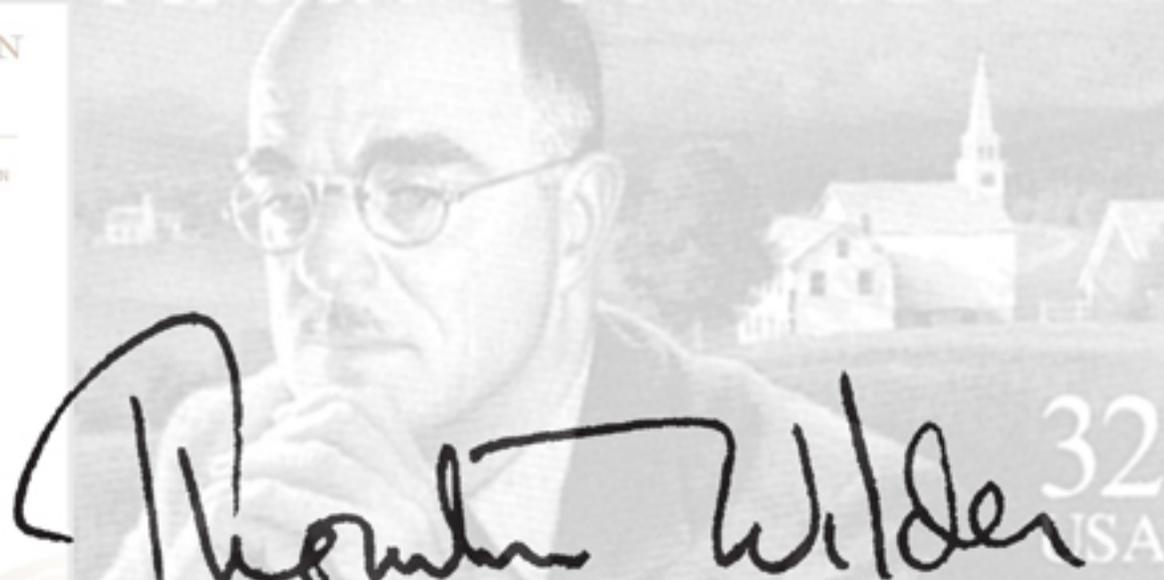


THORNTON
WILDER

a life

PENELOPE NIVEN

Author of *Coal Seaboard: A Biography and Dictionary* & *Biography*



Thornton Wilder

32
USA



THE THORNTON WILDER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

SAMPLER



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Thornton Wilder

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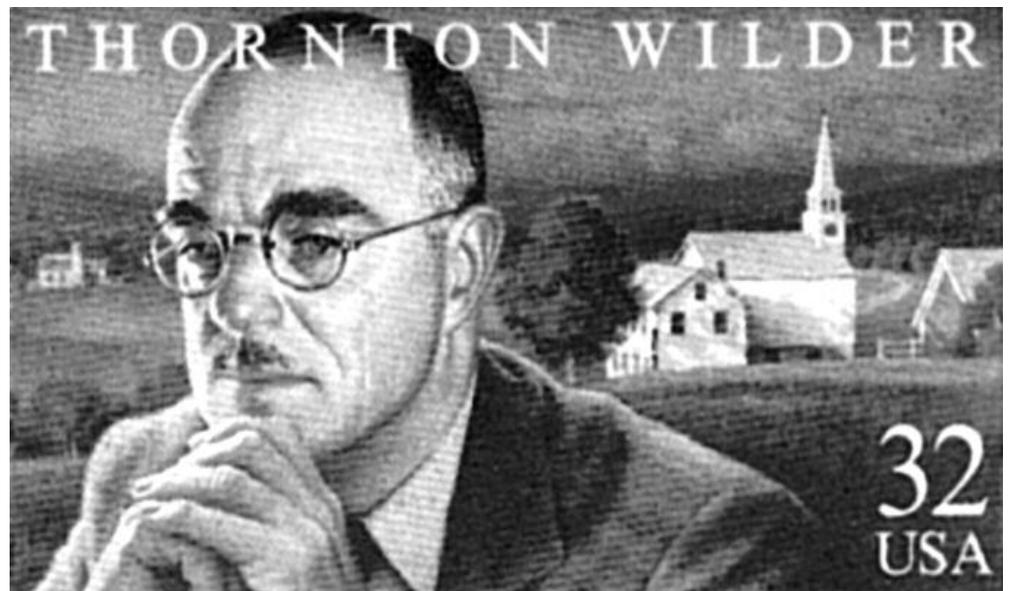
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1997 postage stamp honoring Thornton Wilder on the centennial of his birth. The stamp was designed by Michael Deas, who also designed stamps honoring Marilyn Monroe and James Dean, and is based on a photograph by renowned photographer Gisele Freund. The background landscape in the stamp depicts an idealized Our Town.

INTERVIEW

TAPPAN WILDER TALKS WITH JOHN MCINTYRE PART I: AN OLD-FASHIONED STORYTELLER

JPM: I'd like to start by asking you to comment on your uncle's legacy.

ATW: I see Thornton's chief legacy as his capacity to identify questions about life and living, then to write stories about them, stories that still speak to us today. If this sounds terribly simplistic, well, there you are. At a very deep level, the entertainer and the fabulist meet in Wilder, and they still work for readers and audiences in many parts of the world. For this reason, I enjoy describing him as an old-fashioned storyteller.

JPM: Since your uncle had such a complete life, do we stop there?

ATW: No, no. Behind the storyteller, I'd like to emphasize two additional elements of "legacy." The first concerns the diversity of his achievement, which works across a wide spectrum of the written language; the second involves the "craftsmanship" that he brought to his calling. I agree with those who speak of Thornton as a "Man of Letters" instead of as a "novelist and playwright." My point is always to get away from viewing him narrowly, as associated with this or that artistic expression. Indeed, the more I live with Thornton, the more aware I have become of the depth of his drive to understand language, what he recognized as the sinews of the creative enterprise practiced with a pen. It's no surprise that he was always consumed with "basic questions": what makes a novel a novel, a play a play, an essay an essay, a letter a great letter and so forth. And not only does he yammer about it, he actually goes out and does it. He really makes things: plays, novels, essays, lectures, librettos, film work, translations, letters, great conversation (intangible but important).

JPM: From what I see, you're describing a moving target.

ATW: That he was. And so he was to the end of his life. You know, he was always marvelously exhausting to be around. He wasn't alone, by the way. His brother Amos, the poet and biblical scholar, while vastly different in his habits and personal style, was the same way. As was their sister Charlotte, the poet whose creative life ended with a nervous breakdown in 1941. All of them worshiped at the high table of language, morning, noon and night.

JPM: May I inject a comment about what is to me a striking piece of his legacy? I refer to his handling of the classical tradition—beginning with *The Cabala*, moving through *The Woman of Andros* and immortalized in *The Ides of March*. Old-fashioned critics easily refer to his style as "chaste." Presumably, they mean he combined precision with economy, elegance and discipline, a

WORK IN PROGRESS

Thornton Wilder, So Far

Penelope Niven

TAPPAN WILDER recently sent me a copy of notes for a lecture Wilder gave in the 1930s on biography. In this unpublished manuscript, he offered some advice for biographers. You may be sure that this biographer is paying close attention to what he had to say. Wilder wrote this definition of biography:

*To Biographize = To Write a Life
To Biographize in the highest sense of the word =
To Revivify*

How do I REVIVIFY Wilder? He admonishes and instructs in his manuscript: "The characters must be built from the INSIDE OUTWARD," a difficult if not impossible challenge, he warns, because, he says, "We cannot know others or ourselves."

I came to that conclusion early in my work on the Carl Sandburg biography, taking heed then from what Sandburg, a biographer as well as a poet, said about the challenges inherent in this literary form. Sandburg offered this observation about his subject, Abraham Lincoln:

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Vol. 1, #2, Fall 2004

THE THORNTON WILDER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Actress Pat Carroll on Thornton Wilder and *Our Town*

Round House Theatre, Bethesda, Maryland



Pat Carroll made her professional theater debut in 1947 in a summer stock production of A Goose for the Gander, starring Gloria Swanson. She played more than 200 roles before making her Broadway debut in 1955 in the musical revue Catch a Star, for which she received a Tony nomination. Her one-woman show, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, ran for eighteen months in New York in 1979. She has done classical theater with Washington DC's Shakespeare Theater, including a much-acclaimed portrayal of Falstaff in The Merry Wives of Windsor. In film, among many roles, she played Ursula, the wicked squid-witch, in Disney's The Little Mermaid. Her television career began in 1955 and has included guest appearances on such shows as Caesar's Hour (Emmy Award), The Carol Burnett Show, The Red Skelton Show, and The Danny Kaye Show, as well as continuing roles on The Danny Thomas Show, Busting Loose, The Ted Knight Show, Trapper John M.D., and Crazy Like a Fox. From May 29 to June 23, 2002, she played the Stage Manager in the Round House Theatre's inaugural production of its new facility in Bethesda, MD. This interview was conducted in Harwich Port, MA, where she lives, on July 30, 2002; the interviewer was Jackson R. Bryer, professor of English at the University of Maryland and member of the Board of Directors of the Thornton Wilder Society.

BRYER: How did you first become aware of Thornton Wilder?

PAT CARROLL: I was probably thirteen years of age, and I had started to work for a theater group in Los Angeles because I fell in love with the theater by reading *The Passing of the 3rd Floor Back* by Jerome K. Jerome. Within the first six months of my joining the Catholic Actors' Guild, I was cast as Rebecca, the little sister in *Our Town*. I think it was because of *Our Town* that I became interested in Wilder; the only thing I could find at the library at that time was *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which I just thought was the most extraordinary book.

BRYER: What can you remember of that production of *Our Town*?

PAT CARROLL: I don't remember a bloody thing except climbing up on the ladder as Rebecca and feeling very much at home. I knew this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life; so I guess I have Thornton Wilder to thank for fifty-five years of working in the theater.

BRYER: Do you remember thinking anything about the play itself?

PAT CARROLL: I remember as a youngster thinking the third act was very sad, but it didn't depress me—which I find as true today as then. I think that third act gives people hope, because the discussion of eternity doesn't go on at cocktail parties. That just doesn't happen, but when you're sitting in a theater chair that you've paid an admission for, and you are bombarded in the last act of a play with nothing but a discussion of death, you're forced to think about it. The way Wilder wrote it, it washes over you like a sea wave. And it's not astringent; he doesn't shock you into any kind of confrontation. He uses the people sitting in those chairs, the people who have gone before. What are they doing sitting in those chairs if they're dead? Don't they disappear? No, they're waiting. If we sat around in a circle and spewed out what we really thought about an afterlife—if one believes in an afterlife—everybody's concept of what that afterlife is, or could possibly be, would be different. We've all been reared in

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Actor Pat Carroll Is Interviewed by Professor Jackson Bryer

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COMMENTARY

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WORK IN PROGRESS

Thornton Wilder Documentary

Ken Witty



Ken Witty

TELEVISION PRODUCER KEN WITTY is laying the groundwork for a landmark television documentary film on Thornton Wilder; drawing on a vast collection of Wilder papers and photographs, as well as on extensive interviews. With the support of a grant from the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Library, Ken has already filmed nineteen key interviews exploring Wilder's life and work. The following excerpts from selected interviews yield intriguing glimpses of Wilder the writer and Wilder

the man. We are grateful to these interviewees for permitting their words to be used in this piece.

EDWARD ALBEE, Playwright

Almost everybody does *Our Town* as a sweet, sad, and touching play about how good rural life is in America. But I know Thornton knew, we all knew, [that] it's a tough, existentialist play. And . . . sometimes I can't even think about parts of it without wanting to cry. Not because it is cute and touching, but because it is so tough and so sad. And I don't understand why it's played so cute all the time. I've never seen a more misunderstood American play.

SALLY BEGLEY, Honorary Niece

Conversation [with Wilder] was absolutely marvelous, but it did not consist of a monologue on either side. It was fragments. It was like mosaic. A glitter and a glitter and a glitter, and did you see the whole picture? Maybe not. But it was like nothing else. I read once that Thornton Wilder had talked away at least seven

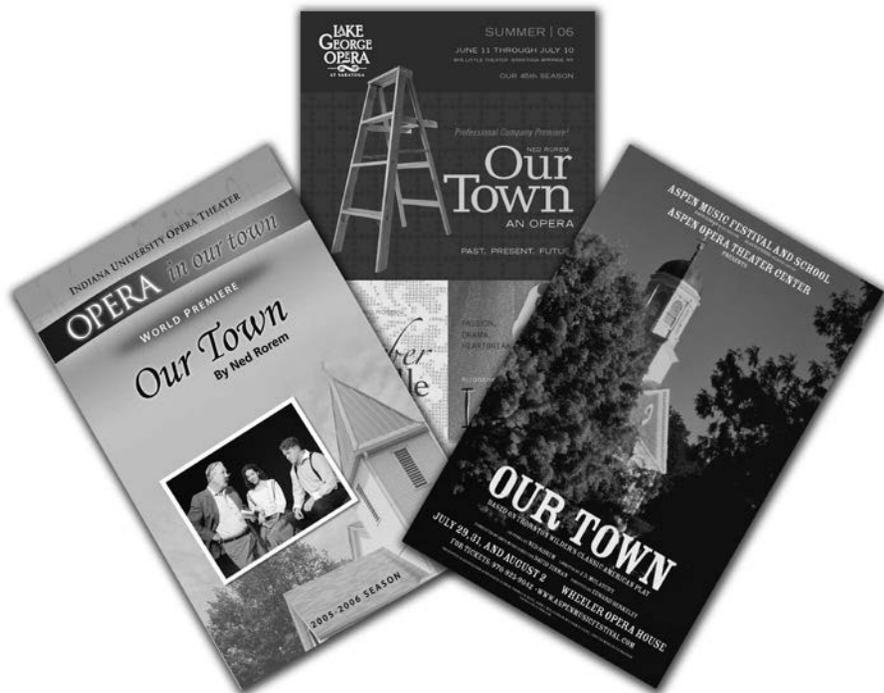
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THE THORNTON WILDER SOCIETY is dedicated to preserving and expanding the legacy of Thornton Wilder.

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Susan Thomas, Editor • *The Thornton Wilder Society Newsletter* • 4855 Reservoir Road, NW • Washington, D.C. 20007 • 202-965-1700 or e-mail suggestions through our Web site. www.thorntonwilersociety.org.

(Our Town Opera, continued from page 1)



Poster art from the Indiana University, Lake George Opera, and Aspen Music Festival productions of the *Our Town* opera.

“The point, I think, is this,” says Tappan Wilder, who gave permission to Rorem and McClatchy to translate his uncle’s play to the new medium; “The reach and scope of opera has grown enormously in the quarter century since Thornton’s death. And the play, which was adapted successfully for radio and film, and as a ballet and a televised musical (with Frank Sinatra) during my uncle’s lifetime, now deserves its chance to be interpreted as an opera. I could not be more thrilled at the prospect.”

After attending a performance of the opera at Indiana University “as though [he] were just a general auditor,” Mr. Rorem commented, “Looking at it, I was very pleased.

I almost didn’t go because I was feeling funny for a long time. But I did go. I forced myself, and I’m awfully glad I did. They rehearsed it, and it was very good. The orchestra sounded marvelous; they didn’t make any mistakes.” Mr. McClatchy was also pleased: “The melodic lines are very strong. The singers are



Joseph Schuyler

Robert Swensen as the Stage Manager in the Lake George Opera production.

sustained and carried by these beautiful melodic surges in the orchestra, which enables them to speak their lines and sound more dramatic.” The review in the *New York Times* concurred: “Deftly matching the character of the play, Mr. Rorem’s music is accessible, singable and full of integrity.” In all three cities the opera has played, the audiences leapt to their feet, cheering. Upcoming productions will be announced in the next Wilder FYI. ■

Carmund White as Simon Stimson with choir in the Indiana University production.



Indiana University Photographic Services

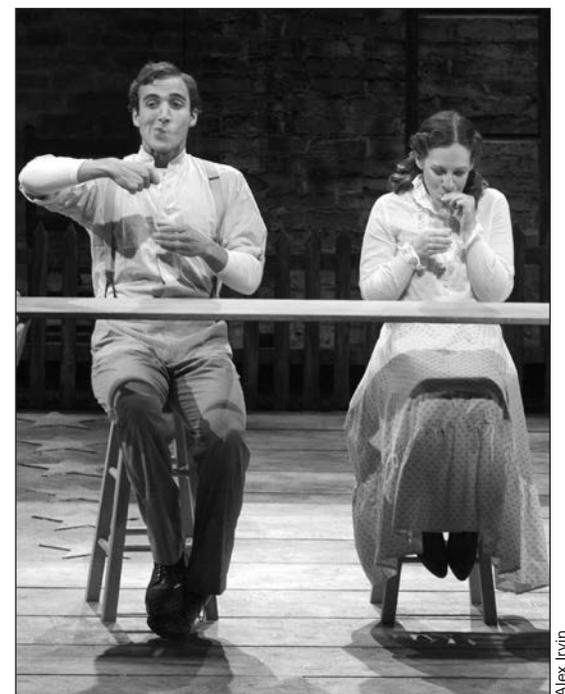
A Note by the Librettist

Music was an essential part of Thornton Wilder’s life. He played it, he studied it, he wrote about it. But when it came to composers who wrote to him for permission to make his major plays into operas, it was a different story. He famously turned down requests from both Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein. (As a matter of fact, back in 1961, Ned Rorem had written to Wilder about setting one of his short plays — a request that led nowhere.) Wilder’s reasoning seems to have been that his plays were conceived in a specific genre, and to adapt them into another would compromise their integrity. That didn’t stop him, however, from fashioning librettos out of two of his own plays, *The Long Christmas Dinner* for Paul Hindemith, and *The Alcestiad* for Louise Talma. But during his lifetime, and for long afterwards, and despite the enormous success of Broadway and television adaptations, his important plays were off limits to operatic composers.

In 2001, I brought the matter up again with Wilder’s nephew, my friend Tappan Wilder, the thoughtful and energetic literary executor of the Wilder Estate. Though there was pressure on him at the time to approve a Broadway musical version of *Our Town*, he could see that opera was indeed an appropriate medium to preserve the play’s dramatic intimacy and emotional force, and thereby extend the play’s reach across time. Once he agreed to my proposal, it was obvious that Ned Rorem had to be convinced to undertake the music. As a master of vocal writing, with a passion for classic American texts, he was a natural fit. And indeed his music, while giving the orchestra the melodic lead in the score, cannily preserves for the vocal lines a theatrical openness and spontaneity that “translate” the original play’s nuances and pathos.

My task, as librettist, was to condense the play’s length while preserving its shape and tone. Because musical time is so much longer than dramatic time, many of the play’s scenes had to be shortened and characters eliminated. In the play, both Emily and George have a sibling, but not in the opera. Many of the play’s minor characters — the townsfolk of Grover’s Corners — have been combined into one, Mrs. Soames, who functions as both busybody and chorus. The play’s most intriguing innovation, of course, was the Stage Manager and the way he comments on the action, bringing forward various “experts” to fill us in on the town’s history. Again, this would have slowed down our opera intolerably.

This is why I thought to make use of another theatrical innovation — at least in the opera house. Supertitles are used as captions to enhance the audience’s understanding of what’s transpiring on stage. But what if the device were also used as a character in the opera itself . . . I have, in a sense, split the Stage Manager into a singer and a screen. I should note too that the play and the opera open differently. For the sake of dramatic continuity, I wanted the opera to open with a funeral, just as it closes with one — in this case, the very same funeral. And I thought it best to open with a hymn, one beloved and familiar. Once the composer agreed to this idea, he wanted to make his own setting of the hymn, but I insisted that the traditional one would be best, that the *sound* of the familiar, communal hymn would set the right tone for what follows. Indeed, that hymn’s words go right to the heart of the story:



Alex Irvin

Matthew Patrick Morris as George Gibbs and Jennifer Zetlan as Emily Webb in Aspen Music Festival’s production.

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FEATURED WORK

Wilder & Hitchcock: Writing and Re-writing *Shadow of a Doubt*

Max Alvarez

"I might add that the reason I wanted Wilder is that he had written a wonderful play called Our Town." –Alfred Hitchcock to François Truffaut

Alfred Hitchcock was delighted when Thornton Wilder agreed in 1942 to adapt a screenplay from a seven-page film treatment by Gordon McDonnell entitled "Uncle Charlie." Although the collaboration lasted a mere six weeks (up until the time Wilder commenced his World War II service), the resulting screenplay was to become one of the director's finest cinematic achievements, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

The *Shadow of a Doubt* narrative is by now familiar to many cinephiles: charismatic, iconoclastic Uncle Charlie (played in the film by Joseph Cotton) evades detectives by reuniting with his sister's family in the small town of Santa Rosa, California. His worshipful niece, Young Charlie (Teresa Wright), with whom he has a seemingly unbreakable and telepathic bond, begins to sense that her uncle is harboring a secret. As it turns out, this suave, irresistibly charming relative is suspected of being the notorious Merry Widow Murderer.

After Wilder departed for war duty in late June 1942, his screenplay underwent revisions by two others: short story writer and *New Yorker* magazine contributor Sally Benson and Hitchcock's wife, Alma Reville. With all three writers eventually receiving screen credit, historians have for decades speculated as to how much of Thornton Wilder remained in the completed Hitchcock film. Thanks to the Library of America's recent publication of *Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, we now have the pleasure of actually reading Wilder's *Shadow of a Doubt* screenplay. An analysis of this text, the three Wilder script drafts from which it was compiled, and the released film itself can finally put to rest any doubts about Thornton Wilder earning the special credit he received in the opening titles of *Shadow of a Doubt*.

This is not to deny that significant changes were made to his screenplay before the cameras turned two months later. Dialogue was severely edited or rewritten entirely. Comic relief was emphasized, and an insignificant supporting character (Mrs. Potts, the widow) was inserted, but these additions were made to scenes already in existence in Wilder's initial three drafts. While the spirit of Wilder's text did not always suffer with this editing, damage did occur in scenes where Hitchcock (or his new writers) felt it necessary to descend into obviousness to appeal to the mass audience.

Three scenes designed to underscore Uncle Charlie's grim take on humankind illustrate this. In the story's second act, Uncle Charlie is given breakfast in bed by his sister Emmy (Patricia Collinge) who then shows him and Young Charlie a vintage boyhood photo of her wayward brother. The original Wilder dialogue read as follows:

MRS. NEWTON: I can remember the day it was taken just as though it were yesterday. You'd thrown a snowball and hit the policeman—what was his name?

UNCLE CHARLIE (sharply): No!

MRS. NEWTON: You certainly did. And Mama wouldn't speak to you the whole rest of the day, except when we had that appointment at the photographer's. Don't you remember—Mama cried all the way home.

Regrettably, Hitchcock felt it necessary in this scene to have Emmy "explain" why her brother turned out so differently from the rest of the Newton family. The final rewritten dialogue, which must certainly have made

Wilder cringe, was transformed into:

YOUNG CHARLIE: Uncle Charlie, you were beautiful!

EMMY: Wasn't he though? And such a quiet boy. Always reading. I always said Papa should never have bought you that bicycle—you never did know how to handle it, Charlie. (To Young Charlie) He took it right out on the icy road and skidded into a streetcar. We thought he was going to die.

YOUNG CHARLIE: I'm glad he didn't.

EMMY: Well, he almost did. He fractured his skull. And he was laid up so long. And then when he was getting well there was no holding him. It was just as though all the rest was too much for him and he had to get into mischief to blow off steam.

An important dinner table scene in Act Three occurs after Young Charlie realizes her uncle may be a killer of wealthy widows. The oblivious Emmy has invited her brother to address a local women's club. Wilder wrote the following exchange:

MRS. NEWTON: Oh, we're middle-aged women, mostly. Pretty busy with our homes, most of us.

UNCLE CHARLIE: That's right. You're doing something. In the cities it's a different matter. Thousands of middle-aged women...their husbands spent forty and fifty years building up a fortune...work, work, work. They die and leave their money to their wives. And what do they do? You can see them in the hotels, by the thousands...eating great meals...playing bridge all afternoon and all night...diamonds sparkling all over their big chests. Vapid, useless wives. Thousands of them....

Apparently this was also too subtle for Hitchcock. The sequence as filmed expanded Uncle Charlie's speech: "Women keep busy in towns like this. In the cities it's different. The cities are full of women: middle-aged widows, husbands dead..." Joseph Cotton's voice then makes an abrupt transition to a monotone: "...husbands who've spent their lives making fortunes, working and working. Then they die and leave their money to their wives: their silly wives. What do their wives do, these useless women? You see them in the hotels—the best hotels—everyday by the thousands. Drinking their money, eating their money. Losing their money at bridge, playing all day and all night. Smelling of money. Proud of their jewelry but of nothing else. Horrible, faded, fat, greedy women."

Young Charlie's horrified response survived from Wilder's original draft: "But they're alive! They're human beings!" Uncle Charlie's retort was intended by Wilder to have been: "Are they? Barely...and there are some other things best not talked about. Gigolos and what not. I'm not a man to set himself as better than the

next man; but, by God, there are certain things I can't stand."

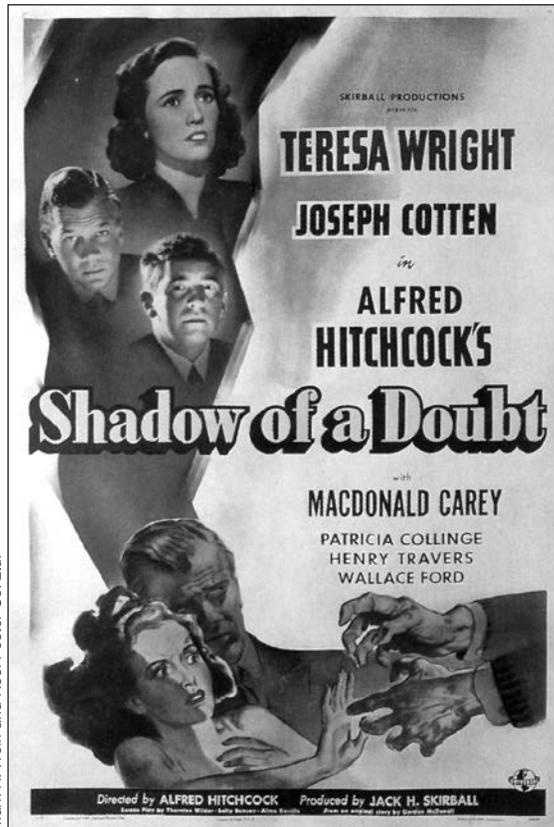
Hitchcock instead opted for a less subdued reaction from his villain. On screen, Uncle Charlie turns to his niece (initially the camera itself) to opine: "Are they? Are they, Charlie? Or are they fat, wheezing animals? And what happens to animals when they get too fat and too old? Well, I seem to be making my speech right here!"

Uncle Charlie's second rant occurs after this infamous dinner, in a tavern where he has taken his niece once he is aware of her suspicions. Young Charlie returns a ring given to her by her uncle and presumably belonging to one of his victims. The waitress Louise admires it: "Oh—oh! Whose is that? Ain't that beautiful? Can I pick it up? It is—? Anyway, it's just as beautiful as if it were. I'm funny that way—I love jewelry."

In the film, Louise gets straight to the point: "Whose is it? Ain't it beautiful! I'd just die for a ring like that. Yes, sir, for a ring like that I'd just about die. I love jewelry, real jewelry. Notice I didn't even have to ask if it was real. I can tell. I can."

After Louise departs, Uncle Charlie attempts to set his devastated niece straight about the cruelties of life. Wilder's script has him saying, "What do you

(continued on page 5)



Mark H. Wolff and Reel Poster Co. Ltd.

PERFORMING WILDER

The Year in Review



Beowulf Boritt



T. Charles Erickson

production starred recent Tony winners Shuler Hensley as George Antrobus and Cady Huffman as Sabina, as well as legendary Eartha Kitt as the Fortune Teller. Late spring saw the Intiman Theater of Seattle celebrate its 35th anniversary with a unique production of *The Skin of Our Teeth* directed by Bartlett Sher and starring deaf actor Howard Seago in the role of George Antrobus; Seago's signing was supplemented by actors saying his lines. Finally, the Festival Opera's (Walnut Creek, CA) production of Ned Rorem and J. D. McClatchy's *Our Town* opera in August brought this spectacular theater season to a smashing close. All we can say is, "Encore! Encore!" ■



Chris Bannion

The 2006-2007 theater season was one of the most exciting in recent memory for fans of Thornton Wilder. It began in the fall with the New York premiere of Matthew Burnett's adaptation of Wilder's last novel, *Theophilus North*; directed by Carl Forsman at the Keen Company, the Off-Broadway production received enthusiastic reviews. Next up was the world premiere of the Ken Ludwig/Thornton Wilder adaptation of George Farquhar's 1707 comedy, *The Beaux' Stratagem*. Directed by Michael Kahn at the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington, DC, the production was nominated for five Helen Hayes Awards. In January, Trinity Rep in Providence, RI, staged a production of *Our Town* that tried to recapture the shock of Wilder's "deconstructed theatrical style" by not just showing the rear wall of the theater but removing the wall altogether to reveal the actors' dressing rooms and other backstage areas. Director Brian McEleney explained, "We won't just see the daily life of people in Grover's Corners but the two-story set will reveal much of the theater's daily life as well." Winter also saw what we believe to be the second-ever production of Wilder's acting version of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen (see article "WORK IN PROGRESS: A Wilder *Doll's House*" elsewhere in the *Newsletter*). April showers not only brought May flowers but also the Westport Country Playhouse's production of *All About Us*, a musical adaptation of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. One of the last works by celebrated theatrical duo John Kander and the late Fred Ebb (joined by Joseph Stein), the



Carol Rosegg



Richard Termini



Robert Shomler

Top left: Giorgio Litt and Regan Thompson in the Keen Company production of Theophilus North; scenic design by Beowulf Boritt. Top right: Christopher Innvar, Ian Bedford, and Veanne Cox in the Shakespeare Theater Company's production of The Beaux' Stratagem. Middle left: Fred Sullivan Jr. and Phyllis Kay in the Trinity Rep production of Our Town; scenic design by Michael McGarty. Middle right: Earth Kitt in the Westport Country Playhouse production of All About Us. Lower left: Laurence Ballard, Howie Seago, Anne Scurria, J.D. Tracy, Kelly Balch, and Lucia Sher in Intiman Theater's production of The Skin of Our Teeth. Lower right: Darla Wigginton, Kirk Eichelberger, and Richard Byrne in Festival Opera's production of Our Town; scenic design by Matthew Antaky.

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Wait Til I'm Dead: A Colloquium on the Fiction of Thornton Wilder



Jackson Bryer, Tappan Wilder, and Sandy McClatchy

(continued on page 4)

WILDER REVEALED

Isabel Wilder: Sister, Secretary, and More

Dennis Loyd



Beinecke Library, Yale University

Thornton and Isabel Wilder, 1933

In 1966, when I was searching for a dissertation topic, I considered studying the novels of Thornton Wilder. I wrote Mr. Wilder but to my disappointment, I received a rather brief typed note that said, "Because of the hundreds of letters Mr. Thornton Wilder receives each year from interested readers, he regrets he is not able to answer each one personally." But someone had written at the bottom of the note the information I sought about Wilder's new novel, *The Eighth Day*.

Less than a month after my attempt to correspond with Wilder, I received the first letter in what would develop into a meaningful correspondence with the author's sister, Isabel Wilder. She provided further information on the new novel, telling me it would be the Book-of-the-Month club selection for April 1967. To my delight she agreed to answer any questions she could and shared the following: "My brother would want me to send good wishes for the success of your project. When asked before a student has started the long, hard work toward a Ph.D. degree, he does his best to discourage the young scholar. He advises, take a DEAD author."

Throughout the next several months, I wrote her rather regularly seeking biographical information; she repeatedly let me know about the many inaccuracies in the books and articles dealing with her brother. Because she was a stickler for exactness, I boldly asked if she would read my biographical chapter. The chapter came back marked up and with attached pages in which she detailed where I had blundered. Miss Wilder granted me permission to use our correspondence as support-

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2010 ALA Wilder Panel

WILDER PRIZE: Robert MacNeil

WILDER REVEALED: Isabel Wilder: Sister, Secretary, and More

WILDER REDISCOVERED: Thornton Wilder's *Ivy Ode* at Yale

WILDER PRIZE AWARDED TO ROBERT MACNEIL



Charles Eshelman

Robert MacNeil Receives Wilder Prize

On Saturday, May 22, 2010, immediately after the matinee performance of the award-winning and record-breaking production of *Our Town* at the Barrow Street Theatre in New York City, the Wilder Society presented the second biannual Thornton Wilder Prize to Robert MacNeil. Attending the ceremony were TWS Honorary Chair Tappan Wilder, President Jackson R. Bryer, Executive Director Lincoln Konkle, and board of directors members Michael Greenwald and Terry Hallquist. Tappan Wilder opened with the following remarks:

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The Thornton Wilder Society is dedicated to preserving and expanding the legacy of Thornton Wilder.

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

2010 ALA Panel

This year's Wilder panel at the American Literature Association annual conference was part of "Intertextual Exchanges: Drama Sessions at the American Literature Association," a collaborative program organized by the American Theatre and Drama Society, the Susan Glaspell Society, the Eugene O'Neill Society, and the Thornton Wilder Society. For this collaborative series, intertextuality was considered in the broadest possible sense. Comprising our panel were Chair Park Bucker, University of South Carolina, Sumter; Tappan Wilder, nephew of Thornton Wilder and his literary executor, Chevy Chase, Maryland; Kristin Bennett, English graduate student at The College of New Jersey; and Jeffrey Eric Jenkins, editor of *The Best Plays Theater Yearbook* and a member of the Theatre Studies faculty at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Tappan Wilder opened his talk, "Thornton Wilder in the '30s: A Petrie Dish for Intertextual Study," with remarks about the current "golden age" of *Our Town*. With over a year-long run of David Cromer's acclaimed production of *Our Town* at the Barrow Street Theater in New York, 400,000 copies of the paperback edition sold, and the opera adaptation produced nearly twenty times since its premiere in 2006, he said this Wilder classic continues to speak at various levels to everyone. As one of his uncle's "marvelous" examples of intertextuality, he discussed Wilder's early three-minute play "Death of a Centaur" (1920) that draws on Ibsen, Shelley, and Milton's idea of "comus." He concluded that Wilder is an interdisciplinary study and, although his uncle saw himself more as a "discoverer of forgotten goods," Tappan believes Wilder is an innovator.



Park Bucker, Jeffrey Eric Jenkins, Kristin Bennett, and Tappan Wilder

In a paper entitled "The Tragic Heroine: An Intertextual Study of Thornton Wilder's Women in *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, and *Our Town* Using Judith Butler's Gender as Performance," Kristin Bennett suggested that both Judith Butler's influential theories of gender and Wilder's plays illustrate a similar investigation of the gendered self and a socialization process that results in the loss of access to one's personal identity. Comparing Emily with Mrs. Gibbs in *Our Town*, and Lucia with Genevieve in *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Bennett demonstrated how gender identities blind us from seeing life's actuality, one of Wilder's major themes. The resulting suffering, epitomized by the character of the "insane woman" in *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, reveals according to Bennett the tragic consequences of social limitations especially evident in Wilder's heroines.

The third paper, "A 'Psalm' for Its Time: History, Memory, and Nostalgia in *Our Town*," by Jeffrey Eric Jenkins, evoked Alexander Woollcott's 1938 comment on *Our Town*—"I would rather comment on the 23rd Psalm"—to mark not only

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The College of New Jersey

Woollcott's close friendship with Wilder but also the profound emotional impact the play had on its contemporary audiences. Jenkins argued that, beyond the religious significance found in the play, *Our Town* conjures the predawn of modern America before the ravages of the early twentieth century: war, disease, and economic calamity. He proposed that the 1938 audience, largely comprised of persons who remembered well the "simpler" times before the great War, may have led Wilder away from his initial dramatic intentions and toward a gauzy nostalgia.

Continuing the tradition of strong ALA Wilder panels, this year's panelists' thought-provoking presentations aptly revealed the rich potential of intertextuality in Wilder's writing that awaits further scholarly attention.

("Ivy Ode", continued from page 3)

An article in the March 30, 1916, *Yale Daily News* furnishes valuable information about the Ivy Ode four years before Wilder's graduation. It states that all seniors who have taken Latin are urged to submit an Ivy Ode by the end of May to be selected from the contributions of the class for use on Class Day; it notes that Professor Morris "will assist in instruction and advice in the art of writing Latin verse." I would like to thank Judith Schiff, the Chief Research Archivist in the Yale University Library's Manuscripts and Archives, for providing me with this information. According to Schiff, moreover, "The Ivy Ode tradition grew out of the custom of the planting of the class ivy that began in 1852. By the 1860s the students added an ode, usually in Latin, sung to a traditional air. The ode was published in the senior class book for the first time in 1927. Beginning in the 1970s the ode was read in English and then in the odist's original language. The odes continue to be delivered in a variety of classical and contemporary languages."

Wilder studied Latin with Dr. Clarence W. Mendell at Yale. Professor Edward Parmelee Morris (1853-1938) who assisted in instructing and advising Yale seniors in Latin verse composition in 1916, taught at Yale from 1891 to 1919, serving as Dunham Professor of Latin Language and Literature from 1909-1919. Since Morris retired the year before Wilder wrote the Ivy Ode, it is not clear if he worked with Wilder on its composition.

Judith P. Hallett is a Professor of Classics at the University of Maryland, College Park. She specializes in Latin language and literature, ancient Roman and Greek civilization, and the classical tradition in America. She is the author of Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family (Princeton 1984), and a contributor of chapters to books, several collections of essays, articles, reviews and translations into both English and classical Latin. She studied at the American Academy in Rome and the Institute of Classical Studies at the University of London. She is a recipient of Mellon teaching fellowships and NEH research fellowship. Most recently she presented at "Wait Til I'm Dead": A Colloquium on the Fiction of Thornton Wilder, where her students from Latin 351, Catullus and Horace, also read their translations of Wilder's Ivy Ode.

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Thornton Wilder

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THE THORNTON WILDER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



American Repertory Ballet. Photo by Leighton Chen

Above: Group scene from the prologue to Philip Jerry's ballet version of *Our Town*

Inset: Emily (Michelle de Fremery) and George (Joshua Kutzberg) duet from Act II of *Our Town* ballet

PERFORMING WILDER *Our Town* as Ballet

Michael Robertson

IF TRANSLATION IS AT BEST AN ECHO, as the British translator George Borrow claimed, adaptation is a new utterance. Successfully adapting a work to a different medium means creating it anew. The 1940 film version of *Our Town* provides a negative confirmation of that truth. The production team's failure in re-conceiving *Our Town* for the film medium led to a work that is occasionally bizarre—as when the Stage Manager turns to the camera and asks for questions from the audience—and more often treachery, as in the shots of a kitten lapping up milk spilled by Howie Newsome or, most notoriously, in Emily's resurrection following her ectoplasmic return to her sixteenth birthday.

Choreographer Philip Jerry's ballet version of *Our Town*, revived by American Repertory Ballet for its Spring 2011 season, is a more successful example of adaptation, all the more striking because of the difficulties Jerry faced. It is tough enough to transform any story into wordless dance, and *Our Town* is an exceptionally *talky* drama, its originality and power centered in the figure of the Stage Manager. What is his balletic equivalent? A magus figure akin to Drosselmeyer in *The Nutcracker*, producing George and Emily from underneath his swirling cloak? An eccentric inventor like Dr. Coppelius, creator of the automaton title-character of *Coppelia*?

Jerry, wisely, did not even try to reproduce the Stage Manager in his ballet. Instead, his one-act, forty-minute version brilliantly captures the aesthetic and thematic concerns at the heart of Wilder's drama: its meta-



theatricality, its linking of the particular and universal, its archeological layerings of time, its mythic attention to the human life cycle, and its obsession with death.

Jerry's *Our Town* begins in silence. From stage left, a man enters, moving slowly and stiffly, carrying on his back a tall wooden stepladder. His back is bent as if the ladder were preternaturally weighted, as heavy as the rock of Sisyphus. A few paces into his journey, the dramatic opening chords of Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" erupt into the theater, ennobling this as-yet-nameless character, turning his journey into a royal progress: he is simultaneously a dancer wearing a dark suit, a stagehand carrying a prop, and the hero of a modern odyssey.

He unfolds the ladder downstage right and soon is joined by other dancers, two of whom carry another ladder, which they set up on the opposite side of the stage. By the conclusion of the "Fanfare," the stage is filled with dancers: another man in a suit, two women in long dresses, young men in knickers, and young women in shirtwaists. All move in straight lines across the stage, as if limited to two dimensions; the effect is frieze-like, Egyptian tomb paintings come to life.

In this prologue, Jerry employs the deliberately archaic, high-modernist balletic technique of Vaslav Nijinsky's 1912 *Afternoon of a Faun*; the ballet's subsequent sections, set to excerpts from Copland's *The Red Pony* and his score for the *Our Town* film, use radically different balletic styles. The ballet simultaneously tells the story of the Webb and Gibbs families and surveys the history of twentieth-century dance, a perfect translation of Wilder's meta-theatrical preoccupations into dance terms.

The next and longest section of the ballet covers Act I of Wilder's drama. Copland's music here is light, quick, skimming, and Jerry uses the graceful theater-dance style that Agnes de Mille employed in mid-twentieth-century works such as her choreography for the musical *Oklahoma!* The growing attraction

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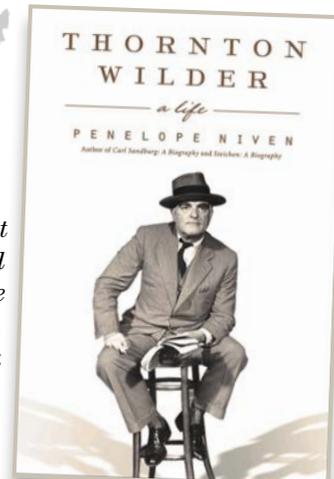
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WILDER REVEALED

The Young Thornton Wilder in China

Penelope Niven



Here is an excerpt from the third chapter of Penelope Niven's biography, Thornton Wilder: *A Life, to be published by Harper Collins on March 27, 2012.*

HarperCollins Publishers

IN SHANGHAI IN 1911, Dr. Wilder was "much pleased with Thornton's cheery temperament and innocence," but he worried about his son's strong artistic tendencies. When his head was not in a book, Thornton, now fourteen, was dreaming up stories or playing music. Concerned about his education in Shanghai, his parents decided he must go away to boarding school. Some thought was given to sending him to join his brother Amos at the Thacher School in California, but an alternative lay 450 miles north of Shanghai, in Chefoo (today Yantai, in Shandong Province). The China Inland Mission School at Chefoo was a well-established English-style boarding school for children of missionaries and other foreigners, founded in 1881 for "the education of the children and the recuperation of missionaries suffering from ill-health."

"I have just got permission to admit Thornton to the Chefoo School," Dr. Wilder wrote to his son Amos in late March 1911, adding that the school was "on the

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

Wilder at American Drama Conference

Michael Krahel



Photos by Edyta Oczkiewicz



Roundtable discussion "Getting Out of Our Town": (left) Yvonne Shafer and Cheryl Black, (right) Don Marlette, and Jackson Bryer;

ON THE BRISK MORNINGS OF OCTOBER 29TH AND 30TH, 2010, SCHOLARS GATHERED at Kean University in Union, New Jersey, to discuss American drama. Six panels were devoted to Thornton Wilder's most famous and lesser-known plays, and a production of *Our Town* by Kean University's drama department was performed on both nights. The conference made clear Wilder's vitality as a playwright.

The first discussion of Wilder took place at a plenary session devoted to the holdings of the Yale University Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. In "Using an Archive in the 21st Century: The American Collection," Louise Bernard, the Curator, focused on the Thornton Wilder collection, a veritable treasure trove of Wilder's writings and memorabilia, from handwritten drafts of his major works to tickets of productions he saw.

The next panel, "Thornton Wilder's Major Plays," was begun by Jonathan Shandell of Arcadia University with "Fitting Practice Into Theory: Using Aristotle, Brecht and Artaud to Read *Our Town*." Shandell framed his discussion of *Our Town* by his experiences in teaching it using Aristotelian, Brechtian, and Artaudian theory to counteract students' "hyperfamiliarity" with the play. Shandell sees *Our Town*'s Stage Manager as a vehicle for Brechtian alienation, eliminating the possibility of any suspension of disbelief, thus forcing the audience to contemplate what it sees every moment. In Aristotelian terms, Emily is the play's tragic hero, moving "from prosperity to affliction" and experiencing the suffering upon her ultimate realization of life's beauty. Artaud's concept of theater as an art form "for madmen and idiots," may be entirely incompatible with *Our Town*, but according to Shandell, the opposite is true. Artaud's view of theatre is of a medium for changing the "unknown to the known," and what is *Our Town*, especially in Act III, if not Wilder's own attempt to do just that?

Katherine Bacon of Broome Community College next presented "Wilder Women: Transforming and Reflecting the Female Archetype." Wilder's female characters, Bacon says, may tend to fulfill certain archetypes, notably the mother, but unlike many of his contemporaries, he never portrays them as victims. In her chronological discussion of Wilder's plays, Bacon claims that Wilder's commitment to a "dynamic, positive female archetype" is a tribute to the women in his life, but because Wilder's characters are both individuals and archetypes, they have a significance that is both personal and universal.

The next Wilder panel was a roundtable discussion called "Approaches to *Our Town*," and it included Bill Bower, director of the Kean University production; Terryll Hallquist of Vanderbilt University, who had directed a production there; and Sean Dineen, delivering the presentation originally scheduled for the morning panel, "Meditations on Mortality and Disability in *Our Town*" that was cancelled. Dineen suggested that *Our Town* is "the embodiment of the disability struggle" inasmuch as it depicts characters who come to have a "love for life that some other people might not have." The defining characteristic of individuals with disabilities, Dineen says, is the same as Emily's: their ability to see every moment of life as precious. Wilder's larger goal in *Our Town*, according to Dineen, is to say that "There is more to life than ordinary experience, but we can glimpse, in that ordinary experience, a bit of eternity."

An internationally known actor and mime, Bill Bower worked exhaustively with his cast at Kean University to get them to perform imaginary actions realistically. The strength of *Our Town*, Bower says, is its potential to show "the space between characters"; when presented with this space in such a literal fashion, we cannot look away. Terryll Hallquist agreed that the connections between the characters are the most important aspect of any production of the play, and that the traditional method of staging *Our Town*, sans props and scenery, is the most direct way of communicating them.

Next morning, the discussion of Wilder's dramatic works continued with a panel entitled "Lesser-Known Plays by Thornton Wilder." Kenneth Sanders of Kean University began with "Sojourners in Time: Revisiting Thornton Wilder's *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*." Wilder's is a unique New Jersey; it is as if he brought *Pilgrim's Progress* to the Garden State. In *Happy Journey*, Sanders says, Ma is on a pilgrimage of her own, but unlike Bunyan's Christian, she "seeks not deliverance, but completion." As neither a comedy nor a tragedy, the play foresees much future misery but is not all pessimistic. Rather, like so much of Wilder's work, it makes its audience stop and reflect on the beauty we can find in a transitory world.

Kristin Bennett of The College of New Jersey followed with "Deconstructing Generational Divisions: An Analysis

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