



by Thornton Wilder

Girl Friday Productions  
July 9-26, 2015  
Performing at Park Square Theatre  
Andy Boss Thrust Stage

Directed by Craig Johnson  
Study Guide Prepared by Christine Gordon

### **About the play**

*The Matchmaker* began its life as *The Merchant of Yonkers* in 1937. Wilder drew on two earlier plays, a 19<sup>th</sup> century German comedy by Johann Nestroy (*Einen Jux will er sich Machen*, 1842), which was based on an English one-act called *A Day Well Spent* (1835) by John Oxenford. In the 1950s, encouraged by actor Ruth Gordon and director Tyrone Guthrie, Wilder transformed *The Merchant* into *The Matchmaker*. Along with the two previous sources, he drew on his background in theatre to mix in a little Plautus, a little Moliere, and a lot of Thornton Wilder. *The Matchmaker* opened on Broadway in 1955, and was subsequently transformed yet again into the musical *Hello, Dolly* in 1964.

The plot is old, familiar, and delightful: wealthy Yonkers merchant Cornelius Vandergelder wants to prevent his niece's marriage to a penniless artist, but fate steps in in the person of Dolly Gallagher Levi, a woman of many talents—including one for meddling. She offers to help the merchant pursue his own courtship, but at the same time schemes to aid his niece in her pursuit of true love. In a parallel plot, two of Vandergelder's clerks, Cornelius and Barnaby, decide to escape from Yonkers to spend a day in New York. Enroute they meet hard-working hat maker Irene Molloy and her assistant Minnie Fay who are drawn into the action as well.

Wilder's combination of the elements of farce with a more complex approach to the issues of work and wealth, love and duty, pleasure and obligation, art and life are all part of the mix in this rollicking comedy that asks us all to think about what we value in our lives.

More info:

<http://www.twildersociety.org/works/the-matchmaker/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einen\\_Jux\\_will\\_er\\_sich\\_machen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einen_Jux_will_er_sich_machen)

### **A sampling of Wilder's wisdom from *The Matchmaker***

Money! Money! It's like the sun we walk under. It can kill or cure.

The difference between a little money and no money at all is enormous and can shatter the world; and the difference between a little money and an enormous amount of money is very slight and that, also, can shatter the world.

Everybody thinks when he get rich he'll be a different kind of person from the rich people he sees around him. Later on he finds out there's only one kind of rich person...and he's it.

Money should circulate like rainwater. It should be flowing down among the people, through dressmakers and restaurants and cabmen. Setting up a little business here, and furnishing a good time there.

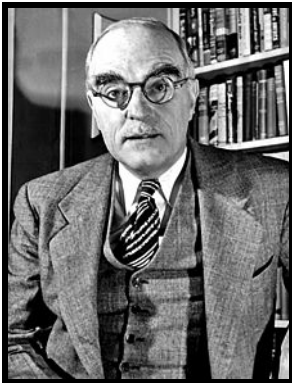
... there comes a moment in everybody's life when he must decide whether he'll live among human beings or not—a fool among fools or a fool alone. As for me, I've decided to live among them.

Yes, like all you other fools, I'm willing to risk a little security for a certain amount of adventure.

Even if I have to dig ditches for the rest of my life, I'll be a ditch-digger who once had a wonderful day.

We all hope that in your lives you have just the right amount of... adventure!

### **About Thornton Wilder**



Thornton Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1897. His family lived for a time in China and California when he was young; he graduated from Berkeley High School in 1915. He attended Oberlin College and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Yale and a Master of Arts degree (in French) from Princeton. He began writing while a young man, and published his first novel in 1926. His second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1927. In addition to his writing, Wilder was a teacher at the Lawrenceville

School (New Jersey) and at the University of Chicago. Wilder wrote fiction and drama throughout his career, and won two Pulitzer Prizes for drama for *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963. He died in 1975.

Wilder's wide-ranging education, his time spent abroad, his many friendships with fellow writers and theatre artists, and his life as a mostly-closeted gay man bring subtle perspectives into his work that may not be immediately obvious. He creates a deep and rich world that is realistic and universal, intimate and questioning, everyday and profound. Wilder's reticence about his personal life is in touching contrast to Dolly's embrace of identity.

Thornton Wilder on *The Matchmaker*: "[the] play is about the aspirations of the young (and not only of the young) for a fuller, freer participation in life."

More info:

<http://www.twildersociety.org/biography/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thornton\\_Wilder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thornton_Wilder)

Paris Review interview (1956):

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/07/man-of-letters-5>

Essay/review of Penelope Niven's *Thornton Wilder: A Life*:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/07/man-of-letters-5>

### **New York City in the 1880s**

Wealthy merchants, tremulous nieces, lively clerks, determined artists, resourceful career women of multiple talents: these are some of the characters who populate *The Matchmaker*—and who populated New York City and its environs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. While not a full portrait of the city, the play provides a lively introduction to selected aspects of its world. The city then, as now, was full of contradictions: great wealth and stark poverty, amazing architecture and devastating slums. Wilder offers us insights into a select group whose struggles and foibles give us a glimpse of possibility under the guise of farce.

More info:

[thehistorybox.com/ny\\_city/nycity\\_nyc\\_highlights\\_1850s\\_1880s\\_article00517.htm](http://thehistorybox.com/ny_city/nycity_nyc_highlights_1850s_1880s_article00517.htm)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_New\\_York\\_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_New_York_City)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_New\\_York\\_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_New_York_City)

New York in black-and-white (photo site):

<http://www.wirednewyork.com/forum/showthread.php?t=5010>

### **Yonkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

For its first two hundred years, Yonkers was a small farming town with an active industrial waterfront. Yonkers's later growth rested largely on developing industry. In 1853, Elisha Otis invented the first safety elevator and the Otis Elevator Company opened the first elevator factory in the world on the banks of the Hudson near what is now Vark Street. It relocated to larger quarters (now the Yonkers Public Library) in the 1880s. Around the same time, the Alexander Smith and Sons Carpet Company (in the Saw Mill River Valley) expanded to 45 buildings, 800 looms, and over 4,000 workers and was known as one of the premier carpet producing centers in the world.

The community was incorporated as a village in the northern part of the Town of Yonkers in 1854 and as a city in 1872. The southern part of the Township became part of the Bronx.

In 1894, the voters of Yonkers were able to take part, along with the voters of Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island, in a referendum to determine if they wanted to become part of New York City. While the results were positive elsewhere, the returns were so negative in Yonkers and neighboring Mount Vernon that those two areas were not included in the consolidated city, and remained independent. Still, some residents call the city “the Sixth Borough” referring to its location on the New York City border, its urban character and the failed merger vote. A subway connection was planned between Getty Square and the IRT Broadway – Seventh Avenue Line, which terminates at 242nd Street just south of the city line, but when Yonkers residents voted against the incorporation, the project was abandoned.

More info:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yonkers,\\_New\\_York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yonkers,_New_York)

## Print resources

“Imagine a city so full of garbage, muck, horse manure and standing sewage that sailors can smell it six miles out at sea. Where a proper gentleman has to toss a coin or two to a broom-wielding street urchin to sweep a path through the knee-high debris just so he can get in his front door. And where pigs trundle down sidewalks and dodge traffic, rooting through the garbage that the locals simply throw out their doors and windows, in vain hope that the ravenous animals will clean up some of the mess.

Welcome to New York City at the dawn of the twentieth century.  
Welcome to American urban life before the rise of the landfill.”

Edward Humes, *Garbology* (2012)

*The Monied Metropolis: New York and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* by Sven Beckert. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Beckert’s book traces how a small and diverse group of New Yorkers developed great economic, social, and political power during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More info:

[http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/168231.The\\_Monied\\_Metropolis](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/168231.The_Monied_Metropolis)

*New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age* by Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman. NY: The Monacelli Press, 1999. More info: <http://www.amazon.com/New-York-1880-Architecture-Urbanism/dp/1580930271>; review: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/12/19/reviews/991219.19ogormt.html>

*How to Be a Victorian: A Dawn to Dusk Guide to Victorian Life* by Ruth Goodman. NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013. While this book focuses on Britain, much material it includes is relevant to life in the United States during the same period. It’s very well written and informative. More info: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/How-To-Victorian-Ruth-Goodman/dp/0670921351>

## One last word

“Wilder, speaking to a diverse and complicated democracy, uses his stage managers and Sabinas and Dolly Levis to throw an arm around the audience and tell us who we are and who we should be.”

A. R. Gurney