



## An actor's dream come true



Frank Ferrante visits George S. Kaufman's old bedroom at The Inn at Barley Sheaf Farm, formerly the home of the playwright and his wife. Groucho Marx was a frequent visitor at the Kaufman home and Ferrante is portraying Marx at "An Evening with Groucho," at the Bucks County Playhouse until Feb. 25.

By Kathryn Finegan Clark

Frank Ferrante joyfully plopped himself on the handsome bed in what was once playwright George S. Kaufman's bedroom. The actor looked dream-come-true happy.

The Kaufman house is now The Inn at Barley Sheaf Farm and owner Mark Frank had invited the actor and director to tour the 1740 stone manor house turned into a luxurious bed and breakfast.

Ferrante, who is starring in "An Evening with Groucho" at the Bucks County Playhouse, jumped at the chance. He said he had seen the house on a previous visit but he'd never been inside. Comedian Marx and Pulitzer Prize winner Kaufman were close friends and collaborators and Ferrante knew Marx had spent a lot of time there as his life was inexorably tied to that of the playwright.

Ferrante was obviously eager to see for himself where some of the great shows had been written and where the two had chatted and joked. He was also quite animated as he looked over Kaufman and Marx keepsakes stored in a glass top cabinet at the inn— a 1937 Life magazine cover, old photos, a guest book that had once been Moss Hart's, bearing the signatures of Broadway celebrities who also played a role in Bucks cultural history when they lived and visited in Bucks in what has been called "The Genius Belt" around New Hope in the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

Ferrante, a prize-winner himself, has been portraying Groucho Marx on stages around the world for 34 years, and 20 years ago he wrote and acted in "By George," a one-man play about Kaufman, so it was doubly thrilling for him.

As he walked through the various rooms, Ferrante talked about the friendship shared by Marx and Kaufman, a unique bond between the educated writer and the zany comedian, "who never made it past the sixth grade. He was always a little embarrassed about that but he was a voracious reader." Ferrante said, "Groucho even carried a dictionary in his car. He was always trying to improve his way of communicating with others." What the two shared was a fabulous gift for one-liners, he said.

Ferrante said, "Groucho described Kaufman as "the man who gave me the walk and the talk," Kaufman wrote the Marx Brothers Broadway musicals, "The Cocoanuts" and "Animal Crackers," as well as the classic, "A Night at the Opera."

"They were two world-class talents," said Ferrante. Impressed with their accomplishments even now, he said, "They did shows that ran for 800 performances," he said, and from 1921 to 1958, not a season passed without a show either written or directed by Kaufman.

Ferrante and a group of reporters and photographers visited three of the suites in the 1740 restored stone house on Monday. Each is named for a Kaufman play, sumptuously furnished, and offering views of the garden, pool and the lawn where Kaufman and Marx played croquet on summer days.

As he passed through each suite Ferrante recalled anecdotes involving the Marxes and Kaufman. He noted the mute Harpo Marx, whose voice was typically not heard, did actually speak only once on stage and that was at the Bucks County Playhouse, when he appeared in "The Man Who Came to Dinner" years ago.

Ferrante said, "George Kaufman hated musicals. There was an Irving Berlin song, "Always – I'll be loving you always," that he wouldn't allow in his show. George, who did not have a sentimental bone in his body, proposed instead, "I'll be loving you Thursdays." The song later showed up in "Pride of the Yankees" and in the film "Blithe Spirit," based on the Noel Coward play.

Ferrante also laughed as he related a story he'd heard about a producer Kaufman disliked. When the producer once admitted, "I'm my own worst enemy." Kaufman said, "Not while I'm alive."

Ferrante, who was named one of the top 10 performers in the country last year by the Wall Street Journal, has been playing Groucho since he was a drama student at the University of Southern California, and Groucho's son, Arthur, awarded him the role in "Groucho: A life in Revue," an off-Broadway show written by Arthur, and portraying the comedian from ages 15 to 85.

"An Evening with Groucho" opened Feb. 14 at the Bucks County Playhouse and runs through Feb. 25.

