

INSIDER'S INSIGHTS

Westport
Country
Playhouse



All About Us | April 10 – 28, 2007

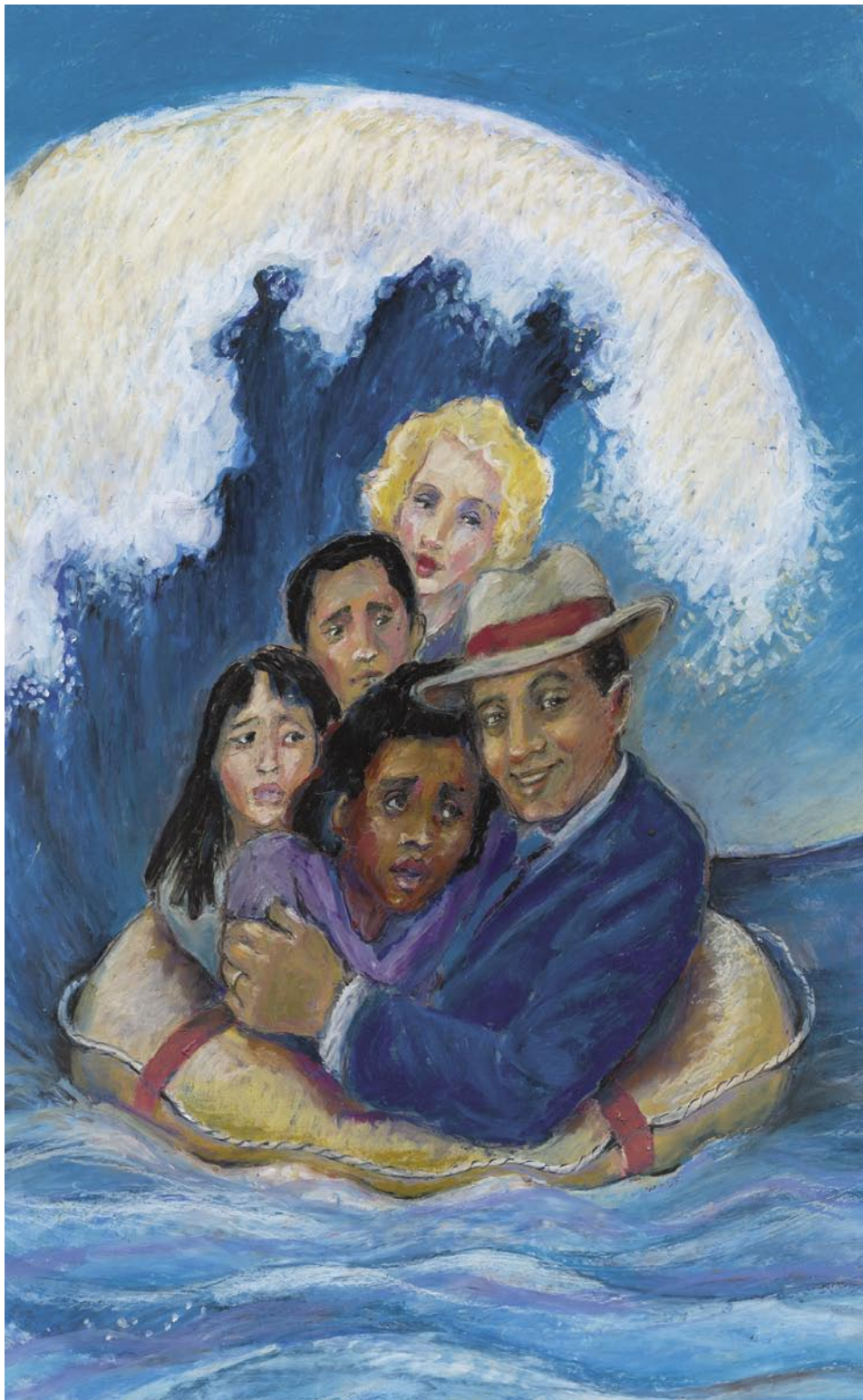


ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH WOLF

“There are no Golden Ages and no Dark Ages, but only the ocean-like monotony of the generations, of men under the alterations of fair and foul weather.”

– Thornton Wilder on *The Skin of Our Teeth*

THE PLAY: *The Skin of Our Teeth*

Wilder once said, “I can take care of my immortal soul, but who’s going to take care of my laundry?” The brilliant perspective that makes Wilder worthy of our attention is his ability to connect what is mundane and everyday in our lives with what is eternal, timeless, and universal. A fully connected life, Wilder tells us, requires equal concentration on both. And he gives both sides of life equal focus in *The Skin of Our Teeth* by dramatizing the entirety of human history, with the most “average” or ordinary stand-ins for all of humankind: a modern, suburban family from New Jersey.

Endowing a typical middle-class family with such epic significance lends the play its satiric flavor. Wilder has aptly given this family the last name Antrobus – taken from the Greek word anthropos, meaning human or person. And all of them exist on multiple levels as relatable contemporary figures, biblical and mythic figures, and finally as archetypes – classic, even generic personality types familiar to all of us (for example, motherhood, adultery, etc.).

For instance, the family’s patriarch George is described in Wilder’s words as a “John Doe or a George Spelvin or you – the average American.” In the theatre, the name George Spelvin is the John Doe equivalent: a generic pseudonym traditionally used by actors. George Antrobus is depicted as an everyman, but he is also connected to Noah before the

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INSIDER'S INSIGHT

Conceived and edited by Debra Baron, Director of Education

Written by Gabriel Davis, Education Associate

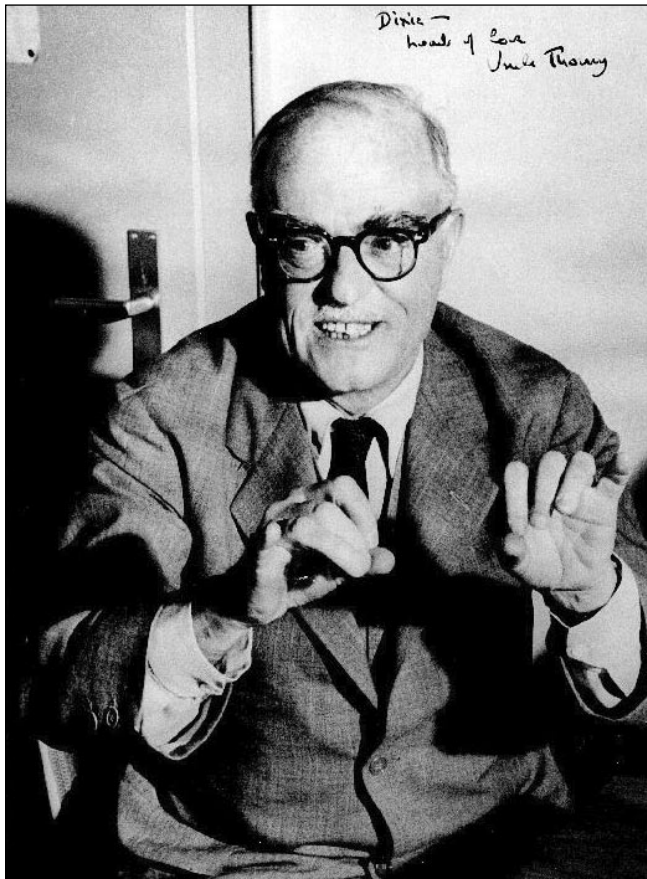
Available for download at westportplayhouse.org/allaboutus.htm

THE PLAY: *The Skin of Our Teeth*
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flood. He is father to a typical, middle-class American family and he is also Adam, father to the human race.

George's wife Maggie is Eve but she is also a contemporary mother. At one point, she takes on epic stature as Noah's wife before the flood, but remains relatable as she worries about whether her children are wearing their raincoats or not. Maggie also exists as a more general archetype of motherhood: she represents the power and ferocity of a mother's love. As her maid puts it, "If you want to know about Mrs. Antrobus... just go and look at a tigress, and look hard."

Wilder has made each member of the Antrobus family simultaneously identifiable in modern, mythical and biblical time periods to underline his play's message: no matter how much the world may shift and transform around us as time marches on, in successive generations we are essentially the same. In this way, Wilder's characters are able to do things as commonplace and everyday as their laundry and in those familiar gestures are able to tend to our "immortal souls," connecting us through suburban folk from New Jersey to what is enduring and perhaps even eternal in our humanity.



Thornton Wilder

THE AUTHOR: Thornton Wilder and his influences

*"Literature has always
more resembled a torch
race than a furious dispute among heirs."*

– Thornton Wilder

The greatest of dramatists are brilliant borrowers and Wilder built a theatrical career on arranging and excavating elements, from a life lived in literature, into fresh works for the stage. Going as far back as Shakespeare's canon of work, great playwrights are notorious for borrowing plots, reconstructing old stories and myths and making them their own. Wilder understood this. His view was that every artist should recognize the "enormous tradition of indebtedness from author to author."

One author to whom Wilder is indebted is James Joyce, whose novel *Finnegan's Wake* influenced *The Skin of Our Teeth*. For instance, Wilder ends *The Skin of Our Teeth* where it begins: with Sabina standing at the window, worried for her survival because Mr. Antrobus is not yet home. Joyce's novel follows a cyclical structure as well. The opening line of Joyce's masterwork is the second half of a sentence and the book ends with the first half of that same sentence; to complete it is to begin again. And like Mr. Antrobus of Wilder's play, Joyce's protagonist Finnegan is both an everyman and the father of man. Both protagonists are strong men, innovators but flawed. Both struggle to survive, fall into venial sin and error that leads to their destruction (or near-destruction in Wilder's) and are revived by the love of a strong woman.

Wilder takes some of the same philosophical material that Joyce grapples with and frames it in an entirely new way: as a comic burlesque. The idea came to Wilder when a chicken was put in his lap during Olsen and Johnson's screwball comedy, *Hellzapoppin'*. And what a choice! The comedy is what gives the play its sense of upbeat optimism even as it grapples with the darkest of themes: that we may go extinct at any moment - in every generation we're just barely hanging on by the skin of our teeth! It was this unique approach to the material that won Wilder the Pulitzer for this play and, as some modern theatre scholars contend - Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Paula Vogel, among them - it could have even won him the Nobel Prize were it not for the barrage of criticism he received when the play first premiered.

At its opening, critics charged that *The Skin of Our Teeth* was little more than an Americanized version of Joyce's work; that the play was in some way plagiarized. In a letter to "The Saturday Review of Literature" (which he never sent), Wilder defended himself, saying that his play "moved into its own independent existence through its insistence on being theatre..." However, in the end, Wilder chose not to dignify the accusation with a reply, perhaps because his own conception of the artist's role did not follow such a narrow, ego-driven view of ownership. As Harold Clurman put it, Wilder "arranges flowers beautifully, but does not grow them."

Wilder understood that his gift as dramatist lay in deft arrangement. Ever humble, he hoped only that his efforts would point the way for future generations: "The theatre has lagged behind the other arts in finding the 'new ways' to express how men and women think and feel in our time. I am not one of the new dramatists we are looking for. I wish I were. I hope I have played a part in preparing the way for them. I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods and I hope a remover of unobtrusive bric-a-brac. And as I view the work of my contemporaries I seem to feel that I am exceptional in one thing - I give (don't I) the impression of having enormously enjoyed it."



Inside front page of production program

THE MUSICAL: *All About Us*

All About Us marks the second collaboration between Joseph Stein, John Kander and Fred Ebb. Their first collaboration was on the musical *Zorba*, which won four Tony Awards. *All About Us* was originally entitled *Over and Over*, and an early draft of the musical had a staging in 1999 at the Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia. After that, they continued to develop *Over and Over* with a number of workshop productions. Then in 2004 Fred Ebb passed away. Kander and Stein continued the work and two years later, revamped and re-titled as *All About Us*, an initial reading of the musical was held on January 17, 2006 in New York City, featuring Eartha Kitt and Karen Ziemba. Westport Country Playhouse's production of *All About Us* is the first, full professional staging of the musical.

Kander and Ebb: a career-spanning, career-making collaboration

Transforming Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* into musical form, was one of Kander and Ebb's final collaborations, marking the end of an incredibly successful creative partnership that had greater longevity than many marriages and gave birth to a number of theatrical careers. Their first produced musical, *Flora the Red Menace*, launched Liza Minnelli's Broadway career, with a Best Actress Tony win at 19 years old. She won a Tony playing the lead in their musical *The Act* and an Oscar in the film version of their hit musical *Cabaret*, which ran on Broadway for over 1100 performances, won a Tony Award for best musical and a Grammy for best cast recording. They didn't hurt Chita Rivera's career either; both her Tony-wins were for Kander and Ebb musicals: *The Rink* (1984) and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993). Ms. Rivera first worked with them on *Chicago*, a popular success which ran for nearly 1000 performances but was overshadowed that year by *A Chorus Line*. However, the 2001 Broadway revival of *Chicago* was among the most celebrated productions of the decade and the film version won the duo an Oscar nod. They hit another one out of the park with *Woman of the Year*, winning four Tony Awards, including one for its star Lauren Bacall. And the duo continued to be recognized with awards and nominations through the remaining years of their collaboration with *Steel Pier* (1997), *Fosse* (1999), *The Visit* (2001), and *Curtains* (2006). The duo has been



**Costume Renderings for
Mrs. Antrobus in *All About Us***
Courtesy of Costume Designer Ann Hould-Ward

Wilder and World War II

Early on in the writing of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder said he “fixed his thoughts on the War and the situation of the eternal family under successive catastrophes.” Wilder’s genuine concern over the war was a strong driving inspiration for the play. He knew that like his fictional Antrobus Family, Americans were up against incredible odds and genuine catastrophe. Many were ill-prepared; millions of draftees were rejected by the army because they were illiterate and incapable of basic math.

The draft, in exposing deficiencies of American education, ended up being a catalyst to the vast overhaul and improvement of the school system that took place over the next decade. In the meantime, men like Wilder, who held a B.A. from Yale and an M.A. from Princeton, were of value in wartime. At 45 years old, with poor vision that guaranteed he would

never be drafted, shortly before his play’s premiere, Wilder joined the Army as a captain and was assigned to the Army Air Corps where he worked in, fittingly, the brains of the operation: Intelligence and War Plans.

Meanwhile *The Skin of Our Teeth* opened at the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway. It was 1942 and here was a play about the human race facing (and surviving) extinction when Germany controlled most of Europe; when British and Russian airmen and soldiers were hanging on grimly against seemingly unbeatable German forces; and when America had been driven from the Phillipines by Japanese troops, who controlled much of Asia. At a time when America was just entering the war, with survival-anxieties running high, this play hit too close to home for audiences.

Westport Country Playhouse's 1948 production of *The Skin of Our Teeth*

However, it was received exceedingly well in Germany after the war. Here was a nation that had come to the brink of extinction, and a people who related deeply to the Antrobus family and found themselves nourished by the resilience and spirit of hope the Antrobus’s possessed: a spirit they used to pick up the pieces and carry on. When the play was first shown there, audiences would “lose” a meal and brave cold, bombed-out churches and beer halls to see it because, as Wilder stated, “in the end you come out of the cellars and begin life over again.”

Today, given the current state of affairs, with nations ravaged, in states of civil unrest and families struggling to survive, the Antrobus resilience and spirit of hope are in high demand and Wilder’s tale of survival in the face of incredible threat is just as contemporary now as when it was first written.



Thornton Wilder as Mr. Antrobus, Armina Marshall as Mrs. Antrobus, the rest of the Antrobus family, and Betty Field as Sabina in the Playhouse’s 1948 production of *The Skin of Our Teeth*

Kander and Ebb: a career-spanning, career-making collaboration
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recognized for their contribution to theatre and music with the Kennedy Center Honors.

In the following excerpt, Kander and Ebb discuss what made their creative partnership so long lasting and successful:

Kander: *When we first began to work together we fell into a way of working that allowed us to enjoy what we were doing. But it was just luck that we established that kind of rapport because if it weren’t fun for the two of us we wouldn’t be working together. Writing is never really difficult for us even if it takes a long time. We may write junk, tear it up, and then write it again, but the process of writing is never agonizing or depressing. Even writing badly is fun while we’re doing it.”*

Ebb: *You never challenged me in any threatening way. There was a safety in being with you that I hadn’t often felt with other people, and a lack of desire to ingratiate. I always felt confident in your affection for me, and that was sustaining. I don’t remember my ever questioning that or going to sleep worried about whether or not you would like me. There is a freedom, a total lack of anxiety when we work.”*

Excerpt from *Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz, Collaboration, and All That Jazz*.

Wilder and Westport Country Playhouse

Before he found fame, Thornton Wilder was commissioned by Westport Country Playhouse in 1931 to work as an adaptor and translator on the foreign play *The Bride of Torozko*. After he won his two Pulitzer Prizes, he returned to the Playhouse to perform the role of Stage Manager in *Our Town* in 1946 and the role of George Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1948.



Set Model pieces for *All About Us*

Courtesy of Set Designer James Youmans

Joseph Stein:

words from the book writer

Joseph Stein is best known as the book writer for hit musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Zorba*, *Take Me Along*, and *The Baker's Wife*. He started out as a social worker, writing comedy on the side. A chance encounter led him to Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, where he joined the writing team that included Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Carl Reiner and Neil Simon.

Q: Where did you get the idea for and what was the genesis of this musical?

Joseph Stein: *The three of us (himself, Kander & Ebb) were looking for an idea for a project because we'd written Zorba and wanted to work together again. My wife, who had played in The Skin of Our Teeth years before, had thought of it as a possible musical and I mentioned it, and both John and Fred were very intrigued by it, and that was the start of it.*

Q: What was the biggest challenge working to adapt Wilder's vision into musical form?

Stein: *To make it work for modern audiences: after all it was written in the early forties. I adapted it to make it much more contemporary and eliminated some things that I felt were unnecessary for our purposes. We had to create certain sections that were not in the play at all, to make it work as a contemporary musical.*

Q: How would you describe your collaboration with Kander and Ebb?

Stein: *It's a very close relationship to collaborate on a musical. When we worked on Zorba we fell into a working structure that was very comfortable. We had a strong mutual respect between the three of us, which I think is essential for any successful collaboration.*

Q: Was it hard to continue work on the musical with Fred Ebb gone?

Stein: *No, because most of the musical was complete before he left us. Fred was a joy to work with, aside from being a superb lyricist and very witty and very thoughtful and very poetic, he was also a wonderful human being, we were very close friends for years since we worked together on Zorba. But he's made his contribution to this show: it's his show.*

Q: Was there a moment when you knew you wanted to work in the theatre?

Stein: *I was always interested in working in the theatre. From the time I first saw my first play I was intrigued in working for the stage. One of the plays I saw very early, that left an impression on me, that is being revived now, was Journey's End.*



Costume Renderings for the mammoths in *All About Us*

There are over 50 costumes in this production. Colored costume renderings and fabric swatches help create the overall stage picture.

Courtesy of Costume Designer Ann Hould-Ward

Suggested Readings

The Skin of Our Teeth by Thornton Wilder. With a forward by Paula Vogel and afterward by Tappan Wilder. Published by HarperCollins, 2003. Includes production notes, diary entries, and other documentary materials.

Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz, Collaboration and All That Jazz by John Kander, Fred Ebb and Greg Lawrence. With a forward by Harold Prince and introduction by Liza Minnelli. Published by Faber and Faber, Inc., 2003.

Thornton Wilder: the bright and the dark by Mildred Christophe Kuner. Published by Crowell, 1972. A biography.

The Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961 Published by Yale University Press, 1984.

Discussion Points

- (1) Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928, and in 1998 it was selected by the editorial board of the American Modern Library as one of the 100 best novels of the twentieth century. The book explores the question of evil and why unfortunate events occur to people who seem "innocent" or "undeserving". The book was quoted by British Prime Minister Tony Blair during the memorial service for victims of the September 11 attacks in 2001. Based on *The Skin of Our Teeth*, how do you think Wilder would answer the question he poses in his novel: how must we carry on after devastating events; how should these events shape the way we live our lives? How are these same questions present in his other well-known play, *Our Town*?
- (2) Compare and contrast the audiences of 1942 and 2007. What are the ways in which the audience will experience the essential themes differently; in what ways will we experience them similarly today?
- (3) Was *All About Us* a successful adaptation? Did the music contemporize this well-know material? Did it create a greater understanding of the themes? Did it distract? A reading of *The Skin of Our Teeth* might be an interesting pre-show activity!
- (4) The musical, like the play, is filled with Biblical and mythological references. What events in each act, and what traits of each character, support these references?
- (5) Compare and contrast *The Skin of Our Teeth* with James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. What are the similarities in content and structure? What are the differences between the ways in which each author viewed the world? Both pieces are highly aware of themselves as works of art (a novel and as a play); how is this accomplished by Joyce in novel form and how by Wilder in play form? In terms of this concept of self-aware art: how might the influence of Bertolt Brecht, a German socialist dramatist and one of Wilder's contemporaries, be felt in *The Skin of Our Teeth*?

All About Us: Special Events

Sunday Symposium April 15, 2007, immediately following the 3pm matinee
Free and open to the public. Join Wilder's nephew, Tappan Wilder, for a post-show discussion on Thornton Wilder in the 21st Century.

Thursday Talkback April 26, 2007, immediately following the 8pm performance
Free and open to the public. Join the cast members of *All About Us* to discuss their experiences working on the production. *Artist attendance subject to availability.*