

CONFERENCE REPORT

Wilder Panels at ALA



TO SEE WILDER'S CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE EXTEND far beyond his American classic drama *Our Town*, one only needed to attend the 24th Annual Conference of the American Literature Association in Boston, May 23–26. It featured three separate panels with a total of eleven papers devoted solely to the works of Thornton Wilder. The topics ranged from the role of Newport in Wilder's last novel to Wilder's Theater of Engagement to an on-going investigation of Wilder and the Classics. The panelists presented thought-provoking interpretations and explored new directions in Wilder research, demonstrating Wilder's currency and significance to scholarly discussions today.

"The Newport of Thornton Wilder's *Theophilus North*" panel, organized by Sarah Littlefield of Salve Regina University, looked at the significance of Newport, Rhode Island, as the single locale for Wilder's vision in his final novel. The three panelists argued that *Theophilus North* is more than just a fanciful excursion down memory lane; rather, it is an incisive commentary on Newport society.

In "Faded Glory: Images of Newport in Wilder's *Theophilus North*," John Quinn, of Salve Regina University, discussed how the Newport visited by Theophilus in the summer of 1926 had largely disappeared by the 1920s. After World War I began, fewer socialites flocked to Newport. Those who continued summer visits made no effort to organize great balls as Alva Vanderbilt and Caroline Astor had done when the Gilded Age was at its peak. The Casino also had fallen on hard times in 1915 when it lost the US Open to Forest Hills. Hence, Quinn argued, Wilder is recalling a Newport of an earlier age in *Theophilus North*.

Taking her cue from Theophilus, who whispers to his broken down car "Hannah" a line from Goethe's poem, Sarah Littlefield in her paper "'Soon you too will rest': The Lure of Newport for Thornton Wilder and Theophilus," proposed that Wilder, who too may have gotten "his rest" through his persona Theophilus, points to the importance of Newport. A haven, indeed a *port*, this not-so-accidental setting provides for Theophilus, and for the nomadic Wilder, both an entry and an exit. Thus Newport helps to shape and define both Theophilus and Wilder.

In "Through the Eyes of Theophilus: Vintage Images of the Nine Cities," independent scholar Daniel Titus discussed how, in *Theophilus North*, Wilder crafts wonderful scenes of a bygone time, reachable only in imagination. Titus concluded that, fortunately, images and other ephemera exist to help us recreate this visual landscape from the past, thereby bringing the visions of Theophilus himself to life once again.

Organized by the Thornton Wilder Society and chaired by President Jackson R. Bryer, a panel on "Thornton Wilder and the Theater of Engagement" offered four different perspectives on Wilder's works. In "Thornton Wilder's Jian Chang in *Our Town*, the Stage Play," Hsin Hsieh, a graduate student from the National University of Taiwan, expanded on Yuan



Left to Right: Lindsay Rogers, Nicole Magno, Lincoln Konkle, Hsin Hsieh, Jackson R. Bryer



Front: Stephen Rojcewicz, Willard Spiegelman, Mathias Hanses Back: Thomas Buck, Judith Hallett, Katharine Pilkington

Xia's recent identification of Chinese influences in the representation of Wilder's Stage Manager. Hsin argued that the Stage Manager not only tells the story but also expresses Wilder's meditation upon life through the adaptation of "Jian Chang." She called for a more complex reading of Jian Chang's influence on the Stage Manager in *Our Town* to further demonstrate Wilder's attempt to adapt Chinese theatrical conventions for the Western stage.

Next Lincoln Konkle, the Executive Director of the Society, discussed "Wilder Towns: Twenty-First Century Stagings of the American Classic." You can read the expanded version of his presentation on pages 4 and 5.

Nicole Magno, a graduate student from The College of New Jersey, explored "Carnavalesque Havoc and the Shifting of Gendered Stages in Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* and *The Eighth Day*." While Wilder often challenges strict gender roles in his works, she argued that both *The Matchmaker* and *The Eighth Day* reveal his preference for a matriarchal rule. In order to create this matriarchy, Wilder uses elements of Bakhtin's carnival, a ritualistic event that suspends socioeconomic hierarchies, celebrates transition, and exposes joyful relativity. Havoc ensues when the hierarchal patriarchy is challenged, allowing for the shift between patriarchy and matriarchy. By de-crowning the patriarchs, the matriarchal figures, from Mrs. Levi to Mrs. Lansing, are able to rise and rule. Consequently, Magno posited, Wilder creates a space which, while ruled by women, allows for greater gender equality and illustrates that gender is not innate, but rather a relative performance where men and women are merely players.

In "Contesting Heteronormativity and Constructing the Essential Woman in Wilder's *Three Plays*," Lindsay Rogers, another graduate student from The College of New Jersey, argued that through *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *The Matchmaker*, Wilder allies himself with his female characters who are forced to reckon with the oppressive hegemonic discourse of patriarchal society. In *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder details the markers of essential femininity through mothers and daughters who represent generations

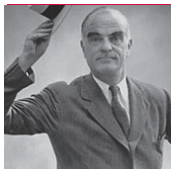
of women amidst changing times. Wilder's essential woman demonstrates intelligence, practicality, deep emotion, spiritual transcendence, wisdom, fertility, leadership, and disruptive feminine aggression. In *The Matchmaker*, Wilder's essential femininity, represented by Dolly Levi, disregards traditional and patriarchal notions of being and embraces the diversity of women's humanity. Glorifying the role of Woman as the hub of the society-sustaining family, usually underappreciated in patriarchal society, Rogers saw Wilder sympathize with women and advocate for their advancement, self-actualization, and enfranchisement, subversively commencing his literary fight against the rigid heteronormativity of patriarchal society.

Four presenters and a responder mined "Thornton Wilder's Classical Engagements" on the third panel, which was chaired by Judith Hallett from the University of Maryland, College Park. In "Recasting Greco-Roman Comedy as an American Tragic Novel: Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in *The Woman of Andros*," Katharine Pilkington, from the University of Maryland, examined how in this 1930 novel, based on a second-century BCE Roman comedy of the same name by the playwright Terence, Wilder transformed the dramatic and comedic Latin text into a narrative that examines the desires, alienation and sufferings of individuals, particularly women, living on the margins of their society. Through this transformation, Wilder created a tragic scenario rich with socio-political significance for his American readership at the time of the book's publication.

Stephen Rojcewicz, also from the University of Maryland, considered "The Spread of Manure: From Parasite to Calling to Life in *The Matchmaker*." Having himself played the role of the parasite in a college production of Plautus' *Menaechmi*, Wilder, Rojcewicz contended, refashioned this stock figure of ridicule from Greek and Roman New Comedy, a personality focused primarily on getting a meal and manipulating others, into the life-affirming Dolly Levi of *The Matchmaker*. Like Wilder himself, Dolly calls all the other characters into life. Rojcewicz concluded that through creative adaptations of his immediate sources (the British John Oxenford and the Austrian Johann Nestroy), as well as the Greek Menander, the Latin Plautus and Terence, and the French Molière, Wilder transforms middlebrow entertainment into enduring literature, and transmutes the supposedly unsophisticated genre of low farce into the life-giving spirit of carnival.

In "Once our brief light has set...": Catullus in Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March*," Mathias Hanses of Columbia University examined how Wilder intersperses the fictionalized portrayal of the Latin poet Catullus among portrayals of Julius Caesar's friends, enemies, and (imagined) correspondents with actual quotations and interpretations from the ancient writer's oeuvre. As Hanses read *The Ides* against Catullus's poems, he pointed out areas where Wilder's presentation of ancient material is particularly sophisticated and well-grounded in classical scholarship. In the process, Hanses claimed, Wilder to an extent cast himself as Catullus and ultimately presented his novel as the next

(continued on page 8)



THE THORNTON WILDER SOCIETY
MEMBERSHIP FORM

Membership in The Thornton Wilder Society is open to scholars, teachers, professionals in the arts, and members of the public interested in the life and legacy of Thornton Wilder.

Annual dues are \$30.00.
Please make checks payable to The College of New Jersey with Thornton Wilder Society in the memo line.

Name _____

Institutional affiliation (if applicable) _____

- I wish to join. My \$30 check is attached.
- I wish to give a membership(s) as a gift. (The Society is happy to handle these arrangements. Please provide instructions in a separate letter.)
- I would like to support the Society with a donation at this time. Enclosed is my contribution of \$_____

Address _____

City _____

State, ZIP _____

Email _____

Please check areas of particular interest to you.

- Drama
- Fiction
- Non-fiction
- Wilder's life and times
- Other _____
- Wilder's Family
- Wilder Scholarship
- 20th Century
- American culture

Please complete this form and return to:

Lincoln Konkle, Executive Director
The Thornton Wilder Society
The College of New Jersey
P.O. Box 7718, Ewing, NJ 08628-0718

or join online at:

www.thorntonwildersociety.org

Contributions to the Society are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and we thank you for them.



The College of New Jersey

This issue of *The Thornton Wilder Society Newsletter* was made possible in part by the support of the English Department & the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at The College of New Jersey.

(Conference Report continued from page 7)

link in an artistic chain that reaches back at least into the first century BCE.

The Alcestiad represents Wilder's twentieth-century version of a Greek tragic tetralogy. In his presentation "Sophoclean Echoes in Wilder's *The Alcestiad*," Tom Buck from the University of Buffalo acknowledged Wilder's debts to Aeschylus and Euripides, but he proposed that Wilder also owes a great deal to Sophocles in the construction of his individual scenes. Wilder recasts the plague scene at the beginning of *Oedipus Tyrannos* and the apotheosis at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* for his third act. This rewriting of Sophoclean scenes is firmly in the Greek tragic tradition and gives the play, Buck argued, a characteristically Greek tone.

In conclusion, Willard Spiegelman of the Southern Methodist University shared the following remarks:

What all four papers suggested was the way that Wilder, *mutatis mutandis*, was a middle-brow version of the more famous "high" modernists like Pound and Eliot, who used literary allusiveness, quotation, personae, classical referentiality, and historical anachronism as the basis of their most original compositions. I was reminded of the importance of *Quellenforschungen*, source study itself, a basic component of classical philology, and the ways in which echo, quotation, and allusion call into question the nature of historical influence and historical illumination. The past casts light upon the present, and vice versa.

One wonders what in Wilder compelled him to update the classics that he had studied in school

and university, why he felt the need to allude to ancient mores when dealing with contemporary economic and political issues or to handle his political and social views through historical filters. And one wonders how we might compare him to more conventional historical novelists (Mary Renault comes to mind) whose minds were focused more unvaryingly on the ancient world. Wilder's lament for the loss of a "religious tremendum" in the modern world encouraged in him a nostalgic backward glance. At the same time, an updating of both gender roles and genre in his use of Terrence, Plautus, and the Greek tragedians might make us consider the radical ideas that often lie hidden behind a mild-mannered facade. Historical allusion and classical myths were for him a pair of asbestos gloves, allowing him to present situations and issues otherwise too hot to handle.

In any case, with the recent publication of his letters, a new biography, and scholarly interest such as these Wilder sessions have generated, it is clear that we can take a new backward glance at the twentieth century and observe that Wilder was as much the innovator as his more famous, "high culture" contemporaries, and that a resistance to his originality from various corners of the academy might have something to do with a suspicion and envy of his enormous popular and financial success. That was the kind of success that always eluded the high modernists. ■

(Just Moms? continued from page 3)

extremes of life and death. Wilder cannily fits their previous characterizations to the roles they play in the final scene as illustrated by the two facsimiles for the original play's original prompt script. Myrtle Webb, who throughout the drama appears more hectic and alert to immediate sensations, represents life's daily routines as she busies herself—significantly for the third time in the play with making breakfast. The prompt script manuscript revisions underscore the contrast between Emily's transcendent understanding and her mother's mundane focus. Julia Gibbs, who dreams of France and urges her husband to "smell the heliotrope in the moonlight" (39), serves as Emily's serene guide to the afterlife. In a line crossed out in the prompt script, Mrs. Gibbs emerges as the "mother hen" of the cemetery, chastising Simon Stimson for his "rebellious spirit's stirring us up here." Both remain loving mothers but nurture different needs, the physical and the spiritual.

In the final act Mrs. Webb speaks only during the flashback scene, but she should play a powerful physical role in the funeral procession as a woman burying her second and last child. Wilder, whose twin brother died at birth, often dramatizes the effect of a dead child on a mother. Kate Kirby remembers her dead son as she travels to console her daughter on the loss of her grandchild; Maggie Antrobus recalls her slain son Abel. In the Coward McCann version Wilder compounds the play's bleakness by clearly stating that Emily's child died with its mother in childbirth. When Sam Craig asks the undertaker if the baby lived, Joe Stoddard raises his coat collar and responds: "No. 'Twas her second, though" (Coward McCann 106). In the Samuel French acting edition and the 1957 Harper revision, Wilder leaves Sam's question unasked and therefore makes the baby's fate ambiguous. Perhaps director Jed Harris found one more dead child in Grover's Corners too much for a Broadway audience.

In *Our Town* Wilder depicts the mothers as not merely housekeepers, cooks, or nursemaids, but rather as the caretakers of civilization through their emphasis on ritual. Wilder grew up with parents who actively campaigned for women's rights. In a 1902 article advancing women's suffrage, Wilder's father argues for the necessity of female civic participation: "It is a man's government now, and shows the absence of women's conscience and devotion to simplicity and truth. Organized womanhood thrown into the disposal of problems, local and national, would be a power for good" (*Thornton Wilder: A Life* 13). For Wilder women exist as individual characters but perform the same necessary tasks. They sing in the choir; they prepare the meals; they preside over the weddings; they strengthen the community—all without a nervous breakdown. ■

Park Bucker is an Associate Professor of English at the University of South Carolina, Sumter. He is on the Board of Directors of the Thornton Wilder Society.

* All *Our Town* quotes are from *Three Plays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) unless otherwise specified.



**BECOME A MEMBER...
JOIN THE CONVERSATION!**

THORNTONWILDERSOCIETY.ORG

[FACEBOOK.COM/THORNTONWILDERSOCIETY](https://www.facebook.com/thorntonwildersociety)