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SF PERUSALS

# Bernice

by Thornton Wilder

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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# INTRODUCTION TO WILDER'S *BERNICE*

## The Sin of Pride

From the time he began dreaming up plays as a boy Thornton Wilder's vision of the theater transcended conventional boundaries, and to the end of his life his vision continually evolved and expanded. In 1956, he began work on what grew into an extravagantly ambitious project: two cycles of seven one-act plays based on the Deadly Sins and the Ages of Man. *Bernice* represents "Pride" in Wilder's projected cycle on the Seven Deadly Sins.

In what would prove to be his final dramatic works, Wilder sought not only to explore the theatrical possibilities inherent in the Sins and Ages, but (as he phrased it in his private journal on Christmas Day 1960) to "offer each play in the series as representing, also, a different mode of playwriting: Grand Guignol, Chekhov, Noh play, etc., etc." In short, he envisioned nothing less than a *tour de force* of dramatic theme and form encapsulated in the economy and intensity of the one-act play.

Wilder did not complete the challenge he set for himself, but he came close. The surviving work enriches his dramatic legacy and deserves to be remembered as more than a footnote to his lifelong conviction (written soon after *Our Town* opened on Broadway in 1938): "The theater offers to imaginative narration its highest possibilities."

### The Sins and Ages Then And Now

A brief overview of the history of these plays will help readers place them in Wilder's career as a dramatist. Two Sins, *Bernice* (Pride) and *The Wreck on the 5:25* (Sloth), premiered in English at a special event in Berlin in 1957 (with Wilder performing in *Bernice*). For reasons that have never been clear, for he enjoyed the experience and felt that plays did well, he withdrew them. That same year a third Sin, *The Drunken Sisters* (Gluttony), written as the satyr play for Wilder's full length drama, *The Alcestiad*, proved successful in its premiere on the stage of Zürich's fabled Schauspielhaus.

Five years passed before the continuation of his ambitious scheme appeared on a stage in the United States. In January 1962, two new Ages (*Infancy* and *Childhood*) and a new Sin, *Someone From Assisi* (Lust), opened at Circle in the Square, then located off-Broadway on Bleecker Street, to the reported largest pre-opening advanced sale in that stage's then 11-year history. Billed as "Plays for Bleecker Street," the show of ran for 349 performances.

Then silence. After "Plays for Bleecker Street" closed, no more Sins or Ages appeared. When Thornton Wilder died in 1975 the public record of his 14-play scheme contained only four plays – two Ages (*Infancy* and *Childhood*) and two Sins (Lust and Gluttony).

Today, eleven of Wilder's Sins and Ages are available for production: a completed cycle of the seven Deadly Sins and four of seven Ages of Man. The source of the seven "new" plays is no secret. The missing pieces were found in Thornton Wilder's archives at Yale[1]. From this source, starting in 1995, his literary executor and family released the two plays withdrawn in 1957, *Cement Hands* (Avarice), and four additional titles (*Youth*, *The Rivers Under the Earth* [Middle Age][2], *A Ringing of Doorbells* [Envy] and *In Shakespeare and the Bible* [Wrath]) recovered and completed by the actor, director and friend of Wilder's, F.J. O'Neil. (Mr. O'Neil's valuable notes on the origin of each of these missing links follow the text of each play.)

The public reception of Thornton Wilder's long lost and new plays was gratifying. *The Wreck on the 5:25* was selected as one of the Best American Short Plays of 1994-95. In 1997, the Centenary of the playwright's birth, Kevin Kline starred in a premiere reading in New York of *Cement Hands*, and the works recovered by Mr. O'Neil served as the centerpieces of Actors Theatre of Louisville's 13th Annual Brown-Forman Classics in Context Festival. Finally, as the capstone to the Centenary celebration, TCG Press in 1997 published the 11 Sins and Ages in Volume I of *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder.*

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[1] No additional one-acts remain to be discovered in Thornton Wilder's archives at Yale.

[2] We believe Wilder intended *The Rivers Under the Earth* to represent Middle Age.

Wilder never followed conventional theatrical practice. As a young writer in his "Classic One Act Plays" of 1931, he swept away scenery and played provocative games with time and place. In the Sins and Ages, his farewell as a playwright, he is no less adventurous by way of settings, techniques, stage-craft and themes. One artistic trend of the day especially "fired his imagination" where these plays are concerned: his passionate belief in the value of the arena stage. "The boxed set play," he wrote in 1961, "encourages the anecdote…The unencumbered stage encourages the truth in everyone." Wilder felt so strongly that audiences should be seated as close to the actors as possible that Samuel French, for several years, was only permitted to license these plays to companies agreeing to perform them on a three-sided thrust or arena stage.

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As part of its celebration of Wilder's one-act plays, Samuel French and the Wilder family take great pleasure in issuing new acting editions for the Sins and Ages long in print and, for the first time, acting editions of the seven new Wilder works. We invite those performing or teaching these plays to visit www.thorntonwilder.com for additional information.

– *Tappan Wilder,*
Literary Executor for Thornton Wilder

## CHARACTERS

**MR. MALLISON**, Mr. Walbeck's lawyer, fifty-nine
**BERNICE MAYHEW**, Mr. Walbeck's maid, fifty
**THE DRIVER**
**MR. WALBECK**, forty-seven

## SETTING

Drawing room of a house in Chicago, 1911.

*(Door into the hall at the back. All we need see are an elaborate, but not weighty, table in the center and two chairs. At the front of the stage are some andirons and a poker, indicating a fireplace.* **MALLISON**, *fifty-nine, all a lawyer, now very nervous, is standing before the table holding an open watch in his hand. By the door is* **BERNICE**, *colored, fifty, in a maid's uniform.)*

**MALLISON.** Remind me…remind me, please…your name?

**BERNICE.** *(unimpressed)* Bernice.

**MALLISON.** Thank you. – Now Mr. Burgess, your employer, may be a little bit…moody. You do whatever he wants. Have you enough help to run the house?

**BERNICE.** I did what you told me. There's Jason for the heavy work and the furnace. This Mr. Burgess – will he be alone in this house?

**MALLISON.** Alone? Oh! Most probably. At all events, you are in charge. Get whatever help you need. I am Mr. Burgess's lawyer, but he will be getting another lawyer soon. All your bills will be paid, I'm sure…You have some dinner waiting for him now?

**BERNICE.** *(slowly)* Why do you talk so funny about this Mr. Burgess? Is he coming from the crazy house or something?

**MALLISON.** *(outraged)* No, indeed!! I don't know where you got such an idea. All that's expected of you is…uh… good meals and a well-run house.

**BERNICE.** You talk very funny, Mr. Mallison.

**MALLISON.** *(after swallowing with dignity and glaring at her)* Mrs. Willard recommended you as an experienced cook and housekeeper, Bernice. My duty ends there.

**BERNICE.** I don't have to take any jobs unless I likes them, Mr. Mallison. I never agrees to work any place more than three days. Mrs. Willard don't like it, but that's my terms – if I likes it, I stays.

**MALLISON.** Well, I hope you like it here. You're getting very well paid and you can ask for any further help you need – within reason. There's an automobile stopping before the door now. I think you'd better go to the door.

*(***BERNICE** *doesn't move. Arms akimbo, she looks musingly at* **MALLISON.***)*

**BERNICE.** I seen people like you before…You're up to something.

*(The front door bell rings.)*

**MALLISON.** I don't like your tone. You've been engaged to work here – for three days, anyway. You can begin by answering that door bell.

*(***BERNICE** *goes out.* **MALLISON** *straightens his clothes, goes to the table and picks up his briefcase, then stands waiting with pursed lips. Sounds of altercation from the hall.)*

**DRIVER'S VOICE.** All right! The price is twenty dollars. But if I'd know'd it was a night like this –

*(Enter the* **DRIVER**, *a livery stable chauffeur, Irish, slightly drunk. He is carrying a small rattan suitcase, which he puts down by the door. He is followed by* **WALBECK**, *forty-seven, prematurely gray; he speaks softly, but gives an impression of controlled power.* **BERNICE** *enters behind them.)*

**WALBECK.** *(to* **MALLISON**, *in a low voice)* I understood that the fare was paid in advance?

**MALLISON.** The twenty dollars was paid in advance.

**DRIVER.** Anybody'd charge twice to drive on a night like this. First it was rain and snow –

**MALLISON.** The livery stable was given twenty dollars – *(to* **BERNICE***)* You can prepare the dinner!

*(exit* **BERNICE***)*

**DRIVER.** Then it turned to ice. The worst night I've ever seen, to go to Joliet and pick up a I-don't-know-what. The car falling off the road every minute. To go to Joliet and pick up a criminal of some sort –

**WALBECK.** *(gesture of empty pockets)* I have no money.

**MALLISON.** *(to the* **DRIVER***)* I will give you five dollars, but I shall report you to the livery stable.

**DRIVER.** *(taking the bill)* What do I care? Thirty-five miles each way and half the time you couldn't see the road five yards in front of you; and the other half sliding into the ditch. All right, tell 'em and see what I tell 'em.

**MALLISON.** You have your five dollars. If you go now, I'll say nothing to your superiors – But go!

**DRIVER.** *(starting for the door, then turning on* **WALBECK***)* And who do you think you are, Mr. Bur-gessss! Keeping your mouth so shut! You a murderer or I-don't-know-what; and too big and mighty to talk to anybody. – Oh, you had to think, did you? So you had to think? Well, you've got enough to think about for the rest of your goddamned life.

*(He goes out.)*

**MALLISON.** *(stiffly)* Good evening, Mr. Walbeck.

*(The front door is heard closing with a slam.)*

**WALBECK.** *(always softly, but impersonally)* What is this name of…Burgess?

**MALLISON.** We assumed, Mr. Walbeck, that you would prefer us to engage the household staff and…make certain other arrangements under…another name. Since you did not reply to our letters on this matter, we selected the name of Burgess.

**WALBECK.** I see. – Is…my wife here?

**MALLISON.** *(astonished)* You did not get Mrs. Walbeck's letters?

**WALBECK.** I did not open any letters.

**MALLISON.** And our letters, Mr. Walbeck?

**WALBECK.** I haven't opened any letters for six months.

**MALLISON.** *(controlling his outrage, primly)* Mrs. Walbeck left a week ago – with the children – for California. She has filed a petition for divorce. In her letters she probably explained it to you at length. She did not wish to make this move earlier…She wished it to be known that she stood by you through…your ordeal. When she heard that your sentence had been reduced and that you would be returning this week, she –

**WALBECK.** *(coolly)* There's no need to say anything more, Mr. Mallison.

**MALLISON.** A woman has been engaged to attend to your needs. Her name is Bernice. A wardrobe – that is, a wardrobe of clothes – you will find upstairs. Your measurements were obtained by your former tailor from the authorities at the…institution from which you have come. – Here are the keys of the house. Here are the statements from your bank. A checkbook. Here *(He places a long envelope on the table.)* are five hundred dollars which I have drawn for your immediate needs.

**WALBECK.** Thank you. Good night.

**MALLISON.** Mr. Walbeck, hitherto the firm of Bremerton, Bremerton, Mallison and Mallison has been happy to serve as your legal representatives. From now on we trust that you will find other counsel. We relinquish – here *(He lays down another document.)* our power of attorney. And in this envelope you will find all the documents and information that our successors will require. I wish you good night.

**WALBECK.** *(stonily)* Good night.

*(***MALLISON** *turns at the door.)*

**MALLISON.** You read no letters?

**WALBECK.** *(his eyes on the ground)* No.

**MALLISON.** That reminds me. Your daughter Lavinia wished to leave a letter for you. Her mother forbade her to do so. However, I…I was prepared to take the responsibility. Your daughter gave me this letter to give to you.

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