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THEATER REVIEW

‘The Skin of Our Teeth’ Review: Tending the Fire of Civilization

A rare revival of Thornton Wilder’s comedy that follows a 5,000-year-old family through history’s disasters.

By Terry Teachout

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Washington

Theatre for a New Audience’s 2017 revival of “The Skin of Our Teeth” was cause for rejoicing among a generation of New York playgoers who, like me, had never before had the opportunity to see a professional production of Thornton Wilder’s

1942 tragicomedy about the history of the world. “The Skin of Our Teeth” calls for a huge ensemble of actors—40, according to the program for the Broadway premiere—which puts it out of reach of virtually all of today’s cash-strapped drama companies. That Theatre for a New Audience still managed to bring a first-rate version to the stage was a not-so-minor miracle, one I didn’t expect to see repeated anytime soon.



Steven Carpenter, Tonya Beckman and Lilian Oben in ‘The Skin of Our Teeth’
PHOTO: DANIEL SCHWARTZ

Imagine my surprise, then, when Constellation Theatre Company, a scrappy but well-regarded troupe whose specialty is “epic stories in an intimate space,” announced that it was reviving Wilder’s play with a cast of 13 at Source, a 100-seat black-box theater in Washington. I knew at once that I had to go, and to say I wasn’t disappointed is the happiest of understatements. Constellation’s production isn’t perfect—it couldn’t have been, since big, baggy plays like “The Skin of Our Teeth” don’t lend themselves to gem-like stagings—but [Mary Hall Surface’s high-spirited version is festive, imaginative and completely involving.](#)

The Antrobuses, on whom the action is centered, appear to be Wilder's version of a middle-class sitcom-type family (husband, housewife, two cute kids and a sexy maid). Within a few minutes, though, we learn that they're all 5,000 years old and that the play begins in the Ice Age, after which we move forward in time with vertiginous speed, first to the Great Flood and then to World War II. What we have here, in short, is a parable, a symbolic tale of how humankind copes with disaster. But "The Skin of Our Teeth" is also a screwball tragedy, one in which events of the gravest import are portrayed with a farce-flavored lightness of touch.

Moreover, Wilder's tragic vision, here as in "Our Town," is fundamentally optimistic, though never naively so. What he is telling us is that human history has always been fraught with disasters, and that the only way to stay afloat when "the whole world's at sixes and sevens" is to cling tightly to hope. As Mr. Antrobus (Steven Carpenter), the family patriarch, explains in the first act, "The sun's growing cold. What can I do about that? Nothing we can do but burn everything in the house, and the fence posts and the barn. Keep the fire going. When we have no more fire, we die."

A year after the New York revival of "The Skin of Our Teeth," this message feels even more timely — especially when you're seeing it performed a mile from the White House. Fortunately, Ms. Surface has avoided the fatal mistake of dragging in ham-handed references to current events. She's content to let the play speak for itself, trusting in Wilder's ability to make his points without having them underlined and italicized.

The cast, led by Mr. Carpenter and Tonya Beckman, who plays Sabina, the maid, emphasizes the comic side of "The Skin of Our Teeth," perhaps a bit too much so in the first act, whose aggressive zaniness occasionally reminded me of Edmund Wilson's shrewd observation that the Antrobuses are "a little too cozy, even when ruined by war." Yet everyone is fully in tune with Wilder's unironic sweetness and sincerity, rising effortlessly to the heightened emotional stakes of the last act. Ms. Beckman, as it happens, has been cast in a role that was created by Tallulah Bankhead, and she has found a wholly personal way to play the part, steering clear of easy caricature without stinting on Sabina's earthy physicality.

Much of the credit for the success of this production belongs to A.J. Guban, the set designer, who has turned the stage into a Frank Lloyd Wright -style living room complete with brick hearth, an ideal visual counterpart to Wilder's theme of tending the fire of civilization. He uses every square inch with supreme

resourcefulness, and if you stay in the auditorium during intermission, you can watch as the Antrobus home is turned into the Atlantic City boardwalk, a splendid piece of theatrical prestidigitation.

All praise, then, to Constellation for bringing off a seemingly impossible task with supreme aplomb. If, like most theatergoers, you don't know "The Skin of Our Teeth," then you'll come away with a clear sense of what it's all about. If, on the other hand, you know it well, then you'll be dazzled and delighted by the way in which Ms. Surface and her actors have fit it into so compact a performing space without breaking anything—except, at evening's end, your heart.

Mr. Teachout is the Journal's drama critic. He is directing a new production of "Satchmo at the Waldorf," his first play, which begins previews at Houston's Alley Theatre on Feb. 24. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.



Other Reviews for *The Skin of Our Teeth* at Constellation Theatre January, 2018

Broadway World Washington

[By Pamela Roberts, Jan 16, 2018](#)

"THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH at Constellation Theatre is a thought-provoking, skillfully-rendered reminder that chaos and uncertainty are not unique to our time - or to any single time. In the sure directorial hands of Mary Hall Surface, Thornton Wilder's masterpiece is a wild time-traveling, allegorical tragicomedy...

"Surface presents a stylized world where the action is larger than life. In her sure hands we seamlessly accept the absurdities of Dad coming home from a hard day of wheel-inventing... Surface is a great match with Constellation's commitment to telling epic stories in an intimate space.



MD Theatre Guide

[by Mary Ann Johnson, January 16, 2018](#)

"...directed with a light touch by Mary Hall Surface; the actors just seem to inhabit these characters, and the pacing is superb."

DC Metro Theatre Arts

[By John Stoltenberg, January 15, 2018](#)

"The fun is in the fast-paced farcical crises that beset this tenacious family, and Mary Hall Surface keeps up a winning momentum. ...overall there's an energetic pleasantness and cheerful inventiveness to the performances that well sustains the show's two and a half hours."

