

Foreword



I took my second trip to the MacDowell Colony for artists in 1989. Two hours, and a world away, outside of Boston, nestled in time-locked rural roads, stands Peterborough, New Hampshire. Those of us who are invited to MacDowell remember the hills and deep forests with gratitude, but we remember the small clustered cottages that house writing desks facing the unpeopled woods with love.

My second invitation to write among the painters and composers and the poets and fiction writers meant two months of solitude and solicitude from the colonists and administrators. On the drive to the colony on the back roads of New Hampshire, I envisioned unpacking my boxes in my cottage, spreading out my computer and my books, and sitting down to write the play on domestic violence, *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, upon which I had spent months of research and preparation.

—Until I actually went to my cottage, that is. The first thing colonists do, when they are alone in their cottage, is read the “tombstones” on the wall: wooden tablets that bear the signatures of all the artists who have spent time pacing the cottage

floor. As I traced the names back in time, I saw his signature: Thornton Wilder.

In a fever of excitement, I sat down on my cot and gave myself a pep talk: Vogel, you'd better dig a little deeper this time: you're in *his* cottage. In a night, I scrapped the plans for the play I'd been working on and started page one of another play, *The Baltimore Waltz*. Three weeks later, I emerged, blinking in the sunlight, with a first draft.

For an American dramatist, all roads lead back to Thornton Wilder. Time and again, I return to his scripts and grapple with the problems he tackled—so, it seems, effortlessly—in the unwieldy theatrical apparatus. How do we, when we enter the theater, arrest time and make this art, made of actors and audience, the weight of scenery, flesh and face paint, melt into something fragile? How can we make the material mess of it all—rehearsals, tech, and opening night—disappear into spirit?

The remarkable thing is how we forget, again and again. We forget Wilder's vision and voice; in our memory we assign his works to a nostalgic theater of our youth, encountered first in high school, in community theater, in assigned work judged to be inoffensive enough to constitute the canon for young readers. It's as if he were the theatrical equivalent of castor oil and the honey used to coat the medicinal taste: literature that is good for our moral constitution dredged in sentiment. And then we encounter him on stage as he is and will remain through the ages: tough-minded, exacting, facing the darkness in human existence without apology.

The question I want to face, as prefatory remarks to this edition of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, is why we relegate one of our most remarkable and enduring dramatists to such a place in memory. Because to read him again, whether it be *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, or his short plays—*The Long Christmas Dinner*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, or *The Happy Journey to Tren-*

ton and Camden—is to be astonished. I am astonished each time I read him, at the force of his work, at the subtle blend of humor and pathos, and his masterful balancing act of abstraction and empathy. I remember anew how much I owe to him, and see in his work the roots or parallels of so many theatrical forebears and influences on my own work: Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Lanford Wilson, and John Guare.

At one level, the forgetting of Wilder's impact is almost Oedipal—a rejection of the playwright who has given us our American vocabulary, who forged a synthesis of theatrical traditions from the past, from Europe, from Asia—with an American theater taken over by a viral infection of “realism” (an infection from which we've never recovered). By tearing down the walls of the box set, he concentrated our focus on the essential with an almost ruthless insistence that we pay attention to the story of the drama unfolding, rather than the props and decoration, the fussy business of stage machinery inflicted on an audience by the boulevard theater of Broadway.

There is an irony in forgetting the influence of Thornton Wilder. The man who generously paid tribute to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* wrote: “I should be very happy if, in the future, some author should feel similarly indebted to any work of mine. Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs.” He suffered the charge of plagiarism leveled against *The Skin of Our Teeth*, written in the spirit of tribute to Joyce's work. This spurious charge, brought by Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson in the two articles they published in late 1942 and early 1943, may well have cost him the Nobel Prize. Of all his contributions to us, Wilder's belief that every new work is in fact a response to the writers who came before, a dialogue between two writers separated in space and time, and not the narcissistic “rip-off” of the imitative, may well

be his most important generosity. Wilder may have cast himself in the raiment of others, freely taking from a vast theatrical hope chest, but he always stitched together the old cloth with a new vision and a sense of gratitude.

I have found, in the last three years as I have revisited him on the page, a realization that he was the writer I have borrowed from, not second hand, but third hand—because his work has so imbued the works of writers who have followed him. Wilder has indeed led the torch race, and we remember the recent runner but forget the lead athlete who started the race. There, in *Our Town*, is the bold audience address that I attributed to Tennessee Williams. There, in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, is the collapsing fragile box set exposing the family to the world that I remember in *Death of a Salesman*. There, also in *Skin*, is the nuclear family leaping across centuries and eras that I remember vividly in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*.

We may also forget Thornton Wilder because he is the last private writer of the twentieth century. After him, any writer of such stature has suffered the glare of celebrity in a culture that consumes us, rather than us consuming culture. Do we remember *Glass Menagerie* more perhaps, because it belongs to the obsessive cult of personality in which the work itself becomes digested by a pop-psych analysis of the writer, Williams? Wilder wrote elegantly about Emily Dickinson, who, while in seclusion, nonetheless embraced the world in her poetry. He managed to draw a parallel veil himself around his own life and was the last writer not subjected to the analytic couch of theater critics. How fascinating that his two towering works, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, take place in the two locations in American life where there is neither privacy nor acceptance of deviance from the norm—the small town or the suburban tract—places where “almost everybody in the world gets married—you know what I mean? In our town there aren’t hardly any exceptions.” As a persona in the theater, Wilder successfully evaded the glare of cultural consumption

by creating the role of Stage Manager, the character apart from the play-world, the outsider who manipulates the stage, but is not himself captured by the frame of the play-world itself.

Of all his innovations, we are most indebted to the way Wilder transformed the passage of time on stage—an innovation most often attributed to Samuel Beckett a decade later. Wilder wrested theater out of the apocalyptic sense of catastrophe, the ticking of the bomb due to explode in an Aristotelian plot-driven play-world, that had driven all Western drama since the Elizabethans. Instead, in *Our Town* he managed to freeze time, to stop plot, in ways familiar to the Japanese theater and the medieval cycle plays: by staging all moments of time simultaneously so that our awareness of the fragility of time is captured with a delicacy unknown to the American stage of the time. Take, for example, the Stage Manager’s introduction of Joe Crowell, the eleven-year-old paperboy in *Our Town*: “Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. Joe was awful bright—graduated from high school here, head of his class. So he got a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech. . . . Goin’ to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France.—All that education for nothing.”

The Skin of Our Teeth was written in the midst of apocalypse, about apocalypse, and here Wilder once again renovates our sense of theatrical time by borrowing a trick from the Viennese playwright Arthur Schnitzler. In order to stop the explosion of the world, he uses a plot structure similar to Schnitzler’s *La Ronde*: a pattern plot that creates a cycle. A pattern plot is simply the same act occurring again and again—so that the more furiously our characters run in place, the deeper the rut of stasis. He creates, in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, a theatrical treadmill of entrapment for the Antrobus family, facing the end of time again and again and again, until we realize that the human race is perpetually caught in crises, but also perpetually surviving. The effect of stasis is created by running furiously in the same place, until we

end up where we began (the plot form of *The Skin of Our Teeth* would become favored by the French Absurdist, in plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Rhinoceros*).

The Skin of Our Teeth was a remarkable gift to an America entrenched in catastrophe, a tribute to the trait of human endurance. But Wilder does not give us a sentimental or easy bromide of a play: the gift for destruction and violence is as innate as our spirit to survive. Remarkably, he suggests that violence begins at home, not abroad in the breasts of our enemies, nor outside the family circle. At the time of the greatest threat, our most American dramatist does not shy away from suggesting we cast out the mote in our own eyes.

I've just seen a remarkable production of the play at Trinity Repertory, in 2002, proving that the text is uncannily timely for an American audience. Why, if *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *Our Town* remain as topical as our daily papers, do we relegate Wilder to a slot for community theater? There is one theatrical element that ages quickly, and is the weakest element among the tricks of our trade: the language. Wilder's use of plot structure remains extraordinary, as do the characters in the Antrobus family and his remarkable use of the stage. But the way people talk on stage has changed under the influence of David Mamet and Quentin Tarantino (themselves influenced by a German writer, Franz Kroetz). The fashionable notion of the "real" in speech right now promotes a view that the way we speak is wounded, incapable of eloquence, or of speaking an original thought. American stage speech right now sounds programmed, reflecting an urban poetry of profanity.

Against the scripts of *American Buffalo* or *Pulp Fiction*, *Fargo* or *The Sopranos*, Wilder's characters speak an American English that sounds quaint to our urban ears: "This is his home . . . conveniently situated near a public school, a Methodist church, and a firehouse; it is right handy to an A. and P.," the announcer says in the first act of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. It

sounds quaint, that is, until one drives the back roads of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, or Maine. And probably, the speech sounds "real" when one talks to one's neighbors in any small town, where men still wait until ladies leave the room before spitting out any regionalism not fit for mixed company. Perhaps the reason Wilder is relegated, then, to our community stages is that his characters do not offend the ears of the community.

Regardless of how his characters speak, it is what his characters say that remains timeless. He believed that the most pertinent of voices to listen to in times of crisis are the voices passed down through the ages. If, at this point in time, we may not share Thornton Wilder's confidence in the strength of canonic literature and great minds to pull us through, we can enjoy, in the words of critic Francis Ferguson, Wilder's "marriage of Plato and Groucho Marx."

And now, more than ever, we can appreciate his legacy, his questioning mind and his belief that hope is the most necessary of civic virtues.

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