

Play Guide

Girl Friday
PRODUCTIONS

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH

By Thornton Wilder



February 7-March 3, 2019

Performing at
Park Square Theatre
Proscenium Stage

Directed by Joel Sass
Play Guide Prepared
by Christine Gordon

My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.

Job 19:20

About the Play

The Skin of Our Teeth follows the journey of the Antrobus family through history: from the ice age to the great flood to world war. George and Maggie Antrobus, their children Henry and Gladys, and their maid Sabina bring the ordinariness of the everyday to the span of human history. Through the lens of this family, Thornton Wilder offers a perspective on the dangers to and possibilities for human life on our planet.

Wilder began the play in early 1940, but the third act was not completed until late 1941. Wilder's visit to England in September 1941, when he saw the results of German bombing, was part of the impetus for completion of the third act. He sent it off to director Jed Harris on January 1, 1942. The original production was ultimately directed by Elia Kazan, and the cast included Fredric March as Mr. Antrobus, Florence Eldridge as Mrs. Antrobus, Frances Heflin as Gladys, Montgomery Clift as Henry, and Tallulah Bankhead as Sabina. The reviews overall were excellent, and the play received the Pulitzer Prize (Wilder's third) in May, 1943.

MORE RESOURCES:

<http://www.thorntonwilder.com/drama/full-length-plays/the-skin-of-our-teeth/>

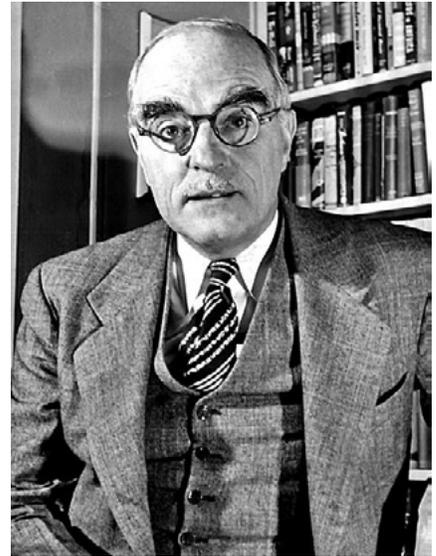
<http://www.twildersociety.org/works/the-skin-of-our-teeth/>

Thornton Wilder's preface to the play, published in *Thornton Wilder: Three Plays* (NY: Harper and Row, 1957)

The Skin of Our Teeth begins, also, by making fun of old-fashioned playwriting; but the audience soon perceives that he is seeing "two times at once." The Antrobus family is living both in prehistoric times and in a New Jersey commuters' suburb today. Again, the events of our homely daily life—this time the family life—are depicted against the vast dimensions of time and place. It was written on the eve of our entrance into the war [World War II] and under strong emotion and I think it mostly comes alive under conditions of crisis. It has been often charged with being a bookish fantasia about history, full of rather bloodless schoolmasterish jokes. But to have seen it in Germany soon after the war, in the shattered churches and beerhalls that were serving as theatres, with audiences whose price of admission meant the loss of a meal and for whom it was of absorbing interest that there was a "recipe for grass soup that did not cause the diarrhea," was an experience that was not so cool. I am very proud that this year it has received a first and overwhelming reception in Warsaw. The play is deeply indebted to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. 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.

About Thornton Wilder

Thornton Wilder (1897–1975) was a pivotal figure in the literary history of the twentieth-century. He is the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction and drama. He received the Pulitzer for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and the plays *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). His other best-selling novels include *The Cabala*, *The Woman of Andros*, *Heaven's My Destination*, *The Ides of March*, *The Eighth Day* and *Theophilus North*. His other major dramas include *The Matchmaker* (adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!*) and *The Alcestiad*. *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *The Long Christmas Dinner* are among his well-known shorter plays.



Wilder's many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Book Committee's Medal for Literature and the Goethe-Plakette Award (Germany).

Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897. He spent part of his boyhood in China and was educated principally in California, graduating from Berkeley High School in 1915. After attending Oberlin College for two years, he transferred to Yale, where he received his BA in 1920. His post-graduate studies included a year spent studying archaeology and Italian at the American Academy in Rome (1920-21) and graduate work in French at Princeton (Master's degree, 1926).

In addition to his talents as a playwright and novelist, Wilder was an accomplished essayist, translator, research scholar, teacher, lecturer, librettist and screenwriter. In 1942, he teamed up with Alfred Hitchcock on the classic psycho-thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*. Versed in foreign languages, he translated and adapted plays by Ibsen, Sartre and Obey. He read and spoke German, French and Spanish, and his scholarship included significant research on James Joyce and Lope de Vega.

Wilder enjoyed acting and played major roles in several of his plays in summer theater productions. He also possessed a life-long love of music and wrote librettos for two operas, one based on *The Long Christmas Dinner* (composer Paul Hindemith) and the other based on *The Alcestiad* (composer Louis Falst).

One of Wilder's deepest passions was teaching. He began this career in 1921 as an instructor in French at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. During the 1930's he taught courses in Classics in Translation and Composition at the University of Chicago. In 1950–51, he served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard.

During WWII, Wilder served in the Army Air Force Intelligence. He was awarded the Legion of Merit Bronze Star, the Legion d'honneur and the Order of the British Empire.

In 1930, with the royalties received from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder built a home for himself and his family in Hamden, Connecticut. Although often away from home, restlessly seeking quiet places in which to write, he always returned to "The House The Bridge Built." He died here on December 7, 1975.

MORE RESOURCES:

Thornton Wilder: A Life by Penelope Niven. NY: Harper Collins, 2012. The first definitive biography of Thornton Wilder.

The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder (2008) edited by Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer. A sampling of some of Wilder's thousands of letters.

Official Thornton Wilder website:

www.thorntonwilder.com

Thornton Wilder Society website:

<http://www.twildersociety.org/>

Paris Review interview (1956):

<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4887/thornton-wilder-the-art-of-fiction-no-16-thornton-wilder>

Essay/review of Penelope Niven's *Thornton Wilder: A Life* (2013):

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/07/man-of-letters-5>

Wilder Moments: www.wildermoments.com

Up to date news and interviews about Wilder productions worldwide.

Earth History Timeline

13.5-14 BILLION YEARS AGO

Origin of the universe

4.5 BILLION YEARS AGO

Origin of the solar system

65 MILLION YEARS AGO

Extinction of the dinosaurs

195,00 YEARS AGO

Earliest known homo sapiens bones

110,000 YEARS AGO

Last glacial period begins

9600-9700 BCE

Last glacial period ends

2700 BCE

Historical/mythical Gilgamesh lived

2600 BCE

Emergence of Mayan culture in Yucatan peninsula

2350 BCE

Noah's Ark (putative date of the biblical flood as calculated by Bishop James Ussher, 1581-1656 CE)

1700-1500 BCE

Nomads from the Iranian plateau arrive in India bringing with them the roots of Hindu religious belief

1200-1100 BCE

Trojan War/Odyssey

700 BCE

Epic of Gilgamesh

563 BCA

Buddha born

1564-1616 CE

William Shakespeare

1939-1945 CE

World War II

1945-2019 CE

Korean War

Vietnam War

Iraq/Afghanistan war

The War on Terrorism

The Next War...

The Skin of Our Teeth Timeline

ACT I

The ice age cometh

ACT II

The deluge

ACT III

After the war

Articles Related to Recent Productions

Artists Rep in Portland Oregon in 2016:

<http://wildermoments.com/2016/06/18/interview-every-good-and-excellent-thing-lives-on-the-razor-edge-of-danger/>

Theatre for a New Audience in New York City in 2017:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/theater/the-skin-of-our-teeth-thornton-wilder-trump.html>

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/thornton-wilders-optimistic-catastrophe-the-skin-of-our-teeth>

The Skin of Our Teeth also played in Chicago in late 2017 (Remy Bumppo Theatre Company) and in Washington, DC in 2018 (Constellation Theatre Company).

Some Final Thoughts

“...now, more than ever, we can appreciate [Wilder’s] legacy, his questioning mind and his belief that hope is the most necessary of civic virtues.”

—Playwright Paula Vogel

“Wilder, speaking to a diverse and complicated democracy, uses his stage managers and Sabinas and Dolly Levis to throw an arm around the audience and tell us who we are and who we should be.”

—Playwright A. R. Gurney

To the end of his life he believed, as he had written in 1952, that “the artist through his creation, has been in all times a force that draws men together and reminds them that things which men have in common are greater than the things that separate them; and that the work of the artist is the clearest example of the operation of freedom in the human spirit.”

—Biographer Penelope Niven