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Theater review: 'The Royal Family' hams it up at Theatre Three

12:00 AM CDT on Wednesday, August 5, 2009

By **MANUEL MENDOZA** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News
Manuel Mendoza is a Dallas freelance writer.

At the edge of Theatre Three's in-the-round stage stands a staircase. Members of the highly theatrical Cavendish clan frequently use it to make grand entrances and exits. Being show people, they can't help themselves.

That's just about all there is to *The Royal Family* – 24/7 divas on parade. But it's enough to create a diverting evening at the expense of those who aren't like you or me. Snappily directed by Theatre Three co-founder Jac Alder, the 1927 play by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, loosely based on the acting Barrymore family of the period, generates laughs from boisterous, quarrelsome characters who bring as much drama to their offstage relationships as to their work on the boards.

"I think that speech needs cutting." "Let me make another entrance." "Stop acting like somebody in a melodrama." Half the fun of *The Royal Family* is this hall of mirrors: actors playing actors who are on all the time and know it. Of course, like the rest of us, they have problems too. They just handle them with more flair.

The oldest of three generations – ailing matriarch Fanny Cavendish (Carolyn Wickwire), who's itching to get back on the road; her brother, Herbert (Jerry Crow, stealing every scene he's in); and Herbert's wife, Kitty (Leslie Turner) – are all in denial about their fading careers.

Meanwhile, Fanny's daughter, Julie (centering force Morgana Shaw), who calls herself "a madwoman in a family of maniacs," is about to start a play with her own daughter, Gwen (Hilary Couch). But there are obstacles. Each has a suitor who would take them away from their theater lives, and a manager (Robert Grossman, bringing old New York to life) whose self-interest wouldn't be served if they quit.

Fanny puts the situation in its proper perspective. "Marriage isn't a career," she tells Gwen. "It's an incident."

But it's the men in the family who are the biggest brats, starting with Fanny's son, Tony (Jack Foltyn), who's given up the stage for Hollywood. Channeling Robin Williams, Peter O'Toole and Errol Flynn, Foltyn goes for broke, employing every joint in his body to convey Tony's engorged self-involvement. It's a defensible choice but also a distraction.

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JOHN F. RHODES/DMN
The stage is bursting at the seams with all of these egos, portrayed by (from left) Morgana Shaw, Robert Grossman, Hilary Couch and Carolyn Wickwire.

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Through Aug. 30 at Theatre Three, 2800 Routh St. \$10 to \$40. 214-871-3300. www.theatre3dallas.com.