



Thornton Wilder's eternal optimists

A luminous production of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer-winning 1942 play about a family battling terrible odds holds up beautifully.

By **LISA BROCK**, Special to the Star Tribune

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There's a classic moment early in the first act of "The Skin of Our Teeth" when one of the characters, Sabina, drops her maid role and her perky feather-duster routine, turns to the audience and announces in disgust: "I hate this play and I don't understand a word of it!" That's the precise instant when this Girl Friday Productions' staging of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning play snags its audience and holds them rapt for the next couple of hours.

"The Skin of Our Teeth" opened on Broadway in 1942, against the backdrop of a country that had been catapulted from the Great Depression into World War II. It's a wildly anachronistic ride through the history of humanity, and this production, directed by Benjamin McGovern, reveals all the hard-won optimism with which it is infused.

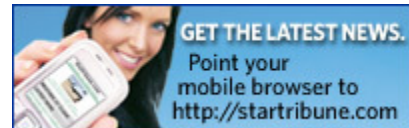
The first act opens at the dawn of the Ice Age, in the Antrobus family home in New Jersey. Early 20th-century furnishings and a chandelier vie with stone-age clubs and cave drawings on Erica Zaffarano's delightfully eclectic set. George Antrobus busily invents the wheel, the multiplication tables and the alphabet, while his wife, two children and Sabina huddle by a fire and worry about the glacier bearing down on their house.

Each of the succeeding acts encompasses another disaster, from a deluge of biblical proportions to a brutal seven-year war. Yet, despite the odds, the Antrobus family, aka the human race, manages to survive and thrive.

Standout performances come from Kirby Bennett as Mrs. Antrobus and Alayne Hopkins as Sabina. Bennett is a powerhouse of fortitude in the face of increasing adversity, while the speech she delivers in the second act, as the First Lady of the Fraternal Order of Mammals, Subdivision Human, is one of the comic highlights of the play. Hopkins comfortably inhabits the mercurial role of Sabina, displaying a fine disdain for the conventions of theater as she routinely drops out of character or comments on the script.

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Sandwiched between these two, John Middleton is nicely modulated as George Antrobus, capturing his character's innate pomposity and dark moods as well as his single-minded focus on the future of the human spirit. Anna Sundberg and Ian Miller are effective as Gladys and Henry, the two Antrobus children. Other strong ensemble performances come from George Muellner, Mike Rylander and Amanda Whisner.

"The Skin of Our Teeth" was written in an anxious time, as the world seemed on the verge of calamity. This luminous production demonstrates that Wilder's play speaks as easily to this generation as it did to his own.

Lisa Brock writes regularly about theater.

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