

## Review: "The Skin of Our Teeth," Girl Friday Productions—Five stars

July 06, 2009

by [Matthew A. Everett](#) | 7/6/09 • "We're not what the books and plays say we are." It's a bitch when the world keeps ending on your wedding anniversary. After seeing [Girl Friday Productions'](#) presentation of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning absurdist comedy "[The Skin of Our Teeth](#)," I think I finally get it. Only adults, talented adults, like these, should be encouraged to take on this script. The myriad of wrong-headed productions in high schools of this play (and "Our Town" for that matter), stumble right out of the gate because, well, kids just don't get it. The world ending? In ice? In flood? In war? As a comedy? How do you wrap your head around that as a kid, when you think you're indestructible, and that nobody you know is ever going to die? Adults can comprehend that, they get that. [Girl Friday Productions](#) gets that. And that's a large part of why this production of "[The Skin of Our Teeth](#)" practically sings (no, it's not a musical, but it does have near operatic heights and depths at times, among all those laughs.) Wilder wrote this in the early 1940s, and each act takes place in a New Jersey somewhat of that time, but also not of that time. It seems to be the home of a typical nuclear family, but in Act I, a dinosaur and a mammoth are household pets, the telegram man is a Neanderthal in a bright red uniform, a stone fire pit sits in the middle of the living room, and the Ice Age is bearing down on the remnants of the human race. In Act II, the old boardwalk in Atlantic City is also the epicenter of a great Biblical flood. In Act III, the remains of the family home in Jersey appear out of the ashes of a just-finished war - which war, who can say, there are so many. "[The Skin of Our Teeth](#)" is a story both modern and ancient, and in that way, timeless. The fact that the war could be any war, that the flood reminded me of Hurricane Katrina as much as Noah's Ark, and that the Ice Age brought to my mind the flipside of the fires of global warming, all without changing so much as a word of the text, says a lot about Wilder's genius. The fact that the end of the human race works as a comedy says still more about the writer. Probably because it's not really the end of the human race. The disasters come, but there are always survivors, and they rebuild, and go on. Just as we all will, no matter what happens. It's only a tragedy if everybody dies. If there are people to carry on, then it's a comedy. And in this case, a very peculiar and funny comedy. Mr. & Mrs. Antrobus (Greek for "human" or "person") (John Middleton & Kirby Bennett) are Mr. & Mrs. Everyman & Woman. There are traces of Adam and Eve, Noah and his wife, even Bill & Hillary Clinton, rattling around in this old married couple (they've been together thousands of years). Two of their many children survived - Henry (Ian Miller) and Gladys (Anna Sundberg). Henry once went by the name of Cain, until a violent and tragic incident involving his late brother Abel. The impact of the loss of a child on the Antrobus parents resurfaces periodically, feeling like another sort of end of the world. Henry's violent nature continues to resurface across the ages. Gladys' sexual curiosity clashes with her lack of worldliness, and causes her parents a different sort of distress. The family maid, Sabina (Alayne Hopkins), makes a number of attempts at climbing the social ladder, all undone one way or another by larger forces stronger than her ambition. But like a cat, she always lands on her feet, and survives. Around these central five, director Benjamin McGovern has gathered a great ensemble of actors each taking on a handful of smaller but pivotal roles (Joel Grothe, Sam Landman, Courtney McLean, George Muellner, Mike Rylander, Julie Weaver, and Amanda Whisner - plus a couple of audience plants for added amusement). Whisner's all-too-knowing Fortune Teller, Landman's world-weary stage manager, and Rylander's caveman telegram guy were among my favorites, but there are lot to choose from. It's so rare that one sees a truly large cast assembled anymore that this production really seems to take on the dimensions of the human race at times (albeit a fairly pale cross-section). The crush of Ice Age refugees, the party of oblivious conventioners laughing in the face of the oncoming deluge, the people each preserving a whiff of the wisdom of the great philosophers, they all populate each incarnation of this world fully. But like Wilder's other classic, "Our Town," "[The Skin of Our Teeth](#)" never lets the audience forget they're watching a play. In fact, it regularly engages the audience, often at the instigation of Hopkins' Sabina, who drops out of character and frequently brings the production to a halt. This is scripted, and quite deliberate. The play's whimsical notion of time and period can be a hurdle for some spectators. So rather than pretend the problem isn't there, the actress playing Sabina, in a play outside the story of the play, acts as a confused audience surrogate. She demands answers and changes and says things none of the characters inside the story could get away with. As the production goes on, other members of the cast become "themselves" or stand-ins for members of the crew. The wires are showing, the curtain is pulled back, there are no walls we can't see through. Yet, despite all this, or perhaps because of it, the world is recognizable as our own, and the story holds together, having just as much resonance for our troubled current times as it did on the cusp of the end of the Great Depression and in the thick of the Second World War, when this play first hit the stage. Another reason why this production works is that it embraces wholeheartedly Wilder's great sense of humor about, and abiding affection for, the human race - and his optimism about its chances at a brighter future. Every time the world ends, every time things fall apart, things also get just a little better the next time around. We learn from some, if not all, of our mistakes. This is a very old story, and a very new one. The fact that we can recognize it as both means perhaps we can learn from it, even as we laugh at the absurdity of it all. Theater "about theater," art about art, often leaves me cold. But that's not what's going on here. "[The Skin of Our Teeth](#)" is getting at the guts of how and why we tell each other stories, even as it spins a oddball tale of its own. The multiple levels of artifice and time and reality are a tricky thing to pull off, as the aftertaste of many a bad production of Thornton Wilder's plays bears witness. [Girl Friday Productions](#), however, gets it right, across the board - direction, design, acting, crew - not a missed step in the bunch. This is the way its done. Audiences, and especially people that do theater (at all levels), should come, laugh, enjoy a good story, (and perhaps take notes). Very Highly Recommended "[The Skin of Our Teeth](#)" from [Girl Friday Productions](#) performs at the Minneapolis Theater Garage (711 West Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis - the corner of Franklin & Lyndale Avenues) through Saturday, July 25th, 2009. Thursdays through Saturdays at 7:30pm, Sundays at 2pm. Special Monday night pay what you can performance on July 13th, 7:30pm. Tickets are \$20, with discounts for students, seniors and groups. For reservations, call 612-729-1071. For more information, visit [www.girlfridayproductions.org](http://www.girlfridayproductions.org) [Matthew A. Everett](#) is a local playwright and three-time recipient of grant support from the Minnesota State Arts Board. Information on Matthew and his plays can be found at [matthewaeverett.com](http://matthewaeverett.com).

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