



NEW YORK—The fragility and fleetingness of life is examined by the Peccadillo Theater Company in its excellent presentation of “A Wilder Christmas,” the umbrella title for two rarely performed one-act works by Thornton Wilder. Both “The Long Christmas Dinner” and “Pullman Car Hiawatha” quietly and powerfully examine just how short our time on this planet actually is.



(L–R) Giselle Wolf, Brad Fryman, Barbra Wengerd, and John Pasha in the rarely produced “The Long Christmas Dinner” by Thornton Wilder. (Carol Rosegg)

‘The Long Christmas Dinner’

Spanning the years 1840–1930, “The Long Christmas Dinner” offers snapshots of an extended family as it changes over the generations, seen via the December 25th holiday meal. While the characters each stand out on their own, it’s the strength of the story that makes one want to see how things turn out.

Certain habits and expressions of the characters are passed down through the years. One expression, “only the passage of time will help,” responds to family deaths—be they the sudden passing of a child or the loss of a grown son in war.

By the end of the play, a sort of circular progression has taken place. The first scene connects with the last, albeit in a different location and with different characters, as one tradition ends and another begins.

‘Pullman Car Hiawatha’

The second story takes place on the Pullman railroad car Hiawatha as it travels between New York and Chicago on the night of Dec. 21, 1930. With the helpful guidance of Stage Manager (Michael Sean McGuinness), the audience is allowed insights into the lives of the passengers.

Ironically, neither play has much to do with Christmas.

The passengers include an out-of-work engineer (Brad Fryman), wondering if his old firm will take him back; a young man (Jeremy Russial), going to see the woman he loves; a maiden lady (Barbra Wengerd), planning to spend Christmas with relatives; and an insane woman (Giselle Wolf), being transported to a hospital.

No sooner are these situations established then things turn existential, and the play takes the audience to an entirely new plane of reference. We see the Earth's place in the solar system and, indeed, the entire universe—a place where those judged insane in our world may in fact be the sanest of all.



(L-R) LaMar Giles in white as the Archangel and Giselle Wolf as the Insane Woman with the cast in "Pullman Car Hiawatha." (Carol Rosegg)

The Effect

Ironically, neither play has much to do with Christmas. The first could easily take place at any family meal, while the second has only a few lines about the holiday. Wilder uses these settings to show not only how little time we all actually spend in this world, but also how little we learn while we're here.

In "The Long Christmas Dinner" it's continually mentioned how the family history is written down in a book somewhere—though quite likely it isn't. Rather, various chronicles are passed down through memories of those who've actually lived them to those who hear about it firsthand, to those who question

it, and finally, to those for whom they have ceased to have meaning.

The actions of the characters, while sometimes seeming small, often reveal something much bigger when one looks at the entire picture.

In “Hiawatha,” a character dies and is immediately filled with regret. The regret is not for what the character did while alive, but for what she didn’t do—both in terms of accomplishments and for not letting the ones she loved know how important they were to her.

Whereas “Christmas Dinner” looks inward toward family, “Hiawatha” looks outward. The train passes though many small towns of which the passengers are unaware, as well as past the body of a German workman (Jamil Chokachi) who died while building the railroad line. This death recalls the idea that there is always something bigger than ourselves—be it just over the horizon or just beyond our frame of reference.





(L-R) Barbra Wengerd as Genevieve and Giselle Wolf as Lucia in "The Long Christmas Dinner" by Thornton Wilder. (Carol Rosegg)

The acting is enjoyable throughout. The actions of the characters, while sometimes seeming small, often reveal something much bigger when one looks at the entire picture. A new wife (Anna Marie Sell) takes the seat at the head of the table from an aging matriarch (Wolf) in "The Long Christmas Dinner," thus indicating the inevitable changing of the guard.

There's also a husband and wife (John Pasha, Sell) quarreling before they go to bed, in separate compartments, on the train in "Hiawatha." The two have terrible regrets later on, but by then it may be too late to make things right.

Standouts among the cast in "Hiawatha" include Wolf as the Insane Woman, Sell as Harriet, McGuinness as the genial yet all-knowing Stage Manager, and LaMar Giles, who switches effortlessly between comic relief as a Pullman Porter and a more dramatic turn as an Archangel.

Far more than a simple holiday treat, "A Wilder Christmas" shows the importance of appreciating both your life and the lives of those around you before they and you become little more than a mention in a long-neglected book that's been tossed in a corner gathering dust—if even that. It's a sobering fact, which we would all do well to remember.

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- [Theater Review: 'A Child's Christmas in Wales'](#)

Also in the cast are James Beaman, Victoria Blankenship, Kristin Parker, Barbara Salant, Gael Schaefer, Rafe Terrizzi, Merissa Cxyz, and LaWanda Hopkins.

"A Wilder Christmas"
Theatre at St. Clements