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SF PERUSALS

Childhood

by Thornton Wilder

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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FOREWORD TO *CHILDHOOD*

The Second Play in Thornton Wilder's *Ages of Man* One-Act Play Cycle

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. *Childhood* is the second play in Wilder's series on the Ages of Man.

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

CAROLINE – the oldest daughter, twelve
DODIE – her sister, ten
BILLEE – her brother, eight
MOTHER
FATHER

SETTING

A suburban house and yard.

(Some low chairs at the edges of the arena. These at first represent some bushes in the yard of the children's home. At the back, the door to the house; the aisle through the audience serves as a path to the street. Enter from the house **CAROLINE**, *twelve;* **DODIE**, *ten; and, with a rush,* **BILLEE**, *eight.)*

DODIE. Shh! Shh! Don't let Mama hear you! Car'line, Car'line, play the game. Let's play the game.

CAROLINE. There's no time, silly. It takes time to play the game.

BILLEE. Play Goin' to China.

CAROLINE. Don't talk so loud; we don't want Mama to hear us. Papa'll be here soon, and we can't play the game when Papa's here.

DODIE. Well, let's play a little. We can play Going to a Hotel.

BILLEE. *(clamorously)* I want to be Room Service. I want to be Room Service.

CAROLINE. You know Going to a Hotel takes *hours.* It's awful when you have to stop for something.

DODIE. *(quickly)* Car'line, listen, I heard Mama telephoning Papa and the car's got to be fixed and Papa's got to come home by a bus, and maybe he'll never get here and we can play for a long time.

CAROLINE. Did she say that? Well, come behind the bushes and think.

(They squat on their haunches behind the bushes.)

BILLEE. Let's play Hospital and take everything out of Dodie.

CAROLINE. Let me think a minute.

MOTHER. *(at the door)* Caroline! Dodie! *(silence)* Dodie, how often do I have to tell you to hang your coat up properly? Do you know what happened? It fell and

got caught under the cupboard door and was dragged back and forth. I hope it's warm Sunday, because you can't wear that coat. Billee, stand out for a moment where I can see you. Are you ready for your father when he comes home? Come out of the bushes, Billee, come out.

*(***BILLEE**, *a stoic already, comes to the center of the stage and stands for inspection.* **MOTHER** *shakes her head in silence; then:)*

I simply despair. Look at you! What are you children doing anyway? Now, Caroline, you're not playing one of those games of yours? I absolutely forbid you to play that the house is on fire. You have nightmares all night long. Or those awful games about hospitals. Really, Caroline, why can't you play Shopping or Going to School? *(silence)* I declare. I give up. I really do. *(false exit)* Now remember, it's Friday night, the end of the week, and you give your father a good big kiss when he comes home.

(She goes out.)

*(***BILLEE** *rejoins his sisters.)*

DODIE. *(dramatic whisper)* Car'line, let's play Funeral! *(climax)* Car'line, let's play ORPHANS!

CAROLINE. We haven't time – *that* takes all day. Besides, I haven't got the black gloves.

*(***BILLEE** *sees his* **FATHER** *coming through the audience. Utter and final dismay.)*

BILLEE. Look't! Look!

DODIE. What?

ALL THREE. It's Papa! It's Papa!

(They fly into the house like frightened pigeons. **FATHER** *enters jauntily through the audience. It's warm, and he carries his coat over his shoulder. Arriving at the center of the stage, he places his coat on the ground, whistles a*

signal call to his wife, and swinging an imaginary golf club, executes a mighty and very successful shot.)

FATHER. Two hundred and fifty yards!

MOTHER. (*enters, kisses him and picks up the coat)* Why, you're early, after all.

FATHER. Jerry drove me to the corner. Picked up a little flask for the weekend.

MOTHER. Well, I wish you wouldn't open your little flask when the children are around.

FATHER. *(preparing a difficult shot)* Eleventh hole…Where *are* the children?

MOTHER. They were here a minute ago. They're out playing somewhere…Your coat on the ground! Really, you're as bad as Dodie.

FATHER. Well, you should teach the children – little trouble with the dandelions here – that it's their first duty… when their father comes home on Friday nights… *(shouts)* Fore, you bastards!…to rush toward their father…to grovel…abject thanks to him who gave them life.

MOTHER. *(amused exasperation)* Oh, stop that nonsense!

FATHER. On Friday nights…after a week of toil at the office…a man wants to see… *(He swings.)* his wives and children clinging to his knees, tears pouring down their cheeks. *(He stands up very straight, holding an enormous silver cup.)* Gentlemen, I accept this championship cup, but I wish also to give credit to my wife and children, who drove me out of the house every Sunday morning… Where *are* the children? Caroline! Dodie!

MOTHER. Oh, they're hiding somewhere.

FATHER. Hiding? Hiding from their father?

MOTHER. They're playing one of those awful games of theirs. Listen to me, Fred – those games are morbid; they're dangerous.

FATHER. How do you mean, dangerous?

MOTHER. Really! No one told me when I was a bride that children are half crazy. I only hear fragments of the games, naturally, but do you realize that they like nothing better than to imagine us – away?

FATHER. Away?

MOTHER. Yes – dead?

FATHER. *(his eye on the shot)* One…two…*three!* Well, you know what *you* said.

MOTHER. What did I say?

FATHER. *Your* dream.

MOTHER. Pshaw!

FATHER. *(softly, with lowest insinuation)* Your dream that… you and I…on a Mediterranean cruise…

MOTHER. It was Hawaii.

FATHER. And that we were – ahem! – somehow…*alone.*

MOTHER. Well, I didn't imagine them *dead!* I imagined them with Mother…or Paul…or their Aunt Henrietta.

FATHER. *(piously)* I hope so.

MOTHER. You're a brute, and everybody knows it…It's Caroline. She's the one who starts it all. And afterwards she has those nightmares. Come in. You'll see the children at supper.

FATHER. *(looking upward)* What has the weatherman predicted for tomorrow?

MOTHER. *(starting for the house)* Floods. Torrents. You're going to stay home from the golf club and take care of the children. And I'm going to the Rocky Mountains… and to China.

FATHER. You'll be back by noon. What does Caroline say in her nightmares?

MOTHER. Oh! When she's awake, too. You and I are – away. Do you realize that that girl is mad about black gloves?

FATHER. Nonsense.

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