20240106-all-the-drama-idiots-delight

**Jan Simpson:** [00:00:00] The year is 1936, and the winds of war are racing across Europe. A coalition of leftist groups wins the general election in Spain, kicking off a three year civil war that rattles the entire continent and beyond. Germany's Chancellor Adolf Hitler sends troops into the Rhineland and makes another display of his nation's new imperialist ambitions when it hosts the Olympic Games.

Meanwhile, Italy annexes the African kingdom of Ethiopia as part of its plan to revive the glory of the ancient Roman Empire. And in that year of 1936, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama went to Robert E. Sherwood's Idiot's Delight. A cautionary tale about the insidious nature of nationalism and the [00:01:00] then rising tensions between the fascist regimes of Italy and Nazi Germany and the allied forces determined to defend democracy.

My name is Jan Simpson. Welcome to All the Drama, a podcast about the plays and musicals that have won American theater's highest accolade, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The name Robert E. Sherwood may not be familiar to many theatergoers today, but Sherwood was a creative powerhouse in the first half of the 20th century.

He was a pioneering film critic and a founding member. of the famous Algonquin Roundtable. He won three Pulitzer Prizes for drama, as well as one for biography, and an Oscar for screenwriting. He also created the Voice of America and served as a chief speechwriter for President Roosevelt during World War II.

This literary [00:02:00] renaissance man was born on April 4, 1896 in the New York City suburb of New Rochelle. He was the fourth of the five children born to Arthur Murray Sherwood and Rosina Emmett Sherwood. Arthur was a rich stockbroker, but he had literary interests, and in his days at Harvard, had founded the satirical publication, The Harvard Lampoon.

Rosina was an accomplished illustrator and portrait painter, who was known to her family and friends as Posey. During young Bobby's childhood, the family split their time between a large apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side and a 40 room country house in the Adirondacks that was co designed by Posey and Charles McKim of the leading architectural firm of the day, McKim, Mead White.

The Sherwood household was devoted to [00:03:00] the arts. The parents socialized with artists, writers, musicians, and actors. The children were regularly taken to operas and plays and put on their own productions at home for family and friends. Bobby, who both wrote and illustrated stories almost from the moment he could hold a pen, was just eight when he wrote his first play.

But he was an indifferent student, always on the verge of being expelled from school. Still, Bobby excelled in all kinds of extracurricular activities, including sports. He also served as managing editor of the school paper at Milton Academy, the private boarding school he attended. And he was elected president of both the school's Glee Club and its Literature Club.

He was so popular. that even though he'd almost flunked out, his classmates voted for him to give the valedictorian speech at [00:04:00] graduation. Despite his poor grades, and no doubt because of family connections, Bobby then went on to Harvard. There, like his father before him, he was elected president of the Harvard Lampoon, and he wrote his first full fledged play, a comedy called Barnamor's Rite for the Hasty Pudding Theatrical Society.

But Bobby still paid only passing attention to his classes, and when the U. S. entered World War I, he got swept up in the patriotic excitement and left school to enlist. But he was six feet, six inches tall and weighed only 167 pounds, and so the army rejected him. Undaunted, he tried his luck in Canada, which was less fussy, and accepted him into its famous Black Watch infantry unit.

However, being at the front in World War I turned out to be different [00:05:00] from the glorious adventure Bobby had imagined. He saw scores of fellow soldiers killed, was himself badly gassed twice, and further injured after falling on spikes when attacking a German trench. The experiences turned him into a pacifist.

Meanwhile Back in New York, Arthur suffered a heart attack that made it impossible for him to work. He and Posey had to sell both their homes, and she had to scrounge around for portrait commissions to help make ends meet. That meant their son had to find a way to support himself when he got out of the army.

He appealed to Frank Cronenshelt, a family acquaintance who happened to be the editor of Vanity Fair magazine. And Cronenshelt hired the 23 year old Robert Sherwood as a general gopher. Sherwood shared an office with two other young people on the staff, [00:06:00] Robert Benchley, who was 28, and Dorothy Parker, then 25.

All three shared the same quick witted sense of humor, and they became fast friends. A year later, Sherwood moved to Life Magazine. It wasn't the weekly photo magazine that most of us remember, but was then a humor publication similar to the Harvard Lampoon. He started out as that life's movie critic, one of the first to take the new art form seriously.

But he rose quickly to become its managing editor, and he recruited his old pals, Benchley and Parker, to join him there. They had begun having daily lunches together at the Algonquin Hotel, which was near their offices, and they were soon joined there at a bar. big round table in the center of the room by a rotating roster of similar young wits that [00:07:00] included the New Yorker editor Harold Ross, the playwright Georges Kaufman, the novelist Edna Ferber, the composer Irving Berlin, and the up and coming actresses Tallulah Bankhead.

Ruth Gordon and Helen Hayes. In 1922, now married and looking to pick up some extra cash to supplement his magazine salary, Sherwood began writing subtitles for the silent movies. Although the work paid well, he wanted a more creative outlet, and in 1927, he made his Broadway debut with a play called The Road to Rome.

It told the story of the African general Hannibal's attempts to conquer Rome. It was a comedy, but Sherwood folded in a lot of his pacifist beliefs about what he considered to be the destructiveness of war. For the most part, the critics, many of them Sherwood's friends, praised the play, which [00:08:00] ended up running for a then impressive 392 performances.

And so, when new management took over Life magazine and opted for a less satirical approach, Sherwood left his job there to focus entirely on his own writing. Over the next decade, Sherwood bounced back and forth between Broadway and Hollywood, churning out almost one play a year, then adapting many of them into screenplays, including Waterloo Bridge, a romance about the ill fated love affair between a soldier and a prostitute.

He turned her into a dancer for the 1940 movie starring Robert Taylor and Vivian Leigh. And there was The Petrified Forest, which gave Humphrey Bogart his breakout role as the leader of an outlaw gang named Duke Mantee, a part Bogie also played in the movie version. In 1931, the actors Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine, [00:09:00] longtime family friends, scored a big success in Sherwood's play Reunion in Vienna, and they asked him to write something else for them.

That turned out to be Idiot's Delight. It unfolds over 24 hours in a hotel in the Italian Alps, where a disparate group of travelers anxiously wait for the outbreak of the war that will change each of their lives. They include a pair of British honeymooners, a French pacifist, a Nazi arms dealer and his Russian mistress, and an American entertainer named Harry Vann, who's traveling with a troop of showgirls, and who may have had his own relationship.

with the mysterious Russian woman. Sherwood named Idiot's Delight after a version of the card game Solitaire that is notoriously difficult to win. He said he wrote it in three weeks, but he worried that real life events in Europe might [00:10:00] overtake the play. The Theatre Guild, which had agreed to produce Idiot's Delight, worried about mixing comedy with the drama of a real life approaching war.

Meanwhile, the DuPont Company threatened to sue when it learned that Sherwood's play had called out the company as an evil villain seeking to profit from the war. But, worried that the publicity might call more attention to the play, DuPont quietly let its complaint drop. The Luntz, however, totally loved it.

the play. Alfred Lunt took tap dancing lessons and consulted the vaudevillian Sophie Tucker for advice on how a performer like Harry would handle himself. Lynn Fontaine hired a young émigré to help her perfect a more convincing Russian accent. They loved the play so much that when a storm caused the lights to go out in the theater during the show's Pittsburgh tryouts, [00:11:00] The couple performed while stagehands held candles and flashlights until the generators got going.

The New York opening of Idiot's Delight at the Shubert Theatre on March 24th, 1936 was exciting in a different way. It reportedly drew 19 curtain calls and won generally good reviews. Two months later The play won the Pulitzer. Lunt and Fontaine took advantage of all the praise and booked the show for what turned out to be a sold out tour across the country.

And Sherwood sold the movie rights to MGM for 125, 000, even though the studio worried that the film might be perceived as anti Italian and that some Italy friendly countries might ban it. They also thought a happier ending might help ticket sales. So, MGM got Sherwood to remove all overt references to [00:12:00] fascism and to Italy from the screenplay.

Instead, the setting was moved to an unnamed Central European country, and the Italian dialogue in the play was changed to the international language of Esperanto. An alternative ending was also filmed. According to Sherwood's biographer, MGM paid Sherwood an additional 135, 000 to make those changes. The movie, which starred Clark Gable and Norma Shearer, was finally released in December 1939.

But despite the changes, the film was still banned in Italy, Spain, France, Switzerland, and Estonia. And it might as well have been banned in the U. S. because, stripped of its bite, it was a near total flop here. But other versions haven't done any better. A 1963 TV series called Harry's Girls limped through one season.

In [00:13:00] 1983, an Alan Jay Lerner, Charles Strauss musical adaptation of Idiot's Delight called Dance a Little Closer. Closed on its opening night. And when the director Peter Sellers staged a 50th anniversary revival of the play at the Kennedy Center in 1986, the theater critic Frank Rich dismissed it as a grand hotel knockoff filled with boilerplate anti war sermons.

Sherwood's biographer says that after completing The Idiot's Delight screenplay, Sherwood went through a period of feeling insanely critical and insanely uncertain of himself. He needn't have worried. He would go on to write two more poet's or wedding plays, Ape Lincoln in Illinois in 1939 and There Shall Be No Night in 1941.

And to win a Pulitzer for biography in [00:14:00] 1948 for his book Roosevelt and Hopkins about the relationship between the president and his closest political aid. Sherwood shed his pacifism as fascism spread in the late 30s. In June 1940 he spent twenty thousand dollars of his own money, the equivalent of over four hundred thousand dollars today.

On an ad campaign declaiming stop Hitler now. During World War II, he served as overseas director at the Office of War Information and as a speechwriter for President Roosevelt. After the war, he wrote The Best Years of Our Lives, an award winning screenplay about returning vets struggling to adapt to civilian life.

It won seven Oscars, including Best Picture. Nine years later, on November 14th, 1955, Sherwood [00:15:00] died following a heart attack. He was just 59 years old. (15:11) Idiot's Delight has 20 speaking parts and seldom gets done nowadays. So, I'm particularly delighted that my guest this month is Kirby Bennett, the Artistic Director of Minnesota's Girl Friday Productions, which produced the play.

in 2017. Hello Kirby Bennett, welcome to all the drama.

**Kirby Bennett:** Thanks so much, really great to be here.

**Jan Simpson:** Now I'm going to jump right in and ask you how you first encountered Idiot's Delight, because it's not well known today.

**Kirby Bennett:** That’s true. Well, I'll give you just a tiny bit of context about our company because that helps to answer the question, actually.

We're a very small professional company here in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and we have a history [00:16:00] of focusing on larger scale American plays of exceptional literary merit that are less frequently produced today. So we kind of have a reputation in the community here as the little company that does big plays. We've produced The Skin of our Teeth twice.

**Jan Simpson:** Wow.

**Kirby Bennett:** We produced Camino Real, and we produced Street Scene, quite a successful production of Street Scene, actually, with 26 actors and a dog, so for a small company it was quite an accomplishment.

So that's kind of our background and approach. We've tended to do one larger play every other year. Now, post pandemic, we're, you know, shaking up our approach a little bit, but that's really in the DNA of our background, and we're particularly interested in themes of human resilience and exploring how that thread in [00:17:00] classic works resonates today, so that really put Idiot's Delight right, right in our wheelhouse.

I hadn't been familiar with the title until an actor in town and someone who'd worked with us numerous times, John Middleton, brought the play to our attention. So we read the play in private reading with actors and discussed it and I think we actually, we did that a couple of years before we actually produced the play, but then came back, came back around to it and John ended up playing Harry Van in our production quite tremendously.

So, you know, I'm grateful to him for bringing it to our attention. At that time, then, I also researched some past productions, which you probably know are scattered. There's not a lot to look at, but it was done in Toronto in 2014 with the Soulpepper Theater and then Oregon Shakes did it, I believe, in 2002.

And then, of course, you're [00:18:00] probably aware of the revival at the Kennedy Center in 1986. So we looked at all of the reviews and things for context for that and decided to go ahead with it and produced it at Park Square, which is a larger company in town where we were a theater in residence, essentially.

**Jan Simpson:** Were you familiar with Robert Sherwood before?

**Kirby Bennett:** I was just a bit, not terribly familiar, to tell you the truth, so we did, you know, a little bit of research about him and his background. Of course, he fought in World War I with the Canadians, actually, and that certainly had a big influence on his approach to this play.

I know the plays after, I have not read those texts, so I had a little familiarity, but not a lot. There was quite a bit written about the initial production and the fact that it was a vehicle certainly for Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine, who played the roles of Irene and Harry [00:19:00] initially, and had that successful initial run in 1936.

**Jan Simpson:** Now, this is the question that I ask in each of these episodes. What do you think made the Pulitzer jury go with this play? And they really went with it. They were really unanimous. They were really enthusiastic.

**Kirby Bennett:** Well, it certainly reflects its time well because of being right on the cusp of World War Two.

I think it's reflective of the horrors of World War One, which, as we know, Sherwood experienced firsthand. He was a pacifist but not an isolationist and his view shifted as the events shifted throughout the years. He ended up working with the Roosevelt administration ultimately during wartime, but it really reflects that world being on the edge in the 1930s.

And I'm sure [00:20:00] that it must've landed with a, uh, a Pulitzer jury. And to my mind, the play really brings together some multiple viewpoints, and it asks us to consider the cost of war, um, as well as the importance of responding to threats to freedom, and that must have been very much on people's minds at the time.

And I think when we, we view it today, through the lens of today's America, It's a very pointed warning against blind nationalism, and we really saw a plea for kind of a global perspective in the play, so I'm presuming some of that may well have landed with the Pulitzer jury as well. You know, in doing some prep for this chat, I reread the play and took a look at some of our materials and things, but there's an interesting note, the playwright's note at the beginning of the play about the timeframe for the piece, and he says, uh, “it's an afternoon [00:21:00] of a winter day in any imminent year.” So you know, we're accustomed to seeing the time is the present or, you know, variations of that. So I, that really strikes me actually, “of any imminent year.” So he was certainly, I think, speaking to his time, but also with an awareness that we, we as humans may always find ourselves on the brink of war, so I, I guess it kind of lands with me that that phrase really struck me when I re-read the text.

**Jan Simpson:** What was the major challenge for you all in staging the play? Now, it wasn't that it had a big cast, because you're used to doing that, but what were some of the challenges in producing this one?

**Kirby Bennett:** Well, the big cast is a challenge, but it's fun, too. I mean, that's part of what's fun about it. It does have that extra layer of some musical elements, which was new to us. You know, the play has this appealing combination, I think, of depth and [00:22:00] fun, because it's ultimately an anti war play, which is why it appealed to us.

But it also has this fantastic entertainment value with the, the humor and period glamour and romance and these musical accents. So that was all new for us, adding in that layer and involved some extra steps in terms of licensing music. There's a fun element in the show, which is basically a floor show. So at some point, Harry Van and his showgirls, they, they do kind of an impromptu show for the, uh, guests at the hotel. And the playwright leaves that open. There, you know, there's a stage direction that says, well, insert, basically “insert floor show here.” You know, so that was fun to have, to have that freedom and we did license some additional music from the period for that purpose.

So, we really had just a, a joyous time doing it. It was great fun, uh, and it was a, a really a fresh thing for our [00:23:00] audience. And to our knowledge, the show had not been produced here, uh, in Minneapolis, St. Paul. They'd never had a, a local professional production. So that gave it, um, some nice visibility. It was very well received, um, by critics and by audiences with the exception of one critic. And I suppose that might in some ways be our, our biggest challenge in that, uh, you know, unfortunately, the major daily in town did not like the play or the production. So it was you know, it was challenging. But we still had a really good audience and really great response from all of our other press.

So he, he, unfortunately, he just didn't see the relevance. Just about every other reviewer and multiple audience comments really praised the fact that it was, you know, uncannily relevant for our time. Um, so his opinion was an isolated minority opinion, but [00:24:00] that, you know, but it's out there in the internet so that's what people will typically find if they Google our production. But there are some other good reviews too. And he, he sadly was very influenced by the New York Times review of the 1986 revival, which was quite a scathing review. It sounds like their approach to that production was pretty different than ours, because we played it to the very, I mean, it was set in the period, we played it very humanly, we really worked to flesh out the characters, make them very real. These are real struggles, even though we're dealing with some archetypes. So we made it a very human experience. And I think that people really felt the, um, the emotion and the struggle behind it.

There was also something fairly serendipitous with the timing in that, uh, Trump's election had just happened in the fall of 2016 and our production [00:25:00] was in the summer of 2017. So it's the world felt, um, on the edge again. And, you know, and even today we're experiencing, uh, fascism increasing throughout the world, fascism here at home, the increasing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. So it's, I, in many respects. I think it's even more relevant today than it was in 2017. So it was, we worked really hard to bring all of that out and it landed with most folks, so it was gratifying in the end that we were able to bring the play to our audience.

**Jan Simpson:** It was such a timely play when it was first produced. And we don't get a lot of these current event, I'm using air quote, plays today. I was wondering why you think it is that [00:26:00] our contemporary playwrights don't go into major issues of the day in the way that Sherwood did.

**Kirby Bennett:** Right, that's interesting. And actually the way some other playwrights of his time did too, um, to a certain degree. There's sort of a, a preference in American drama for sort of these more intimate, you know, the family, uh, family drama or the kitchen sink kind of drama where we're getting really into those kinds of dynamics and, and, and there's less of the, um, what it means to be a citizen of the world and what, you know, what, what it means to wrestle with bigger questions outside of the home and what it means to be part of a community.

So I don't know why it's tended to be that way if it's just part of the kind of the DNA of what American drama is. It's probably also just in [00:27:00] terms of producibility. You certainly don't see large plays, like the, you know, being written in, in some, it just, you know, people would say, say, well, it's just not possible to produce it at that scale. So that may have something to do with it, just sheer size and unwieldiness of, of, of some of these works. But, um, they're they're the ones that have really certainly attracted me through the years.

**Jan Simpson:** I have one, one final sort of big question to ask, which is, Robert Sherwood was such a dominant figure in his time, uh, writing plays, writing movies, writing speeches for FDR, why do you think his name has faded in a way that, say, Eugene O'Neill's hasn't. I mean, Sherwood won three Pulitzer Prizes for drama. [00:28:00]

**Kirby Bennett:** Yeah, that is a tough one. I, I can't speak so much to, I'm just not as experienced in, in O'Neill as some of the, these other, uh, works, but I have done a lot of Thornton Wilder, so I've produced all three of the full length plays, and so I've, you know, as another contemporary to compare, you know, those works have certainly, um, endured perhaps more than Sherwood's in terms of people's collective memory.

**Jan Simpson:** Does Wilder seem to speak more directly to today or more in today's language than Sherwood?

**Kirby Bennett:** I think possibly yeah, so it's easier to take it there. I think there's something more poetic about his work, maybe.

**Jan Simpson:** Poetic about Sherwood or Wilder?

**Kirby Bennett:** Wilder, actually, yeah. Um, he wrestles with the really big cosmic [00:29:00] questions of, you know, what it means to be human, what it means to be alive, um, but yet makes it so personal. So I think that's one reason, you know, why those works have endured more throughout time, but there's also something about Wilder's work I mean, one reason we've looked at his work so much was great roles for women. And that is sometimes a little harder to find when you're looking at these classic pieces. They tend to be pretty male dominant.

**Jan Simpson:** Even this piece. I mean there is Irene or Irina but There's only Mrs. Cherry, the British newlywed, right?

**Kirby Bennett:** And the showgirls.

**Jan Simpson:** Right.

**Kirby Bennett:** But we actually worked with the licensing agency to flip the gender onto the smaller roles. The role of Dr. Waldersee, the German doctor and, uh, Pittaluga, who was the manager of the [00:30:00] hotel, um, which was the part that, that I played in the piece.

So we've had permission to make those two parts women, uh, played by women so that we could have that equity in the cast, but also it really kind of dovetailed nicely with changing roles of women in Europe at that time, both in Germany. and in Italy, women's roles in society had kind of freed up and loosened and, and they entered professional life much more than they had previously because during World War I, of course, they were needed.

And then the rise of fascism and that really became dominant in the mid to late 30s got, that shut down the roles of women and kind of relegated back to the home. So the timing of the play kind of coincided with that shift. And it was very interesting to us to think, what would it mean to be a female doctor at that time? Or a female manager of the resort trying to also maintain the home front and keep your family [00:31:00] business running. So we have some nice historical meat behind that decision, and we're able to balance the cast out gender wise a little more to our liking, which was really nice to do that.

**Jan Simpson:** Doing this show, did it make you curious about or predisposed toward doing any of Sherwood's other plays?

**Kirby Bennett:** I don't know that it has yet, but, um, and I think in part, maybe because of that gender question, I'd need to look at them more closely again, but it hasn't, um, it's not something I've explored yet to this point.

**Jan Simpson:** Well, I'm glad that you did this one, did Idiot's Delight, and, um, and very glad that you, uh, were willing to take the time, uh, to talk with, with us [00:32:00] about what was Sherwood's first Pulitzer Prize winning play.

**Kirby Bennett:** Well, I'd sure love to have another group take a look at it too. It would be, I think it's still well worth groups looking at this title and engaging in it. So hope someone else does as well.

**Jan Simpson:** Yeah, me too, and I hope closer to new york so I can see it.

**Kirby Bennett:** We're proud to represent the midwest here.

**Jan Simpson:** So again, thank you very much for for for talking with us about this.

**Kirby Bennett:** Thank you, Jan. Appreciate it.

And thank you for listening. I hope you'll come back next time. And if you have any comments, questions, or suggestions, please send them to me at jan at broadwayradio. com.