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SOAP operas frequently portray the family business as a battleground of power, greed, and ambition. Comedy writers lampoon the tangled family emotions that lie behind the corporate face of earnest respectability. In *Other People's Money*, a play that later became a movie, the family business briefly enjoys heroic status as a symbol of staunch values: A multi-generation New England manufacturing company that cares about its employees falls prey to an unscrupulous corporate raider.

The dark side of the family business is now back, with a vengeance, in a play that opened on Broadway in April. Any resemblance to real families or businesses in *A Small Family Business*, by Britain's Alan Ayckbourn, is purely coincidental. However, the witless, spineless, scheming, dotty characters in this comedy about Ayres & Graces, a British family furniture maker, have qualities that strike a very familiar chord.

There is Ken Ayres, the aging, semi-senile owner of Ayres & Graces, who suspects that someone on the inside is ripping off the company's furniture designs; knockoffs of Ayres & Graces products are being sold under a chic Italian label. There is the idiot son, Desmond, whose real ambition is to be a chef in his own restaurant and who is more or less permanently ensconced in the kitchen concocting his recipes. There is Jack McCracken, the idealistic son-in-law played by Irish actor Brian Murray. And there is the ineffectual third-generation, represented by Roy, married to Jack's daughter, Tina. Tina seems mildly encouraged when she discovers Roy is part of a conspiracy to cheat the company. "If you're

going to be a criminal," she suggests, "you have to have some sort of brain, don't you?"

The plot concerns the intra-family cabal. Ken calls upon Jack to take over as managing director of Ayres & Graces. Jack, who has been a successful executive of a fish-sticks company, discovers that his family is easygoing in its morals and the company is rotten to the core. The relatives are profiting from the illicit sales of the furniture designs to an Italian firm. Jack's leggy sister-in-law, Anita, is in bed—literally—with the five Rivetti brothers (all played by the same actor) whose firm is ripping off the designs. His son-in-law, Roy, warns that even workers in the plant partake of the profits. If Jack tries to put a stop to it, Roy ingenuously suggests, "The lads in the shop aren't going to like it."

Jack is forced to make his first compromise with principle when his sullen teenage daughter, Samantha, is caught shoplifting shampoo and hair pins. The family insists that he get "Sammy" off the hook by offering a job to the store investigator who has caught her red-handed, Benedict Hough (pronounced Huff). Hough, a red-faced, smarmy man of cheerfully malign motives is—naturally—hired to investigate the theft of designs at Ayres & Graces. He draws Jack deeper into blackmail to cover up the crime.

The family conspirators, meanwhile, drag Jack into further compromises with principle. Jack reasons and rages, trying to make his wiggy relatives see the light and restore order to the family and the business. Someone gets his head bashed in upstairs in a bathtub, and the Rivettis are hired to dispose of the body. They,

in turn, engage in some blackmail of their own. All this takes place on a stunning two-level set in which fast paced action is going on simultaneously in different rooms.

The play perpetuates family business stereotypes, but its reckless fun and polished Broadway entertainment.

A Small Family Business ends as it begins, with a happy family party, this time honoring Ken's 75th birthday. In a brief speech, Jack says: "We've had our share of troubles, but now we've seen them off." Then everybody joins in a rousing toast: "To the family business! To the family business!" ■

Howard Muson is a writer, editor and consultant, and former editor and co-publisher of Family Business Magazine.

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