SOFTWARE & TECH

Man Who Came To Dinner Script

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Unpacking the Timeless Appeal of The Man Who Came to Dinner Script

For decades, theatre enthusiasts, drama students, and professional directors have returned to one particular comedy classic with remarkable regularity. The Man Who Came to Dinner script, penned by the legendary duo Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman, remains a cornerstone of American theatrical comedy. First performed on Broadway in 1939, this play has not only survived the test of time but continues to delight audiences with its sharp wit, memorable characters, and chaotic comedic structure. Whether you are a student studying the play, an actor preparing for an audition, or a director looking for your next production, understanding the nuances of this script is essential. This article explores the script in depth, examining its history, structure, characters, and enduring legacy while offering practical insights for anyone working with the text.

The Origins and Historical Context of the Script

To truly appreciate The Man Who Came to Dinner script, one must understand the world from which it emerged. Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman were among the most successful playwrights of their era, and their collaboration produced some of the sharpest comedies on the American stage. The play was inspired by the real-life figure of Alexander Woollcott, a famous critic and radio personality known for his acerbic tongue and larger-than-life persona. Woollcott was a friend of both Hart and Kaufman, and his overbearing personality provided the perfect template for the central character, Sheridan Whiteside.

The play premiered at the Music Box Theatre in New York City on October 16, 1939, with Monty Woolley in the lead role. It ran for an impressive 739 performances, cementing its place in theatrical history. Interestingly, Woollcott himself later played the role of Whiteside in a summer stock production and even in a 1942 film adaptation. The script captures a specific moment in American pre-war culture, yet its humor remains remarkably fresh. The interplay between high society, celebrity culture, and the chaos of ordinary life is as relevant today as it was in 1939.

Plot Overview: The Chaos Begins

The premise of The Man Who Came to Dinner script is deceptively simple. Sheridan Whiteside, a famous and notoriously cantankerous radio personality and critic, is passing through a small Ohio town on a lecture tour. He accepts a dinner invitation from the Stanley family, the town's most prominent citizens. However, after slipping on the icy front steps of the Stanley home, Whiteside injures his hip and is forced to convalesce in the family's home. What begins as a brief visit extends into weeks, and then months, as Whiteside commandeers the household with his outrageous demands, a steady stream of eccentric celebrity guests, and his relentless manipulation of everyone around him.

The script unfolds with Whiteside holding court from a wheelchair in the Stanley living room, turning the family's life upside down. He becomes embroiled in the romantic lives of his secretary Maggie Cutler and a local newspaperman named Bert Jefferson. When Maggie falls in love with Bert and plans to leave Whiteside's employment, the egotistical Whiteside refuses to lose his indispensable assistant. He schemes to break up the romance by inviting a glamorous but shallow actress, Lorraine Sheldon, to seduce Bert. The plot thickens further with the arrival of Banjo, a boisterous and eccentric entertainer based on Harpo Marx, who helps Maggie and Bert

outwit Whiteside. The script expertly balances farcical situations with genuine emotional stakes, keeping audiences laughing while invested in the outcome.

Character Analysis: The Heart of the Script

Sheridan Whiteside: The Tyrant in a Wheelchair

The central figure in The Man Who Came to Dinner script is, without question, Sheridan Whiteside. He is a magnificent monster of a man: arrogant, witty, manipulative, and utterly without filter. Whiteside is not a villain in the traditional sense; rather, he is a force of nature. His dialogue is packed with some of the most quotable lines in American comedy. He insults everyone around him with surgical precision, yet the audience cannot help but admire his audacity. The challenge for any actor reading this script is to make Whiteside charming enough that the audience enjoys his antics while recognizing his selfishness. He must be infuriating and lovable in equal measure. The role demands impeccable comedic timing, a commanding stage presence, and the ability to deliver rapid-fire dialogue with ease.

Maggie Cutler: The Indispensable Secretary

Maggie Cutler serves as the audience's entry point into the chaos. She is intelligent, loyal, and resourceful, having managed Whiteside's career and personal life for years. The script shows her evolution from a devoted employee to a woman willing to defy her boss for love. Maggie is not merely a pawn; she is the driving force behind the play's resolution. Her romantic subplot with Bert Jefferson provides the emotional core of the story. An actress tackling this role must balance strength with vulnerability, humor with sincerity. Maggie's dialogue reveals a woman who knows exactly how to handle Whiteside, which makes her ultimate rebellion all the more satisfying.

The Stanley Family: Victims of Circumstance

The Stanley family represents the ordinary world that Whiteside invades. Mr. and Mrs. Stanley are well-meaning provincial citizens who are completely out of their depth. Their daughter June and son Richard provide additional complications, as they become involved in their own romantic entanglements under Whiteside's roof. The script uses the Stanleys to highlight the absurdity of Whiteside's behavior. Their polite Midwestern sensibilities clash violently with his cosmopolitan rudeness, creating some of the play's funniest moments. The family's gradual descent from bewilderment to outright desperation mirrors the audience's own reaction to Whiteside's escalating demands.

Lorraine Sheldon and Banjo: Forces of Chaos

Lorraine Sheldon, the glamorous and vapid actress, is one of the script's most entertaining creations. She is self-absorbed, manipulative, and utterly theatrical. Her entrance signals a shift in the plot, as she becomes Whiteside's weapon against Maggie and Bert. Banjo, on the other hand, is pure comic relief. Loosely based on Harpo Marx, Banjo is a whirlwind of physical comedy, eccentric behavior, and unexpected kindness. The contrast between Lorraine's artificial glamour and Banjo's genuine eccentricity adds rich texture to the ensemble. Both roles require performers with strong comic instincts and the ability to command attention whenever they appear.

The Structure and Style of the Script

The Man Who Came to Dinner script is a masterclass in comedic structure. It follows the classic three-act format, with each act escalating the stakes and deepening the complications. The exposition is handled efficiently: within the first few pages, we understand exactly who Sheridan Whiteside is and what kind of chaos he can create. The rising action involves his machinations to derail Maggie's romance, while the climax arrives when Maggie and

Banjo devise a scheme to outwit Whiteside and Lorraine. The resolution is satisfying and heartwarming, with Whiteside ultimately conceding defeat in his own inimitable fashion.

Hart and Kaufman's dialogue is the script's greatest asset. The lines crackle with wit, intelligence, and a distinctly theatrical energy. The repartee between Whiteside and his guests is fast-paced and demanding, requiring actors with excellent diction and timing. The script also features several monologues, particularly for Whiteside, that are set pieces of comedic writing. These speeches allow the actor to showcase their range and command of the stage. The humor ranges from highbrow literary references to slapstick physical comedy, offering something for every audience member.

Key Themes in the Script

Beneath its comedic surface, The Man Who Came to Dinner script explores several enduring themes. The most prominent is the clash between celebrity culture and ordinary life. Whiteside represents a world of fame, privilege, and artistic temperament that is completely alien to the Stanley household. The script satirizes the way that powerful personalities can dominate and disrupt the lives of those around them, a theme that resonates strongly in the age of social media influencers and reality television.

Another important theme is the nature of loyalty and independence. Maggie's journey is about asserting her own desires against her domineering employer. The script suggests that even the most indispensable employees have the right to their own lives. Similarly, the Stanley family eventually finds the courage to stand up to Whiteside, albeit comically. The theme of finding one's voice and asserting boundaries runs throughout the play, giving it substance beneath the laughter.

Finally, the script celebrates the transformative power of community and genuine human connection. Bert and Maggie's romance represents a return to authentic values, while Banjo's friendship with Whiteside hints at the possibility of redemption even for the most difficult personalities. The conclusion, in which Whiteside is outwitted by the very people he sought to control, affirms that genuine affection and cleverness can triumph over selfishness.

Performance History and Adaptations

The popularity of The Man Who Came to Dinner script has led to numerous productions and adaptations over the decades. The original Broadway production was a sensation, with Monty Woolley earning rave reviews for his portrayal of Whiteside. The 1942 film adaptation, directed by William Keighley, featured Woolley reprising his role alongside Bette Davis as Maggie Cutler and Ann Sheridan as Lorraine Sheldon. The film remains a beloved classic of screwball comedy and is widely available for study.

Numerous revivals have kept the script alive on stage. Notable productions include the 2000 Broadway revival starring Nathan Lane as Whiteside, which introduced the play to a new generation. Lane's interpretation emphasized Whiteside's vulnerability and charm, offering a nuanced take on the character. Regional theatres, community groups, and educational institutions frequently produce the play, drawn to its large ensemble cast and proven audience appeal. The script's availability from major publishing houses like Dramatists Play Service ensures that it remains accessible for licensing.

Why the Script Endures: Insights for Modern Audiences

Several factors explain why The Man Who Came to Dinner script continues to be produced and studied. First, the humor is genuinely timeless. While some cultural references may require a footnote for modern audiences, the

comedic situations and character dynamics are universal. The spectacle of a demanding guest overstaying their welcome is a scenario that resonates with anyone who has ever hosted a difficult relative or endured an awkward social situation. The larger-than-life quality of Whiteside makes him a memorable and entertaining antagonist.

Second, the script offers excellent roles for a large ensemble cast. In an era when many new plays feature small casts, The Man Who Came to Dinner provides opportunities for a dozen or more actors to shine. This makes it an attractive choice for schools, community theatres, and companies with large acting pools. The play's period setting also allows for attractive costume and set design, adding to its visual appeal.

Third, the script rewards careful study. Beneath the laughs, Hart and Kaufman have constructed a tightly plotted comedy with genuine emotional stakes. The character arcs are clear and satisfying, and the thematic resonance gives the play substance. For drama students, analyzing the script offers lessons in comic structure, dialogue writing, and character development that remain relevant in any era.

Practical Tips for Working with the Script

If you are preparing a production of The Man Who Came to Dinner, several considerations will enhance your work. First, pay careful attention to period details. The script is set in 1939, and the language, costumes, and social mores reflect that era. While the humor translates well to modern audiences, respecting the historical context adds authenticity. Second, cast your Whiteside carefully. This is one of the most demanding roles in American comedy, requiring an actor who can deliver rapid-fire dialogue, command the stage, and earn the audience's affection despite the character's rudeness.

Third, embrace the physical comedy. The script features several moments of slapstick, from Banjo's antics to Whiteside's wheelchair maneuvers. These moments should be choreographed carefully to maximize laughs while ensuring safety. Fourth, pay attention to pacing. The script's success depends on crisp timing and rhythm. Rehearse scenes with an emphasis on the musicality of the dialogue, building to the big comedic moments and allowing silences to land when appropriate.

Conclusion: A Script Worth Every Minute

The Man Who Came to Dinner script is more than a historical artifact or a comedy classic. It is a living document that continues to entertain, challenge, and inspire those who encounter it. Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman created a work that captures the absurdity of human behavior while affirming the value of love, loyalty, and community. For anyone involved in theatre, studying this script offers invaluable lessons in craft, character, and comedic timing. For audiences, the play remains a riotous evening of

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