

The Skin of Our Teeth

A play by Thornton Wilder

I've got to admit it's getting better, a little better all the time. - The Beatles

Proposal by Dan Rogers

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The Staff:

Director: Dan Rogers '08

Assistant Director: Jenn Simonian '09

Stage Manager: Amanda Glassman '08

Production Manager: Nick Leiserson '09

Tech Director: Matt Ball '09

Set Designer: Peter Fallon '09

Scenic Painter: Laura Atkinson '07

Lighting designer: Justin Spiegel '08

Sound designer: Todd Lipcon '07

Costume Designer:

The Story (so far):

The Skin of Our Teeth received its first performance in New Haven, Connecticut, on October 15, 1942. The United States had declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941, and the Battle of Stalingrad, which would, in 1943, mark the first major German defeat of the war, had on just begun on September 13th. Meanwhile American troops were becoming more and more involved in the War on both fronts. The themes of war are echoed in the text: man's potential for savagery, the progress of science (Hiroshima was bombed in 1945), and man's determination to survive. This play is about humanity and what it does in the face of tragedy. How do we pull through in a world that repeats itself with natural disasters, family problems, and, as Wilder's audience in 1942 saw (and we today see), war? *The Skin of Our Teeth* presents the whole of human history as its story, and comes to the conclusion that, in the end, all that we really have is each other. What we need to go on living is hope and faith – in progress, in the future, and in all of humanity.

One of the important concepts to grasp in reading this work is its cyclical nature.

On the page, the work ends with its beginning. The sun rises at the end of the play, the Antrobus household has been returned from a state of disarray back to the way it was for the top of Act I, and Sabina comes out and delivers the opening monologue. In fact, each of the acts tells the same story with different events. The story is this: because of an upcoming disaster, whether natural (like a wall of ice or a flood) or man made (war), the world is about to end. To make matters worse, the Antrobus (from the Greek word for “man”) family is undergoing a crisis, a crisis where Mr. George Antrobus loses his will to live. Fortunately, before disaster truly strikes, George recovers his faith in humanity and is able to act in time to save his family and, with them, the human race. We escape disaster by the skin of our teeth.

The play is cyclical, not circular: it moves in a spiral, going through the same positions but making forward progress with each turn. In Act I, George learns to have faith in his children - that they can learn and make use of that knowledge. He finally resolves not only to keep the fire burning but to teach his children as much as he can. In Act II, he learns to have faith in his entire family. While Sabina offers a tempting diversion from the responsibilities of fatherhood, when the shit hits the fan family bonds are the most durable. He realizes when he sees Gladys’ red stockings and Henry’s murder of the chair pusher that he has a responsibility to his wife and children. In Act III Mr. Antrobus learns to put faith in humanity, to have hope that we can recover and, with the help of the knowledge gained by great men before us actually make life better. As Thornton Wilder wrote, in a journal: “The existence of his children and the inventive activity of his mind keep urging [man] on to continued and better-adjusted survival, [while] the ideas contained in the great books of his predecessors hang above him in mid-air, furnishing him adequate direction and stimulation.”¹ Forward progress in the play is made through an expanding circle of faith: from faith in individuals (Act I) to faith in human institutions and relationships (Act II) and finally to faith in existence (Act III).

“This is all very well and good,” you might say, “but how do a pet dinosaur, a self-referential writer who can't decide whether his play is set in biblical times or 1942, and actors who frequently break character and have to be persuaded by the stage manager (actually an actor) to continue fit into all of this?” The best answer to this is universality.

¹ <http://www.tcnj.edu/~wilder/>

That is to say, Wilder's point is that it doesn't matter *who* we are, *where* we are, or *when* we are, but rather that the point is that this is the story of us all, and that we're all involved. Hope in a better tomorrow and, more importantly, faith in humanity to make it that way, is the reason we go on living, and the reason we keep on trying to create. The story even affects the actors themselves, and they step out of the archetypes Wilder has created for them to express how it effects them.

This breaking down of conventions also presents an opportunity for commentary on the nature of the theatre and theatre-going. People come together to tell a story, and everyone in the building is involved. The play needs the audience just as much as the audience needs the play. In a world where our existence is largely insignificant and transient, our only choice is to put faith in each other, for we all need each other to keep on.

The Cast:

12-14: 6 female / 4 male / 2-4 swing

It will be very easy for me to adjust my casting based on who auditions. The cast size will vary depending upon how many roles are doubled among the ensemble, and of course the balance there will be between having a cast large enough to enliven the stage (particularly in the refugee and boardwalk scenes) while having enough meaty roles to challenge the actors. If suitable people show up, there's probably room to expand the cast to 16 while still having reasonable parts for everyone. Conversely it would also be possible, by cutting the roles of the refugees and the conveners, to do the show with as few as 10. In this case I would probably throw most of my gender preferences out the window, leaving a split of 3 female / 2 male / 5 swing. The show could still work, but I'd want to adapt my design concepts to a more minimalist approach - by gearing the set design to a smaller space, for example. In general I aim to have as much flexibility as possible so I can take the best group of actors I can get.

The Approach to the Work:

The scope of this play is gigantic. I think one of the first things that strikes me is the universality of time depicted in it. The Ice Age and present day are happening concurrently, and somehow we accept it. The events of the Second Act take place

thousands of years after those in the First Act, but also in the same year, present day. I would like to add to and emphasize that universality of time by setting the play in the second half of the twentieth century. These characters are everyone throughout history – past, present, and future. The First Act will be set in the late 50s / early 60s when post-War conformity was still mainstream, but the ideas of counterculture were beginning to take hold. These new ideas are represented in the form of the refugees, and costuming could make this more apparent by referencing the hippy movement. In the world of the play this staging makes sense. In the First Act, everyone's in their place, especially Henry who is still out to please his father. The Second Act I would like to place in the decadent 80s, the Reagan years when people said, “Enjoy yourselves!” as America sunk into debt and the stock market crashed. The Final Act will be set today. The emphasis will be not on today's wars and disasters but on the rebuilding that comes after them, and the hope and faith in the future necessary to drive that rebuilding. Even though I won't go out of the way to reference it, parallels to both the Iraq War, Katrina, and Darfur will be hard to deny. I hope that the universality will be achieved through the conflict between the elements of the text that refer to biblical time, the settings implied by the design, and the parallels easily drawn to modern day. In other words, the production will represent three different “presents” at once, and the effect will be to make the audience recognize that the story it tells is universal, and all of these “presents” are true. The audience will recognize the piece not just as the story of a family's hardships, or of a production gone terribly awry, but as the story of all humans throughout history. If you were to represent the history of the universe as 24 hours on a clock, humanity would come into the story in the last minute of the last hour. In the grand scheme of things a human being is a small, fragile, not to mention short-lived thing, and ultimately humanity's only hope lies in its members. This theme runs through all of Wilder's writing, especially his other Pulitzer winning works, the play *Our Town* and the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

Another important thing achieved by this play is ambiguity in theatrical relationships and conventions. When Sabina drops character and addresses the audience, I want them to be unsure as to whether or not it's actually scripted. When she asks them to pass up their chairs, they should catch themselves thinking that they should get up and

do it. One of the things about this play that was shocking when it came out in 1942 was that when actors addressed the audience, they did so in the colloquial speech of the audience, and not in the play's language. To preserve that feeling, I will have actors who break character rewrite their lines to bring the language up to date. It'll take a lot of work to make an acceptable draft, but I think the payoff will be splendid. I'm considering going so far as to mess with the program a little too by, for example, listing Ivy as Assistant Costumer and Mr. Fitzpatrick as Assistant Director or Stage Manager. The jury's still out on that, but this may be what revitalizes the effect in an era where breaking the fourth wall is a little more common than it was when the play premiered.

Why does Wilder, and why will I, go to such lengths to force the audience to be constantly aware that they are watching actors performing in a play? In the same way as his concept of time is, this theatricality is aimed to make the audience realize their association with what is going on on the stage. There's no remove: as soon as all of this breaking character business starts the way the audience views the play is radically changed. As Thornton Wilder said, "it is precisely the glory of the stage that it is always 'now' there."² We are no longer watching events that happened in the Stone Age. We're watching "now," and the story that is happening now is a production that is going horribly awry. This is the third time line I was talking about. We're amused by Miss Somerset's plight, we don't want them to skip the scene in Act II; essentially we become invested in the story of the play and the story of the actors involved in an entirely new and more committed way. Another effect of this breakdown of conventions is a realization of the audience's role in the process: as Sabina says in Act I, "Now that you audience are listening to this, too, I understand it a little better." If I am successful, everyone in the building will be working toward the common goal of telling the story.

With all of these strange occurrences, I think it could become easy for the audience to be distracted and lose sight of the simple story and message at the heart of the play. It's also an easy thing for the people involved in producing and performing the piece to do, as the play has a very definite theatrical nature. It's "deep" and it's easy to get lost in all the interesting discussions and ideas it provokes. In a lot of ways, this is a very problem to the some of the ones we face when producing Shakespeare. Experience has

²Forward to the compilation, *3 Plays* (includes *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *The Matchmaker*).

shown me that the best way to solve this issue is to keep the story clear in everyone's minds and to make sure that every decision made serves to tell it better.

It is also easy to become caught up in the allegory. “Ok,” an actor may think to himself, “so if I represent humanity's Impulse to Create, I should react this way to this happening.” The paradoxical part of this show is that even though one must be aware of Big Ideas in a general sense, this information is almost useless to an actor trying to continuously be a living character. Our job in rehearsal will instead be to try and find the script's practical underpinnings, as we would for any scene. The allusions and symbolism will speak for themselves if we can create a true rendering of the text. My ideal for a good director, which I'll go into more fully a little later, is someone who acts as a guide on a journey of self discovery. The process is collaborative and experimental. The actor does something based on suggestions that I have made, and then we move on based on the results. The main idea is exploration.

With that in mind, although I am going into this project with some ideas about these characters, but these ideas are starting points rather than fixed notions. If you want to know specifics, by all means ask me, but here are some of the kinds of questions I hope to explore with my cast. What kind of tensions would you expect in a nuclear family? What tension would a young housekeeper / potential mistress in the house put on a married couple? What is it that allows Maggie and George to weather such long years together? I think, in the end, the relationships between Maggie, George, and Sabina will be the keys to getting the show to work, although this by no means diminishes any of the other characters (and I don't just mean Gladys and Henry).

Finally, I would like to transfer this idea of universality to the set design. The focus would be a sort of raised platform, probably with a few different levels. This platform may even be able to reconfigure itself between acts, changing shape. Additionally, it will have slats or brackets to accommodate thin flats. These flats could be made of particle board, or canvas stretched over a frame and painted, or even (as the script suggests for the Second Act) cardboard nailed to wood supports. The idea is that each set is composed of the same elements, but rearranged in a different configuration to create the space. How this will actually look is quite another thing, which I leave to my

set designer. Of course, for the boardwalk a rail will be able to be placed along it, and it'll have a trap door for the Third Act. These ideas are flexible, and I will be open to discussion with my set designer, Pete Fallon. Working with him as my tech director for *Twelfth Night* has resulted in an understanding between us that I think will result in an excellent collaboration.

The Why's:

Michael Perlman posed this question to me when I approached him for advice about directing *As You Like It*: “If an atomic bomb went off in Providence center, and you and your actors survived, why would you do this production?” I can imagine nothing more fitting to do in such circumstances than *The Skin of Our Teeth* for, more than anything, the play is about hope. We can rebuild after disaster strikes. The play is a resounding answer to the question of “why go on?” With the same shit happening over and over again, people need to believe in a better future and the possibility of creating it.

What can humans do in the face of tragedy? If 9/11 or Katrina were any indication, I think that the answer is that we can come together. Thornton Wilder's message is clear – in the end all we really have is each other. The play found some of its greatest popularity produced in the bombed out churches and beerhalls of post-World War II Germany, and it has never been more topical, more powerful, or more important to produce than now. We have lost a city to a flood, genocide continues in Darfur and our nation is fighting a war for what we realize more and more to be the wrong reasons. Meanwhile, our president tells us not to worry; “Enjoy yourselves!” he says as he orders illegal wire-tappings behind our backs. In a world like this, where we find tragedy everywhere we turn, a message of hope in the face of destruction is more salient than ever.

Doing this play would be a great opportunity for PW. The text is Pulitzer Prize-winning for good reason. It's fairly well known, classic even, yet rarely produced. It's timeless. It's important. It's been called a landmark work of 20th century playwriting, although it likes to go by SoOT for short, and that alone would make it a valuable experience for Brown performers and theatergoers. Most importantly it's absolutely bizarre, blurring the boundaries between actor and character, character and audience,

ancient time and present day. Now I'm not saying PW is weird or anything, and certainly not that it's unattractive. I mean, I'm attracted to it, but just not in that way. Ok, I am. It somehow is both a milestone in the Western cannon and fearlessly experimental, and as such it is an enormous and singular opportunity for everyone involved. Not to toot my own trombone here, but I also think it would be amazing to start off the semester with a truly exceptional show. You know, teach those 2010ers some R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

So why does this play need PW? First of all, the more intimate space will allow me to rub out those boundaries between the audience and the play even more than I could otherwise. With all the times that the audience is directly addressed by the cast, sheer proximity will go a long way towards getting them involved. The play will grab the audience by its collar and yank its members along with it. The black and boxy nature of the space will also allow for many more possibilities in tech design for an admittedly technical show.

Most importantly, it seems to me that PW as an organization has a fundamentally collaborative nature. That is to say that creating art in PW is not simply “[Director's Name] presents *Play*,” but that the finished product is truly created by a group of artists working together.

The Four C's:

A good way to summarize my view on what's important as a director is with four c-words.

1.) *Collaborate*. It's silly to go into something, especially something as complex as a play, and assume that you have all of answers. If an actor asks me a question to which I don't know the answer, I want to figure it out with him or her rather than bullshitting my way out. The best ideas in my productions have come from my actors. Or maybe they took something I thought of and ran with it. Or the other way around. In any case, the best aspect of working collaboratively is that the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts, and this definitely extends to the technical side of the production as well. What do I know about lighting design? I guarantee you not as much as Justin. I'll bring my ideas to the table, and again guide him in the direction I want, but I know and expect him to come up with concepts that I haven't thought of. On the other hand, it seems like the better productions I've seen at PW have had a strong and clear

vision at their core. Along these lines, I'm ready to be decisive and have the final say, when necessary. I do know what I want, but the question that I'll be continually asking is "How can my designers improve this?" I want my art to be a two-way street. It's not my play, it's *our* play.

- 2.) *Casting*. It is a true cliché that if you do a good job casting, you've done at least 80% of the work. Probably more. Explaining why this is is a rather difficult task, but I've seen it demonstrated over and over again. When I cast I'm looking for actors who not only read their parts appropriately, but imaginatively and with a sense of fun and playfulness that makes them interesting to watch and work with. Finding an actor who sees exciting possibilities in the role is what I call good casting.
- 3.) *Coordinate*. Thankfully I'll be able to *collaborate* with my SM here. It's basically keeping track of what needs to be done and who can do it. I suppose you could put leadership this heading as well. The challenge of leading well is balancing getting the people that follow you to like you enough that they'll help you do what you want to do, while also not being so friendly that nothing gets done because you're too busy "hanging out." This is also about scheduling and good communication (a lower-case c, if you will). Efficiency = high five!
- 4.) *Crap I need to do*. This is the category for all the little things. Chief among them is stage picture – being careful about where I focus the viewer's attention. Also important is creating cast unity, building with an ensemble rather than a bunch of sassy little egoists. I've been pretty successful at this in the past, and I think that part of it is another lower-case c, circle or "checking in." The idea is that before rehearsal takes off, each person in the cast gets the full, undivided attention of the rest of us to say whatever he or she needs to say to feel comfortable going balls-out in the space. The whole thing doesn't take longer than 15 minutes typically, but for some reason it helps build cast unity.

The Moment:

Act III opens in darkness. You hear the sound of foreboding, as if someone has died but you haven't yet heard about it. One light slowly turns on, shooting several rays through the fog gathered onstage. In the dim light, you can barely make out the ruins of

the set of Act I. It is like Picasso's painting "La Guernica," only it's dawn the morning after and everybody's dead. "Hello?" Sabina calls, wandering onstage and holding a flashlight, "Mrs. Antrobus? Gladys?" The dreadful sounds are still playing in the background. Perhaps they've died. Sabina continues to wander through the ruins, hoping nothing terrible has happened.

Just when you feel you can't stand it any longer, all of the lights abruptly come up (houselights first) and a techie, listed as Assistant Stage Manager in the program, comes running in with the whole company asking to interrupt the play. Sabina, who at first was so quick to drop character any chance she got, tries to push on but eventually acquiesces. Apparently some of the actors are sick with food poisoning, and the Stage Manager will have to rehearse their replacements now, onstage. She tells the audience to "talk amongst yourselves," or even to go out for a smoke. But no one moves a muscle. Is she serious? Or is this just part of the crazy play? Nobody moves. What is it that's so important about sitting and watching? Like Sabina, you're trying to keep the play going, to tell the story. And what they discuss in the "rehearsal" is all these different interpretations for the text. Everyone has a different theory of what the "play" means. What's yours?

The Budget:

Rights are \$155 for four performances. With the new budgeting, that still leaves \$650 for the show. To entirely estimate:

Copying - \$30

Lights and sound - \$70

Props - \$100

Costumes - \$250

Set - \$200

An awesome show that challenges our conception of theatre, and also has a mammoth...

- Priceless

I anticipate that lights, sound, and props will need less money than I've budgeted, in which case more funding will go into the set.

The Me:

Fall 2004 – Stage managed *3 Chairs, 2 Cubes*

Spring 2005 – Co-directed *As You Like It* for Shakespeare on the Green

Fall 2005 – Directed Act I of *Henry V* for Shakespeare on the Green “Day of Scenes”

Spring 2006 – Lighting designed *This is Our Youth* for UpSpace

Spring 2006 – Set designer *Twelfth Night* for PW

Spring 2006 – Played Bardolph in *Henry IV* for Shakespeare on the Green

4/2/2006 – Ate another sandwich

The Epilogue:

In his foreword to *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*, a collection of 3-minute, 3-character plays that comprise his earliest dramatic work, Thornton Wilder wrote:

I hope, through many mistakes, to discover the spirit that is not unequal to the elevation of the great religious themes, yet which does not fall into a repellent didacticism. Didacticism is an attempt at the coercion of another's free mind, even though one knows that in these matters beyond logic, beauty is the only persuasion.

I hope to do the same in this production. These things may happen over and over again. Life may seem bleak. But we *do* make progress, and there *is* hope for humanity in the midst of this mess. If we can come together and have faith in each other, we can achieve amazing things. Now, in the wake of all of these disasters, from New Orleans to the surveillance scandal to the Pakistan earthquake, is a time when this message desperately needs to be heard. I hope that I can be the one to say it. Give me the chance, and I'll use everything I have to say it as loudly, as eloquently, and as beautifully as possible.