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OPINION | THEATER REVIEW

‘A Wilder Christmas’ Review

Two rarely seen one-act plays that serve as previews of ‘Our Town’



From left: Giselle Wolf, Brad Fryman, Barbra Wengerd and John Pasha. PHOTO: CAROL ROSEGG



By

TERRY TEACHOUT

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New York

For most of us, Thornton Wilder is a man of one play, “Our Town.” But he wrote many

other plays, two of which, “The Matchmaker” and “The Skin of Our Teeth,” were equally big hits, as well as a number of shorter works that get done from time to time—usually by students—but are almost never produced professionally. Blessings, then, on the Peccadillo Theater Company for giving us “A Wilder Christmas,” a flawlessly staged double bill of rarely seen one-act plays by Wilder, “The Long Christmas Dinner” and “Pullman Car Hiawatha,” that are as extraordinary in their own ways as “Our Town.”

A Wilder Christmas

Peccadillo Theater Company, Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. (\$25), 866-811-4111

Closes Jan. 10

Part of what got Wilder interested in playwriting was his sense that old-fashioned “fourth-wall” 19th-century theatrical realism had exhausted itself and become inhibiting to the imagination. “When the theater pretends to give the real thing in canvas and wood and metal,” he explained, “it loses something of the realer thing which is its true business.” So he started writing one-act plays in which he

jettisoned those conventions and played tricks with time and space.

In “The Long Christmas Dinner,” first performed in 1931, the scene is the dining room of the Bayards, an upper-middle-class American family circa 1840. The family is sitting down to turkey and stuffing, but there’s no food to be seen and no scenery save for the table and chairs and a pair of “portals” on either side of the stage, one green and leafy and the other bare and bleak. For this is no ordinary dinner: According to the stage directions, “Ninety years are traversed in this play which represents in accelerated motion 90 Christmas dinners in the Bayard household.” We watch the Bayards get married, have children, go off to war, become steadily more prosperous, grow feeble and depart one by one through the second portal, sometimes speaking a few quick words of startled farewell: “Yes, but...but...not yet!”

In “Pullman Car Hiawatha,” first performed the following year, the scene is a sleeper car on a train going from New York to Chicago. We see five lower berths and three compartments, all represented by simple chairs and benches, and we are introduced by a genial “stage manager” (Michael Sean McGuinness) to 10 passengers who are traveling west at Christmastime. One is a woman (Giselle Wolf) who is being escorted to an insane asylum, another a housewife (Anna Marie Sell) who will die en route. Yet “Pullman Car Hiawatha” is no “Grand Hotel”-style melodrama but a fanciful group portrait of the passengers and their places in the world “geographically, meteorologically, astronomically, theologically considered” as of Dec. 21, 1930, the day on which the play takes place.

It's clear that these plays, "Pullman Car Hiawatha" more obviously than "The Long Christmas Dinner," are in a sense previews of "Our Town," which was first performed in 1938. Not only do they employ its anti-naturalistic storytelling techniques, but they also constitute, as Wilder said of "Our Town," "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life." Their characters are commonplace people living everyday lives—but viewed through a prism that lets us see them from a fresh perspective. And though both plays are shot through with darkness and sorrow, there is nothing lugubrious about them. "Sad things aren't the same as depressing things," one of the Bayards says. "I must be getting old: I like them." So will you—though you'll shed more than a few tears as you watch the characters come to terms with the passage of time and the inevitability of death.

The Peccadillo, according to its mission statement, specializes in producing classic American plays "which, despite their obvious literary and theatrical value, are not regularly revived." It did so memorably with "Room Service" in 2007 and William Inge's "A Loss of Roses" last year, and it has done so even more successfully in "A Wilder Christmas." Dan Wackerman, the company's artistic director, has staged these little plays with a warm simplicity that conceals supreme artfulness, adding discreetly innovative touches (he has, for instance, introduced audience participation into "Pullman Car Hiawatha") that are as true to the spirit of the text as were David Cromer's more radical but equally convincing innovations in his great 2009 revival of "Our Town." The 16-actor ensemble is right in every way, as is Quentin Chiappetta's sound design, which incorporates Arvo Pärt's "Fratres" to miraculously subtle effect.

If you're tired of blowing big bucks on no-but-I-saw-the-movie Broadway musicals, then consider spending \$25 on a ticket to "A Wilder Christmas." Despite their comparative obscurity, "The Long Christmas Dinner" and "Pullman Car Hiawatha" are miniature masterpieces, at once poetic and profound, and I doubt you'll ever see either one done better.

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