A NOTE TO TEACHERS AND PARENTS

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH

Dear Educators and Parents,

The melting ice caps, earthquakes, floods, California fires, hurricanes and the threat of nuclear war. We have survived all of these as a collective global community through faith and spirit. How do we survive?

Enclosed in this enrichment guide is a range of materials and activities intended to help you discover connections within the play through the curriculum. It is our hope that you will use the experience of attending the theater and seeing THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH with your students as a teaching tool. As educators and parents, you know best the needs and abilities of your students Use this guide to best serve your children—pick and choose, or adapt, any of these suggestions for discussions or activities. We encourage you to take advantage of the enclosed student worksheets—please feel free to photocopy the sheets for your students, or the entire guide for the benefit of other teachers.

Enjoy the show!

Julia Magnasco
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FIRST STAGE POLICIES

• The use of recording equipment and cameras are not permitted during the performance.
• Food, drink, candy and gum are not permitted during the performance.
• Electronic devices are not permitted in the theater space.
• Should a student become ill, suffer an injury or have another problem, please escort him or her out of the theater space.
• In the unlikely event of a general emergency, the theater lights will go on and the stage manager will come on stage to inform the audience of the problem. Remain in your seats, visually locate the nearest exit and wait for the stage manager to guide your group from the theater.

Seating for people with special needs: If you have special seating needs for any student(s) and did not indicate your need when you ordered your tickets, please call our Assistant Patron Services Manager at (414) 267-2962. Our knowledge of your needs will enable us to serve you better upon your arrival to the theater.
The play is divided into three very distinct acts.

**ACT I**
The first act takes place in New Jersey at a time when the entire eastern United States is threatened by a giant wall of ice moving south from Canada. The family is introduced by a narrator and further described by their maid, Sabina. George, the father of the family, is inventing things such as the wheel, an alphabet, and multiplication tables, paralleling the early development of humans.

Act I ends with refugees from the impending Ice Age arriving at the Antrobus house. These figures include the Old Testament prophet Moses, the Greek poet Homer, and the Muses, the Greek goddesses of the arts.

**ACT II**
The second act takes place on the Atlantic City Boardwalk where George is being sworn in as president of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Human Subdivision. Sabina shows up disguised as a beauty queen who tries to steal George away from his wife, Maggie. Throughout the raucous party, the weather starts to change and leads to a great flood like the one from the story of Noah’s Ark in the Bible. The act ends with the Antrobus family acting like Noah and directing pairs of animals onto a boat.

**ACT III**
The final act takes place after a devastating war. Maggie and her daughter Gladys emerge from a cellar to find the Antrobus house destroyed. George and his son Henry, who had been generals on opposite sides of the war, return home. The family discusses how civilization will be rebuilt this time and asks whether it is worth it to rebuild society at all since humanity just keeps destroying itself?

The play ends with Sabina dusting the living room and reciting the same dialogue she delivered at the beginning, suggesting the circular nature of time.
THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH is a celebration of the indestructibility of the human spirit. It was inspired by an impending World War, James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, biblical references and a vaudeville production Thornton Wilder attended where a plastic chicken fell in his lap. Mr. Wilder’s masterpiece defies theatrical convention and style by inviting the audience to be engaged not just as spectator but participant. THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH salutes mankind’s resilience to catastrophic events throughout world history. In essence, the play is about celebrating our collective human perseverance - your bravery. All to honor this brief wonder we call Life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR—THORNTON WILDER

Adapted from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thornton_Wilder

Thorton Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin. He began writing plays at The Thacher School in Ojai, California. He was considered an outcast. Wilder did not fit in with his classmates and was teased for being overly intellectual. A classmate as quoted saying, “We left him alone, just left him alone. And he would retire at the library, his hideaway, learning to distance himself from humiliation and indifference.”

Years later Wilder, served three months in the Army’s Coast Artillery Corps at Fort Adams (World War I) and rose to the rank of corporal. In 1920, he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Yale and in 1926 earned his Master’s degree in French literature from Princeton University.

After graduating, Wilder started to write more and more. His first novel was published in 1926 entitled *The Cabala*. His work started to received recognition and Wilder’s success started to flourish. His second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, brought his commercial success and his first Pulitzer Prize. Thornton Wilder would then go on to win many more Pulitzer Prizes for his work, including, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

The play *The Skin of Our Teeth* opened in New York on November 18, 1942. The themes the play serves are familiar to us: the timeless human condition, history as progressive, cyclical or entropic, and literature, philosophy, and religion as the touchstones civilization.

In 1930, Wilder built a house for his family in Hamden, Connecticut. Thornton traveled a great deal and lived away from his home in Hamden for significant amounts of time. In 1975, Thornton Wilder died in his home due to heart failure. While his physical presence may be gone, his great works live on!
RECOMMENDED READING

Our Town, by Thornton Wilder

Araby, by James Joyce

Matchmaker, by Thornton Wilder

The Minister’s Black Veil, by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Gift of the Magi, by O. Henry

Animal Farm, by George Orwell

The Giver, by Lois Lowry

The Hunger Games (collection), by Suzanne Collins

Gathering Blue, by Lois Lowry

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. What is the origin of the phrase, “skin of our teeth.” What does it mean?

2. Natural disasters take place in each act of THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH. Name some natural disasters that have recently been in the news.

3. How did these natural disasters impact the people living in these regions of the earth? How has the environment changed as a result of these natural disasters?
Thornton Wilder chose to set his story in the fictional town of Excelsior, NY. After reading the poem, why do you think he chose this name to represent the “typical” American city?

**Excelsior**

**HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW**

The shades of night were falling fast,
As through an Alpine village passed
A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice,
A banner with the strange device,
   Excelsior!

His brow was sad; his eye beneath,
Flashed like a falchion from its sheath,
    And like a silver clarion rung
The accents of that unknown tongue,
   Excelsior!

In happy homes he saw the light
Of household fires gleam warm and bright;
Above, the spectral glaciers shone,
And from his lips escaped a groan,
   Excelsior!

"Try not the Pass!" the old man said;
"Dark lowers the tempest overhead,
The roaring torrent is deep and wide!"
And loud that clarion voice replied,
   Excelsior!

"Oh stay," the maiden said, "and rest
Thy weary head upon this breast!"
A tear stood in his bright blue eye,
But still he answered, with a sigh,
   Excelsior!

"Beware the pine-tree's withered branch!
Beware the awful avalanche!"
This was the peasant's last Good-night,
A voice replied, far up the height,
   Excelsior!

At break of day, as heavenward
The pious monks of Saint Bernard
Uttered the oft-repeated prayer,
A voice cried through the startled air,
   Excelsior!

A traveller, by the faithful hound,
Half-buried in the snow was found,
Still grasping in his hand of ice
That banner with the strange device,
   Excelsior!

There in the twilight cold and gray,
Lifeless, but beautiful, he lay,
And from the sky, serene and far,
A voice fell like a falling star,
   Excelsior!
Definition of Allegory
An allegory is a work of art, such as a story or painting, in which the characters, images, and/or events act as symbols. The symbolism in an allegory can be interpreted to have a deeper meaning. An author may use allegory to illustrate a moral or spiritual truth, or political or historical situation. Allegories can be understood to be a type of extended metaphor. An extended metaphor develops a certain analogy to a greater extent than a simple comparison. An allegory, meanwhile, uses a particular metaphor throughout an entire plot.

Common Examples of Allegory
There are many common stories that we tell which have allegorical meanings. These are especially popular in stories for children, as allegories often mean to teach some lesson or help the audience understand complex ideas and concepts. Stories such as Aesop’s Fables often have morals, and thus are examples of allegory. We also use real events that have happened to teach lessons. Here are some stories that have entered into public consciousness that are also allegories:

- **The Tortoise and the Hare** from Aesop’s Fables: From this story, we learn that the strong and steady win the race.
- **The Story of Icarus**: Icarus fashions wings for himself out of wax, but when he flies too close to the sun his wings melt. This story is a message about the dangers of reaching beyond our powers.
- **Yertle the Turtle** by Dr. Seuss: This story about a turtle who yearns for too much power is actually an allegory about Adolf Hitler and the evils of totalitarianism.
- **The Hunger Games**: This trilogy of Young Adult books (and now blockbuster movies) is an allegory for our obsession with reality television and how it numbs us to reality.

Significance of Allegory in Literature
Allegories have been used for centuries in many different cultures. They are used to teach lessons, explain moral concepts, and show the author’s views on a certain situation. An allegory is a very specific type of story, as it must stay true to the message for the entirety of the story. Allegories thus can be difficult to master, as they can be pedantic when done poorly. However, some works of literature that can be read allegorically gain much strength from their deeper meanings.

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The play, THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH, is about the indestructibility of the human spirit.

What do you think it means to have an indestructible spirit? In your life, how will you persevere and overcome obstacles to reach your goals?

Use the chart below to identify your goals the challenges you may face, and how you will accomplish reaching your goals.

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THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH is an allegory about the history of mankind told through the story of one family, the Antrobuses, who lived through a new ice age, a great flood, and a devastating war.

**ACTIVITY**

1. Ask your students to define the word **history**—what comprises the study of history and what makes a historical event worth studying and having knowledge of?

2. Read the following quotes from history teachers and professors to your students:

   - One should learn from the study of history about the major events, ideas, and individuals that have shaped the modern world. This knowledge is needed to be an intelligent, thinking, effective person in today’s world. It is also needed to enable one to make decisions as a member of a democratic society. This background knowledge I would call a foundation for democratic participation.
     —Sam Wineburg

   - History educations in the deepest sense. Of the subjects in the secular curriculum it does the best in teaching those virtues once reserved for theology—the virtue of humility, in the face of our limits to know; and the virtue of awe, in the face of the expanse of human history.
     —James D. Wolfensohn

   - History remains a central feature of the school curriculum for these reasons: History shows us what it means to be human; History improves judgment; History provides instructive examples; History makes us better thinkers; History supports common cultural understanding and dialogue; History satisfies a need for identity; History gives pleasure; Studying the past is preparation for the future.
     —Beverly Southgate

3. Ask students to identify reasons for why they think we study history? Do they agree with any of the reasons for studying history stated in the quotes, or do they have different or additional reasons as to why we study history?

4. Have the class reexamine Beverly Southgate’s quotation. Split this quote into eight separate pieces:

   - History shows us what it means to be human;

   - History improves judgment;

   - History provides instructive examples;

   - History makes us better thinkers;

   - History supports common cultural understanding and dialogue;

   - History satisfies a need for identity;

   - History gives pleasure;

   - Studying the past is preparation for the future.
Place students into eight small groups, and provide each group with one of these points Southgate uses in her justification as to why we study history. Have students explore these points in detail, by providing an explanation to their portion of the quote, as well as evidence to support it.

5. Once students have researched and explored their phrase, have them share what they have come up with as a group with the entire class. These small group presentations may be used to spark additional conversations about the importance of history and why we study history.

6. For more insight on Beverly Southgate's quotation, refer to the following link: http://studentsfriend.com/onhist/uses.html

Active Thematic Discussion
1. Have students get up and stand by their desks in Neutral. Share with them that we are going to be actively discussing one of the main themes in The Skin of Our Teeth. Have them begin walking around the room in neutral—no talking, no touching, until FREEZE is said. Then, have students get into small groups of 3-4 with the people in the room closest to them. Once in these new groups, they can sit down in the room with their group members. Share with students that they will have 2 minutes as a group to come up with a response to the following statement: What do you think the statement, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” (George Santayana) means?
   a. After the 2 minutes are up, have each group share their response. Other possible statements: The human body has limitations. The human spirit is boundless. (Dean Karnazes)
   b. This discussion may lead to journal writing or as a creative writing prompt.

Don’t forget that a few years ago we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth; one more tight squeeze like that and where will we be? (Sabina)

I’m through with you, that’s all! - Sabina Sabina! - Don’t you know your father’d go crazy if he saw that paint on your face? Don’t you know your father thinks you’re perfect? Don’t you know he couldn’t live if he didn’t think you were perfect? - Sabina! (Mrs. Antrobus)

I don’t know. I don’t know anything. Some say that the ice is going slower. Some say that it’s stopped. The sun’s growing cold. What can I do about that? Nothing we can do but burn everything in the house, and the fenceposts and the barn. Keep the fire going. When we have no more fire, we die. (Mr. Antrobus)
1. Children are a thing that only a parent can stand, and a truer word was never said.

2. Have you milked the mammoth?

3. Ladies and gentlemen! Don't take this play serious. The world's not coming to an end. You know it's not. People exaggerate! Most people really have enough to eat and a roof over their heads. Nobody actually starves--you can always eat grass or something. ... Savages don't love their families--not like we do.

4. The dinosaur is extinct; the ice has retreated; and the common cold is being pursued by every means within our power.

5. One of those black disks means bad weather; two means storm; three means hurricane; and four means the end of the world.

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. What are the similarities between the animals and humans in the play?

2. Why did Wilder choose the specific animals for the play?

3. List the topics addressed in play.

4. THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH is an allegory which was written in 1942. An allegory is a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning that is a moral or political. What historical events took place in 1940-42 that may have inspired the play?

5. Is this allegory as relevant today as it was in 1942?
1. Children are a thing that only a parent can stand, and a truer word was never said.                ... SABINA
2. Have you milked the mammoth?                                                               MRS. ANTROBUS
3. Ladies and gentlemen! Don’t take this play serious. The world’s not coming to an end. You know it’s not. People exaggerate! Most people really have enough to eat and a roof over their heads. Nobody actually starves−−you can always eat grass or something. ... Savages don’t love their families−−not like we do.           SABINA
4. The dinosaur is extinct; the ice has retreated; and the common cold is being pursued by every means within our power.                        MR. ANTROBUS
5. One of those black disks means bad weather; two means storm; three means hurricane; and four means the end of the world.                     SABINA