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Girl Friday sinks 'Teeth' into Wilder

Two years after its successful "Our Town," Girl Friday produces another well-known Thornton Wilder play.

By **GRAYDON ROYCE**, Star Tribune

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It's the steamy July 4th weekend -- so Girl Friday Productions must be putting on a show. The brainchild of producer/actor Kirby Bennett, Girl Friday has surfaced in a biennial cycle to stage a play during the summer lull.

The troupe began in 2005 with "An Empty Plate at the Café du Grand Boeuf." Two years ago, Craig Johnson directed a crisp and intelligent "Our Town" that drew 1,300 people during the theater doldrums, when Minnesotans are not inclined to huddle inside.

This year, Bennett has gone back to playwright Thornton Wilder. His Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Skin of Our Teeth" opened last night at the Minneapolis Theatre Garage.

"Rather than try to maintain a full season,

we're looking at one big project every two years," Bennett said.

It is an ethic that she learned from Joel Sass, now associate artistic director at the Jungle Theater. Bennett was a frequent collaborator when Sass headed Mary Worth Theatre Company. His idea was to do something substantial, rather than do many things insufficiently.

"I admire Joel's aesthetic, both in what he puts on stage and how he operates," Bennett said.

Girl Friday has not achieved nonprofit status, but it has been able to raise a little money, including a grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, by using the Jungle as a fiscal agent. "Skin of Our Teeth" will be the company's largest production to date, with a budget in the \$26,000 range. Two years ago, "Our Town" turned a small profit on a budget of about \$17,000.

The success of "Our Town" heartened Bennett, but it was not the reason she chose "Skin of Our Teeth." She had wanted to produce that show long before "Our Town" came around. In both plays, Wilder puts people who seem rather ordinary into

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extraordinary settings. His work is filled with the spiritual moments of everyday life, the sheer wonder of being alive and the mystery of existence.

Cosmic universe

In "Skin of Our Teeth," which was produced at the Guthrie in 1991, the Antrobus family represents nothing less than the history of humanity. Set in a mid-20th century suburb, the play's action roams from the beginning of time, through a particular flood (Noah, anybody?) during which the family saves the animals, to a wrenching and dislocating war. If Wilder had cracked the door on convention with his earlier "Our Town," here he kicked the door off its hinges, including more extensive use of direct address and a challenge to our approach to prevailing reality.

Those shifts in place and time, the number of characters (and the animals, all those animals!) make the show a rough one to produce. No animals will be harmed, much less put on the stage of the Theatre Garage for this production, but Bennett has put the design in the hands of scenic designer Erica Zaffarano and costumer Kathy Kohl.

Bennett has consciously chosen different

directors each time Girl Friday comes out with its summer show. This year, she went with Ben McGovern, whose day job has him programming the Guthrie Studio.

In terms of cast, however, she has gone back to some favorites. John Middleton and Sam Landman, who did very well in "Our Town," are back, and Alayne Hopkins, who was in "Café," rejoins the effort.

Bennett admits that for each of the company's productions, she has chosen this time of year because the competition isn't so stiff. True enough, but the challenge remains to draw people in when the sun is still shining on those soft summer nights.

"I hope the air conditioning doesn't break down," she said.

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