

Afterword



Overview

Thornton Wilder began writing *The Skin of Our Teeth* (then titled *The Ends of the Worlds*) on June 24, 1940, at the MacDowell Colony, the artists and writers retreat in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where *Our Town* had been born three years earlier. He was searching for a way to bear witness to a world increasingly at war, and he had been inspired, in part, by the way James Joyce had presented “ancient man as an ever-present double to modern man” in *Finnegans Wake*. Wilder coupled this note in his journal entry of July 6, 1940, with these quasi-hopeful words: “During the last year subject after subject presented itself and crumbled away in my hands. Can this one hold out?” Hold out it did, although not without many discouraging and—appropriately for the property—dramatic moments.

During a nearly three-month stay that fall at the Château Frontenac in Quebec, a still deeper retreat from places where people knew him, Wilder completed much of the work on the first two acts. Significantly, he was now living among people who

were officially at war. On November 13, he wrote his dramatic agent: "Scarcely dare talk about it; looks to me like the play's prodigious. First two acts done. Not a sight or sound out of me until I return with the finished script, maybe as soon as Dec. 10."

He did not meet his deadline. On December 14, about to leave Quebec, Wilder wrote Robert Ardrey, a fellow playwright and his former student, "The new play is not finished yet after all. Heigh-ho. I swear I don't know what I've got here. I just keep trying to bring into shape—it a fine idea, but very hard to do."

In the end, Act III, the war act, which Wilder found the most difficult to write, was not ready for Jed Harris, his director of choice, until January 1, 1942, a year later. Many honorable deeds and distractions came between Wilder and his goal of completing the play, among them a three-month trip on a cultural goodwill mission to Latin America for the Department of State, a summer term teaching a double course load at the University of Chicago, and an autumn trip to London as U.S. delegate to an international PEN conference. This last assignment offered him an opportunity to view actual war damage and to talk with courageous civilians, soldiers, and fighter and bomber pilots in England and Scotland. These encounters helped Wilder to begin to conceive for the end of the play a note about the survival of the human race that would be hopeful but not "trite" or "evasive," words he used at the time. His search for the right words continued during the play's rehearsal period until, as a last touch, he added George Antrobus's final speech in the play: "We've come a long ways. We've learned. We're learning. . . ."

Several years later, in a 1948 letter to his brother, Amos, Wilder recalled this creative challenge:

I've always assumed a very slow curve of civilization. But I always affirm too that my toleration of humanity's failings is more affirmative than most "optimists." When I first

wrote *Skin of Our Teeth* it lacked that motto-humanity-climbing-upward speeches of Mr. Antrobus at the end. I assumed that they were omnipresent in the play and didn't have to be stated. I assumed that they were self-evident,—that's how highly I believed in mankind. But more and more of the early readers found the play "defeatist." So I wrote in the moral and crossed the t's and i's.

It was Wilder's expectation that Jed Harris, who had produced and directed *Our Town*, would play the same roles for *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Harris turned him down, however. Wilder then offered the producer's role to Michael Myerberg, an entertainment promoter who had worked as Leopold Stokowski's manager. Wilder had known Myerberg casually for about five years, and did not consider his lack of Broadway experience a disadvantage. On the contrary, he made this unusual choice because he had no faith that, with the exception of the legendary Harris, any experienced Broadway producer could do justice to a drama that Wilder predicted to his attorney would "probably involve a complicated history." He was right.

Exuding just the fresh energy that Wilder was counting on, Myerberg orchestrated a production that included the exciting young director, Elia Kazan, and a galaxy of distinguished actors: Fredric March and Florence Eldridge as Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus; Montgomery Clift and Frances Heflin as Henry and Gladys; Florence Reed as the Fortune Teller; and the already legendary Talulah Bankhead as Sabina. But almost immediately there were complications. Myerberg's imperiousness, unpredictable moods, and indifference in handling budgets and people combined with Bankhead's volatile temperament to make life unusually hellish for the cast as well as the author and his representatives.

Bad feeling backstage did not at first compromise the quality of the production. *Skin* played to mostly favorable press and

many a sold-out house in its four-week, four-city tryout period in New Haven, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Not that people necessarily understood a play that an out-of-town *Variety* story reported “bewilders, bemuses and befuddles while it amuses.” Had the reporter added the word “upsets” to the list, he would have scooped Wilder’s own assessment, written to his family soon after rehearsals had begun: “I think it’s a very good play, but it’s so daringly written as to theatre-mood that it may well puzzle and upset instead of amuse and move.”

And upset it did. As long as there is Broadway lore, it will likely include stories of taxis lining up early to snag the fares of people fleeing *The Skin of Our Teeth* at the end of Act I or II, some even jamming their fists through the play’s posters along the way. According to Richard Maney, the play’s publicist, fifteen people walked out early at the world premiere in New Haven’s Shubert Theater on October 15, 1942. Hoping that knowledge might stem the tide, Myerberg ordered Maney to write a synopsis of the play to insert in the playbill. These words greeted the audience at the second performance:

The Skin of Our Teeth is a comedy about George Antrobus, his wife and two children, and their general utility maid, Lily Sabina, all of Exelsior, New Jersey. George Antrobus is John Doe or George Spelvin or you—the average American at grips with destiny, sometimes sour, sometimes sweet. The Antrobuses have survived fire, flood, pestilence, the seven-year locusts, the ice age, the black pox and the double feature, a dozen wars and as many depressions. They have run many a gamut, are as durable as radiators, and look upon the future with a disarming optimism. Alternately bewitched, befuddled and becalmed, they are the stuff of which heroes are made—heroes and buffoons. They are true offspring of Adam and Eve, victims of all the ills that flesh is heir to. They have survived a

thousand calamities by the skin of their teeth, and Mr. Wilder’s play is a tribute to their indestructibility.

Out-of-town success is no guarantee of Broadway success, but in the case of *Skin*, which opened on November 18 at the Plymouth Theater in New York, it was. With few exceptions, reviews were strong, some even raves: “A dramatic bombshell”—*Life*; “Theater-going became a rare and electrifying experience”—*New York Herald Tribune*; “Quite sure to prove the supreme novelty of the theater season”—*New York Daily News*. Two especially influential tastemakers put the case this way: “One of the wisest and friskiest comedies written in a long time,” critic Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*. Wilder’s friend, the critic and commentator Alexander Woollcott, called *The Skin of Our Teeth* “the nearest thing to a great play which the American theater has yet produced.” There were critics on the other side of the fence, of course. As a general comment, they found tricks rather than substance. “[It] dolls up its theme rather than dramatizes it,” said *Time*. “It is too overt, too garish, too sensational in the literal sense,” wrote the *Commonweal* reviewer.

At the end of a theatrical day, the box office never lies. Through the first five months of the run, *The Skin of Our Teeth* rarely earned less than \$20,000 a week in ticket sales, all but a sellout. After falling off only a bit (to the \$16,000 to \$18,000 range) in the normally slower theatrical months of March and April, sales jumped up again when the play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in May 1943.

Controversy is always good for box office. Consequently, it did not hurt sales when Henry Morton Robinson and Joseph Campbell, students of James Joyce, ignited a firestorm of debate and comment in the press when they accused Wilder in two articles published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in December 1942 and January 1943, of writing “an Americanized re-

creation, thinly disguised," based on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. The accusers never used the word "plagiarism," but they implied it, and the term appeared in the press. Specious if malicious, the charge was dismissed by authorities at the time and since. Still, it probably cost *The Skin of Our Teeth* the 1943 Drama Critics Award, but not the Pulitzer Prize. At the time, Wilder chose not to respond publicly to the charges, other than to encourage those interested to embark on the daunting task of reading *Finnegans Wake* and deciding for themselves.

Wilder was, in fact, in no position to give serious attention to his accusers even if he had wanted to. Two months before the play went into rehearsal, at age forty-five, he had eagerly entered active duty with Army Air Force Intelligence, turning over the playwright's duties to his agent, his attorney, and his knowledgeable sister, Isabel, a graduate of the Yale School of Drama.

Nevertheless, until the recently promoted Major Wilder departed for overseas duty in North Africa in late May 1943, he found it impossible to avoid all the drama playing out on both sides of the curtain. Through letters, telegrams, occasional visits from various principals, and anguished phone calls, Wilder found himself dragged into the fray surrounding *The Skin of Our Teeth*. He saw the show from beginning to end only twice, once in November just before the New York opening, and again in April 1943.

Had the original cast held on, *Skin* might well have played far longer on Broadway than it did. But by June 1943, backstage tensions had become so intolerable that March, Eldridge, and Bankhead took advantage of clauses in their contracts and left the show. Like a wounded animal, *Skin* (now earning \$10,000 or less weekly at the box office) limped through the always difficult summer months with new faces in key roles. As the production had come to depend on Tallulah Bankhead's star power in the role of Sabina, her departure was all but a death blow.

A play as famous and even infamous as *The Skin of Our Teeth*

could usually count on a successful post-Broadway national tour, and Myerberg planned this for the fall, starting with a two-week engagement in Boston. The 359-performance Broadway run closed on Saturday, September 25, opened in Boston the following Monday and closed after only the first week. Gladys George, the new Sabina, was now out of the part, claiming throat problems. She was replaced by Elizabeth Scott. The box office was terrible. This "sudden eclipse," wrote a *Variety* reporter, "was no surprise to those who have followed the vagaries of the show."

A by-product of *Skin*'s early demise was the earlier-than-anticipated release of the amateur and stock rights and the beginning, in 1944, of *Skin*'s enduring popularity with high school, college, and community drama groups. Nor has the play faded entirely from the professional stages. Since 1980, it has been produced some twenty times in stock and regional theaters around the country. Major productions since the war have included the 1955 revival starring Mary Martin and Helen Hayes and the 1961 ANTA-American Repertory Company revival. Both productions were sent abroad as part of the State Department's cultural programming. (The 1955 *Skin*, directed by Alan Schneider, went to Paris, while the 1961 production played in twenty-four countries in Europe and Latin America.) In 1975, José Quintero directed a production that kicked off the American Bicentennial Theater season project at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington with Elizabeth Ashley as Sabina. *Skin* had its last New York appearance in 1998. The production, by the New York Shakespeare Festival in its Delacorte Theater in Central Park, was directed by Irene Lewis and featured Kristen Johnson as Sabina. In 1945, Laurence Olivier directed the London opening with his wife, Vivien Leigh, as Sabina; no British production is more famous. Finally, not to be forgotten are Wilder's own appearances playing George Antrobus in several summer stock productions after

World War II, including such notable “straw hat” addresses as the Berkshire Festival Playhouse in Stockbridge, the South Shore Players in Cohasset, Massachusetts, and the historic Westport Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut.

There have been several televised versions of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, including a 1952 Pulitzer Prize Playhouse production on which Wilder himself consulted. None is better remembered today than the Globe Theater’s important 1983 PBS “American Playhouse” version. But like a mountain that refuses to be conquered, the play has so far resisted all attempts to be adapted as a major film, opera, or musical. The prospect has attracted the attention of such talents as Leonard Bernstein, Mary Ellen Bute, Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy—and most recently, John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Joe Stein. The story of *Skin* in translation is a different matter. Starting with a performance in German in Zurich’s renowned Schauspielhaus in the spring of 1944, *The Skin of Our Teeth* has been performed in some twenty languages in more than forty countries. As Wilder noted in his influential preface to *Three Plays* (1957), it had a special resonance in post-war Germany, where the first production occurred in the ruins of Darmstadt on March 31, 1946. By November 1949, *Skin* had been performed in both the Eastern and Western Zones 501 times by fifteen companies in thirty German cities. (By the late 1940s, Wilder’s works, including *Skin*, had been banned in the Soviet Union and most Eastern bloc countries, including East Germany, for promoting bourgeois values.) In short, *The Skin of Our Teeth*—so often thought of as especially American because of its eagerness, high jinks, and vision of human capability—is a well-established piece of world theater, although it would also be fair to say that it has been produced less frequently since the end of the Cold War.

The experimental techniques Wilder employed in 1942—the anachronisms, the asides, the interruptions—are now familiar to a twenty-first-century audience raised on modern theater and

the television sitcom. And contemporary critics have squirmed in their seats at Wilder’s proclamations about patriotism and loyalty and what one admirer of the play in 1975 summarized as a perceived tendency toward “excessively abstract, dreamy allegory, populated by stock characters of popular cliché.” Have the novelty of the play and its whimsy grown thin for some theatergoers? Perhaps. But what the record also shows is that because of its theatricality and humor, and the sheer craziness of exploring and producing what is known in the business as a “theatrical bible,” *The Skin of Our Teeth* continues to attract and to hold the attention of actors, audiences, playwrights, and students today, more than sixty years after it opened on Broadway.

—Tappan Wilder
Chevy Chase, Maryland

Readings

During the Writing of the Play

A Letter

Wilder writes a newsy letter, from which this excerpt is taken, to his family from the Château Frontenac.

Sunday, Oct. 20, 1940, 11:10 P.M.

Chateau Frontenac
Quebec, P.Q.

Dear Ones:

The first snow. And a surprise. I’d just—but I’d better tell you the whole afternoon.

After lunch, it being a fine day I thought I’d get out the car, just to keep my hand in. So I drove all around the Ile

d'Orleans, the farms pretty well modernized, but great views of the great river and many yellow-ochre forests. Then I drove to the Falls of Montmorency—one hundred feet higher than Niagara, and a very fine sight. (Coleridge—I think it's Coleridge—"uses" them in a poem in that "Spirit of Man" anthology on your table there.) The water hurtles down creating a wide diversity of effects in lace and mist and rainbows and parsley-sprays and gossamer ladders and climbing serpents. And I had tea at a very nice hotel beside it, now unfortunately closed to residence, called Kent House, because it was the summer house of the Duke of Kent, Father of Queen Victoria, then Governor-General of New France.

Then I got home and went to church to Vespers at St. Matthew's, which on All Soul's Day—November first, as all readers of *Finnegans Wake* must know well—will celebrate its mere 150th anniversary, which must arouse a scornful laugh from the Roman Catholic churches, all fifty of them, nearby. Half the congregation was in uniform, and we prayed for the Royal Family, and sang "God Save the King," and the Rector cast some of those condescending bathetic references to our dear boys in the service which would make a conscientious objector out of a Theodore Roosevelt.

Then I stopped for something to eat in town, knowing the worst, for the food in this city is so dreadful that when I eat anywhere except in this hotel I am indubitably poisoned and belch darkly throughout the night. Then I came home to couch on paper the new suggestions for Act Two that had arrived to me during Vespers—your church-going being a lively incentive to your playwriting, though the *point-de-départ* is left far behind. On my door I found word that a special delivery was waiting for me below. It seemed impossible that you could have already received and replied To my Special, and yet you're the only correspondent whom I told

my address. I thought I had turned in for the night, but just before I went below to claim the letter I looked out of the window at my now cherished view and saw Everything Covered with Snow. Well, the first snow of the year is one of my fêtes, and I had always felt that Quebec, like Litchfield, and Oxford, and, I assume, Prague, mutely *waits* for snow. So I put on my overshoes—packed, remember? at the last moment, and have taken another walk. . . .

A Journal Entry

Wilder writes in his journal about the problems he continues to face in completing Act III, in which he wished to employ a device he first used in his one-act play *Pullman Car Hiawatha* in 1931. He wrote this entry on December 2, 1941, while visiting Alexander Woollcott's retreat on Neshobe Island in Vermont.

Again bogged down and frightened. Last month in New Haven not only did I tighten up Acts One and Two—I think I can say that with the exception of a short passage in Act Two they are finished, and good—but I wrote a "through" Third Act; but it is not right.

The employment of the "Pullman Car Hiawatha" material [in *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, published in the volume *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act* (1931), minutes appear as gossips, hours as philosophers, and years as theologians] is (1) Dragged in indigestibly; (2) Insufficiently related to the surrounding material; (3) An incorrect statement of the central intention of the Act—is *that* intention, by the way, to be "save the cultural tradition?"—and (4) It smacks of the *faux-sublime*.

To go back to first principles: what does one offer the audience as explanation of man's endurance, aim, and

consolation? Hitherto, I had planned here to say that the existence of his children and the inventive activity of his mind keep urging him to continued and better-adjusted survival. In the Third Act I was planning to say that the ideas contained in the great books of his predecessors hang above him in mid-air furnishing him adequate direction and stimulation.

- (1) Do I believe this?
- (2) Have I found the correct theatrical statement for it?
- (3) Is it sufficient climax for the play?

Taking these in turn: (1) I do believe it. I think the only trouble with it is that *there* is the point where the vast majority of writers hitherto would have planted the religious note. It's not so much that I deny that religious note as that it presents itself to me only intermittently and in terms too individualistic to enter the framework of this place.

(2) The statement that the ideas and books of the masters are the motive forces for man's progress is a difficult one to represent theatrically. The drawbacks against the "Pullman Car Hiawatha" treatment are that (a) the Hours-as-Philosophers runs the danger of being a cute fantasy and not a living striking metaphor, and (b) . . . I cannot find citations from the philosophers' works that briefly and succinctly express what I need here.

At all events, I have begun work as usual by excision. Out go the "people who had died in the house"—we have had enough of the common men who preceded our Antrobus. Out also goes, I think, the natural history, though maybe that might be useful, not as giving the arch of the natural world that surrounds us, but as making more easy the identification of Stars and Hours with

Philosophers and Artists. Out go the allusions to the various calendars—partly because it is so difficult to choose *one day* to cite. Into the earlier part of the Act should go, if I can keep Hours-Philosophers, much more reference to Mr. Antrobus's books.

Couldn't the quarrel between Henry and his father hang on Henry's contempt for the books that had led his father astray?

A Country at War

After returning from a monthlong trip to England in the fall of 1941, which took him from London to Bristol and Glasgow, Wilder spoke of his impressions on NBC Radio and wrote them in an article entitled "After a Visit to England" in *The Yale Review*, from which this excerpt is taken.

At times I felt like some passerby who has strayed by accident upon a stage where a play is in progress. Each of the highly dramatic episodes of the action was clear to me, but seemed to be misunderstood by the performers. Suddenly, however, I realized that I was a late arrival; that earlier in the play there had been a scene exhibiting these characters in some situation of a gravity so profound that there was no need to allude to it afterward; that allusion could only be inadequate, so it could only be disruptive. Back had flowed the spirit of the daily life, and only with close attention could the newcomer surprise some exchange between them of glance or gesture that recalled the vows they had taken and the agony they had shared. . . .

To overemphasize a few of such difficulties—common enough to other countries even when there is no confusion of crisis to complicate them—would be an injustice to the total magnificent achievement of civilian defense in

Britain under the unheard-of conditions of the air raids. Yet to pass them over in silence would be to overlook an important new element in current attitudes. The principal thing in the mental temper of Britain is the unity and resolution exemplified in the self-imposed restraint and the co-operation of all citizens in the emergency. In a factory which produces certain delicate instruments for airplanes the workers had denied themselves three week-ends off in succession. Great was the anticipation for the recess finally accorded them. On the Friday before it they were called together at the noon hour and addressed by two air pilots each of whom had made over thirty flights into enemy territory. The airmen explained to them the urgency of the demand for the several hundred instruments that would be lost through the closing of the factory and asked them to remain at their tasks. The workers remained. On an historic estate in Sussex, a lady from Mayfair had herself milked the cow, churned the butter, and, with the help of one friend, cooked the dinner for six.

The enemy had first shown what a total war can be—every citizen bent to an activity directed against every citizen in the enemy country. Britain is making it clear that what the Germans have effected, first with rhetorical oratory, and finally with threats and coercion, a democracy can achieve with composure and free will.

Seeing His Play

After seeing *Skin* in November 1942, shortly before it opened in New York, Wilder, now an Air Force Intelligence officer, sent notes, through his dramatic agent, Harold Freedman, on the performance to Michael Myerberg (producer), Elia ("Gadgett") Kazan (director), and his sister, Isabel (his representative). His

report, from which this excerpt is taken, was mailed from Spokane, Washington, November 24, 1942.

Notes on the performance of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, (Harold, will you ask a secretary to type these out and provide copies for Michael, Gadgett and my sister, as I cannot take the time to write them separately.)

First place,—many thanks to all concerned for all the fine things about the performance. The following is a list of passages that I feel would be bettered, but that doesn't mean that I am not overwhelmingly grateful for what is already there.

For me the only real flaw in the present production is the hurry-hurry-hurry. The lack of variation in pace, in the First Act, from the time of Mr. Antrobus's entrance. This uniform onward rush prevents both the serious aspect of the play emerging (so necessary as preparation for the change of tone in Act III) and prevents a real sense of excitement in the possibility of danger before the oncoming ice.

Examples: The monotonous busy-busyness of the stage pace prevents any attention being given to Mrs. Antrobus' "No, they've been as good as gold—haven't had to raise my voice once"; to the interchange between Mr. and Mrs. A while he is playing with the animals. (Keep that mammoth quiet in many places,—he's the kind that will get worse and worse.) That conversation should have ominous weight, real pauses, and much violence at its climax—"The Sun's growing cold. What can I do about that?"

Also give Mr. A. a real moment with his—"Yes, any booby can play it with it now, etc." inward, withdrawn, brooding.

The "Abel—my son—my son—Abel"—I beg you to go back to my original stage direction—she rises, sits

again, rises . . . give the actors time to extract the maximum legitimate effect from these things.

Henry comes down the stairs with chairs or whatever it is and causes distraction at a vital moment.

Freddie does both his moment of despair in the chair and his Build up the Fire superbly, but it would be still stronger if the momentum about him had not been so rattat-tat uniform. Urge him to prepare the moments with even longer pauses, if he likes.

As Arthur Hopkins [a producer and director who admired the play and knew Wilder] said at the end of the First Act—"It's as though they had no faith in the play"—galloping as though the most they could hope for was the collection of a few laughs.

Controversy: The Playwright Finally Speaks

When Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson leveled their charges, Wilder was an acknowledged authority on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and his expertise in deciphering it was widely known in literary circles. Here in its entirety is the letter he wrote but did not send to the editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature* at the time of the first article, believing his rebuttal would only lead to further accusations and debate. The letter was found in Wilder's legal files and first published in 1999.

To the Editor of the Saturday Review of Literature.

Dear Sir:

Many thanks for your telephone call and your request that I comment upon the article in the Review pointing out some real and some imagined resemblances between my play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and James Joyce's novel, *Finnegans Wake*.

At the time I was absorbed in deciphering Joyce's novel the idea came to me that one aspect of it might be expressed in drama: the method of representing mankind's long history through superimposing different epochs of time simultaneously. I even made sketches employing Joyce's characters and locale, but soon abandoned the project. The slight element of plot in the novel is so dimly glimpsed amid the distortions of nightmare and the polyglot distortions of language that any possibility of dramatization is out of the question. The notion of a play about mankind and the family viewed through several simultaneous layers of time, however, persisted and began to surround itself with many inventions of my own. If one subject is man and the family considered historically, the element of myth inevitably presents itself. It is not necessary to go to Joyce's novel to find the motive of Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Lilith and Noah.

From Joyce, however, I received the idea of presenting ancient man as an ever present double to modern man. The four fundamental aspects of *Finnegans Wake* were not to my purpose and are not present in my play. Joyce's novel is primarily a study of Original Sin and the role it plays in the life of the conscience. Its recurrent motto is St. Augustine's "*O felix culpa!*" Nor could I use its secondary subject, the illustration of Vico's theory of the cyclic seasonal repetitions of human culture. Nor could I find any place for its primary literary intention, the extraordinary means Joyce found for representing the thoughts of the mind while asleep, the famous "night-language." Nor could I employ his secondary literary intention, the technical tours-de-force whereby through puns and slips of the tongue he was able to represent several layers of mental activity going on at the same time and often contradictory to one another. If I had been able to transfer to the stage several or any one of these four basic aspects of the book, wherein its greatness

lies, I would have done it and would have gladly published the obligation at every step of the way.

The germ of my play, once started, began to collect about it many aspects which had nothing to do with Joyce. It fixed its thoughts on the War and the situation of the eternal family under successive catastrophes. It grouped to find a way to express dramatically the thought that the great "unread" classics furnish daily support and stimulation even to people who do not read them. But principally the play moved into its own independent existence through its insistence on being theatre, and theatre to such an extent that content was continually in danger of being overwhelmed by sheer theatrical contrivances. I can think of no novel in all literature that is farther removed from theatre than *Finnegans Wake*.

The writers of the article in the *Review* list a long series of resemblances. Only those who have pored over the novel can realize how patiently the authors must have searched through that amorphous dream texture to assemble them and how surprising it is to find them confronting the concrete theatrical material they are supposed to parallel. Maggie Earwicker's letter buried in the rubbish heap behind her house becomes the letter of proud and indignant self-justification that Maggie Antrobus throws into the sea over the heads of the audience? Well, all the Margarets in the world can be presumed to have written letters that were important to them. In the most wonderful chapter in the novel, Anna Livia Plurabelle, river and woman, looks for a match to search for some peat to warm her husband's supper. The authors of the article quote this passage and tell your readers that it resembles Mrs. Antrobus and Sabina asking for fuel to warm the household against the approaching glacier. By such devices your authors could derive "Junior Miss" from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The ant-like industry of pedants, collecting isolated fragments, has mistaken the nature of literary influence since the first critics

arose to regard books as a branch of merchandise instead of as expressions of energy.

Should a group of men of letters represent to me that the dependence of my play on Joyce's novel is so close as to justify adding a note of acknowledgment to the theatre program, I would willingly accede to their opinion. I have placed such a note twice before—once in *The Woman of Andros*, though Terence's riotous farce had been changed into a reflective tragedy, and once in *The Merchant of Yonkers*, though its principal personage did not appear in the Austrian prototype at all. The first of the credentials of my advisers in this matter, however, would be that they had decoded all six hundred pages of Joyce's crowded and mighty novel and realized how great were its differences from my three act comedy.

Sincerely yours,
Thornton Wilder

Washington, D.C.
December 17, 1942

More on Joyce

Why did Wilder admire Joyce and *Finnegans Wake* so deeply? These excerpts from a talk given at a meeting of the James Joyce Society in New York on February 2, 1954, offer clues. His subject was "Joyce and the Modern Novel."

First we would seek for our place in myths. Myths are the dreaming soul of the race, telling its story. Now, the dreaming soul of the race has told its story for centuries and centuries and centuries, and there have been billions of stories. They're still telling them. Every novel for sale in a railroad station is the dreaming soul of the human race

telling its story. But the myths are the survival of the fittest of the billions of stories most of which have been forgotten. No chance survival there. The retelling of them on every hand occurs because they whisper a validation—they isolate and confer a significance—Prometheus, Cassandra, Oedipus, Don Quixote, Faust.

Joyce not only drew on myth; he used history as though it were myth. He made a hero who was Everyman, and to describe him to us he played on the vast repertory of myth and history as upon a clavier. . . .

The hero of *Finnegans Wake* is the most “generalized” character in all literature, but he is also completely a unique and individualized person. We overhear and oversee him in bed above his tavern at the edge of Dublin. His conscience is trying him for some obscure misdemeanors committed—or perhaps only partially envisaged—during the day. He is in disgrace. He identifies himself with Lucifer fallen from heaven, Adam ejected from Paradise, Napoleon defeated at Waterloo, Finnegan of the old ballot laid out for his wake. It is the Book of Falls, and as the night advances he plunges deeper and relives all the crimes of which man is capable; he stands trial (the very constellations of the night sky are sitting in judgment). He submits his defense and extenuation. Finally dawn arrives; the sun climbs through the transom of the Earwickers’ bedroom. The last chapter is a wonderful sunburst of Handelian rhetoric; all the resurrection myths of the world are recalled along with Pears’ soap advertisements and the passing trains and the milkman. The phoenix is reborn; Everyman re-awakes.

Wilder on Drama More Generally

Wilder completed the most extended statement of his views on the nature of drama, “Some Thoughts on Playwriting,” just as he

began writing *The Skin of Our Teeth*. (The statement was first published in 1941.) These two excerpts focus on “acting” and “pretense” in drama, for which *Skin* is a laboratory specimen.

[Fundamental Conditions]

Four fundamental conditions of the drama separate it from the other arts. Each of these conditions has its advantages and disadvantages, each requires a particular aptitude from the dramatist, and from each there are a number of instructive consequences to be derived. These conditions are:

- I. The theater is an art which reposes upon the work of many collaborators;
- II. It is addressed to the group-mind;
- III. It is based upon a pretense and its very nature calls out a multiplication of pretenses;
- IV. Its action takes place in a perpetual present time. . .

[The Actor As the Dramatist’s Chief Collaborator]

The actor’s gift is a combination of three separate faculties or endowments. Their presence to a high degree in any one person is extremely rare, although the ambition to possess them is common. Those who rise to the height of the profession represent a selection and a struggle for survival in one of the most difficult and cruel of the artistic activities. The three endowments that compose the gift are observation, imagination, and physical coordination:

1. An observant and analyzing eye for all modes of behavior about us, for dress and manner, and for

the signs of thought and emotion in oneself and in others.

2. The strength of imagination and memory whereby the actor may, at the indication in the author's text, explore his store of observations and represent the details of appearance and the intensity of the emotions—joy, fear, surprise, grief, love, and hatred—and through imagination extend them to intenser degrees and to differing characterizations.
3. A physical coordination whereby the force of these inner realizations may be communicated to voice, face, and body.

An actor must *know* the appearances and the mental states; he must *apply* his knowledge to the rôle; and he must physically *express* his knowledge. Moreover, his concentration must be so great that he can effect this representation under conditions of peculiar difficulty—in abrupt transition from the non-imaginative conditions behind the stage; and in the presence of fellow actors who may be momentarily destroying the reality of the action.

A dramatist prepares the characterization of his personages in such a way that it will take advantage of the actor's gift.

Characterization in a novel is presented by the author's dogmatic assertion that the personage was such, and by an analysis of the personage with generally an account of his or her past. Since in the drama this is replaced by the actual presence of the personage before us and since there is no occasion for the intervening all-knowing author to instruct us as to his or her inner nature, a far greater share is given in a play to (1) highly characteristic utterances and (2) concrete occasions in which the character defines itself under action and (3) a conscious preparation of the text

whereby the actor may build upon the suggestions in the rôle according to his own abilities.

Characterization in a play is like a blank check which the dramatist accords to the actor for him to fill in—not entirely blank, for a number of indications of individuality are already there, but to a far less definite and absolute degree than in the novel.

The dramatist's principal interest being the movement of the story, he is willing to resign the more detailed aspects of characterization to the actor and is often rewarded beyond his expectation.

The sleepwalking scene from *Macbeth* is a highly compressed selection of words whereby despair and remorse rise to the surface of indirect confession. It is to be assumed that had Shakespeare lived to see what the genius of Sarah Siddons could pour into the scene from that combination of observation, self-knowledge, imagination, and representational skill, even he might have exclaimed, "I never knew I wrote so well!"

[The Theater As Pretense]

It lives by conventions: a convention is an agreed-upon falsehood, a permitted lie.

Illustrations: Consider at the first performance of the *Medea*, the passage where Medea meditates the murder of her children. An anecdote from antiquity tells us that the audience was so moved by this passage that considerable disturbance took place.

The following conventions were involved:

1. Medea was played by a man.
2. He wore a large mask on his face. In the lip of the mask was an acoustical device for projecting the

voice. On his feet he wore shoes with soles and heels half a foot high.

3. His costume was so designed that it conveyed to the audience, by convention: woman of royal birth and Oriental origin.
4. The passage was in metric speech. All poetry is an "agreed-upon falsehood" in regard to speech.
5. The lines were sung in a kind of recitative. All opera involves this "permitted lie" in regard to speech.

Modern taste would say that the passage would convey much greater pathos if a woman "like Medea" had delivered it—with an uncovered face that exhibited all the emotions she was undergoing. For the Greeks, however, there was no pretense that Medea was on the stage. The mask, the costume, the mode of declamation were a series of signs which the spectator interpreted and reassembled in his own mind. Medea was being re-created within the imagination of each of the spectators.

The history of the theater shows us that in its greatest ages the stage employed the greatest number of conventions. The stage is fundamental pretense and it thrives on the acceptance of that fact and in the multiplication of additional pretenses. When it tries to assert that the personages in the action "really are," really inhabit such-and-such rooms, really suffer such-and-such emotions, it loses rather than gains credibility. The modern world is inclined to laugh condescendingly at the fact that in the plays of Racine and Corneille the gods and heroes of antiquity were dressed like the courtiers under Louis XIV; that in the Elizabethan Age scenery was replaced by placards notifying the audience of the location; and that a whip in the hand and a jogging motion of the body indicated that a man was on horseback in the Chinese theater; these

devices did not spring from naïveté, however, but from the vitality of the public imagination in those days and from an instinctive feeling as to where the essential and where the inessential lay in drama.

The convention has two functions:

1. It provokes the collaborative activity of the spectator's imagination; and
2. It raises the action from the specific to the general.

This second aspect is of even greater importance than the first.

If Juliet is represented as a girl "very like Juliet"—it was not merely a deference to contemporary prejudices that assigned this rôle to a boy in the Elizabethan Age—moving about in a "real" house with marble staircases, rugs, lamps, and furniture, the impression is irresistibly conveyed that these events happened to this one girl, in one place, at one moment in time. When the play is staged as Shakespeare intended it, the bareness of the stage releases the events from the particular and the experience of Juliet partakes of that of all girls in love, in every time, place, and language.

The stage continually strains to tell this generalized truth and it is the element of pretense that reinforces it. Out of the lie, the pretense, of the theater proceeds a truth more compelling than the novel can attain, for the novel by its own laws is constrained to tell of an action that "once happened"—"once upon a time."