Hart begins to collaborate with him on *Once in a Lifetime*

**MRS. ROSENBLUM**, a fellow tenant in Hart's apartment building

**BEATRICE KAUFMAN**, George S. Kaufman's wife

**DOROTHY PARKER, LANGSTON HUGHES, ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT**, prominent writers of the 1920s who Hart meets at a party given by the Kaufmans .

**BOARDERS, ACTORS, STAGE MANAGERS, USHERS, FOLLIES GIRLS, MAIDS**

## A CLOSER LOOK

**Charles Gilpin** was one of the most highly regarded actors of the 1920s, but struggled because there were so few parts available to African-Americans at that time.

**Dore Schary** was a prominent film director, writer, producer, and playwright who became head of production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and eventually president of the studio. He directed the film version of Hart's *Once in a Lifetime*.

**Jed Harris** was a renowned Austrian-American theater producer and director with a reputation for being a genius, but also for being one of the most disliked people in the theater and film industry due to his hot temper and mean spirit.

**Sam Harris** built and owned the Music Box Theatre on Broadway where *Once in a Lifetime* premiered.

See *The Scene: People, Places, and Events* for more information.

Chuck Cooper as Charles Gilpin in Lincoln Center Theater's production of *Act One*. Photo Courtesy of Beowulf Boritt.



# THE PLAYWRIGHTS

**JAMES LAPINE** was born in 1949 in Mansfield, Ohio and lived there until his early teens when his family moved to Stamford, Connecticut. He attended public schools before entering Franklin and Marshall College where he majored in History. He went on to earn an MFA in Design from the California Institute of the Arts.

After graduate school, he moved to New York City where he worked part-time as a waiter; a page and tour guide at NBC; a freelance photographer and graphic designer; and an architectural preservationist for the Architectural League of New York. One of his freelance jobs was designing the magazine of the Yale School of Drama. Subsequently, the Dean of the School of Drama offered Lapine a full-time job designing all of the printed materials for the School and Yale Repertory Theatre, along with a faculty position teaching advertising design.



Courtesy of James Lapine

While at Yale, his students urged him to direct a play during the annual January gap-period in which faculty and students undertake a project outside of their area of study or expertise. At their suggestion Lapine directed a Gertrude Stein play, *Photograph*. With a cast of students and friends, the play was presented in New Haven. It came to the attention of the avant-garde theater director Lee Breuer, who helped arrange for a three-week run in a small performance space in Soho. The production was enthusiastically received and won Lapine an Obie Award.

Lapine was approached to create a new piece for the Music-Theatre Group. He wrote and directed *Twelve Dreams*, a work inspired by psychoanalysis, which was later presented at the Public Theater and revived by Lincoln Center Theater. Lapine has also written and directed the plays *Table Settings*; *Luck, Pluck and Virtue*; *The Moment When*; *Fran's Bed*; and *Mrs. Miller Does Her Thing*. He has written the book for and directed Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, *Passion*, and the multi-media revue *Sondheim on Sondheim*. He also directed *Merrily We Roll Along* as part of Encores! at New York City Center. With William Finn he has collaborated on *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*, (later presented on Broadway as *Falsettos*), *A New Brain*, *Muscle* and *Little Miss Sunshine* at Second Stage Theatre. On Broadway he has directed David Henry Hwang's *Golden Child*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Michel Legrand's *Amour*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, and the 2012 revival of *Annie*. He co-produced and directed the HBO documentary *Six By Sondheim*. He is the recipient of three Tony Awards, five Drama Desk Awards and the Pulitzer Prize. In 2011, he was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame.

Read an interview with James Lapine here. <http://www.lct.org/content/lctreview/TheArtofCollaboration.ACTONE.pdf>

**MOSS HART** was born on October 24, 1904 in Manhattan to poor English-born Jewish immigrants. Hart's Aunt Kate also lived with the family, and being a theater-lover, she encouraged the stage-struck Hart by taking him to see his first live theatrical performance. Hart left school after the eighth grade and took a job at a fur warehouse. In his late teens he landed a job as an office boy for the producer Augustus Pitou Jr. who produced Hart's first play, *The Beloved Bandit*, in 1924. The show opened in Chicago, immediately flopped, and Hart was fired. In his late teens and early twenties, Hart directed amateur theater throughout the city and in Newark, and spent his summers direct-

ing social activities at resorts in the Poconos and Catskills. He wrote six plays during that time, all of which were rejected by producers. With the help of a friend he got his play *Once in a Lifetime* to producer Sam Harris, who agreed to stage it if Hart agreed to revise it with the established playwright George S. Kaufman.

**GEORGE S. KAUFMAN** was born on November 16, 1889, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the son of German Jewish immigrants. When he was a teenager, the family moved to Paterson, New Jersey. Kaufman briefly studied law, but quickly turned to writing. He wrote for a number of newspapers, including the *Evening Mail* and the *Washington Times*, and eventually became a drama critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times*. Throughout this time he was writing plays both on his own and with collaborators. In 1921 he had his first hit, *Dulcy*, a play he co-wrote with Marc Connelly, and soon thereafter co-wrote the *The Cocoanuts* (1925) and *Animal Crackers* (1928) for the Marx Brothers with Morrie Ryskind.

## KAUFMAN AND HART

At the age of 41, Kaufman teamed up with the 26-year-old Hart and they began revising Hart's play *Once in a Lifetime*. After numerous out-of-town tryouts and rewrites, the play arrived on Broadway in 1930 where it was a great success. Kaufman and Hart collaborated on seven more plays over the next 10 years, which included:

*Merrily We Roll Along* (1934), the Pulitzer Prize-winning *You Can't Take it With You* (1936), the musical *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937) with music and lyrics by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and the satire *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939). Their partnership ended in 1940, but both continued to have flourishing careers in the theatrical world.



George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, circa 1930s Source: AP Photo.

## HART: ACT TWO

Hart went on to write four more plays on his own, including the popular *Light Up the Sky*, and collaborated with Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin on the musical *Lady in the Dark*. He also wrote four screenplays: *Gentlemen's Agreement*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture, *Hans Christian Andersen*, *A Star is Born* starring Judy Garland, and *Prince of Players*. In addition to writing, he followed in Kaufman's footsteps by directing both his own plays, and many others. He won a Tony Award for directing the original production of Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*. In 1959, Hart completed the autobiography, *Act One*, upon which this play is based. The book became a best-seller. Hart died on December 20, 1961.

See a timeline of Moss Hart's life here: <http://www.lct.org/content/lctreview/MossHartslife.ACTONE.pdf>

Learn more about Hart and Kaufman in these interviews with their children:

“Silver Spoon Life: An Interview With Christopher Hart”: <http://www.lct.org/content/lctreview/SilverSpoon.ACTONE.pdf>

“In Her Father's Eyes: An Interview With Catherine Hart”: <http://www.lct.org/content/lctreview/InHerFather'sEyes.ACTONE.pdf>

“A Daughter's Reflection” by Anne Kaufman: <http://www.lct.org/content/lctreview/Daughter.ACTONE.pdf>

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: THE RAGS TO RICHES NARRATIVE

In many ways, *Act One* is a classic “rags to riches” story. The play chronicles a young man’s journey from poverty to prosperity and the stumbling blocks he encounters along the way. In this pre-performance activity, students will reflect on Hart’s struggle, research a historical or contemporary figure who had a similar struggle, and connect what they have learned to their own lives.

### PART 1

Share the following quote from Hart’s memoir with students:

“ I have never been able to explain satisfactorily to myself or to others just why I hated poverty so passionately and savagely. I can only remember that my childhood from quite early on was filled with a series of bitter resolves to get myself out of it—to escape to a less wretched world than the one I knew.”

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- Based on this quote, what do you think the play *Act One* is going to be about?
- How would you define “resolve?” What does the author mean by “bitter resolves?” Why might they be bitter?
- Why do you think the author wrote a memoir in which he explicitly shared the details about his experience growing up in poverty?
- Why do you think Moss Hart’s memoir about overcoming adversity was so well-received when it was published? Why do you think Lincoln Center Theater felt that it was important to dramatize and present it now?

### PART 2

Have students choose a historical or contemporary figure from the list below and research their “rags to riches” story. Have students present their research to the class and then discuss the common qualities and traits that helped their figure rise above their difficult beginnings.

Andrew Carnegie

Ursula Burns

John D. Rockefeller

Booker T. Washington

Oprah Winfrey

Frederick Douglas

Henry Ford

Frank McCourt

Sonia Sotomayor

J.K. Rowling

**TO EXPLORE:** Watch the video “James Lapine on Life in the Theater,” a master class for theater students presented at the University of California, Los Angeles.

<http://www.tft.ucla.edu/2011/03/video-james-lapine-on-life-in-the-theater/>

Watch the trailer for the film version of *Act One*.

<http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/446040/Act-One-Original-Trailer-.html>

Read Kaufman and Hart’s play *Once in a Lifetime*, which is featured in *Act One*.

**TO DISCUSS:** The play *Act One* has over thirty characters in it, most of them based on real people. What challenges might this present to the fifteen actors playing these roles?

**COMMON CORE CONNECTION:** [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/ social science.



A scene from Lincoln Center Theater's production of *Act One*. Photo Courtesy of Beowulf Boritt.

# BROADWAY IN THE 1920s

In his article “Lucky Guy” for the *Lincoln Center Theater Review* theater writer and New York University professor Laurence Maslon states: “he [Hart] came of age during the most fertile period in the American theater and crossed paths, in one way or another, with most of the era’s major players.” <http://www.lct.org/content/lctreview/LuckyGuy.ACTONE.pdf> Use this section to familiarize students with general Broadway terms, theatrical styles, and the “players” Hart interacted with or was influenced by.

## A SNAPSHOT OF BROADWAY THEN AND NOW

	THEN (1920-29)	NOW (2000-2013)
Most expensive ticket price	\$3.50	\$487.25
Number of Broadway theaters	70	40
Average number of Broadway openings in a year	251	43
Average cost to mount a Broadway play	\$10,000 - \$30,000	\$2.8 million
Average weekly gross for a play	\$15,000 - \$22,000	\$150,000 - \$900,000
Director’s fee per play (Stage Directors and Choreographers Union minimum)	\$2,000	\$8,178 - \$14,733
Actor’s salary per week (Actors’ Equity minimum)	\$100	\$1,807
Average featured actor salary per week	\$1,000	\$35,000
Some popular plays *Based on awards, critical acclaim, and number of performances	<i>Beggar on Horseback</i> (Kaufman & Connelly; 223 performances), <i>The Emperor Jones</i> (Eugene O’Neill; 204 performances), <i>Abie’s Irish Rose</i> (Anne Nichols, 2,327 performances)	2013 Tony Award winners: <i>Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike</i> (Christopher Durang; 201 performances), <i>A Trip to the Bountiful</i> (Horton Foote; 187 performances), <i>Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> (Edward Albee; 142 performances)
Some popular musicals *Based on awards, critical acclaim, financial grosses, and number of performances	<i>No, No, Nanette</i> ; <i>Shuffle Along</i> ; <i>Ziegfeld Follies</i> ; <i>Show Boat</i> ; <i>Blackbirds</i>	<i>The Lion King</i> ; <i>Matilda</i> ; <i>The Book of Mormon</i> ; <i>Mamma Mia</i> ; <i>Once</i>
Other forms of popular entertainment	Radio, film	Radio, film, television, internet



The Astor Theatre, ca. 1936, New York City. © Bettman/Corbis

## THE STYLES

The style that Kaufman and Hart wrote in is generally characterized as comedy, often with a satirical twist. In particular, *Once in a Lifetime* (the play they are writing in *Act One*) was a satire that poked fun at the dramatic shift that occurred in Hollywood after the first “talking” film was released. However, during what has been called the Golden Age of Broadway, there was a little of everything to choose from. What follows are some of the most popular styles that graced Broadway stages at that time.

### VAUDEVILLE

A popular form of theatrical performance in the United States from the early 1880s to the early 1930s. Each performance is made up of a series of separate, unrelated acts that range from musical performances, sketch comedy, juggling, acrobatics, magicians and other forms of entertainment that are grouped together on a common bill.

### MUSICAL

A form of theatrical performance in which the storytelling is done through a combination of song, dance, and spoken dialogue.

## **MELODRAMA**

A popular form of theater in the late 19th century characterized by stereotypical characters, exaggerated emotions, and heightened situations.

## **FARCE**

A form of broad comedy that aims to entertain the audience through situations that are highly exaggerated and improbable.

## **THE FOLLIES**

Lavish musical revues famous for their beautiful chorus girls wearing elaborate costumes.

## **SATIRE**

A form of theater that uses humor, irony, and exaggeration to ridicule and expose people's ignorance or vices.

## **REALISM**

A form of theater that deals with relevant social issues and the ordinary people who struggle with them. The characters dress, talk, and behave in ways that are recognizable to a contemporary audience.

## **EXPRESSIONISM**

A literary and artistic movement in the early 20th century that focuses on revealing the inner depths of the human mind and soul in an externalized and heightened way.



Ziegfeld Follies. Photo by Alfred Cheney Johnston



# THE ROLES

During the time Kaufman and Hart were writing, it was much more common for theater professionals to work in multiple facets of the industry. During his career, Hart worked as an assistant to a producer, a playwright, a director, and an actor, often doing multiple jobs simultaneously. Even though Kaufman found great success as a playwright in the 1920s, he didn't give up his job as a drama columnist for the *New York Times* during that time and usually directed his own plays. In fact, Kaufman wrote, directed, and acted in the Broadway production of *Once in a Lifetime*. For students less familiar with the theatrical roles referred to in *Act One*, the following provides a general overview.

## PRODUCER

The person who oversees the following aspects of a production: raising funds, establishing and executing the budget, leasing an appropriate theater space, and bringing together the artistic team.

## PLAYWRIGHT

The person responsible for adapting or writing a play.

## DIRECTOR

The person who leads the creative team and works directly with the actors. The director executes the staging, decides on the casting, and works closely with the full creative team overseeing the collaborative process. The director ensures that the story and its themes are fully realized onstage through the many different artistic components.

## ACTOR

The person responsible for using the words of the script to bring a character to life onstage during each performance.

## STAGE MANAGER

The member of the theatrical team who is responsible for managing the day-to-day responsibilities of rehearsals and for “calling the show” (giving lighting, sound, and scene-change cues throughout the performance).

## CRITIC

A person who works for a newspaper, magazine, or other form of media who attends, analyzes, and reviews a production and then shares that review in a public forum.

## THE SCENE:

### *A GLOSSARY OF ACT ONE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND EVENTS*

**THE ZIEGFELD FOLLIES:** A series of elaborate theatrical productions launched by producer Florenz Ziegfeld in 1907 known for their opulence and beautiful show girls.

**FANNY BRICE (1891–1951):** Brice was one of the most popular singers, comediennes, and stage actresses of her day. She was born and grew up on the Lower East Side, the daughter of middle class saloon owners. At age thirteen, she won an amateur singing contest in Brooklyn, and soon thereafter, left school to perform in variety shows in Newark and Coney Island. A few years later, she joined the Ziegfeld Follies where she became a headliner. She ultimately became one of the most popular stage, radio, and film stars of her day.

**ALGONQUIN ROUND TABLE:** The Algonquin Round Table was a group of influential writers and columnists reknown for their wit who gathered daily in the Rose Room of the Algonquin Hotel in midtown Manhattan to gossip, trade ideas, and talk about the happenings of the day. They referred to themselves as “the vicious circle” and met regularly throughout the 1920s. Group regulars included Alexander Woollcott, Dorothy Parker, Harpo Marx, George S. Kaufmann, Edna Ferber, and Marc Connelly.

**DOROTHY PARKER (1893–1967):** Parker was an American poet, short story writer, and columnist known for her satires, wit, and her insights into contemporary urban life. She was born to German Jewish immigrants and grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She sold her first poem to *Vanity Fair* in 1914 and then went to work as an editorial assistant at *Vogue*. Two years later, she became a staff writer at *Vanity Fair*, eventually becoming their drama critic. She went on to become a member of the board of editors at *The New Yorker*.

**ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT (1887–1943):** Woollcott was an American critic and journalist who was the “self-appointed” leader of the Algonquin Round Table. He was known for his eccentricities, and was both respected and feared for his wit and intellect. Kaufman and Hart based the main character of their play *The Man Who Came to Dinner* on him, a role which Woollcott himself performed in the touring production in 1940. As a drama critic, his reviews were so harsh that some producers banned him from reviewing their shows.



Dorothy Parker in 1924. Source: New York Public Library.

**LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967):** Hughes was an African-American writer born in Joplin, Missouri. He began writing poetry in high school and after graduation spent a year at Columbia University, before leaving to take odd jobs and travel through Mexico, Africa, and Europe. He settled in Washington D.C. in 1925, and the next year published *The Weary Blues*, his first collection of poetry. His writing was strongly influenced by the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age, and he was known for his insightful depictions of the African-American experience.

**EUGENE O'NEILL (1888–1953):** O'Neill is widely considered the first great American dramatist. Prior to the 1920s, Broadway mostly consisted of crowd-pleasing melodramas and farces. O'Neill was the first American dramatist to see theater as a literary medium that could be used to explore substantial ideas and psychologically complex characters. His first Broadway play *Beyond the Horizon* was produced in 1920 and was followed later in the decade by *Anna Christie*, *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill was the only American playwright to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature (1936).

**EUGENE DEBS (1855–1926):** Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, Debs was an American union leader and one of the founding members of the Industrial Workers of the World. He became one of the best-known socialists living in the United States. He was elected to Congress in 1916, but was arrested and sentenced in 1918 to 10 years in prison under the Espionage Act for making “anti-war” statements in a speech. While imprisoned he ran as the Socialist Party's Presidential candidate and received 915,000 votes.

**JOSEPHINE BAKER (1906–1975):** Baker was the first African-American female to become a world-famous entertainer. Born in St. Louis, Missouri she began performing as a street musician before breaking into the vaudeville circuit. While working as a wardrobe girl for the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*, she secretly studied the chorus routines. When one of the dancers left the show, Baker stepped in for her and brought a comic flair to the role that audiences loved. Following *Shuffle Along* she was hired for a Paris revue called *La Revue Negre*, and overnight she became the toast of Paris. By 1927 she was earning more than any other entertainer in Europe.

**IRVING BERLIN (1888–1989):** Berlin is one of the most successful songwriters of the 20th century. Born to Russian immigrants on the Lower East Side, Berlin began his musical career as a street singer during his childhood. He was soon hired to sing in cafes, restaurants, and eventually music halls. He began writing lyrics and earned a reputation



Langston Hughes in 1942. Source: Library of Congress.

for his clever parodies of popular songs. Despite the fact that he was unable to read music and could only write in one key, he eventually began composing his own songs for Broadway, using an arranger to notate his music. His most well-known songs include: "God Bless America," "Puttin' on the Ritz," "White Christmas," and "There's No Business like Show Business."

**MUSIC BOX THEATRE:** A Broadway theater built in 1920 by Sam Harris and Irving Berlin to present Berlin's new show, *The Music Box Revue*, which Harris produced. The two co-owned the theater throughout the 1920s. During the 1930s, The Music Box housed the Kaufman and Hart shows *Once in a Lifetime*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *I'd Rather Be Right*, and *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. Situated on 45th street between 7th and 8th Avenues, the Music Box is an active Broadway theater, currently running the Tony award-winning revival of *Pippin*.

**THE MARX BROTHERS:** A comedic team of brothers (Chico, Harpo, Groucho, and Zeppo) from New York City who performed in vaudeville, on Broadway, and in television and films. In 1925 they starred in *The Cocoanuts* (co-written by George S. Kaufman), a Broadway musical comedy hit, followed in 1928 by *Animal Crackers*. Both were later made into movies starring the brothers.

**THE JAZZ SINGER:** Released in 1927, *The Jazz Singer* was the first feature film that had both singing and synchronized dialogue using Vitaphone technology. Its release ushered in the rise of the "talkies" and the decline of silent film. Moss Hart used the popularity of the "talkie" as an inspiration for *Once in a Lifetime*.



Left: The Music Box Theatre, circa 1920s. Source: New York Public Library. Right: The Music Box Theatre, 2013. Photo by Andrew Hinderaker

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: A CLOSE READ

The following activity engages students in a close reading of an abridged version of E.B. White's 1949 essay, "Here is New York." <http://www.lct.org/content/lctreview/HereisNY.ACTONE.pdf>

1. Have students read the passage, circle and define any unfamiliar words, and note the author, genre, tone, and when they think the essay was written.
2. Have students read the essay a second time with a partner and underline the sentence or phrase that captures the author's "big idea." Have pairs share out. Then, try to come to consensus as a class about the essay's "big idea."
3. Have students reflect on the author's passage with the following questions:
  - How do you feel about what you have read? What does it make you think of?
  - Do you belong to one of the "New Yorks" that White refers to? If yes, which one? Why?
  - Which "New York" do you think White belongs to? How does his writing reflect that?
  - What do you think was the author's motivation for writing this essay about New York?
  - How might this essay be different if it had been written in 2014? What would be the same?
4. Have students write their own essay about New York using the prompt: "This is what it's like in my New York..."

As an extension, you can also share information about author E.B. White provided on the Scholastic website. <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/contributor/e-b-white>

**TO EXPLORE:** Learn more about this period in Broadway history with the following educational resources from PBS. [http://www-tc.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/files/2012/09/BWAY\\_student\\_cards.pdf](http://www-tc.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/files/2012/09/BWAY_student_cards.pdf)  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/timelines/1920-1932/>

Watch video clips featuring many of the performers from Lincoln Center Theater's production on the *Act One* backstage blog. <http://actonelct.blogspot.com/>

**TO DISCUSS:** Why do you think theater flourished during this time in history? What social, historical, economic, and cultural components may have influenced its growth? Why do you think we still need theater today with all the other forms of media and entertainment we have at our disposal?

**COMMON CORE CONNECTION:** [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1](#) Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2](#) Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

# THE BACKDROP: THE PROSPEROUS YEARS

The 1920s were a time of fun and frivolity for many Americans. Women’s hemlines rose and they kicked up their heels to jazz music, danced the Charleston, and celebrated their newly won right to vote. Investors profited from the rising stock market. Companies launched brand-new, cutting-edge products, and nearly half the population owned automobiles, radios, and appliances like vacuum cleaners and washing machines. Working people at various income levels saw their standard of living rise. Consumer credit allowed many people to make purchases based on their expectation of future earnings. As depicted in *Act One*, the gap between rich and poor widened enormously during this time. As the son of poor immigrants, Hart grew into adulthood on the wrong side of this divide.

## TIMELINE: A PLAYWRIGHT OF THE ROARING 20S

**1904** Moss Hart is born

**1920** Hart drops out of school and takes a job at a fur warehouse

The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is passed ushering in Prohibition

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives women the right to vote

Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* and *Beyond the Horizon* premiere

The Boston Red Sox sell Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees

**1921** Hart’s future collaborator George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly’s hit play, *Dulcy* premieres

Anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti are found guilty of murder

First play-by-play radio broadcast of the World Series—the National League

New York Giants defeat the American League New York Yankees

**1922** Hart’s family takes in boarders to help cover their expenses

Anne Nichols’ *Abie’s Irish Rose* is a success on Broadway

Eugene O’Neill’s *Anna Christie* wins the Pulitzer Prize for drama

The stock market begins to boom and ushers in an age of prosperity and excess

**1923** Hart gets a job as an office boy for theatrical road producer Augustus Pitou Jr.

George Gershwin composes “Rhapsody in Blue”

The musical *No, No, Nanette* opens on Broadway



Moss Hart. Source: New York Public Library.

**1924** Hart writes his first play, *The Beloved Bandit*, under a pseudonym and submits it to his boss, Augustus Pitou Jr., who produces it out-of-town in Chicago

The Immigration Act of 1924 limits the number of immigrants allowed into the United States

George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's *Beggar on Horseback* opens

**1925** Hart begins directing amateur theater groups in the evenings and works as social director for a summer resort in the Catskills

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is published

*The New Yorker* magazine is first published

The Charleston becomes a dance craze

**1926** Hart continues to direct amateur theater in the evenings and resumes writing plays during the day

Eugene V. Debs, American socialist, dies

The first jazz recordings of Duke Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton appear

Planning begins for the George Washington Bridge to span the Hudson River between Manhattan and Fort Lee, New Jersey

**1927** *The Jazz Singer*, the first talking picture, premieres starring Al Jolson

Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's musical *Show Boat* premieres in New York

The Holland Tunnel opens as the first tunnel for cars and trucks linking New York and New Jersey

**1928** Hart becomes one of the most sought after and well-paid summer resort social directors

Republican candidate Herbert Hoover is elected President

Disney's first Mickey Mouse films appear

U.S. electric washing machine sales reach 913,000 units

*The New York Times* installs a "moving" electric sign around the Times building

**1929** Hart completes a draft of *Once in a Lifetime* that garners the interest of producer Sam Harris and gets paired with George S. Kaufman to revise the script

The "talkies" have mostly replaced silent films

On Black Friday, October 28th, the New York stock market crashes triggering a world economic crisis

**1930** Hart's *Once in a Lifetime*, written with George S. Kaufman, opens on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre to rave reviews



Charleston at the Capital. Source: Library of Congress.



Bronx Opera House. Source: Theatre Historical Society of America.

## THE BRONX IN THE 1920S

Moss Hart grew up in the Bronx, the northernmost of New York City's five boroughs. During Hart's childhood, the borough's population grew at a ferocious pace. Between 1900 and 1930, with immigrants arriving daily from Europe, the population rose from 201,000 to 1,265,000. Neighborhood shopping districts sprang up with family-owned grocery stores, restaurants, vegetable and fruit markets, hardware stores, cobblers, and tailors. At 149th Street and 3rd Avenue, an area known as "the Hub" was populated with department stores, boutiques, movie palaces, and vaudeville theaters.

One of the most popular theaters was the Bronx Opera House. The Bronx Opera House was built in 1913 and was owned by composer George M. Cohen and producer Sam Harris, the same Sam Harris who introduced Hart to George S. Kaufman and produced their first play, *Once in a Lifetime*. The Bronx Opera House was a mainstay of what was called the "subway circuit." The subway circuit was a group of theaters in the outer boroughs, accessible by subway, that featured shows getting a try-out before they arrived on Broadway or headed out on national tour.



If Hart headed over to Fordham Road, he might stop and window shop at Alexander's, a store that made more sales per square foot than any other department store in the nation at that time. Or he might wander over to Loew's Paradise Theater, on the Grand Concourse, with its four thousand seats and spectacular ceiling painted to resemble a nighttime sky. If he saved up enough money he might be able to sit back and enjoy the latest "talkie" amidst the grandeur of the Loews baroque interior.

Sports fans had Yankee Stadium at 161st Street and River Avenue, built in 1923 as the home of the New York Yankees. The team soon became known as the "Bronx Bombers" because of the large number of home runs hit in the following decades by players Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, and Mickey Mantle. The stadium was also used for football games, championship boxing matches, religious gatherings and concerts.

Learn more about the Bronx Opera House here. <http://www.operahousehotel.com/default.aspx?pg=history>

Watch a video about the Loew's Paradise Theater here. <https://vimeo.com/8172360>

## THE OTHER SIDE OF PROSPERITY

Hart was the son of English-Jewish immigrants, and despite the abounding prosperity of the 1920s, first and second generation immigrants were faced with many challenges as they tried to adapt to a new way of life and support themselves and their families. The jobs that were available to them were often substandard, offering hazardous conditions and very low wages. Urban housing was overcrowded and unsanitary.

At the turn of the century more than half the population of New York City, and most immigrants, lived in tenement houses. Tenements were narrow, low-rise apartment buildings that were cramped, stuffy, and often lacked indoor plumbing. Generally, each apartment had three or four rooms: a living or front room, kitchen, and a small bedroom. Several children slept in one bed and there were frequent issues with mice, rats, roaches, and the diseases they carried. The lights were powered by gas, which tenants paid individually, through a coin-operated gas meter in the kitchen of their apartments. In many cases, struggling families like Hart's had to take in boarders or paid roommates, in order to survive. Tenement life was not easy.



The tenement bath tub. Source: Library of Congress.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: A CLOSE LOOK



The image above and the activities below can be used to introduce your students to *Act One* and get them thinking about the challenges Hart had to overcome in his life before he found success as a playwright. This activity is adapted from Ed O'Donnell's S.I.G.H.T. method of visual analysis. [http://www.edwardtodonnell.com/teacher\\_prof\\_devel\\_how\\_to\\_use\\_images.html](http://www.edwardtodonnell.com/teacher_prof_devel_how_to_use_images.html)

Before identifying the image or providing any details about it, have students work on their own to answer the following questions. While many of their answers will be inferences, students should support them with evidence from the image:

**1.** Scan the photo for details.

- Describe the people in the image. What are they doing? Why are they doing it?
- What is the setting or environment like? What sounds would you hear there? What smells would you smell?
- What do you notice in the foreground? What do you notice in the background?

**2.** Describe the conflict.

- What challenges might these people experience?
- What are their living conditions like?

**3.** Guess the creator’s intent or message.

- Why might a photographer take this picture?
- What do you think the relationship is of the photographer to the photo subjects?
- How might the public release or exhibition of this photo impact the family?

**4.** Hear the voices.

- What do you think the photographer said to the photo subjects when taking this picture?
- What do the children say?
- What might the adult in the photo say when the children aren’t present?

## **DISCUSS**

Have students share their answers with the class, and discuss how this image might relate to the production.

## **SHARE**

Share the following quote from the final chapter of Hart’s *Act One*, as he leaves his family’s apartment behind, and discuss how it connects to the image.

**“ I took one quick look around to keep the memory of that room forever verdant and then walked to each window and threw it wide open. The rain whipped in through the windows like a broadside of artillery fire...More reasonable gestures have seldom succeeded in giving me half the pleasure this meaningless one did. It was the hallmark, the final signature, of defiance and liberation. Short of arson, I could do no more. I slammed the door behind me without looking back.”**

## **WRITE**

Provide students with copies of the image and let them create “thought bubbles” that they fill in with what the characters might be saying or thinking. Students can then use the content of their “thought bubbles” as a starting point for writing dramatic scenes.

## RESEARCH

This photo, “Mrs. Lucy Libertine and Family” (1911), was captured by Lewis Hine, a pioneering activist photographer of the early 20th century. Have students conduct internet research to find out more about Lewis Hine and the historical significance of this photo. More information about Hine can be found on the NYPL website. [http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/explore/dgexplore.cfm?col\\_id=175](http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/explore/dgexplore.cfm?col_id=175)

All photo details can be found at the Library of Congress website. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004000426/PP/>

**TO EXPLORE:** Enhance your exploration of the 1920s with these Library of Congress web resources:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/gatsby/preparation.html>

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/coolhtml/coolhome.html>

Learn more about the Bronx on the Bronx Historical Society website. <http://www.bronxhistoricalsociety.org/bxbrief>

Read narratives from people who grew up in the Bronx in the 1920s. <http://bronxboard.com/diary/diary.php>

Share this video with footage from New York City in 1928. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkqz3lpUBp0>

**TO DISCUSS:** There was a wide gap between the very wealthy and the very poor during the 1920s. In what ways does that time period parallel the one we are currently in? What were the consequences of the “prosperous years?”

**COMMON CORE CONNECTION:** [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7](#) Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

# BEHIND THE SCENES

## TELLING STORIES

Several themes run through Hart's narrative in *Act One* that elevate this "show business" story to a more universal story of overcoming obstacles and adversity with determination and optimism. Lincoln Center Theater's Producing Artistic Director André Bishop and actor Santino Fontana (Moss Hart in *Act One*) were asked to personally reflect on these themes in the following interview.

**Hart says, "The theater is not so much a profession as a disease, and my first look at Broadway was the beginning of lifelong infection." When and how did you get "infected" with the theater?**



Photo courtesy of Santino Fontana

**FONTANA:** I can't really pinpoint one time. There seem to be a lot of moments, but they're all under the umbrella of "this is just what I do." I forced my friends and family to be in a Thanksgiving play in preschool in our garage. I was both the title character and composer of my first grade's production of *The Gingerbread Man*, where I was adamant about wearing large black garbage bags spray-painted brown. I somehow talked my entire sixth grade class and their parents into coming over to my house on a Saturday, all day, where they waited in the backyard until my assistant director brought them in the house to shoot their scene of my thrilling *Clue*-like film *The Trotter Mystery*. My grandfather introduced me to music and VHS tapes and I would watch the same thing over and over ad nauseam: *An American in Paris*, *Abbott and Costello*, *12 Angry Men*, *Singing in the Rain*. I was a well-rounded, infected, obsessive child.



André Bishop.  
Photo by Paul Skolnick.

**BISHOP:** I grew up in New York City which was an enormous plus. And I had an aunt, not unlike the one in the book, who took me to the theater at a very young age. I was very unhappy and I came from a divorced home. I loved the theater from the very first play I ever saw, which I don't even remember. It was way before I saw the famous *Peter Pan* with Mary Martin, which was the first grown-up play I saw. It's the only thing I ever wanted to do. Hart talks about it in the book, something like, "the theater is the first refuge of the unhappy child." That was my case, certainly. I had no family background in the arts. Well, musicians, yes, but not theater people. So, I don't know if there was any 'infection'-time. It's just the only thing I have ever really been interested in from a really, really young age and wanted to have a life in. I never wavered from that.

**Hart attributes a great deal of his success to luck. Were there any memorable "lucky breaks" that came your way as you pursued your theatrical career? Besides luck, what qualities or traits do you think Hart had that made him so successful?**

**FONTANA:** Oh, the luck thing really can't be underestimated. The randomness is huge. I learned that very quickly, not only in this business but in life. Luck has two sides to it, but I'd say getting cast as Hamlet at the Guthrie [Theater in Minneapolis] was a huge lucky break, because it was the first time people took a second look at me, or maybe it kind of separated me from some of the pack for them. But even luckier was being one of 20 kids flown to YoungArts week in Miami, senior year of high school. It's an amazing scholarship competition for every art form, and I met my mentor Ken Washington there. He really took me under his wing and convinced me I was an actor, and introduced me to this new classical actor training program he was starting at the Guthrie. And I went.

Hart was lucky, but he was also constantly surrounding himself with people doing what he wanted to do. He also didn't see any limits on himself. The chance of luck shining down on you increases exponentially when you don't limit yourself. That's one of the best pieces of advice I've ever received and it seems like it could've come directly from Hart's mouth: "The world will try to limit you. Don't limit yourself." It's no coincidence this man shepherded *My Fair Lady* to such success. An impoverished Cockney child transforms himself in every way and creates a new image and life for himself?

**BISHOP:** Luck is very much a part of every successful actor's or theater person's DNA. To be the right person at the right time. Like James Lapine, you know, who was very lucky when he met Stephen Sondheim. He was relatively young and, to some degree, relatively inexperienced, which plunged him into a much higher level of the theater world than he would've been in before. It's just like in my case, when I went to work at Playwright's Horizons. It was an unknown, unformed theater in a very young movement of the non-profit theater. I was at the same stage in my life that Playwright's Horizons was in its life. And that was just lucky. But I think the other thing about Moss Hart is tenacity. He wouldn't give up on that play *Once in a Lifetime*. He was much more tenacious about it than, say, Kaufman. Kaufman was older. It was just another play for him, but for Moss Hart it was everything. Clearly, his tenacity saw him through. So I would say that it was luck, tenacity and, obviously, talent.

**Despite many setbacks and challenges in his childhood and early in his career, Hart seemed to have an unyielding determination to pursue a career in the theater. What advice would you give to students who come from similar backgrounds but dream of working in the theater?**

**FONTANA:** I'd tell them to keep tracking down what they love doing. That's the only North Star there really is, especially for an artist. Doing what you love is what keeps you wanting to do it. Someone hiring you is a side effect of that. Having a career in the theater is a side effect of someone doing what they undeniably love doing. And the more you do it, the better you get, and the better you get the more undeniable you become.

**BISHOP:** Like everyone, I think if you really want a career in the theater you have to *really* want it. That's obvious. The piece of advice I give that young people are stunned by is, "There's no rush, don't hurry." Find your way—intern here, or study there, go here... Whatever [young people] can study, they should study – if they're lucky enough. And whatever they can learn by apprenticeship, by assisting or by doing, they should. I think theater is a profession that

needs to be learned and studied and experienced and practiced. You can't just kind of fall into it.

**But Hart hustled like a maniac...**

Part of his hustle was to get himself and his family out of that terrible poverty. These days one might choose, perhaps a different career path as an escape from terrible poverty. But in those days, the theater was the only thing. There were no movies except silent movies and the beginning of talkies. There was no television, and radio was just starting. It was a place where you could earn a living, which is not as true now.

**The theater has changed immensely since Hart was writing and since he published *Act One*. What are some of the most significant differences? How do you think Hart would feel about the state of theater today?**

**BISHOP:** I think that the theater in Moss Hart's day—which was its early days, in the twenties and thirties—the American theater, with rare exceptions, didn't take itself too seriously. Then I think by the war—World War II and the post-war—the theater, and by that I mean Broadway, because that's all there was basically until the sixties, the theater took itself much more seriously and plays became part of the national discourse. Now, I think, that's changed.

The theater used to be very glamorous. Stage actors were incredibly famous. Plays cost a great deal less and therefore there were just many more of them. And there was a much larger audience because that's what you did on a Saturday night. Now, the theater is competing with TV, movies, staying at home, YouTube and video games. Most stage actors in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s—many of them didn't want to be in movies, they thought it was low class, a second rate profession.

Despite the lamentable loss of theater being in that national discourse, in my opinion, the theater in this country has never been healthier. There are hundreds of non-profit theaters all over the country with enormous audiences who go to see five, six, seven plays at that theater a year. And that never existed in Moss Hart's day. There was the road. There were little theaters—community theaters, but there weren't, like, twenty-five theaters in Minneapolis. So I always get confused whenever people say, "Well, the theater isn't what it was." Because it *isn't* what it was, but in some ways it's *more* than what it was. You know, in terms of playwriting—there are so many opportunities all over the country, not just in New York. We're in this golden age of American playwriting, we just don't know it. The theater is also much broader than it used to be. The theater in Moss Hart's day was extremely limited in terms of what the plays were about and who came to see them. It's all better.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: REVIEW, REVISE, REWRITE

This activity will provide students with a hands-on opportunity to experience adapting a memoir into a dramatic scene, and collaborating with a partner the way Kaufman and Hart do in *Act One*.

1. Begin by using the first five steps of this WNET memoir writing activity in which students write an essay using the prompt: "Once I was... Now I am." [http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/adulted/lessons/lesson3\\_activities.html](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/adulted/lessons/lesson3_activities.html)
2. After students have shared their stories with the class, put them into pairs. These will be their writing collaborators.
3. Collaborative pairs will begin by choosing one essay to adapt into a dramatic scene.
4. First, they will work independently to write the scene. After they have each completed a draft, have them swap papers and make notes about the following:
  - What jumped out as being exciting, dramatic, funny, or compelling?
  - What was unclear or confusing?
  - What ideas do I have that could be integrated with my collaborator's?
5. Collaborators will give each other feedback based on their notes and discuss the next draft, which they will then work on together.
6. Pairs will then present their second drafts to the class, with the class taking notes and giving feedback as they did before.
7. Pairs will then do another round of revisions, based on the "audience" feedback.

**TO EXPLORE:** Read and act out scenes from Kaufman and Hart's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *You Can't Take It with You*.

**TO DISCUSS:** What are the challenges of writing plays with a collaborator? What are the challenges of writing alone? When you watch the performance, try to notice what qualities Hart and Kaufman each had that made them well-suited to write together.

**COMMON CORE CONNECTION:** [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5](#) Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.



# RESOURCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY

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"You Can't Take it With You." *Drama for Students*. Eds. David Galens and Lynn Spampinato. Vol.10 . Detroit: Gale, 1998. 145-165.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

The Lincoln Center Theater Review <http://www.lct.org/talksLctReview.htm?id=19>

Bronx Historical Society <http://www.bronxhistoricalsociety.org/bxbrief>

Bronx History [http://thebx.net/info/\\_history\\_bronx\\_index.php](http://thebx.net/info/_history_bronx_index.php)

New York Preservation Archive Project <http://www.nypap.org/content/broadway-theatre-zoning-district>

Intersections: The Grand Concourse Beyond 100 <http://grandconcourse100.org/brief/history>

Musicals 101 <http://www.musicals101.com/>

Library of Congress (The Coolidge Years) <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/coolhtml/coolhome.html>

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum <http://www.tenement.org/>

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Eugene Debs [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/peopleevents/p\\_debs.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/peopleevents/p_debs.html) <http://debsfoundation.org/>

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<http://parlorsongs.com/bios/berlin/iberlin.php>

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