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A Wilder Christmas

By Thornton Wilder; Directed by Dan Wackerman
Produced by The Peccadillo Theater Company

Off Broadway, One Act Plays

Runs through 1.13.16

Theatre at St. Clements, 423 West 46th Street

- ◆ Two one-acts by Thornton Wilder
- ◆ Ensemble driven
- ◆ Visually stunning
- ◆ Rarely performed plays
- ◆ Runs 95 minutes with an intermission

by Ken Kaissar ([../../whoweare.php](#)) on 12.9.15



A scene from *Pullman Car Hiawatha*. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

BOTTOM LINE: A beautiful production of two rarely seen one-acts by Thornton Wilder.

It's December again, which means time for holiday theatre: *A Christmas Carol*, *The Radio City Christmas Spectacular*, and one-act plays by Thornton Wilder—you know, the author of such feel-good classics as *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Thornton Wilder doesn't exactly call to mind the joyful holiday cheer that most audiences are looking for during this time of year, and these two one-acts, *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, are no exception. But as a Wilder fan, I am grateful to the Peccadillo Theater Company for the opportunity to discover these fascinating and beautiful short pieces.

For starters, each play boasts a cast of 12 or more, and rings in at under 45 minutes. Producing these forgotten gems is prohibitively expensive and risky. I regard Peccadillo's decision to grace their stage with these plays as an act of literary heroism.

The Long Christmas Dinner is aptly named as it takes place at the Bayard family Christmas dinner table over the course of 90 years. During this time babies are born, parents die, sons replace their fathers at the head of the table, and wives, their mothers-in-law. We watch as several generations of a family develop and evolve from 1840 to 1930, experiencing all the euphoric joy and inevitable grief that one can expect from a fully lived life.

Pullman Car Hiawatha brings us closer to the Thornton Wilder we all know and love. Wilder wrote the play before *Our Town* and in it he experiments with the Stage Manager character that would later become so iconic. The Stage Manager (Michael Sean McGuinness) introduces us to passengers aboard a Pullman car traveling between New York and Chicago in 1930. He even acquaints us with the train car itself, the planet Earth, and the entire universe, making the point that every individual is but small and inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. And then, in classic Wilder fashion, after reminding us of the insignificance of the human condition, he gives us the death and redemption of a character.

Staged by artistic director Dan Wackerman, both plays are profound, breathtaking and bound to occupy your mind for days after you see them. The real star of the evening is set and lighting designer Harry Feiner whose choices deliver the lion's share of the philosophical story telling. In *The Long Christmas Dinner*, characters enter stage right through a trellis made of lush trees representing life. They exit stage left through one made only of barren branches representing death. The set design tells the story so effectively that the play could have been performed silently and its main point would still have been communicated. Feiner also provides a stunning moment of lighting in *Pullman Car Hiawatha* when a character dies and ascends to heaven. Each of the 12 actors is illuminated by a different lighting instrument creating a celestial symphony of light beams.

While both plays are gorgeous and philosophically mesmerizing, they will not fill you with the warm and fuzzy holiday cheer that you get from watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. In both plays, we hear the echo of Emily's voice saying goodbye to food, coffee and Grovers Corners. But no matter. How many times can you really hear Tiny Tim's "God bless us, every one"? Maybe what we all need this Christmas is something a little more somber and introspective. You'll find it in *A Wilder Christmas*.

(*A Wilder Christmas* plays at Theatre at St. Clements, 423 West 46th Street, through January 3, 2016. The show runs 95 minutes, with an intermission. Performances are Mondays at Tuesdays at 7; Thursdays through Saturdays at 8; and Sundays at 3. Tickets are \$25 and are available at [thepeccadillo.com](http://www.thepeccadillo.com) (<http://www.thepeccadillo.com>) or by calling 866-811-4111.)

A Wilder Christmas is written by Thornton Wilder. It is directed by Dan Wackerman and produced by The Peccadillo Theater Company. Scenic and lighting design is by Harry Feiner, costume design by Marianne Custer and sound design by Quentin Chiappetta.

The cast includes James Beaman, Victoria Blankenship, Jamil Chokachi, Brad Fryman, Michael Sean McGuinness, Kristin Parker, John Pasha, Jeremy Russial, Gael Schaefer, Anna Marie Sell, Rafe Terrizzi, Barbra Wengerd, Giselle Wolf, Merissa Czyz, LaMar Giles, LaWanda Hopkins, and Barbara Salant.