

Denver Center
Theatre Company

InsideOut

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the SKIN *of* OUR teeth

Oct. 10 - Nov. 9 • Stage Theatre

An attractive suburban house in Excelsior, New Jersey is home to the wacky Antrobus family, who will face the End of the World — three times. George Antrobus, inventor of the wheel, who along with his wife, two children and their maid, confront the calamities of all mankind in this theatrical allegory. Despite fire and flood, plague and pestilence, war and depression, even a perilous wall of ice, this family does what human beings do best: they endure. This timeless classic is a testament to life itself, as the Antrobus clan comically faces and bravely survives the epic problems man has faced since time began.

In Wilder's own words, "They are the stuff of which heroes are made, heroes and buffoons...*The Skin of Our Teeth* is the destiny of the whole human group seen from a telescope 1000 miles away." ■

**"I am escaped with the
skin of my teeth."**

-Job 19:20



Photo by Gary Isaacs

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Thornton *Niven* WILDER

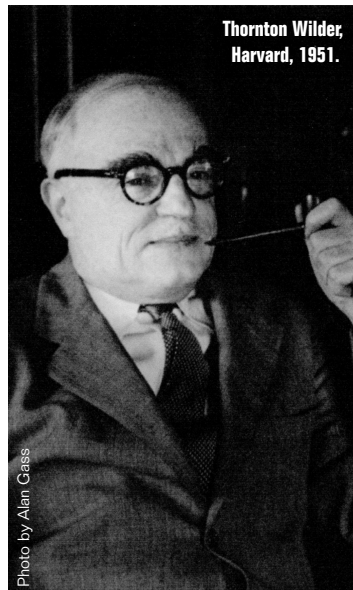
Thornton Niven Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin on April 17, 1897. He was the second son of Amos Parker Wilder, a newspaper owner and editor, powerful speaker and the United States Consul General to Hong Kong and Shanghai. His mother, Isabella Niven Wilder was a cultured, educated woman who instilled in her children a love of literature, drama and languages. She was a writer of vivid poetry.

Wilder grew up with an older brother and three younger sisters and the family was filled with highly-educated and accomplished people. Older brother, Amos, was a highly-acclaimed professor of New Testament scholarship, an insightful essayist and distinguished poet, as

Thornton Wilder was a leading spokesman for the humanistic values our country was founded upon; his works affirm the dignity and worth of the individual.

well as a tennis champion. Of his sisters, Charlotte was an English professor and an award-winning poet; Isabel was the author of three popular novels and curator of Yale University's theatre archive. The youngest, Janet, was a professor of biology, an author and a noted environmentalist. Through their emphasis on education and output, the Wilder family made its mark across generations and in many different fields.

In 1926, after receiving his MA from Princeton University, Thornton had his first play, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, produced at New York's



Thornton Wilder, Harvard, 1951.

Photo by Alan Cass

Laboratory Theater and his first novel, *The Cabala*, was published. He won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction one year later for his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Over the next ten years, plays including *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays* and novels such as *The Woman of Andros* and *Heaven's My Destination* were published. In 1938, Thornton Wilder

broke customary notions of time and space when *Our Town* opened on Broadway. It brought him his second Pulitzer Prize, this time for drama and four years later, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, would win Wilder his third.

From 1942-1945, Wilder served in the Army Air Force Intelligence Services in North Africa and Italy. He resumed writing in 1948 with a novel, *The Ides of March*, about life and love in ancient Rome and *The Victors*, a translation of the Jean Paul Sartre play, *Morts Sans Sepulture*. In 1955, *The Matchmaker* opened on Broadway and less than ten years later, it was the basis for the wildly successful musical, *Hello Dolly*. He continued writing novels and, between 1967 and 1973, published *The Eighth Day* and *Theophilus North*.

Thornton Wilder was a leading spokesman for the humanistic values our country was founded upon; his works affirm the dignity and worth of the individual. By the time of his death on December 7, 1975, he was an American icon, a world-renowned playwright and highly respected novelist. The greatness of his gift is evident in a number of his plays that are produced throughout the world today. ■

Myth and ARCHETYPE in

T H E S K I N O F O U R T E E T H

For Thornton Wilder myth was a “significant truth presented in a narration form in the light of a universality that does not exclude the innerness of every existing human being.”² In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, he examines history through a mythical framework.

The choice of the family name, Antrobus, comes from the Greek “anthropos,” meaning man, so they are not only the typical American family, but also the Family of Man. During the course of the play, they relive the history of the world, both real and mythical, beginning with an Ice Age. Humankind’s struggles are eternal yet time is of no consequence. The family has a dinosaur and a woolly mammoth for pets, they are celebrating their 5000th anniversary and disasters like the Great Flood are the things of their everyday life.

**“The older I grow the more
I lean on myths and on
prototypes in literature.”**

-Thornton Wilder¹

In Act I, Wilder gives us the patriarch, George Antrobus—an Old Testament Adam—and his wife, Maggie—the eternal mother, Eve. It is Maggie who keeps the homefires burning and protects her family like a tigress, while George adventuresome, inventive spirit brings progress, civilization and culture into the world. The Biblical figures continue with the two Antrobus children, the archetypes of good and evil. Gladys is the family’s hope of perfection and proof that it can never be fully realized. She is praised for her good behavior, scolded for her attempts to become a woman. Her red lipstick in Act I and red stockings in Act II bring about the idea of knowingness and Original Sin. Henry is Cain, the evil that is always with us. A red mark on his forehead is the constant reminder of his brother’s blood, killed by Henry’s own hand. And then we have the

maid, Sabina or Lily Sabina as she is sometimes called. She is the temptress, Lilith of the Night, symbol of the eternal wicked woman. Many ideals are brought forth through mythical figures in the form of the refugees seeking shelter. Moses represents Justice, Homer equates the ancient Greek ideals and culture, and the Muses, or the arts, give Antrobus a reason to survive.

Old Testament references abound in Act II as we see George Antrobus as chief of the mammals, president of their convention. He is the paragon of the animal kingdom, complete with the weaknesses and virtues of his human form. The Atlantic City Boardwalk setting gives us bingo games, a beauty contest and a fortune teller to reflect the carnival quality of life. When the storm comes up and the deluge is upon them, it is George, like Noah, who is responsible for the survival of the earth and all her creatures.

The end of the play brings the world to a time of peace and the hope of rebirth. George receives guidance and hope from three historical philosophers — Spinoza, Plato and Aristotle — who reaffirm his belief that learning is progress.

Wilder presents the American Family with all the faults that have hindered it from reaching perfection, but also with the strengths that have allowed it to survive since the beginning of civilization. Deep themes are presented with light-hearted humor and a dash of the absurd, for people learn most about their nature when they can laugh at it. The play “portrays the mythic American cheerfully and energeti-

**“Democracy has a great duty: to
create new myths, new metaphors
and new images to show the new
condition of dignity into which
Man is entering.”**

**-Thornton Wilder in a speech
given in Germany, 1957**

THEATRICAL styles *in*

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH



DCTC's production of *The Skin of Our Teeth* - Act I

Set Design by Andrew Yelusich

"What good is it for a man to be dissatisfied with always repeating the same acts? For he must, just like the animals, perform and repeat daily those acts which are basic and indispensable to life, if he does not wish to die."

-Luigi Pirandello

"Wilder used a jumble of theatrical styles to support the universal themes of enduring everyday life and survival in *The Skin of Our Teeth*," writes David Castronovo in his essay, "A Powerful Study of Humanity's Ability to Survive."

Using the strategy of Bertoldt Brecht and his epic theatre, Wilder employs screen projections and announcements in his production to set up the idea to be addressed in the coming act. This mixes media styles by borrowing from film and radio. At the top of the play, he bucks tradition with the use of an announcer presenting the "News Events of the World," which leads the audience into the Antrobus household. Again, at the top of Act II, projections and the announcer give the audience the Atlantic City setting in "Fun at the Beach" and the event that draws the audience in with a gathering of "The Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals." By use of these devices, Wilder is able to take the audience where he wants them to go without exposition in the scenes.

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The influence of Luigi Pirandello and his play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, is felt as Wilder liberates the play from the confines of the set and the use of the theatre's aisles and

A hint of slapstick and vaudeville sneak in with the flying scenery of Act I and the flashing, whirling lights, high whistles, loud thunder and conventioners snake-dancing across the stage in Act II.



-James Joyce. *Finnegan's Wake*, first sentence

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WILDER'S WOES: *the* problems *in* WRITING *and* PRODUCING

T H E S K I N O F O U R T E E T H

Thornton Wilder faced many difficulties in writing and producing his play. The rejection by Jed Harris, his producer of choice, was one of many.

Wilder wanted to write a play about the positive in man in the midst of the abysmal events of 1939. The first act was finished in six weeks in early 1940, but by the autumn, he was beset by doubts. In his journal he writes of the “most ambitious subject I have ever approached” and “am I actually interested in — the struggles of the race and its survival?”¹

**“Your first act is noble. . .
Your second act seemed to me a
comparatively faulty and confused
re-statement of theme. . .
The third act. . . seemed to me
utterly trivial.”**

Producer Jed Harris in a letter to Thornton Wilder after reading *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Jan. 27, 1942

He also faced other difficulties, one being simplicity, as passages he wrote seemed to digress from the forward drive of the play. Another challenge was his own perseverance. The two years prior had been spent in a mix of activities and evasive reading; now he found it difficult to concentrate on a single effort. The third

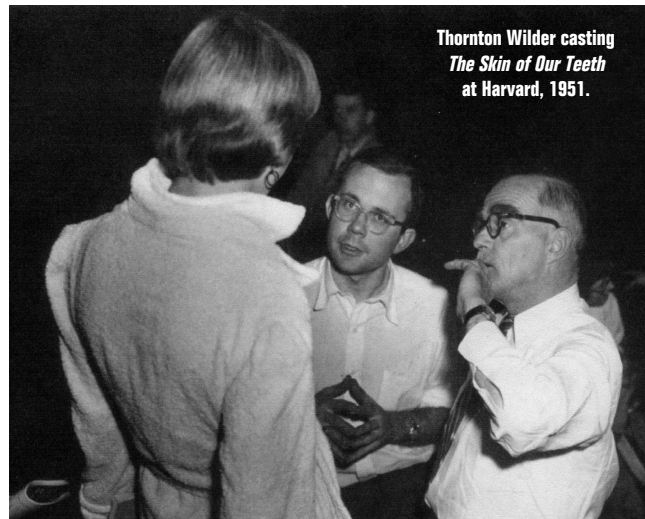


Photo by Alan Gass

problem was “inspiration without emotion.”² At these times he would break down in tears and the material would become distorted and “pathetic.” On New Year’s Day 1942, he completed the play to his satisfaction.

Wilder gave the play to Michael Myerberg, a novice producer who had been a public relations representative for conductor Leopold Stokowski. Myerberg chose the young Elia Kazan to direct and the play was cast in winter, 1942. After Helen Hayes turned down the role, Tallulah Bankhead signed on to play Sabina. Frederic March played Mr. Antrobus and his wife Florence Eldridge was cast as Mrs. Antrobus. Frances Heflin played the role of Gladys, Florence Reed was the Fortune Teller and Montgomery Clift played Henry. The tempestuous Miss Bankhead lived up to her reputation, creating turmoil and stirring up the pot. With her drink, pills and entourage of young men, Thornton thought her “unforgivable.”³ The play opened on Broadway November 18, 1942 to mostly rave reviews and Tallulah’s performance was hailed. After this long process, Thornton Wilder was rewarded with his third Pulitzer in 1943. ■

ACTIVITIES

I. TIMELINE

Thornton Wilder uses an unrealistic time-frame for the events of the play by having one family live through a period spanning more than 5000 years.

- Find the events chronicled.
 - Which of these events are historical?
 - Which ones are mythical?
 - How much time passes between these events in “real time”?
 - How do the social and political ideas evolve from event to event?
 - Can you find links between the events that could show cause and effect?
-
- Some of Wilder’s events could represent more than one time in history.
-
- See how many you can place in each category, i.e. eras, conflicts, natural disasters, etc.
 - What current world events do you think are similar to situations in the play?
 - How do the actions of the Antrobus family contribute to their moral growth?
 - Is there anything you could learn from them and apply to your own life?

List five ways that you could apply the lessons of the play to situations that occur in your life.

These exercises relate to Colorado Model Content Standards for History #1. Students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships.

II. PROBLEM SOLVING

For discussion.

- What are the problems that must be solved in the play?
 - What obstacles do the characters have to get over to solve them?
 - What types of attitudes do the characters possess?
 - How do their attitudes help or hinder them?
 - How would you view a situation if you were an optimist?
 - How would you view the same situation as a pessimist?
-
- Tell or write a story where a difficult situation is handled with optimism.
 - Retell or rewrite the story with a pessimistic outlook.
 - Which is the stronger? Why?
-
- Write a story about endurance.
 - What is the level of endurance of the protagonist?
 - Of the antagonist?
 - How is their endurance tested within the story?

These exercises contribute to Colorado Model Content Standard #4 for Reading and Writing. Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing. For Theatre #1. Students develop interpersonal skills and problem-solving capabilities through group interaction and artistic collaboration.

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ACTIVITIES

C O N T I N U E D

III. MAKING PROGRESS

- Make a list of all of the things that are invented or discovered in the play.
- How does the discovery of one effect the discovery of another?
- What is the playwright saying through the introduction of these discoveries?
- Who or what influences Mr. Antrobus?
- What do you think is important to him?
- To his wife?
- To his family?
- How do they change from beginning to the end of the play?
- Who has changed the most? How have they changed and why?
- What type of play is *The Skin of Our Teeth*? (drama, comedy, realism, absurd, poetic prose, etc.)
- What makes it so?
- What is the universal theme of the play?

Colorado Model Content Standard for Theatre #5. Students analyze and assess the characteristics, merits, and meanings of traditional and modern forms of dramatic expression.

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