

A Wilder play for our times

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"... we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth; one more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?" — Thornton Wilder

Recession, depression, inflation, oh my! These words resurface as another economic struggle looms ahead, but if history offers any proof, Americans will be able to pull through it. Their perseverance for survival is the basis for Thornton Wilder's play, "The Skin of Our Teeth," which will be performed by the Connecticut Repertory Theatre at the Jorgensen Center for Performing Arts in Storrs beginning Friday at 8 p.m.

"We're all going through a bit of a survival struggle," Director Helene Kvale said. "The Skin of Our Teeth' feels like it was written yesterday."

The play, actually written in 1941 on the eve of World War II, covers an enormous time span from the ice age, to a great flood, to an impending, apocalyptic war. It chronicles one eternal family, the Antrobuses and the archaic milestones they accomplish like the invention of the wheel and the multiplication table. They are the quintessential American family fueled by an unwavering American dream. It is their nuclear family that provides resistance and strength against all worldly disasters.

"Here's a family that's going through a timeless struggle," Kvale said. The play celebrates eternal optimism, she said. "It's the

classic American dream no matter what."

Wilder incorporated every allusion he could into the play. The title actually originates from the book of Job, Mr. Antrobus is literally Mr. 'every man' and his wife, Eva, is named after the biblical character Eve.

"The Skin of Our Teeth" premiered in 1942 starring Wilder as Mr. Antrobus and Tallulah Bankhead as Sabina, Antrobus' second mate. Bankhead's character alludes to the rape of the Sabine women, which occurred in early Rome and involved the abduction of women from the Sabine tribe. She is Antrobus' concubine modeled after Lilith, Adam's wife before Eve, who was demonized then banished from Eden for disputing with her husband.

Julia Coffey, a newcomer to CRT, will play Sabina. Bankhead, Coffey said, is credited with making the role of Sabina into the lead.

"She was the most famous of all the performers," Coffey said. "She demanded the most attention in a larger-than-life performance."

Every aspect of "The Skin of Our Teeth" is larger than life. It is a three-act play incorporating 23 actors and two large-scale puppets, a woolly mammoth and a dinosaur that act as the Antrobus' pets.

"The mammoth and the dinosaur steal the show," Kvale said.

Ticket prices for "The Skin of Our Teeth" range from \$11 to \$29. There will be eight performances including opening night on Friday and the last on Saturday, Dec. 6. For more information call the Jorgensen box office at 860-468-4799.