

# HUFFINGTON POST

## ARTS & CULTURE

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### First Nighter: Two Superlative Thornton Wilder One-Acts in "A Wilder Christmas"

Perhaps Thornton Wilder's chief glory is his belief in and conviction about the celestial mundane. It's certainly the foundation on which he wrote his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Our Town*, where the daily life of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire is depicted over a few early 20th-century decades, but he'd already been tripping fantastically along those lines in earlier one-acters.

Two -- surely two of the most accomplished and enduring -- are "The Long Christmas Dinner" and "Pullman Car Hiawatha," which luckily for theatergoers are now the objects of fine revivals by director Dan Wackerman's Peccadillo Theater Company at the Theatre at St. Clement's. The event is called *A Wilder Christmas*.

Sometimes overlooked when the top previous-century playwrights are listed, Wilder absolutely shouldn't be. His cheerful playing with theater form is inextricable from the outstanding writing of the period. In "The Long Christmas Dinner," the Bayard family gathers for their annual turkey, but as they convene over the course of 75 years or so, new members regularly enter as aging members leave.

On Harry Feiner's simple set a table set with gleaming tableware is the centerpiece. It's flanked by an arched trellis capped with spring flowers at stage right and a matching arched trellis capped with bare branches at stage left. No need to explain by which trellis the new Bayards arrive and by which trellis they depart.

The laughter and tears common to Everyfamily are common to the Bayards. Wilder sees to it that, while specific ups and down occur -- healthy children mature, a child lost in infancy doesn't, a son has success in business, a son is killed in World War I, a spinster daughter leaves home, another son deserts out of boredom -- the universal is also celebrated.

In "Pullman Car Hiawatha" travelers, again of universal stripe, are on a journey that Wilder undoubtedly intends to be symbolic as well as real. Curiously, they pass through another Grover's Corners, this one in Ohio. Narrating their progress is a stage manager (Michael Sean McGuinness), who foreshadows *Our Town*. Also aboard is a young woman (Anna Marie Sell), who dies and, on being led to heaven by an archangel (Lamar Giles), bids goodbye to the world very much as *Our Town*'s Emily does.

Both plays are beauties and are acted accordingly by Wackerman's troupe. The pieces may not be performed as rarely as the Peccadillo info suggests, but they're the sorts of superior entries that never grow stale in the viewing. By the way, be warned that Wackerman fiddles with some of the roles so that audience participation arises.