



THORNTON WILDER'S
THE
EMPORIUM

BY

SHOW GUIDE

WELCOME

We're delighted to share this Show Guide for Classic Stage Company's production of *Thornton Wilder's The Emporium*, which gives you a deeper look into this production.

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A NOTE FROM JILL RAFSON

CSC PRODUCING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Welcome to *Thornton Wilder's The Emporium*, the final production in CSC's 2025–26 season.



You might be wondering how a play by Thornton Wilder found its way to the stage in this moment. How incredible is it to have this opportunity to see the final new play from a true legend for the very first time? Why did it take 75 years? Will we have the same sensation today as those experiencing *Our Town* or *The Skin of Our Teeth* before they had already been deemed “classics”?

One of my favorite things about CSC is that we get to push at the boundaries of what's considered a classic, and that push can take many forms. In this case, like something out of suspense film, playwright Kirk Lynn followed the trail of a reference in Thornton Wilder's journals to an unfinished work just waiting to be excavated from the author's archives at Yale's Beinecke Library.

With *Thornton Wilder's The Emporium*, we turn to a masterful voice in the American canon—but one whose work continues to surprise, challenge, and reveal itself in new ways. Wilder's writing has always held a mirror up to the human experience with wit, imagination, and deep compassion. This play, in particular, invites us into a world that is at once whimsical and profound, asking big questions about connection, commerce, and what it means to truly see one another.

As our final production of the season, *Thornton Wilder's The Emporium* feels like a fitting culmination of everything we've explored together this year: a musical theater titan's work that took 50 years to reach the New York stage (*The Baker's Wife*) and the illumination of an undeniably classic figure's acts of bravery in one of history's darkest times (*Marcel on the Train*). Thank you for being part of this journey with us. It's been a joy to share this season with you, and I hope you'll continue to return to this space to discover all that every kind of classic can offer in our thrilling 2026–27 season to come.

Enjoy the show!

A CONVERSATION WITH KIRK LYNN, ADAPTER OF *THORNTON WILDER'S* *THE EMPORIUM*

Interview and transcription by CSC Teaching Artist Harmony Harris



Photo Credit: Allison Stock

HARMONY: Are you excited about this production of *The Emporium*?

KIRK: I am over the moon about it. It's really been a wonderful journey. I saw a production of *Our Town* that was at the Barrow Street Theater that David Cromer directed. And I knew Cromer just a little bit, and I texted him afterwards, and said, that was such a great adaptation. It seemed so contemporary. And he was like, oh, we didn't adapt anything. In fact, we used the rehearsal draft, like the early pre-Broadway draft. I had this light bulb go off in my head where I was like, how does Thornton Wilder make something that people think of as so nostalgic and homey and well

made? At the same time, it's still completely experimental and playful, radical in certain ways. So I just started reading all Thornton Wilder, everything. All of his plays, all of his novels. The very last thing I read was his journals, and he writes in his journals about this play. That play isn't anywhere else. I was like, 'Oh my God, this play exists.' He's talking about reading it with friends. He's talking about trying to get it ready for Broadway and feeling chicken about it. It was super fun. Then I had a lectureship at Yale and went into the library and was like, 'Oh my God, there's 360 handwritten pages. There's a whole play here that too few people know about.'

HARMONY: What a great responsibility you have to carry the completion of Thornton Wilder's unfinished play with permission from his family. How has this great task inspired your journey as a playwright and artist?

KIRK: This is a really great question. I take seriously Thornton Wilder's legacy. When I first started, Thornton's nephew, Amos Tappan Wilder, was the literary executor of the estate. Tappan Wilder and I had really robust conversations. I would even say arguments about whether to leave the play unfinished, or whether to work with it. We probably ended up both taking both sides at different points in the conversation. The material is so rich, and I think there's so many people that long to be in Thornton Wilder's company one more time. The estate was really enthusiastic about

finding a way to get it done, and then, they were very welcoming that I should and could be the one to do it. Throughout the process, I was encouraged to be as bold as I needed to be. Rob, who's directing it, frequently says they are a paragon of an estate, that they believe that Thornton Wilder loved the theater, loved the newness in the theatre, and that the way to celebrate Wilder is not to treat him like a relic, but instead to keep working with his work as contemporary material. I think the estate itself wants Thornton Wilder to keep living in the hands of theater artists in the way Thornton Wilder himself would have loved and desired and did desire and love. On my best days, I feel like I get to work alongside him. I have his material, his thoughts, his journals, and then I get to help out and be an apprentice.

HARMONY: As you're talking about Thornton Wilder and his work, I notice your eyes lighting up. Do you hope that when we're long gone, artists will adapt your work and be this excited about it?

KIRK: I know my children remember me as a good dad, and then my students remember me as a really loving teacher. I don't have a lot of concerns after that. It's so interesting because Thornton Wilder probably thought the same thing when he was alive. In addition to *The Emporium*, he was working on another novel, *Theophilus North*. Just a person who liked to work and read and engage with the arts. I would think through most of his life, if he

got an opportunity to play the Stage Manager [in *Our Town*] himself, he would rearrange his calendar and his schedule so he could go perform. He loved to perform. He loved to be in the theater. I don't think he was overly concerned with what would be made of him.

HARMONY: As you mentioned, Thornton Wilder loved to play the Stage Manager in *Our Town*. Is there a specific character in *The Emporium* that speaks to you and you could play?

KIRK: I probably love Laurencia the most. John is this orphan who wants to find his way to the top and really wants to run one of the stores someday. He doesn't care which one. And Laurencia, Bernice and Hobmeyer are all characters that are like, 'No, we kind of belong to The Emporium, it's our place, and I would rather mop the floors of The Emporium than be the president of Craigie's.' I'm probably more like that.

HARMONY: You mentioned the character John. I would like to chat about his monologue at the top of the show. After reading it, I remembered that I describe writers as surrogates of a beautiful collective of words, and they have to be gracious enough to give that collective words up for adoption and trust that the new family will take care of it so it can grow into a beautiful piece of art. The baby is *The Emporium*, and now, CSC is the family. What feels right about this space, this time, this family, and this team, to let this baby grow?

KIRK: The richness of having a place that both is excited by the legacy of Wilder and the future of theatre, of new classics. I think CSC is in this incredibly rich space that sort of stands in the doorway: of we both want to know our history and our legacy, and we want to do all this amazing work to move that legacy forward. I'm thrilled. I think Jill Rafson coming from a new works world into a world of classics is a blessing for me as an author and probably for so many others. The many things that make me a theater person first and foremost, that idea that I sketch out a blueprint then I hand it over to the actors and the directors, and they work feverishly in private for weeks and weeks, and then they hand it over to an audience.

HARMONY: When people leave this show, what do you want them to know about the state of art today?

KIRK: I hope that they feel this deep engagement with people. The struggle and the attempt is the only important part. *The Emporium* captures that feeling and that frustration in moments where we ask, how do we keep muddling forward? Those moments where, whether or not you feel like, 'Oh my God, I got the award or I succeeded or I got a bag of money.' I know as a parent, as a teacher, as a friend, as a husband, those moments where you feel like we're connected and we're addressing the problem together. Independent of the outcome, those are the moments that have deep value. And I think *The Emporium*,

if it has any super clear message, it says that you just have to engage and try. If you engage and try, you're doing your part. I think Wilder wonderfully critiques the arts in a certain sense of well, the pay's not fair and they don't honor people until after they're dead and there's no way to get it. It's not fair. I think that's so true of the state of the arts.

HARMONY: As you've been sitting with Thornton Wilder's writings and journals, do you feel like as you've explored his words, he'd be proud of the words that you created?

KIRK: I feel plagued by that. I think that there are moments where I feel him. I think there's one thing, especially where he really was wrestling with a problem that he talked about in his journals. I felt this moment where he had the sense that the characters, the retired department store workers, needed to be on stage. In one or in three different drafts, he has just one and sometimes he has three, but he didn't know exactly why or what the payoff would be. I feel like solving that, I felt him with me. It was really less of 'I did it' than 'we completed the puzzle.' We've solved it. I think he would be thrilled to see it, and I'm sure he would have. He would love to give me notes. I think he would be proud.

HARMONY: What specifically about this play pulls on your artist heartstrings?

KIRK: I mean, the way in which I feel connected to John's character is a struggle to make your way in the world and to balance this notion of commerce and artistry. I tell my students all the time that when I had a daughter, I started speaking about money so differently. I'm responsible now in a way I've never been and I've got to find a way to take the engine of my meaning in the world and harness it so that I'm also caring for others and taking care of the people closest to me. John really has that struggle of believing there's got to be a way forward through all this. My connection to John and *The Emporium* is real. I'm a kid from San Antonio, Texas. My dad's a barber. My mom's a school teacher. It's not the most direct route to find your way into a professorship or into the theater or even into New York City. But way leads to way, and we can slowly find our way. We're here.

HARMONY: As you've finished adapting this play, how have your conversations with your students shifted?

KIRK: One of my favorite questions to ask my playwriting students is 'how long does it take to write a play?' I think it points us toward this answer, which is you can write a play in two days, three days. You might write a play in one day. Maybe it also takes six years in the course of my work on *The Emporium*, or maybe it takes like 50, 60 years. There are all these answers where we think about what our endurance is, what our fidelity is. I think a lot about our

loyalty to the artwork. It takes a lot of faith. We're in the midst of bigger cultural projects as a democracy and just in terms of civilization, like, we've got to have a lot of faith to keep it going forward.

HARMONY: What's been the driving force keeping you going through this process of finishing this play?

KIRK: Thornton himself, I'm so fed by the artwork. As I'm getting ready for the depth of these rehearsals, I'm rereading all of his work again. What a really loving, wild, playful, deep and strange human being. Auditions are actually one of the best times in the world where you get to see the microcosm of the play itself. The thing you said about my eyes. Joe [Tapper], who is cast as the lead character, when he walked in the room and talked about Thornton Wilder, he lit up. It seemed as if he thought that just the idea that there's a Thornton Wilder play is the greatest idea in the world.

TIMELINE:

THORNTON NIVEN WILDER

Provided by The Thornton Wilder Estate / Wilder Family LLC

1897

Born in Madison, Wisconsin (April 17)

1906

Moves to Hong Kong in May and to Berkeley, California in October

1910

China Inland Mission School, Chefoo, China (one year)

1912

Thacher School, Ojai, California (one year). First play known to be produced: *The Russian Princess*

1915

Graduates from Berkeley High School; active in school dramatics

1915

Oberlin College; published regularly

-

1917



1920

B.A. Yale College (3-month service in 1918 with U.S. Army); many publications

1921

American Academy in Rome (8-month residency)

1920s

French teacher at Lawrenceville School, Lawrenceville, New Jersey ('21-'25 & '27-'28)



1924

First visit to the MacDowell Colony,
Peterborough, New Hampshire



By J. W. Ritchey - Hagedorn, Hermann (December 28, 1921). "The Peterborough Colony". *The Outlook* 129 (17): 686. New York, United States: The Outlook Company. Retrieved on October 18, 2011., Public Domain, Wikimedia

1926

M.A. in French literature, Princeton
University

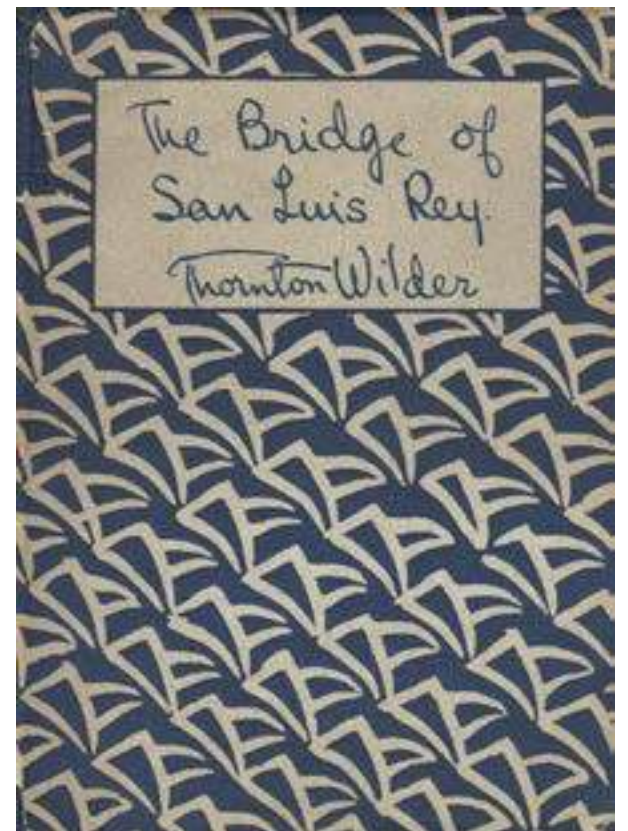
The Trumpet Shall Sound produced off-
Broadway (American Laboratory Theatre)

The Cabala (first novel)

Meets Hemingway in Paris at Shakespeare
& Co Booksellers and they contemplate
sharing a studio

1927

*The Bridge of San
Luis Rey* (novel)



1928

Wins first Pulitzer Prize
(fiction) for *The Bridge
of San Luis Rey*

F. Scott Fitzgerald
writes Wilder a fan
letter: Wilder sends
him a copy of *The
Bridge of San Luis Rey*
and quickly gets invited for a weekend
at Ellerslie, Fitzgerald's home on the
Delaware River.

Goes on walking/hiking tour of Europe with
Gene Tunney, heavyweight boxing world
champion

1930s

Part-time faculty, University of Chicago (comparative literature and composition); lectures across the country; first Hollywood screen-writing assignment (1934); extensive foreign travel

1930

The Woman of Andros (novel)

Completion of home for his family and himself in Hamden, Connecticut



1931

The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays (six one-act plays)

1932

Lucrece opens on Broadway starring Katharine Cornell (translation of André Obey's *Le Viol de Lucreèce*)

1933

Wilder is impressed by a young Orson Welles and writes "letters of introduction to friends in New York."

1935

Heaven's My Destination (novel)

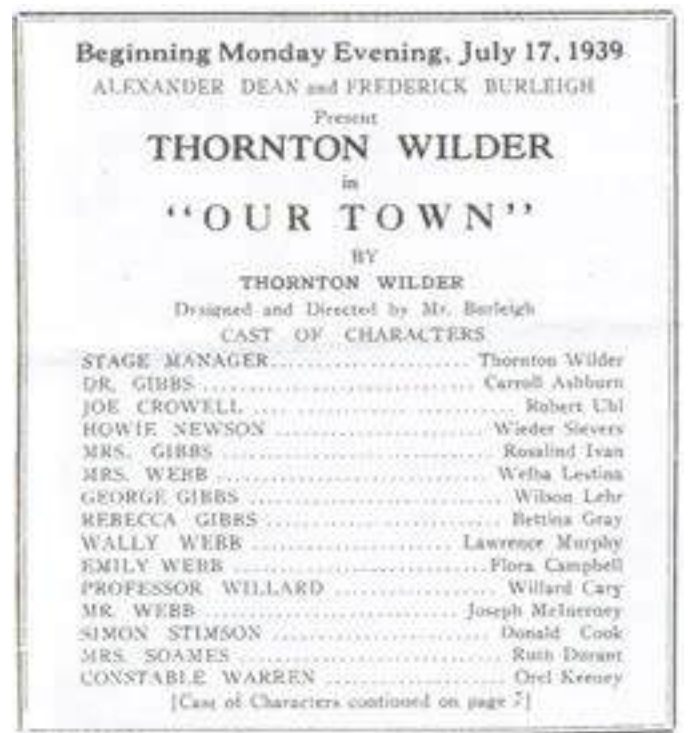
Wilder serves as the "secretary, errand-boy companion" of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas while they stay in his Chicago apartment for two weeks.

1937

A Doll's House (adaptation/ trans.) opens on Broadway with Ruth Gordon

1938

Our Town and *The Merchant of Yonkers* open on Broadway



Wins second Pulitzer Prize (drama) for *Our Town*

1942

The Skin of Our Teeth opens on Broadway

Writes screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*



1942

Service with Army Air Force in North Africa and Italy (Lieut. Col. at discharge –Bronze Star and O.B.E.)



1945

1943

Wins third Pulitzer Prize (drama) for *The Skin of Our Teeth*

1948

The Ides of March (novel); performing in his plays in summer stock in this period

The Victors opens off-Broadway (translation of Sartre's *Morts sans sépulture*)

Begins writing *The Emporium* (play). Left unfinished in 1954.

1949

Major role in Goethe Convocation in Aspen; lectures widely.

1951

Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard

1952

Gold Medal for Fiction, American Academy of Arts and Letters

1953

Cover of *Time Magazine* (January 12)

Wilder meets a young poet named Edward Albee and encourages him to write plays.

1955

The Matchmaker opens on Broadway starring Ruth Gordon

The Alcestiad produced at Edinburgh Festival with Irene Worth (as *A Life in the Sun*)



1957

German Peace Prize

1961

Libretto for *The Long Christmas Dinner* (music by Paul Hindemith—premieres in Mannheim, West Germany)

1962

Plays for Bleecker Street ("Someone from Assisi", "Infancy", and "Childhood") premiere at NYC's Circle in the Square

Libretto for *The Alcestiad* (music by Louise Talma—premieres in Frankfurt, West Germany)

1963

Presidential Medal of Freedom



1964

Hello, Dolly! (adapted from *The Matchmaker*) starring Carol Channing opens on Broadway

1965

National Book Committee's Medal for Literature

1967

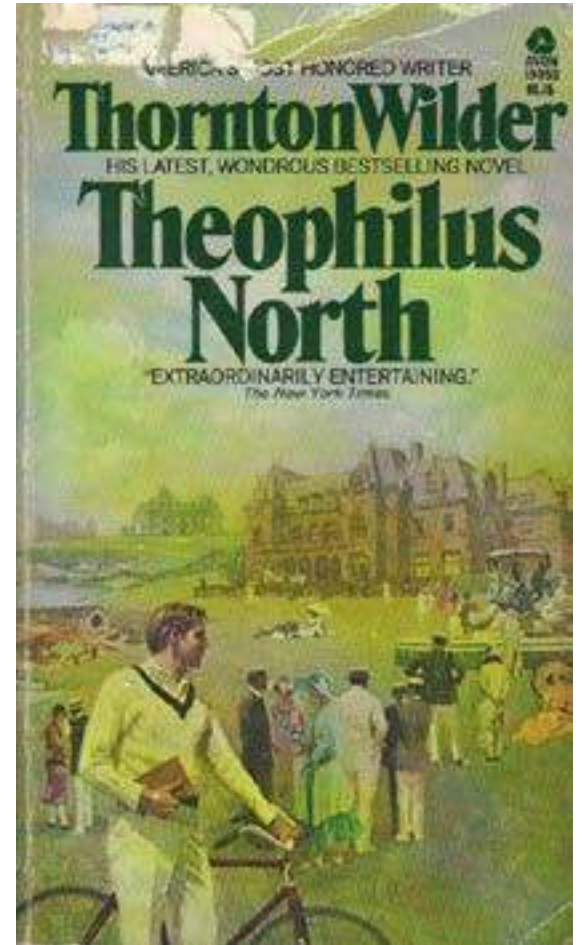
The Eighth Day (National Book Award for Fiction)

1973

Theophilus North (novel)

1975

Dies in sleep in Hamden, CT on December 7.
Buried at Mt. Carmel Cemetery, Hamden, Connecticut



For more information, please visit
www.thorntonwilder.com and
www.thorntonwildersociety.org.

Sources:
thorntonwilder.com

All images are from thorntonwilder.com unless otherwise notated

SETTING THE SCENE FOR *THE EMPORIUM*: A HISTORY OF DEPARTMENT STORES

By CSC Teaching Artist Emmy Weissman

Thornton Wilder's *The Emporium* is set in a mysterious, otherworldly department store. During his time in New York City, Wilder would have had the chance to experience and draw inspiration for the setting of his play from the grand department stores that flourished in the early to mid-20th century.

Department stores found their beginnings in Europe, specifically London and Paris. Though it is debated, Harding, Howell and Company in London, opening in 1796, is considered to be a model for the first department store, selling a variety of items such as fabric, furs, jewelry, and various other household goods.



Harding, Howell and Company Store in St. James's, London by Rudolph Ackermann, 1809. Source: *The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics*.

By the mid-19th century, department stores began to flourish as industrialization enabled the mass production of goods, the rapid growth of cities, and, therefore, the expansion of a middle class with disposable income. These stores also provided women with new opportunities to spend time outside the home. In 1852, Le Bon Marché ("The good bargain") was founded in Paris. Originally a small, family-owned novelty shop selling fabric and assorted household items, the store grew into Paris's first department store, expanding to over 70 departments and five floors by 1887. More department stores, such as Whiteley's and Harrods in London, soon followed.

In the mid-19th century, department stores began making their way to the United States. A.T. Stewart was one of the most significant of these stores. Their building, located at 280 Broadway, opened in 1846 as the "Marble Palace." The building was designed in



'Au Bon Marche' engraving by Frederic Lix, 1875. Source: 'Le Monde Illustré.'

an Italian Renaissance palace style, effectively introducing this style of architecture to the United States. Inside, the building featured a 70-foot glass dome, painted ceilings, and five floors of goods to choose from.

Other retailers of the time included Bergdorf Goodman, Bloomingdale's, B. Altman, and Siegel-Cooper (which briefly held the title of the largest department store in the world). By the end of the 19th century, the Ladies' Mile Historic District was established, running from 15th to 24th streets along Park Avenue South and 6th Avenue. This district was lined with department stores, restaurants, and performance venues.



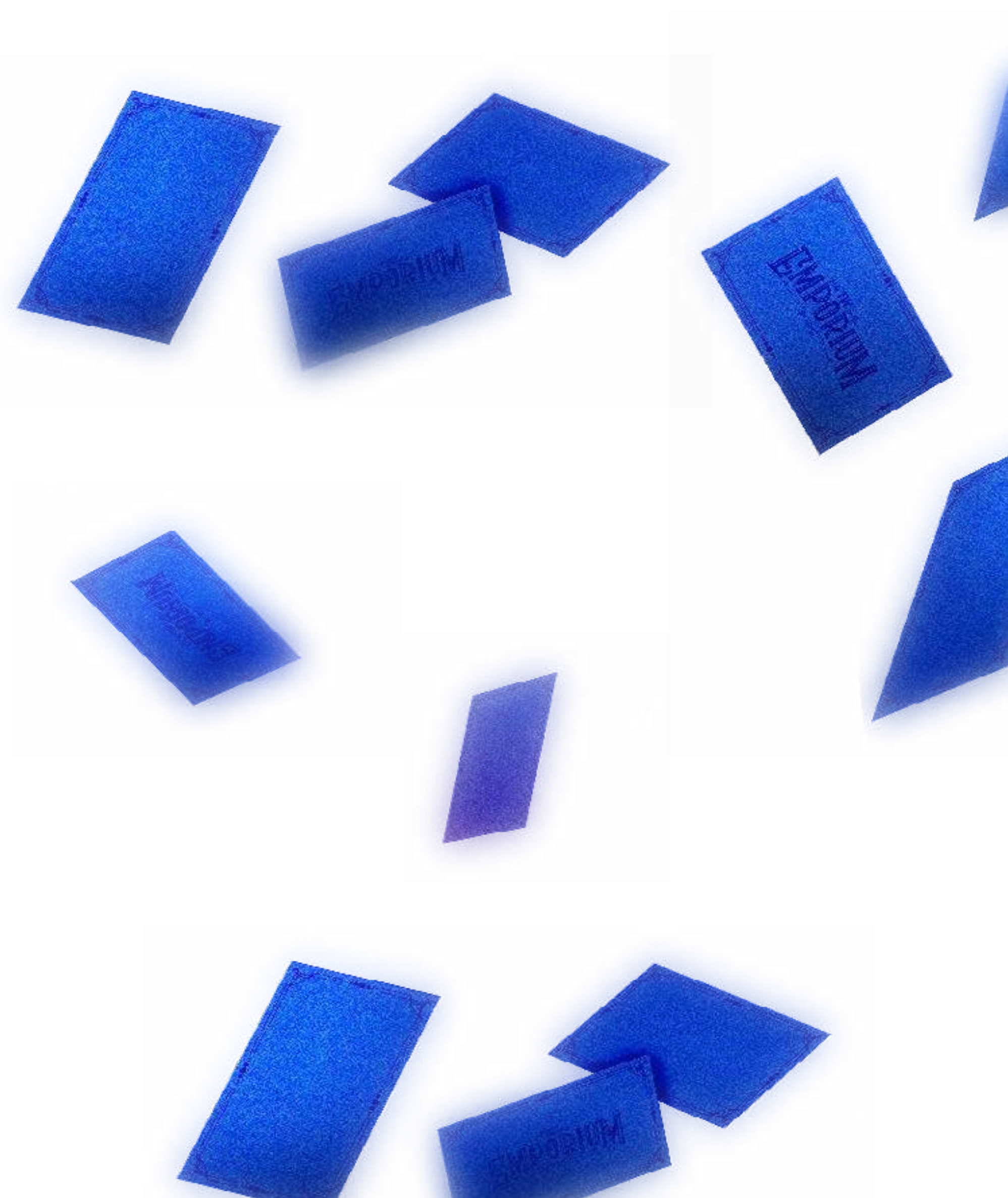
A.T. Stewart's "Marble Palace." 1872. Source: *Lights & Shadows of New York Life*.



"A.T. Stewart's Retail-Geschäft (Business)," 1846. Source: *New York Public Library*.

By the 1920s, when Thornton Wilder began spending time in New York City, he would have encountered some of the city's most architecturally and culturally significant department stores. Among them was Wanamaker's, one of NYC's leading department stores, opening in 1907 at 770 Broadway, formerly another A.T. Stewart store (now Wegman's). He also could have

visited the Lord & Taylor Building, completed in 1914, on 5th avenue between 38th and 39th streets, which spanned ten floors and featured conveyor belts, a tea room, and a men's manicuring parlor. Finally, there was Macy's Herald Square, which opened in 1902 and still stands today. The store pioneered elaborate holiday window displays, launched its own annual Thanksgiving Day parade, and introduced some of the first modern-style escalators in a department store.



THORNTON WILDER IN POP CULTURE

Provided by The Thornton Wilder Estate / Wilder Family LLC

1987

The popular sitcom *Married... with Children's* theme song, "Love and Marriage," originated from the 1955 television production of *Our Town*, for which it was performed by Frank Sinatra.

Our Town is revived on Broadway, directed by Gregory Mosher, starring Spalding Gray as the Stage Manager

1988

1989

Popular TV series *The Wonder Years* airs an episode in which the teenage characters do a production of *Our Town*.

In *The Birdcage*, Nathan Lane's character Albert claims Grover's Corners (the setting of *Our Town*) as his hometown.

1996



2001

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, then British Prime Minister Tony Blair quoted the final lines of Wilder's Pulitzer-winning novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* at a memorial service for the victims.

Our Town once again plays Broadway, directed by James Naughton, starring Paul Newman as the Stage Manager.

2002

2003

The Long Christmas Ride Home by Paula Vogel has its off-Broadway debut, inspired by Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner*.

The Big Meal by Dan LeFranc premieres at Playwrights Horizons in New York, a work deeply influenced by *The Long Christmas Dinner*.

2012

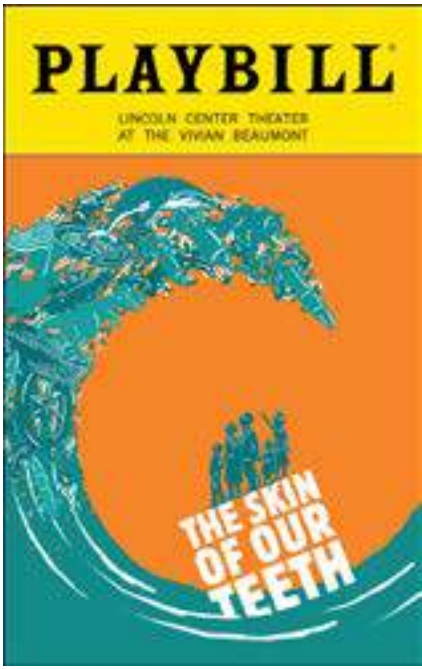
In the best-selling novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, Auggie's sister Via auditions and performs in the school production of *Our Town*.

2013

The Long Christmas Dinner annual holiday Reading & Conversation at the Public Theater launches, featuring actors alongside other artists and community members, reading the iconic play together every year.

2022

The Skin of Our Teeth on Broadway directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz at Lincoln Center Theater



Birthday Candles by Noah Haidle debuts on Broadway, another play in conversation with *The Long Christmas Dinner*.

Our Town inspired *Lunar Eclipse* by Donald Margulies (play)

2023

The novel *Tom Lake* by Ann Patchett features and is structured around *Our Town*.

2024

Our Town on Broadway directed by Kenny Leon, starring Jim Parsons as the Stage Manager.



Our Town - Ephraim Sykes, Richard Thomas, and Zoey Deutch. Photo by Daniel Rader.

2025

The Seat of Our Pants by Ethan Lipton (musical) – a musical adaptation of *The Skin of Our Teeth* – opens at the Public Theater.

Wonder by Sarah Ruhl and A Great Big World, an adaptation of R.J. Palacio's novel (musical) opens at American Repertory Theater.



Amina Faye, Ruthie Ann Miles, and Damon Daunno in *The Seat of Our Pants* at The Public Theater. Photo by Joan Marcus

“Who is Thornton Wilder?” is Final Jeopardy answer to question: “A writer who won three Pulitzer Prizes in two categories (fiction and drama) and famously named his Connecticut home ‘The House the Bridge Built’”.

2026

In *Star Trek Starfleet Academy* (television) the cadets perform *Our Town*.

American Classic (television) features Kevin Kline as a Broadway director returning home to mount a production of *Our Town*.

EDUCATION SECTION

FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

This section was developed to help students and teachers prepare to see *Thornton Wilder's The Emporium*. Feel free to share it!

SUMMARY

More than 75 years in the making, an unfinished work by one of America's greatest dramatists takes the New York stage at last. *Thornton Wilder's The Emporium* unveils the artist's final play, brought to life through playwright Kirk Lynn's masterful completion. As a young man journeys through the city and beyond, he encounters a world of wonder, meaning, and the elusive truths of life itself. Wilder's long-unseen masterpiece is finally ready to be discovered, offering a rare chance to experience a new work from a legendary voice.



Photo Credit: Allison Stock

THIS SECTION CONTAINS SPOILERS!

ABOUT THE CHARACTERS



JOHN: He's desperately trying to find his place in the Emporium and, by extension, the world. He leads the way through the play for the audience. He is warm, playful, and conveys the existential need to solve this mystery of life.



BERNICE: She is a sales associate at the Emporium. The same actor plays...

MRS. FOSTER: orphanage superintendent

MRS. GRAHAM: a farmer's wife and John's mom

MRS. DOBBS: an off-site Employment Agency manager

MRS. D'AGOSTINO: a boardinghouse keeper

ERMENGARDE CRAIGIE: heiress to Craigie fortune



MR. FOSTER: Orphanage superintendent, married to Mrs. Foster. The same actor plays...

MR. GRAHAM: A farmer, married to Mrs. Graham

MR. HOBMEYER: Head floor-walker of the Emporium

MR. CONNOVER: Muscle for the above Employment Agency

MR. CRAIGIE: Owner of Craigie's Departmental Store



LAURENCIA : She is a counter-girl at the Emporium who becomes John's love interest. She's a bit of a mystery to him. She is fully committed to the Emporium way of life. Bright, honest, curious, and articulate.



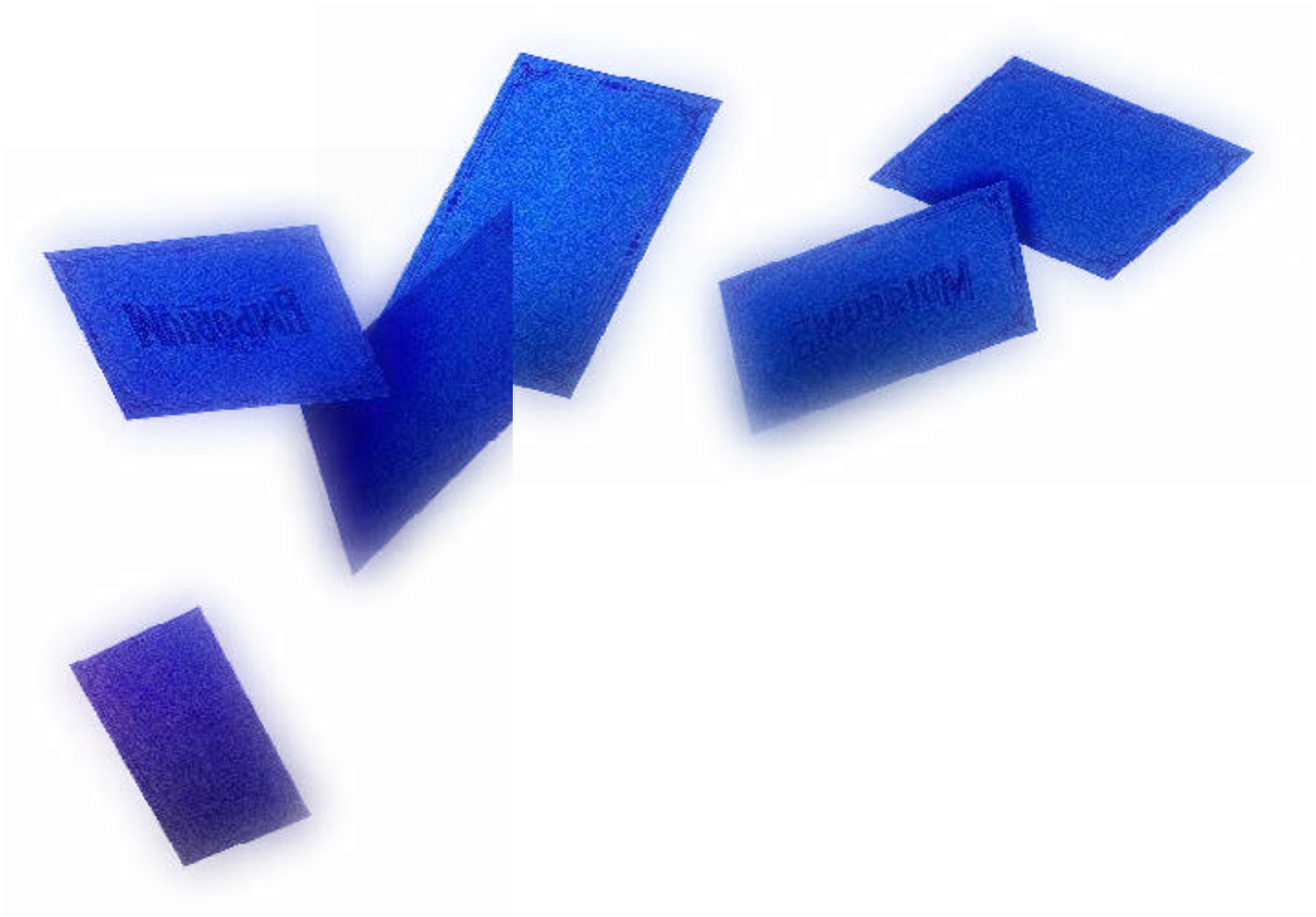
MR. BENJAMIN: Old enough to be retired, worked for years at the monotonous, dependable Craigie's Departmental, longs to be accepted at the more bohemian Emporium. A ward of the R.R.D.S.W. (Retreat for Retired Department Store Workers), who act as the play's Greek chorus.



MRS. FRISBEE: Old enough to be retired, a widow, somewhat ambivalent about the Emporium. A ward of the R.R.D.S.W. (Retreat for Retired Department Store Workers), who act as the play's Greek chorus. Has a good-natured, small-town sensibility.



MISS COLEY: Old enough to be retired, the most playful and knowing of her bunch, worked for the very store in question. A ward of the R.R.D.S.W. (Retreat for Retired Department Store Workers), who act as the play's Greek chorus.



THIS SECTION CONTAINS SPOILERS!

THE STORY

On the steps of the Emporium, a grand department store, a man addresses the audience and introduces the play and its author Thornton Wilder. He is on a quest to read all of Thornton Wilder's writing and hopes to discover why Wilder, who won 3 Pulitzer prizes for his work during his lifetime, stopped writing plays 30 years before the end of his life.

This man reveals that he discovered an unfinished play of Wilder's in a library, called *The Emporium*: the story of "an orphan trying to make his way to a mythical department store containing everything a person could possibly want." As the man describes the hand-written pages of text he found, Bernice, a character from *The Emporium*, enters and launches the narrative into the world of Wilder's play, announcing that the store is closed because a baby was found on the steps. She breaks the fourth wall to speak to the man outside the world of the play, then brings the audience into the play, casting them as a mob at the steps of the Emporium who are rioting because the Annual Great and Good Sale is cancelled, again. Bernice tells the audience she is to deliver the first of nine goodbye speeches and introduces a

chalkboard to tally them. She bids goodbye to the man, who is pulled out of the meta-narrative library space, and taken to the orphanage, becoming the play's main character, John.

The convention established in the first scene of characters speaking to each other and the audience through and between the layers of narrative framing-- a signature style of Thornton Wilder's playwriting-- will continue and evolve throughout the play.

In Scene Two, Mr. Foster, the superintendent of the orphanage, casts the audience as the orphans in his charge. The actress playing Bernice returns as Mrs. Foster. Three other characters, "the wards of the Retreat for Retired Department Store Workers," enter and take on the job of spectators, so the actual audience can assume their new role within the play. John enters, and Mr. Foster names him John Foster, an orphan raised in the orphanage who is constantly running away to the city. John resists this name and identity; he wants to go to work at The Emporium. Mr. Foster insists John doesn't know what the Emporium is, that he's lost, and that by running away from the role he's been cast in, he's resisting what it is to belong. After some persuasion, John agrees to be adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Graham and live on their farm.

In Scene Three, Mrs. Foster becomes Mrs. Graham, and the audience are recast as her

sheep. After 5 years working on Mr. Graham's farm for no pay, and suffering mistreatment at the hands of his adopted father, John plans to run away. Before he goes, Mrs. Graham tells him the true story of the day of his adoption: he was found as a baby on the steps of the Emporium, not wrapped in ratty rags but in a handsome basket outfitted with lovely things in the Emporium's signature blue color from parents who must have loved him. Mrs. Graham reveals that she worked at the Emporium before she got married. She and the audience of Retired Department Store Workers reminisce fondly about their time spent working in the city. She tells John he's an "Emporium man" and sends him off to find his way with a freshly ironed blue suit and some spending money. She warns him that it's a hard place to work, and the pay is inconsistent. John asks if the Emporium is a fair place, and she says: "it's a place to belong." Mrs. Graham helps him escape just as Mr. Graham arrives home to discipline him, giving John her medal for "ten years exceptional service" at the Emporium.

In Scene Four, Mr. Graham becomes Mr. Hobmeyer, a floorworker at the Emporium. He casts the audience as customers at the Emporium and invites them to write down any complaints they have on a card for collection: anything they don't enjoy about the world. Laurenica, an employee, has recently been given a note from the Emporium's directors, Mr. Gillespie and Mrs. Schwingemeister, whom she has never met. The note describes

her work as “astroclated.” She can’t find a definition of the word and sings the audience a song of all the other A-words she found in the dictionary. John has moved to the city and has spent several difficult lonely years trying to find his way in this “strange and expensive place.” He has gotten a little work at Craigie’s Department Store, where everything is regular and predictable. The Emporium isn’t hiring, but John spends every chance he gets there, learning about it. He asks Laurencia how to get a job interview, but she doesn’t like his critical attitude towards the Emporium. When he shows her Mrs. Graham’s medal for ten years’ service, she reveals that before she got the job, she was arrested in the Emporium for shoplifting. She won’t tell him how to get a job, but she reveals the existence of “off-site employment agencies” and the name of the Directors’ assistant, Mrs. Nortini.

In Scene Five, Mrs. Foster becomes Mrs. Dobbs, who runs an employment office. The audience is cast as applicant employees. John now has a steady job at Craigie’s as a manager. He’s tracked down 7 employment offices in the last 5 years, but none have gotten him an interview at the Emporium. John asks the audience of retired workers about their time at the Emporium. He is still unsure if they ever hire new employees, or why it’s such a sought after place to work. Mrs. Dobbs announces that quarterly sales are down at the Emporium and the workers won’t be paid-- she hands around a donation box for

for them. John balks at the injustice of this, more unsure of the Emporium than ever, confused by his lingering desire to seek work there and give up his dependable employment at Craigie's. He starts his own goodbye speech. The original narrator on a quest to read all of Thornton Wilder also admits to feeling lost: he was looking for more than a job at the Emporium; he was looking for meaning and a sense of belonging, to keep him from quitting and running away. He asks Mrs. Dobbs what the Emporium is. She starts to tell him that maybe the Emporium isn't a business at all, but a bigger idea: of pure opportunity, of our hopes and dreams of success, glory and riches--

Suddenly Mrs. Dobbs's glasses fall apart on her face, her speech is interrupted, and she is rushed offstage. Frustrated, John resolves to start a mutiny against the Emporium and shut it down. He offers steady, paying jobs at Craigie's to Laurencia and all the Emporium employees.

After John exits, the Retired Workers offer to share with the audience a never-written prologue to the play that Thornton Wilder outlined in his journal notes, which "gives away the play's meaning" and explains the metaphor of the Emporium. The audience is invited to vote on whether or not to see the company perform a version of this prologue, not written by Wilder, after intermission.

In Scene Six, Bernice mops the floors of a

desolate Emporium. Mr. Hobmeyer explains that for the last five years, John has been coming every night to recruit their best employees to work at Craigie's. Almost everyone is gone, but not Laurencia. Mr. Hobmeyer wonders if John will entice her away with a marriage proposal if he can't offer her a job. They fear dark days ahead for the Emporium: furloughs, layoffs, automation, or worse.

The Retired Workers arrive to announce that the votes have been tallied (only if the votes go this way) and the audience wants to see the "prologue" that Wilder intended to be performed at the midpoint of the play. Bernice and the audience of Retired Workers explain that Wilder intended the Emporium to be a metaphor for a life in the arts: no clear career path, unpredictable pay, unfair advancement, false gatekeepers, a journey determined by chance and luck. The metaphor could also be for something greater and more essential: not art, but love, or, "Everything mysterious and elusive with no clear path to get there." Craigie's Department Store is the counterpoint: a place without metaphor, where things are exactly what they say they are, and you get exactly what you pay for.

Laurencia enters with terrible news: the directors are closing the Emporium! Again, John offers everyone a job at Craigie's, and while Mr. Hobmeyer, Bernice, and Laurencia

consider a different kind of life, John entices them with the perks: steady employment with dependable income and a lavish Holiday Gala at the Craigie Mansion hosted by the boss's daughter, with unlimited food and drink-- a place of pure pleasure.

Mr. Hobmeyer departs for a job at the orphanage, and Laurenica gives a goodbye speech to the Emporium. She invites John to join her while she finishes her last shift. They read several customer complaints from the collection box, then Laurenica burns the whole lot of them. John is shocked to learn that the complaints are what the Emporium uses for fuel. It takes a huge amount of fuel and many years in order to make just one true patron who finds what they are seeking at the Emporium. One of the Retired Workers shares her complaint: the Emporium "killed her husband." He gave his life and his art to the Emporium and never got anything back. John renews his offer of employment at Craigie's and exits with three new recruits from the Retired Workers. Laurencia crosses another goodbye speech off the list and exits after them. Mr. Hobmeyer runs back in with a package for Laurenica from the directors, but she's gone. Bernice insists the Emporium will open again and that Laurenica will be back. Bernice makes a plan to deliver the package to her at just the right time.

In Scene Seven at Mrs. D'Agostino's boarding house, Laurenica sings her A-word song

after a rough day at her job at Craigie's. Mrs. D'Agostino tells her a package has arrived for her-- it might actually have arrived years ago, but now is the right time for her to open it. As Laurencia exits, Mrs. D'Agostino casts the audience as the residents of the boarding house and tells them to get ready to shine any light they have on Laurencia when their cue comes. Mrs. D'Agostino goes to John's boarding room and asks him to deliver the package to her. John says Laurencia has been refusing everything from him, including a promotion, and she won't let him walk her home anymore. He's been spending evenings eating dinner with the boss's daughter instead. Mrs. D'Agostino says he's on the steady path to run Craigie's, unless he delivers the box to Laurencia tonight, and they "make it so beautiful." John refuses to do it and refuses the poisoned cheese Mrs. D'Agostino offers him to kill the rats in his room. He says to refuse the quick fix of the cheese and keep his room clean is better in the long run. She says that attitude allows him to make sense of his life of "delayed gratification and anticipation of future pleasures." She entices him with the knowledge of the "third thing."

John invites Laurencia onto the fire escape, and the audience lights up a night sky for them. He asks her if she'll be his date to the Holiday Gala; she tells him she's quitting Craigie's and going back to the Emporium, as it is re-opening. He offers her all the promises

of his steady advancement at Craigie's, and shares his plan to work his way up, then buy the Emporium. She asks if he'll have to marry the boss's daughter to do it. She accuses him of not taking his last chance: of running away before the good part. Laurencia opens the package: it contains an invitation for a job interview at the Emporium for John and a summons for shoplifting for Laurencia-- after all her years of loyalty. She asks him to go with her to the Emporium to fight the summons, but he refuses.

At the Craigie's Workers' Holiday Gala, Mr. Craigie is disappointed by the small turnout, on account of a storm. He awards the annual Workers' Gala prize to John and makes a threat towards any employee thinking of transferring to the "chaotic, elitist, bohemian establishment" he will not name, that asks for "your whole life" and gives nothing back. He asks John if he agrees, and Mr. Craigie's daughter, Ermengarde, asks John if he will marry her. John can't give an answer. Mr. Craigie gives him until dawn to make up his mind. John leaves the party to walk home in the storm.

Scene Nine is a dream. The Retired Department Store Workers accompany John on his walk home while he considers his life and what to do next, and they reminisce about their own lives seeking work at the Emporium. He blames them for landing him here, lost. Laurencia enters to walk John

home, and he asks why she never told him how to get a job at the Emporium. She told him she “just started” working there and that she was afraid of being found out by him to be a fraud. She reveals the “third thing” in all its simplicity: “when the delayed gratification you find working toward a goal, becomes more important to you than the brief pleasure of achieving it.” She tells him to stop waiting to feel ready, or perfect, or like he belongs. His letter from the Emporium drops out of his pocket. The Retired Department Store Workers reveal themselves to be the directors and their assistant, Mrs. Nortini-- the interview has been happening all along. John has lived many lives, cast and recast, beginning again as the baby on the steps, making different choices each time he journeys through life. John asks who the audience is playing in this scene, and Laurencia says they are just people looking for something, and they might not find it here, but that the gathering together and looking for it is “the miracle.” It’s closing time, and John is back outside the narrative and prepares to make his way home. The company offers to show him the beginning while he’s still inside the story: Bernice enters with a baby in a basket to announce the same words that began Wilder’s play: that the Annual Great and Good Sale is cancelled.

FOUNDATIONS

HISTORIC FIGURES, PLACES, AND MORE MENTIONED IN THE SHOW:

THORNTON WILDER (1897-1975)

Thornton Wilder was a pivotal figure in the literary history of the twentieth century. He is the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction and drama. He received the Pulitzer for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927)



and the plays *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). His other best-selling novels include *The Cabala*, *The Woman of Andros*, *Heaven's My Destination*, *The Ides of March*, *The Eighth Day*, and *Theophilus North*. His other major dramas include *The Matchmaker* (adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!*) and *The Alcestiad*. *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *The Long Christmas Dinner* are among his well-known shorter plays.

Wilder's many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Book Committee's Medal for Literature and the Goethe-Plakette Award (Germany).

Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897. He spent part of his boyhood in China and was educated principally in California, graduating from Berkeley High School in 1915. After attending Oberlin College for two years, he transferred to Yale, where he received his BA in 1920. His post-graduate studies included a year spent studying archaeology and Italian at the American Academy in Rome (1920-21) and graduate work in French at Princeton (Master's degree, 1926).

In addition to his talents as a playwright and novelist, Wilder was an accomplished essayist, translator, research scholar, teacher, lecturer, librettist and screenwriter. In 1942, he teamed up with Alfred Hitchcock on the classic psycho-thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*. Versed in foreign languages, he translated and adapted plays by Ibsen, Sartre and Obey. He read and spoke German, French, and Spanish, and his scholarship included significant research on James Joyce and Lope de Vega.

Wilder enjoyed acting and played major roles in several of his plays in summer theater productions. He also possessed a life-long love of music and wrote librettos for two operas, one based on *The Long Christmas Dinner* (composer Paul Hindemith) and the other based on *The Alcestiad* (composer Louis Talma).

One of Wilder's deepest passions was teaching. He began this career in 1921 as an instructor in French at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. During the 1930s he taught courses in Classics in Translation and Composition at the University of Chicago. In 1950–51, he served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard.



On the deck of the S.S. Britannic, returning to the US, 1933

During WWII, Wilder served in the Army Air Force Intelligence. He was awarded the Legion of Merit Bronze Star, the Legion d'honneur and the Order of the British Empire.

In 1930, with the royalties received from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder built a home for himself and his family in Hamden, Connecticut. Although often away from home, restlessly seeking quiet places in which to write, he always returned to "The House The Bridge Built." He died here on December 7, 1975.



[Click to play video](#)

SARAH BERNHARDT (1844 - 1923)

The greatest French actress of the later 19th century and one of the best-known figures in the history of the stage.



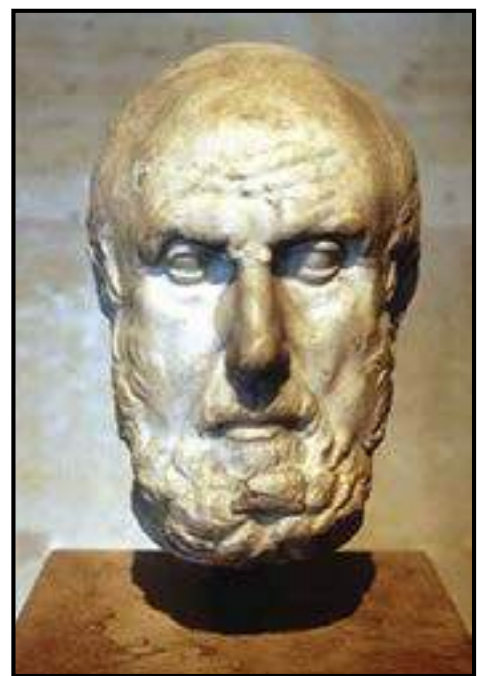
JULES VERNE (1828 - 1905)



A prolific French author whose writings laid much of the foundation of modern science fiction.

HIPPOCRATES (460 - C. 375 BCE)

An ancient Greek physician who lived during Greece's Classical period and is traditionally regarded as the father of medicine.



ALEXANDER HAMILTON (1755/57 - 1804)



A New York delegate to the Constitutional Convention (1787), major author of the Federalist papers, and first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States (1789–95), who was the foremost champion of a strong central government for the new United States.

AARON BURR (1756 - 1836)

The third vice president of the United States (1801–05), who killed his political rival, Alexander Hamilton, in a duel (1804) and whose turbulent political career ended with his arrest for treason in 1807.



BOARDING HOUSE

A house where people pay to live and have daily meals



One of the last remaining textile mill boarding houses in Lowell, Massachusetts, on right; part of the Lowell National Historical Park

Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

ABARCY

insatiableness

ABEQUITATE

to ride off on a horse

AGELAST

one who never laughs



Sources:

<https://thorntonwilder.com/>

<https://www.britannica.com/>

ACTIVITY (THE PROLOGUE)

OPENING MONOLOGUE - *OUR TOWN*



[Click to play video](#)

In his notes, Thornton Wilder was still deciding whether to include a PROLOGUE for *The Emporium*, something he does in his plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. He wonders, what would it be like if the prologue happened after the intermission when the audience had already experienced half the play. Adaptor Kirk Lynn leaves it up to the audience to decide each night by a vote!

Prompt: In a group, create an original PROLOGUE for a play, tv series, film, or book you are all familiar with. Then, rehearse and share with the other groups.

Some questions to ask while creating:

- Is it a monologue or scene?
- Is it spoken by an existing character, a new character, or a narrator?
- Is it performed alone or with other performers on stage?
- How much do you share with the audience before they experience the story themselves, i.e. setting the scene, sharing backstory, the location, the meaning of the piece?

TRIVIA

Which was CSC Producing Artistic Director Jill Rafson's first encounter with a Thornton Wilder play?

- A.) As the Stage Manager for her elementary school production of *The Skin of Our Teeth*.
- B.) In the Drama Section of the bookstore Shakespeare & Co. while on Spring Break in Paris.
- C.) An episode of the popular TV series *The Wonder Years*, in which the teenage characters do a production of *Our Town*.
- D.) The film version of the musical adaptation of *The Matchmaker* called *Hello, Dolly!* starring Barbra Streisand and directed by Gene Kelly.



Photo Credit: Allison Stock

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

THEMES

"*The Emporium* captures that feeling and that frustration in moments where we ask, how do we keep muddling forward? Those moments where you feel like we're connected and we're addressing the problem together. Independent of the outcome, those are the moments that have deep value. And I think *The Emporium*, if it has any super clear message, it says that you just have to engage and try. If you engage and try, you're doing your part."

– Adaptor and Playwright, Kirk Lynn

Prompt: Thornton Wilder's *The Emporium* deals with many themes. Choose the theme Kirk Lynn speaks about above or identify your own, then talk with a partner about how that theme is revealed over the course of the play. How does this theme impact the characters?



RESOURCES AND RELATED WORKS

To broaden your familiarity with Thornton Wilder and the key topics in the play, consider consulting the following resources:

Plays by Thornton Wilder

- *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1926)
- [*The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays* \(1928\)](#)
- [*The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act* \(1931\)](#)
- [*Our Town* \(1938\)](#)
- *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938)
- [*The Skin of Our Teeth* \(1942\)](#)
- [*The Matchmaker* \(1954\)](#)—revised from *The Merchant of Yonkers*
- [*The Alcestiad: Or, a Life in the Sun* \(1955\)](#)
- [*Childhood* \(1960\)](#)
- [*Infancy* \(1960\)](#)
- *Plays for Bleecker Street* (1962)

Books

- *The Castle* by Franz Kafka (1926)
- *Ragged Dick* Series by Horatio Alger Jr. (1867-68)



Trivia Answers:

C. She can still picture Kevin Arnold holding the spotlight!