

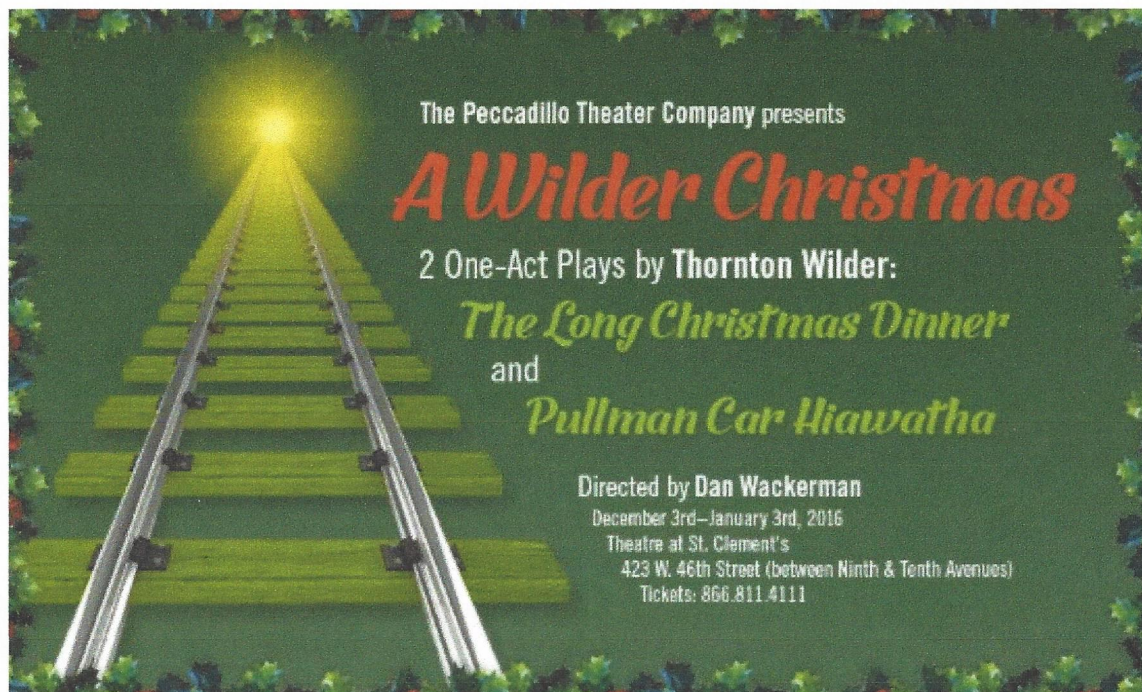
Off-Broadway Review: 'A Wilder Christmas' at the Theatre at St. Clement's

nytheatreguide.com/2015/12/off-broadway-theatre-review-a-wilder-christmas-at-the-theatre-at-st-clements/

Jacquelyn Claire

'A Wilder Christmas'
now playing at the
Theater at St. Clement's

The Peccadillo Theater Company gives us an early Christmas present with 2 One-Act plays by Thornton Wilder. *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha* are both scrumptious feasts and deserve to have two separate reviews as they are each drenched with so much flavor one needs many words to do justice to the creations.



I am always deeply satisfied when I watch a repertory company in action where the same cast are embracing different roles in different plays with glorious skill and hearty commitment. Dan Wackerman has directed both plays with a strong hand and skilled artistic vision. He manages to successfully create the worlds of each play and transports us magically into another time period.

... powerful performances and dedicated creative and production teams ...

Our first course is *The Long Christmas Dinner*. We spend 45 minutes in real time around the dining room table of the Bayard family Christmas table where we see 90 years unfold before us starting from 1840. It's a beautiful, melancholic dance of life and death played out in the microcosm of one family tree. Family members come and go, memories are created, illnesses averted and feuds forged as the turkey gets carved by the head of the household through the generations. It's a delicate, cyclical story crammed with life lessons and emotional heart string tugging opportunities. The cast are a tight, focused and well rehearsed company.

James Beaman as the elder Roderick was commanding with a wonderfully observed performance as an 1840's gentleman. Giselle Wolf, as his religious and loving wife, was delicate and hearty at the same time. Brad Fryman, as cousin Brandon, gave us some delightful comedic moments to lighten the heavily laden family table. I particularly enjoyed John Pasha as Charles. He portrayed his character's aging process with exquisite skill. He transformed from the young man into the mature patriarch seamlessly and is a magnetic performer with a rich, resonant voice. Anna

Marie Sell as Leonora, Charles wife, was effervescent and engaging. Gael Schaefer played the distant relative, Cousin Ermengarde, with a captivating fragility. I loved Barbara Wengerd's as the spinster sister, Genevieve, who crafted a very emotionally engaging performance.

Sponsor

All the performers in the smaller roles including Victoria Blankenship, Kristin Parker, Jeremy Russial, Barbara Salant and Rafe Terrizzi, ignited the stage with their presence and created perfect cameos as the family members who did not stay too long at the family table.

I would have liked to have seen a little more pace to this first piece; as at times, it felt that there was a bit of declaiming with performers picking up each other rhythms. I am sure this will smooth out as the run continues.

The next course was the perfect dessert. *Pullman Car Hiawatha* was just delicious. I loved the styling, the staging, the soundtrack, the audience participation and the sensational performances. We are onboard a Pullman car. The travelers arrive and the journey starts. However, someone on the train will not be getting to their destination. We see multiple life stories played out before us, the train carriage being the metaphor for life and finally death. The script is so clever, and the theatrical devices employed were really satisfying for the audience.

I loved Michael Sean McGuiness as the stage manager, deconstructing the play every step of the way. He was enigmatic and controlled the stage with effortless ease and joy. The pleasure he took in his character was infectious, and he held our attention perfectly. This is essentially an ensemble piece with all of the actors from the first play now transformed into new characters. Lamar Giles joined the cast as both the train porter and the spiritual porter facilitating the journey to the afterlife. Giles is a warm, generous performer who displayed a beautiful empathy for his fellow 'man'.

Jamil Chokachi, Merissa Czyz and Lawanda Hopkins joined the cast adding their fabulous energies into this mouth watering pudding.

I particularly loved Harry Feiner's lighting design of this piece which was stark and provocative and Quentin Chiappetta's powerful, harmonious soundscape. Marianne Custer captured the period perfectly with her gorgeous costume designs.

Thornton Wilder's masterful writing will always ensure a great night at the theater, but when this is also matched by powerful performances and dedicated creative and production teams, you find yourself fully sated.

Running time: 90 minutes with a 15-minute intermission.

A Wilder Christmas is now playing at the Theatre at St. Clements, 423 W. 46th Street, New York, through January 3, 2016. For more information and tickets, [click here](#).