

Stage: 'Once in a Lifetime'

By RICHARD EDER

WHEN "Once in a Lifetime," the first play that Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman wrote together, was revived here a number of years ago it ran for exactly one performance.

The Circle in the Square's leisurely but delightful version, which opened here last night, should do a great deal better. Some of the bones have fallen from the meat of this 1930 comedy; its insance logic has lost some of its logic, but there is plenty of insanity left.

And with John Lithgow sagging gently into a very large comic performance as George, the Heaven-favored fool who out-imbeciles Hollywood, and George Irving as a thundering film tycoon constructed entirely of tiny gas-filled balloons, the Circle production surmounts the play's weaknesses and its own blank spots to give New York something pretty close to ideal summer theater.

At its most alive, "Lifetime" has the wacky, mounting, improbable comic climaxes that distinguish the humor of the 30's. The Marx Brothers had it, and at their best it was in a rhythm that raced and slowed but never dropped.

Quite a bit of "Lifetimes" drops. There is a lot of carpentry showing by now in this tale of the three out-of-work actors who set up an elocution school in Hollywood. It was the time when the talkies came in, and the stars who were the plumed swans of that particular puddle turned out to be as inaudible as swans.

There are grand chains of lunacy to the scenes in a Hollywood studio. A small but deadly not of bitter satire—Kaufman and Hart were New Yorkers, and Hollywood, which ate playwrights alive, was a joke that was no joke—gives the play some real bite. There is, as well, a good deal of stilted dialogue, particularly in the occasional scenes of sentiment. Caricatures wound better than they kiss.

But a lot of the limitlessness of the comedy of that time, the feeling that a joke could end up almost anywhere, remains. Sometimes it made for silliness and contrivance; sometimes for a beautifully irresponsible inspiration. Take the play's final joke.

Mr. Lithgow's George, whose mistakes that turn out lucky keep getting him alternately fired and promoted by the irascible Glogauer, makes one final mistake. He buys 2,000 airplanes. Now, at 50 years distance, this is something of a bald and heavy joke, especially for the climax of a long play.

But then somebody remarks hopefully that there must be some way you can use 2,000 airplanes. "Sure," says May, the acid, good-hearted heroine. "Make applesauce." That afterthought, pure comic madness, is worth a ton of machinery and all the humor in a year's worth of "Saturday Night Live."

The Circle production, directed by Tom Moore on a bare stage upon which furniture is toted in and out, does very well by the best moments, and nurses the longer worn spots with reasonable cheerfulness.

Mr. Moore is particularly good at

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John Lithgow and George S. Irving in Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's "Once in a Lifetime" at Circle in the Square.

Marlanna Barcellona

At Circle in Square

ONCE IN A LIFETIME by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman. Directed by Tom Moore; setting by Karl Eigsti; costumes by Carol Luiken; lighting by F. Mitchell Dana; wigs and hairstyles by Paul Huntley; production stage manager, Randall Brooks. Presented by Circle in the Square, Theodore Mann, artistic director; Paul Libl, managing director. At 50th Street and Broadway.

Joisons	Michael Jeer, Richard Peterson, Jim Shankman
George Lewis	John Lithgow
May Daniels	Deborah May
Jerry Hyland	Treat Williams
Porter	Bob Harper
Helen Hobart	Jayne Meadows Allen
Susan Walker	Julla Duffy
First Couple	Jill P. Rose, Michael Brindisi
Second Couple	Elizabeth Kemp, Eric Uhler
Cigarette Girl	Ellen March
Coat Check Girl	Alma Cuervo
Miss Leigh's Chauffeur	Lance Davis
Phyllis Fontaine	Sydney Blake
Florabel Leigh	Lee Meredith
Bellboys	Jim Shankman, Michael Jeter
Mrs. Walker	Beverly May
Ernest	Kelli Perry
Norton	Peter Bosche
Meisterstein	Peter J. Saputo
Weisskopf	Jerry Zaks
Policeman	Jack Straw
Miss Chasen	Phyllis Somerville
Herman Glogauer	George S. Irving
Miss Leighton	Bella Jarrett
Lawrence Vail	Max Wright
Moulton	Richard Peterson
Rudolph Kammerling	MacIntyre Dixon

some of the visual absurdities. The first entrance of Mr. Irving as Glogauer is a dignified retreat from the portable mob of sycophants he carries with him. He is pursued by a pair of emoting bell-boys who, like everyone else in this hectic Hollywood of the imagination, are always auditioning. Even two electricians, having lunch, begin to improvise a song—it is "Pretty Baby" but they get it wrong—and wash off, presumably to see their agents.

Mr. Lithgow, as the bumbling George, is tall as Jacques Tati is tall. Like a mountain, his peak disappears into a cloudy of tentativeness. He looks like a cartoon of the 1930's, hips thrust forward, rocking back on his heels, and

with one slow tugboat pulling barge-loadsof silliness across his face. He moves in jerks, as if he were a slide-show.

In a scene with Max Wright, a playwright demented by underwork—he has been kept in an empty room for months and nobody has asked him for anything—Mr. Lithgow shows his art. Mr. Wright's performance, all hisses and jerks and twitches, embroiders its own embroideries. There is skill there but it is a sideshow and stops things dead.

Mr. Lithgow, drooping, simply listens. He follows Mr. Wright's gyrations as a sunflower turns with the sun. He does nothing, in effect; he just stands there, and it is quite the best thing to do.

Mr. Irving is a comic roarer, a source of energy and noise but of considerable subtlety as well. His chin is an off-shore continent, a kind of Iceland that precedes the rest of his face and is full of glaciers and volcanic activity.

May, the heroine, is a fairly straight part, and difficult to do. Deborah May translates her gestures and expressions back into the 30's; she is pert, tart and radiant.

Treat Williams is agreeable as Jerry Hyland, the ambitious but ultimately decent boyfriend of Miss May's. Julia Duffy makes a fine, brassy-haired and brassy-voiced young girl who possesses ambitions for stardom and the total doglike devotion of Mr. Lithgow.

MacIntyre Dixon, Jayne Meadows Allen, Beverly May and Bella Jarrett are all amusing in smaller parts. Jack Straw makes a fine screen bishop, who bets on horses between takes, and the rest of the cast is mostly good, too.