Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

The Matchmaker
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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The Matchmaker

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Synopsis: The Matchmaker

Yonkers store-owner Horace Vandergelder refuses to allow his niece, Ermengarde, to marry Ambrose Kemper. He informs Ambrose that he is sending his niece away to stay with a friend, but Ambrose easily learns that she will be in New York City and plans to follow her there. Meanwhile, Horace has arranged for a matchmaker to find a wife for himself.

Dolly Levi, the matchmaker, has arranged for Horace to meet Mrs. Irene Molloy, a New York City milliner, even though she secretly intends to marry him herself. However, Horace surprises her when he announces he is leaving today for New York City in order to propose marriage to Mrs. Molloy. Dolly hastily invents another woman and convinces Horace to not propose to Mrs. Molloy yet, but to meet this new woman at a New York restaurant that evening.

Cornelius Hackl and Barnaby Tucker, two of Horace’s clerks, decide they deserve some adventure of their own, in spite of the fact that Horace has left them in charge of the store. They decide to take the train to New York City that afternoon, resolving not to come back to Yonkers until they have had an adventure and kissed a girl.

In her New York City hat shop, Mrs. Molloy and Minnie Fay, her assistant, discuss the possibility of Horace proposing marriage to her. Cornelius and Barnaby happen by, and, seeing Horace and Dolly approaching, duck into the shop where they convince Mrs. Molloy to hide them. Horace, however, learning that Mrs. Molloy is hiding two strange men, tells her he does not wish to see her again, so Dolly leads him away to the meeting with the non-existent “other woman.”

Meanwhile, Cornelius has become smitten with Mrs. Molloy who thinks he is a wealthy man-about-town and insists that Cornelius and Barnaby take her and Minnie to a nice dinner, at the same restaurant Dolly and Horace are headed for.

Horace is the first to arrive at the Harmonia Garden Restaurant. Dolly enters next, escorting Ambrose and Ermengarde, whom she is trying to help. Horace quickly hides, then, realizing Ambrose and Ermengarde are planning to wed, he arranges for a cab driver to intercept them when they come out of the restaurant and take them to a friend’s home. The young couple goes to another room to dine, and Dolly goes in to meet with Horace and the “other woman.”

Mrs. Molloy, Minnie, Barnaby and Cornelius enter next. They are seated at a table right next to Horace and Dolly, with only a screen between them. Dolly informs a very upset Horace that the “other woman” has eloped with another man. By cleverly suggesting that she herself would never marry Horace, she begins to pique his interest.

Meanwhile, Cornelius and Barnaby have discovered that their employer is on the other side of the screen and are in a panic. Mrs. Molloy suggests they disguise themselves with the women’s coats and veils, but Horace discovers his clerks and angrily fires them. The two men leave the restaurant, with Barnaby still dressed as a woman. Ambrose and Ermengarde enter, Horace becomes angrier still, and the entire scene is chaos!

The action now shifts to the home of Flora van Huysen. A cab arrives with Cornelius and Barnaby (still dressed as a woman), and the driver forces them into the house, thinking they are the couple Horace paid him to detain. Flora also mistakes them for Ambrose and Ermengarde and tries to make them feel at home. Next to arrive are the real Ambrose and Ermengarde (whom Flora insists cannot be who they say they are), followed quickly by Dolly (still scheming to bring all the couples to a happy conclusion), Mrs. Molloy and Minnie (who have been caught up in everyone else’s “adventure”), and Horace (who is still angry and becoming more and more perplexed).

The scene turns to utter pandemonium as everyone tries to sort out identities and relationships. Yet, somehow Dolly maneuvers through it all, bringing everything to a happy, albeit hysterical, end.
Characters: Matchmaker

Horace Vandergelder: A tightwad, middle-aged merchant of Yonkers, New York, Vandergelder has forbidden the marriage of his niece, even though she is of legal age. However, he has hired a matchmaker to find a wife for himself.

Cornelius Hackl: One of Vandergelder’s underpaid clerks, Cornelius decides it’s time to break out of his boring lifestyle and seek some adventure of his own.

Barnaby Tucker: Another of Vandergelder’s clerks, Barnaby is a bit younger than Hackl, but sets out with him in search of an adventure.

Malachi Stack: Frequently unemployed, Malachi is the newest member of Vandergelder’s pool of clerks.

Ambrose Kemper: An artist who is courting Vandergelder’s niece, Ambrose has run afoul of Vandergelder because he doesn’t feel an artist can support a family.

Joe Scanlon: A barber

Rudolph: A waiter at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant.

August: A waiter at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant.

Mrs. Dolly Levi: A matchmaker, only one her many talents, Dolly was a friend of Vandergelder’s late wife. She also has designs on Vandergelder for herself.

Miss Flora Van Huysen: A friend of Vandergelder’s late wife.

Mrs. Irene Molloy: A New York City milliner, Mrs. Malloy has been set up as a prospective wife for Vandergelder.

Minnie Fay: Mrs. Malloy’s assistant.

Ermengarde: Vandergelder’s niece, Ermengarde doesn’t do very well at making decisions for herself. She is, however, in love with Ambrose, whom her uncle doesn’t want her to marry.

Gertrude: Vandergelder’s outspoken housekeeper.

Waiters

Cabman

Miss Van Huysen’s Cook
In his preface to Three Plays, Thornton Wilder advanced the idea that drama has the ability to awaken the audience to what it means to be alive. He also argued that the stage of his day often sacrificed that same ability. He insisted plays were generally “soothing,” catering to the middle class, and “passively diversionary.” In attempting to stem that tide, Wilder became a revolutionary; his experiments and inventiveness in theatre extended to a scene-less stage, pantomime, imaginary props, erratic jumps in time sequences, and the utilization of a stage manager as a character, borrowing not only from the ancient Greek and Victorian “Chorus,” but expanding upon it. Travis Bogard, in Modern Drama: Essays in Criticism, noted that Wilder was “a man who, along with [fellow U.S. playwright] Eugene O’Neill, freed the American theatre from its traditional forms through his experiments in Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth.”

Not as prolific as many of his contemporaries, Wilder, however, was awarded three Pulitzer Prizes in two different categories: fiction and drama. His first prize came in 1928 for his novel, The Bridge of San Louis Rey. The others were awarded in 1938 and 1945 for plays Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth. For his next-to-last novel, The Eighth Day, he was given the National Book Award in 1968. Wilder’s sophisticated understanding of literature, history, and humankind made him popular with the average reader. Described as “a classicist and humanist with a profound interest in the past,” Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor Sally Jones further maintained, “Wilder has always appealed to the sentimental, yet his works avoided sentimentality.”

His scene-less stage experiments were first applied in Pullman Car Hiawatha and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, and finally perfected in Our Town. The setting in Pullman Car Hiawatha consists of chairs placed within chalk-marked areas representing berths, but the stage is otherwise bare. The Happy Journey once again employs four chairs which suffice for the automobile; all the props are imaginary, thus prompting the need for abundant pantomime. “In The Happy Journey, he experimented, with success, in creating illusion on a scene-less stage. This family sketch reveals his ingenuity in stimulating the imagination to supply both scenery and properties on a bare stage” (The Small Town in American Drama, I.H. Herron, SMU press, 1969).

Wilder felt that scenery and realistic properties would have tied Our Town too firmly to a particular place and time, making it the nostalgic, sentimental play it is sometimes mistaken for. “Then too there is the classic simplicity of the setting. Left to the imagination, it avoids realism of time and place which would de voit the play its larger application. Returning to the theatrical tradition ranging from Athens to Elizabethan England, it returns also to a plane of imagination rather than realistic reproduction and soars above mundane distractions of actuality” (In Our Living and Our Dying, A.H. Ballet, English Journal vol. 45 p. 244).

As in Pullman Car Hiawatha and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, an omniscient Stage Manager casually provides the audience with wry humor, narration, and commentary in Our Town. He even plays brief roles during the production. His commentary along with the actors’ pantomimes creates the imaginary props and scenery on the bare stage. A basic principle of Wilder is the idea that the action of a play is always in the perpetual present. Novels have the advantage of an author who can tell his readers essential facts, past and present. “The Greek Chorus performed this function in the theater, and he believed that the modern playwright needed an equivalent . . . . A play thus provided with a Stage Narrator attains a kind of timelessness, for he can be part of the play’s momentary action and yet be a commentator . . . . he can look forward into the future . . . for he is enclosed in finite time . . . he can move back and forth in time” (Kuner).
Wilder’s favorite theatrical device most likely was—time. He first experimented with this in his one-act play, The Long Christmas Dinner. This play employs several unifying elements: its setting—the dining room of an American household, with a long table placed for Christmas dinner, and its characters—family members. The play, however, spans a ninety-year period. Characters exit through portals and doors representing death and birth, thus the ebb and flow of life. The dialogue is simple and believable; a natural rhythm is sustained throughout generations of each Christmas family dinner. Our Town’s Stage Manager permits Emily, who has died in childbirth, to relive a time in her past. She chooses her twelfth birthday. He reminds Emily that not only will she relive that time, but she will see herself doing it. Thus we have Emily experiencing three dimensions of time: acting in the past, watching herself do so in the present and knowing the future. In The Long Christmas Dinner, events occur chronologically, compressing time. The Stage Manager in Our Town exhibits the ability to control time, while implying that the past continues to exist. The Skin of Our Teeth represents another enormous leap in Wilder’s fascination with time; major events in the human race occur simultaneously.

The Autobus family, at once Adam, Eve, and family, experience the great flood and the ice age and survive wars.

In 1938, Wilder abandons these revolutionary concepts in The Merchant of Yonkers. Written immediately after Our Town, it was not at all successful. Making minor revisions to the text and adding a closing monologue in 1955, he simply changed the focus from one character to another and titled it, The Matchmaker. The play became an enormous success. Its musical adaptation by Michael Stewart became Hello, Dolly! “The appearance of something so close to a well-made play at this point in Wilder’s career might seem peculiar, for all his efforts thus far had clearly countered the box-set, representational, realistic traditional conventions. However, as he states in his preface to Three Plays, ‘One way to shake off the nonsense of the nineteenth-century staging is to make fun of it’” (Dictionary of American Literary Biography, 1998). Exhibiting his remarkable versatility, Wilder skillfully crafts this light-hearted entertainment bordering on farce.

Our Town’s Emily cries out, “Do human beings ever realize life while they live it? every, every minute?” Thanks to the revolutionary Wilder, some of us have caught a glimpse.

On December 22, 1975, Newsweek magazine offered this obituary for Wilder, who, had died December 7. “Exit the Stage Manager” written by Bill Roeder in the style of Our Town.” He was getting up in years at the age of 78. Still, it was a jolt for us folks in Grover’s Corners—and I’ll bet for a whole lot of other people, too—when Thornton Wilder slipped away with a heart attack during his afternoon nap the other day. God rest him. H’m—11 o’clock in Grover’s Corners. You can get a good rest, too. Good night.” At first glance Wilder would have clucked his tongue at the sentimentality of it, then after a second thought, we might have seen a slight upward curling of his lips at its pure theatricality.

The Imaginary Invalid was not only Molière’s last play, but a turning of his slapstick upon himself as a man who felt himself to be really ill, and probably dying, but who could not be sure that he was not hypochondriacally deluding himself about his health. In 1673, during his fourth performance in the comedy’s title role, Molière proved he wasn’t imagining himself to be sick by falling into a convulsion and dying later that night.

Farce Is Here to Stay
By Kelli Allred
From Insights, 2007

While Thornton Wilder (1897–1975) is not America’s greatest playwright, he was “a revolutionary writer who experimented boldly with literary forms and themes, from the beginning to the end of his long career” (Tappan Wilder, “Acknowledgements,” Our Town: A Play in Three Acts [Harper Collins Publishers: New York, 1986], pp 277). Wilder’s three greatest contributions to American theatre continue to entertain and enlighten audiences in the twenty-first century: Our Town (1938), The Skin of their Teeth (1942), and The Matchmaker (1954).

Thornton Wilder wrote The Matchmaker at a time when farce was not really popular among audiences in America. However, the resurgence of farce in American theaters since 1990 makes this a perfect choice for the 2007 season at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. The Festival has produced a number of farces, both classical and contemporary, in recent years: Tartuffe and The Imaginary Invalid (Moliere), The Foreigner (Larry Shue), Noises Off! (Michael Frayn), The Servant of Two Masters (Carlos Goldoni), Blithe Spirit (Noel Coward), and Room Service (John Murray and Allen Boretz).

A Note on Farce

The Matchmaker belongs in this select style of comedy—the farce. Farce is a type of comedy written for the stage which aims to entertain the audience by means of unlikely and extravagant situations, employing disguise and mistaken identity, and offering verbal humor in varying degrees of sophistication, which may include puns and sexual innuendo. In farce the plot’s fast pace usually increases toward the end of the play, often involving an elaborate chase scene. Broad physical humor and deliberate absurdity or nonsense often characterize farce.

Unlike some of the more realistic stories on today’s sitcoms, the situations in a farce seem farfetched. The Matchmaker is filled with mistaken identities, secret rendezvous obscured by screens and hidden behind doors, separated lovers, exciting twists and turns, and a light, bantering tone à la Oscar Wilde. According to Thornton Wilder, the root of farce is not silliness; rather, farce is based on deeply imbedded logic and order. He says that “the pleasures of farce, like those of a detective story, are those of development, pattern, and logic” (Amy Boratko, “The Matchmaker,” The Thornton Wilder Society, 2004, http://www.tcnj.edu/~wilder/works/frame.html). Though the farce looks like a wild, chaotic romp, Wilder built The Matchmaker on a firm, well-controlled foundation.

Wilder opens the play with a scene that could have been borrowed from Moliere’s classic comedy, The Miser, wherein the rich elderly man is set up to be duped by his hired help. In The Matchmaker, farce becomes a vehicle for moral courage and social independence among the play’s characters. According to arts theorist Eric Bentley, farce is one way serious individuals can get relief from the daily grind, “however slight or trivial, provided it is harmless. . . . The most pleasurable relief is to be found in the arts” (as cited in Hewitt, 328).

The characters in The Matchmaker are also seeking pleasure in spite of the strict social mores of 1890s New York. They use aggression against established values of their day. Cornelius Hackl and Irene Malloy, along with their sidekicks Barnaby and Minnie Fay, use tremendous energy as they dare to break out of the constricting roles imposed on them by society. At the same time they strive for the elements missing in their lives: change, adventure, and excitement (Emil Hurtik and Robert Yarber, An Introduction to Drama and Criticism [Waltham, MA: Xerox Publishing, 1971], 327–333).

Ambrose Kemper is determined to marry Ermengard, the over-protected niece of Horace Vandergelder. And Kemper is not a Jewish enough name for Ambrose to make a good match for Ermengarde. Although Horace needs a bashert (good Jewish mate) for his niece, he engages the matchmaking services of shadken (romance facilitator) Dolly Levi for himself once he decides to remarry. Indeed, Horace, too, is seeking to break away from the status quo and toward his own adventure, change, and excitement. Dolly accuses

**The Merchant of Yonkers**

The Matchmaker is an adaptation of an adaptation of an adaptation. The play’s original source was entitled “A Day Well Spent,” written by Englishman John Oxenford. This was a lively, one-act British farce that paired a curmudgeon and his young, marriageable ward and added an interesting subplot. In 1842 an Austrian playwright adapted Oxenford’s play into Einen Jux will er sich machen or A Roaring Good Time. Wilder set out to write a contemporary version of the latter in 1938, calling it The Merchant of Yonkers. Although he paired with director/producer Max Reinhardt to produce it, the play’s New York run lasted only 39 performances (Boratko).

**The Matchmaker**

Tyron Guthrie’s interest in remounting The Merchant of Yonkers inspired Wilder to carefully revise the play, adapting it for the talented Ruth Gordon, who had been cast as Dolly Levi. The play was renamed The Matchmaker and traveled to Scotland, where it enjoyed success at the Edinburgh Festival followed by a run at London’s Theatre Royal. The Matchmaker opened in New York on 12 August 1955, more to the playwright’s satisfaction and the public’s liking than its earlier adaptation (Donald Margulies, “Foreward,” Our Town: A Play in Three Acts [Harper Collins Publishers: New York, 1986], 277). Hollywood adapted the play into a film version of The Matchmaker in 1958.

**Hello, Dolly!**

Americans were still mourning the November 1963 murder of President John F. Kennedy when Broadway producer David Merrick went ahead with the opening of Hello, Dolly! In January 1964, the musical adaptation of Wilder’s The Matchmaker enjoyed a long run, and its title song, composed by Jerry Herman, became the most popular melody to come out of Broadway in many seasons. Winning ten Tony Awards, the musical version of The Matchmaker surpassed the commercial success of Wilder’s other two classics, Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth (Gerald Bordman, American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle [Oxford University Press: New York, 1986], 632–634). The financial rewards from Hello, Dolly! allowed “the aging Wilder to live comfortably until his death in December 1975,” at the age of 78 (Boratko).

Since the 1990s, farce has become a staple of American theater. Last year the Utah Shakespeare Festival produced Room Service, a farce from the 1930s, which audiences hailed a success. Thornton Wilder remains a formidable presence in American theatre today, due to the ongoing popularity of his three major works.

**Timeline of Thornton Wilder’s Career**

(http://www.pbs.org)
1897—Born April 1897 in Wisconsin
1915—Attends Oberlin College to study Greek and Roman classics
1919—Leaves school for eight months to enlist and serve in the Coast Artillery Corps in WWI
1920—Yale School of Drama publishes his first full-length play, The Trumpet Shall Sound
1928—Wins Pulitzer Prize for Fiction at age thirty for his novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey
1938—Wins second Pulitzer Prize at age forty for Our Town; writes The Merchant of Yonkers
1943—Wins third Pulitzer Prize for The Skin of Our Teeth
1944—Enlists and serves in the U.S. Air Force during WWII at the age of forty-seven
1954—The Matchmaker premieres at Scotland’s Edinburgh Festival; opens on Broadway
1958—Film version of The Matchmaker released
1963—Receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom
1964—Musical Hello, Dolly! opens on Broadway and wins ten Tony Awards
1975—Dies in December at his Connecticut home, at age seventy-eight