

**2012 Suggestions for Teaching *Animal Crackers* by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind,
Music & Lyrics by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, Adapted by Henry Wishcamper**

Before seeing/reading the play

1. George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind were extremely popular and successful American dramatists in their lifetimes who both earned Pulitzer Prizes for their work. Research their lives and careers. What types of work are they known for? Who did they frequently collaborate with? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/kaufman_g.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_S._Kaufman
<http://www.rnh.com/bio/147/Ryskind-Morrie>
<http://www.aol.com/celebs/morris-ryskind/1869343/biography>
2. The Marx brothers began their careers as popular vaudeville performers. Research the Marx brothers, their life, their career and their performance personas. What type of character was each brother known for? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.marx-brothers.org/index.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marx_Brothers
<http://www.answers.com/topic/groucho-marx>
3. Research vaudeville in the United States. What did vaudeville acts generally consist of? What caused the decline of vaudeville? What lasting influence has vaudeville had on entertainment in the United States? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/makeemlaugh/episodes/history/vaudeville-and-broadway/31/>
4. *Animal Crackers* was written in 1928. Research the United States during the 1920s. Why are the 1920s referred to as the Roaring Twenties? What was going on politically, socially and culturally during this time? Who was the United States president? What were the popular forms of entertainment? How did theatre and film reflect what was going on in the world? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.answers.com/topic/1920s>
<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1564.html>

5. What is farce? What is a slapstick comedy? List contemporary examples of farce and slapstick from television, film and/or theatre.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/201791/farce>
<http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Romantic-Comedy-Yugoslavia/Slapstick-Comedy.html>
6. What is timing? How is timing important to both physical and verbal comedy?
7. What is a debutante? What does it mean for a debutante to “make her debut in society” or “come out”? What is expected of a debutante after “coming out”? This and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debutante>
8. What is meant by the term “high society”? How does an individual enter “high society”? What is a socialite? What is required to be a socialite? Give contemporary examples of socialites. This and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialite>
9. The Marx Brothers were German Jews who grew up in a poor neighborhood in New York City. Research poor neighborhoods in New York City at the turn of the 20th century with particular attention to neighborhoods dominated by Germans, Jews and Eastern Europeans. What was the status of Eastern European Jews in New York City during the early 20th century? What is cultural assimilation? How did Eastern European Jews and other immigrant groups assimilate into the dominant American culture? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.jvhri.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=580:new-yorks-disparate-jewish-neighborhoods&catid=43:dr-stanley-aronson&Itemid=66
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_assimilation
10. Groucho Marx (as Captain Spalding) references the Theatre Guild and parodies Eugene O’Neill’s play *Strange Interlude* a number of times in *Animal Crackers*. Research the Theatre Guild and Eugene O’Neill’s play *Strange Interlude*. These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_Guild
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strange_Interlude

11. What does it mean to say that a check “bounced”? What is a bad check? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/bouncedcheck.asp#axzz1XxUjYT6h>

12. There is a song in *Animal Crackers* called “The Musketeers”. What is a musketeer? Who were the original Three Musketeers? This and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three_Musketeers

Other Resources

Books

The Marx Bros. Scrapbook by Groucho Marx and Richard J. Anobile

The Grouchophile: An Illustrated Life by Groucho Marx

Film

Animal Crackers (1930)

After seeing/reading the play

1. *Animal Crackers* was originally written, in part, to highlight the strengths of Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo Marx as performers. In the OSF production, actors are playing Groucho, Chico, Harpo and Zeppo Marx as well as playing the characters the Marx brothers portray in the story. What is the effect of actors playing multiple roles? How does this add to the comedy of the various scenes?
2. What are the main plot points of *Animal Crackers*? How important is the plot to the show? To what extent is the plot a framework for the jokes, songs, and dances sprinkled throughout the show?
3. Refer to your research on the Marx Brothers, farce, and slapstick comedy. What slapstick elements do *Animal Crackers* contain? In what ways are the characters “stock characters”? What contemporary movies and television programs might you compare this style of production to? List contemporary comedic performers whose style of comedy seems to have been influenced by the Marx Brothers’ work.
4. Consider the songs throughout the show. How does each song drive the story forward? What do the songs contribute to the mood and tone of the show?

5. How does status work in the world of this play? What gives people status within this group of people? Who has the highest status at Mrs. Rittenhouse's Long Island home? The lowest? Whose status changes over the course of the story? How are those with high status treated? How are those with low status treated? What status of people is the object of most of the jokes? What is the play suggesting about this group of people?
6. Compare the romantic couplings in the show: Chandler and Grace, Winston and Arabella, John and Mary, Mrs. Rittenhouse and Spaulding. How would you describe each couple? What are the differences between them? What brings each couple together? Which couple appears the best matched? Which couple communicates the most effectively? Which couple seems the least able to understand one another?
7. Why is Mrs. Rittenhouse so excited about having Captain Spaulding as a houseguest? What does she mean when she says, "After this evening, I don't think there'll be any doubt about who's who on Long Island"?
8. What is the distinction between Long Island and Staten Island in the world of the play? What does Long Island represent? What does Staten Island represent?
9. Refer to your research on New York City ghettos and the status of Jews in the United States in the early 20th century. Why does Abe Kabbible, the fish peddler from Czecho-Slovakia change his name to Roscoe W. Chandler? What does Abe Kabbible gain by being Roscoe W. Chandler?
10. Captain Spaulding's line to Chandler, "Uruguay? Well, you go Uruguay and I'll go mine" is an example of a comic pun. Give other examples of puns in the show.
11. Why does Mary tell John that in order for him to be a successful artist he must meet those who attend Mrs. Rittenhouse's party? What can they do for his career?
12. Why does Mrs. Rittenhouse believe it's important for her daughter Arabella to be in Mr. Winston's gossip column, the Evening Traffic? What does a mention in the Evening Traffic signify? What might be the irony of a respectable person being mentioned in a column entitled the Evening Traffic? What does the title Evening Traffic suggest?

13. What are some of the reasons people collect art, especially expensive art? What gives these pieces their value? What does collecting art suggest about an individual's values? What does art collecting suggest about a person's income level?
14. What is the difference between the original Beaugard painting and the fake ones? Why is the original more valued than the fakes if they all look basically the same? What is at stake if the original painting is not found? Why might someone want to steal a painting? What is the reason that the original Beaugard painting was taken by John and Mary? Why does Mrs. Whitehead want to steal the original?
15. The play ends with the song, "Hooray for Captain Spaulding", celebrating Spaulding as the hero responsible for the return of the Beaugard painting. In what ways are Spaulding's actions heroic? In what ways are his actions not heroic? How has he changed throughout the course of the story, if at all? How have any of the characters changed from the beginning of the play to the end?
16. *Animal Crackers* is set during the 1920s. Refer to your research on the Roaring Twenties. What elements in the production reflect this time period and issues of the day? What elements in the OSF production refer to more contemporary events in the United States?
17. If you are seeing/reading *The Seagull*, compare the humor in it to the humor in *Animal Crackers*. Describe how the humor works in each play? How does satire work in each play?
18. If you are seeing/reading *Romeo & Juliet*, compare the lovers in both plays. How does each couple navigate social responsibilities and personal desires? Which pair is the most successful at navigating social responsibilities and personal desires?

Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department—Amina Henry, Joan Langley, David Thompson—created the "Suggestions for Teaching *Animal Crackers*."

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