

Review

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Review by: Joshua E. Polster

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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

*Directed by Wesley Savick, Micaleen Rodgers, and Sydney Grant
Modern Theatre, Suffolk University*

Boston, Massachusetts

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Reviewed by Joshua E. Polster

The production of Thornton Wilder's collected short plays *The Seven Deadly Sins* was in good hands at Suffolk University, the Boston-based private university located in the center of the city's vibrant theater district. The Theatre Department, chaired by artistic director Marilyn Plotkins, produced the work at the Modern Theatre, a 185-seat theater beautifully restored from a dilapidated cinema (where the 1927 "talkie" *The Jazz Singer* was first presented in Boston). The production was directed by Wesley Savick, Professor of Theatre at Suffolk University, along with Suffolk alumnus Sydney Grant and senior Theatre major Micaleen Rodgers. Savick directed *Bernice, Cement Hands, The Wreck on the Five-Twenty-Five*, and *Someone from Assisi*; Sydney Grant directed *The Drunken Sisters* (not one of Wilder's original seven-play cycle) and *A Ringing of Doorbells*; and Micaleen Rodgers directed *In Shakespeare and the Bible*. The Theatre Department at Suffolk is quite familiar with Wilder. Each fall semester, directing students select work from Wilder's 1928 collection of playlets *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays* for their final projects, which are then performed by the acting students (Fig. 1). Professor Savick is also quite familiar with the playwright who inspired his career, as his program note indicates:

Thornton Wilder is one of my theatrical heroes. . . . [When] I was a freshman in college [I] played Editor Webb [in *Our Town*]. Theatre transformed from a career ambition into something more akin to missionary work after that. Theatre became a place where it was possible to act on one's beliefs . . . without apology. Thornton Wilder took that very seriously. In fact, he occupied the last twenty years of his life to show us what he saw in these sins which are anything but extraordinary. They are common to all of us. [As Wilder said, they] "repeat and repeat in the lives of millions."

The sins of humanity, indeed, repeat throughout the entirety of Wilder's work, such as the "Three-Minute Plays for Three Persons" in *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*, which were mostly written when he was an undergraduate student at Oberlin and Yale. As Wilder once remarked, "I am interested in the drives that operate in society and in every man. Pride, avarice, and envy are in every home. I am not interested in the ephemeral—such subjects as the adulteries of dentists. I am interested in those things that repeat and repeat in the lives of millions" (qtd. in Whitman). During his early years as a playwright, Wilder grew fond of discussing such topics in the short play format. Of his work in this genre, Wilder said that he had "discovered a literary form that satisfied [his] passion for compression" (*Collected Plays* 652).

In 1956, toward the end of his playwriting career, Wilder returned to the short play format with a new series of "Four-Minute Plays for Four Persons," which he eventually developed beyond the four-minute time constraint. First came the satyr play *The Drunken Sisters* (originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1957), then *In Shakespeare and the Bible* (never completed), followed by *The Wreck on the Five-Twenty-Five* and *Bernice*. Wilder, intrigued by the creative potential of arena stages, was pleased with how well these short plays could work for a theater in the round, and he became encouraged to write more:

What I particularly like about all these, including the *manqué* ones, is the completeness of their expression as plays for a theatre in the round. This quality is at its best in *The Wreck*, precisely because it is about "looking through windows"; but in each of the later ones I seem to acquire—without that adventitious aid—a deeper exploration of the mode. Now I want to make some more—and, oh, Muse, I want one or two in lighter vein to go with these horrors. (qtd. in Wilder, *Collected Short Plays* 106)

In 1958, shortly after writing a short play on avarice (which would eventually become *Cement Hands*), Wilder was inspired by scholarship on James Joyce that pointed out how some of the stories in *Dubliners* demonstrated the Seven Deadly Sins:

. . . it suddenly swept over me that maybe all my seven could be *les péchés capitaux*. And in a few minutes I saw that I could save and finish and deepen those two plays which I thought were to be discarded [*The Ringing of Doorbells* and *In Shakespeare and the Bible*], and that the three I had

written could very well fit into such a series. (qtd. in Wilder, *Collected Short Plays* 108)

Wilder decided on an ambitious project, two cycles of one-act plays based on the Seven Deadly Sins and the Ages of Man. In 1959, Wilder compiled seven existing (though not all completed) short plays and labeled them *The Seven Deadly Sins*. This collection included *The Drunken Sisters* (Gluttony), *Bernice* (Pride), *The Wreck on the Five-Twenty-Five* (Sloth), *A Ringing of Doorbells* (Envy), *In Shakespeare and the Bible* (Wrath), *Someone from Assisi* (Lust), and *Cement Hands* (Avarice). What is important to note is that these plays were largely written before they were contextualized into a particular sin, and this is why it is not altogether easy for readers or audiences to identify the specific sin. Savick sees them as “little puzzles” for audiences to contemplate (Discussion).

In terms of production history, *The Wreck* and *Bernice* were both performed in 1957, at the request of the American National Theater and Academy, for a dedication of a new Congress Hall in West Berlin (Ethel Waters and Wilder himself performed in *Bernice*). *The Drunken Sisters*, a satyr play written to accompany the 1957 revision of Wilder’s 1955 full-length drama *The Alcestiad*, premiered at the Schauspielhaus in Zürich in 1957. Wilder’s aspirations to have the *Sins* plays performed in the round were partially realized in 1962 when *Someone from Assisi*, with *Infancy* and *Childhood* from *The Seven Ages of Man*, were produced as *Plays for Bleecker Street* by the Circle in the Square Theatre in New York under the direction of José Quintero. Since then, *The Seven Deadly Sins* has made brief and partial appearances, such as in 1997 when *A Ringing of Doorbells* and *In Shakespeare and the Bible*, with *Youth* and *The Rivers Under the Earth* from *The Seven Ages of Man*, were produced at the Actors Theatre of Louisville; and in 1999 Theatre West produced *A Ringing of Doorbells* and *In Shakespeare and the Bible*, which were directed by F. J. O’Neil, who also edited the cycle plays for the 1997 publication of *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder: Volume 1*. There was also the Keen Company production of *Cement Hands* and *In Shakespeare and the Bible* in 2009. In 2011, the Washington Stage Guild, under the direction of Bill Largess, produced *Bernice*, *The Wreck on the Five-Twenty-Five*, *In Shakespeare and the Bible*, and *Cement Hands* at the Undercroft Theatre (Strub).

Several professional theaters have performed Wilder’s other one-acts, but the *Sins* plays have not had many productions (*A Ringing of Doorbells*, *Cement Hands*, and *In Shakespeare and the Bible* were never done during Wilder’s lifetime). What makes the Suffolk University production so notable and enticing



FIG. 1 Rosey Strub of the Wilder Family Estate with the Cast and Crew of *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Photo credit: Dan McHugh.

is that they produced the entire *Sins* cycle in a single program. This has been done in the past, but such events are quite rare. According to Theodore Clement, Associate Professor of Performing Arts at the Community College of Rhode Island, there was a 2012 student one-act festival where all seven plays were performed together in one evening. Savick also saw the power and appeal of such challenging work for a university setting that could take full advantage of casting its twenty-eight rich roles (four characters for each of the seven plays) and the opportunity creatively to explore this largely unfinished work. Wilder, in fact, was satisfied with only four of these one-act plays and withdrew two from circulation. This incomplete nature of the works proved to be a creative challenge for Savick and his artistic team: “If there are elements hanging out in irresolution, you have to ask yourself: Is this intentional or is this incompleteness?” (Considine).

The unfinished scripts were graphically suggested in the “unfinished” set design of Sara Brown, a scenic design professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Suffolk alumnus Justin Lahue. Brown and Lahue chose a wooden-framed and roofed structure, like the framing of an unfinished house, to present all seven plays. Their set was also suggestive of a traditional Noh stage. Instead of a theater in the round, the action was on a thrust stage with audiences located on three sides. At the back of the stage was a bridgeway for the actors, similar to the Noh *hashigakari*. Toward the end of the evening, the center of the stage floor opened to reveal a small pool for *Someone from Assisi*, an elegant and stunning image. The simplicity and gracefulness of the set, along

with the minimal use of props, worked perfectly with Wilder's compressed work and allowed quick smooth transitions between the plays. This was nicely aided by the seamless sound design of Samantha Noto, which also helped to create specific atmospheres for each of the pieces, such as the ominous piano music in *The Drunken Sisters*. The different worlds in Wilder's scripts were also suggested by the innovative and fluid lighting of Steven McIntosh, technical director at Suffolk University, along with Suffolk alumni Amanda Hackney and Sophia Lajoie. At one point, lights came from a section of the floorboards creatively and efficiently to suggest a fireplace. Wilder would have been pleased with such minimal design aesthetics. As he wrote in 1961, "The unencumbered stage encourages truth in everything" ("Plays for Bleeker Street").

Each of the seven plays were thematically linked with the concept of humanity's unfinished nature, delving into the chasms of our moral character that cause division and disruption. Junior theatre major and assistant director Liv Joans saw how these plays continue to be in dialogue with the self and society: "The stories that we're telling are very intense to the fact that they were written so long ago, but they're still very relatable to today. You can see a lot of yourself in these characters" (Hume). Managing director Jim Kaufman agreed: "The plays resonate with our times, given all of the ethical lapses we see in our leadership" (Considine). The relevance of Wilder's work to the contemporary moment was also not lost on Savick in his program note: "These are important plays to do right now . . . to act in and to watch. Wilder's plays are timeless, true, but they may also be timely. We live in morally fraught times . . . [and it may be] more important than ever to contemplate the seven deadly sins."

This was not the first time Savick turned to Wilder to help contemplate and endure perilous times. After the al-Qaeda airline hijackings and suicide attacks on 11 September 2001, Suffolk University staged *The Skin of Our Teeth*. After a rehearsal for *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Savick recalled how he and his cast looked to the sky with alarm when they would see a passing plane (Discussion). For Savick, the theme of humanity's continuous encounters with (and survival from) disasters in *The Skin of Our Teeth* resonated powerfully in the 9/11 context. In today's troubled world, Savick saw the *Sins* cycle as the dramatic work that best captures the moment:

As we navigate the age of Trump, and the kind of radical polarization that is going on in our country, in looking for scripts I'm looking for projects that reflect something that is of meaning and of immediacy to our students and the world we are living in. . . . There's any number of ways to accomplish

that, there's even more ways to avoid it. What I saw was a windfall with the Wilder plays—the sins, as he's talking about them, have to do with a reminder of morality as a force worthy of our attention. (qtd. in Considine)

In *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Wilder, indeed, gives his audiences a reminder. In *The Drunken Sisters*, the playwright turned to Greek mythology to present Apollo's efforts to save King Admetus from the death grip of the gluttonous three sisters of Fate. In *Shakespeare and the Bible*, the setting is New York in 1898, where the fallen and wrathful Mrs. Mowbrey uses her financial wealth and influence to regain respectability and family relations. *Bernice* takes place in 1911 Chicago, where Walbeck, a prideful man recently released from prison, struggles with his return and relations with his daughter. In *Cement Hands*, affluent New Yorker Diana Colvin learns of avarice in her fiancé who is unable to leave a simple tip at a restaurant. *A Ringing of Doorbells* is set in 1939 Florida where an impoverished and envious con-artist, along with her mother, prey on the wealth of a widow. *The Wreck on the Five-Twenty-Five* looks at another contemporary New Yorker, Herb Hawkins, who recently inherited a great sum of money and struggles with complacency and the choice of returning to his routine life and family. *Someone from Assisi* follows St. Francis at the end of his life in a Poor Sisters Convent at Saint Damian where he confronts a woman he met years ago as a lustful youth.

Each of the plays and their characters—from classical Greek gods and New Yorkers to St. Francis of Assisi—work well independently but together powerfully demonstrate the complexity of human (and godly) nature and a damning portrait of our species' incessant capitulation to sin. In some ways, they function like updated medieval morality plays—stern warnings of what happens if one strays too far from the path of righteousness in a Christian ideological landscape. How much of these plays reflect the writer's own life is tantalizing to speculate. Not much is known of Wilder's private life. That said, Rosey Strub of The Wilder Family Estate sees these plays as a “broken kaleidoscope of Thornton Wilder's inner life” (Discussion). Although there are great moments of light and humor in the *Sins* plays, playwright John Guare also sees the “darkness” and “rueful” quality in these later works of Wilder: “These seven plays are filled with the people who have not escaped by the skin of their teeth. These are the people of *Our Town* who lived long enough to learn the price you pay for staying smugly in your own Grover's Corners. Emily said, ‘Oh life, you are too wonderful? I know what these seven plays are. These are the plays if Emily had lived’ (Wilder, *Collected Short Plays* xix).

The student cast did an excellent job of presenting the different genres in the cycle—the light and darkness—as well as the various styles of the plays, which ranged from realism to postmodernism. “Each of these plays,” Savick observed, “have their own stylistic worlds.” Suffolk University does not typically open its theater productions to professional reviews, but an exception was made due to the importance of this rare event. Taking this into consideration, the work of specific acting students will not be discussed; but, overall, the performers should be commended for the scope, depth, and high quality they brought to such challenging work. As Strub duly noted, “[these] are not perfect plays.” Throughout the rehearsal process, the actors felt the “unfinished quality” of the writing, but they had faith in the scripts and were committed to making them work (and they worked quite well). Despite the incomplete feel to the plays, there are particular strengths in the *Sins* cycle. Discussing *The Seven Deadly Sins*, the actors repeatedly mentioned the great number of “powerful female characters” and the joy of playing roles where women have significant “agency and dimension.” As in *Our Town*, the actors noted, “the women carry the script” (Discussion).

For much of the rehearsal process, the cast for each play rehearsed separately (again, there was no double-casting), unaware of how the other plays were coming together. “[The rehearsal process] was kind of weird,” commented cast member Vincent Douglass, “because you’re disconnected for so much of the process and then [during] tech week, the shows are all together, and you’re sitting there watching it and feeling how they all connect” (Hume). The plays, indeed, did connect. Each play succeeded independently, but they took on greater power and significance by being presented as the complete *Sin* cycle. To perform all seven plays in one evening, again, is a rare and important event; this allowed them to be fully actualized and to speak fully of the repercussions of succumbing to sin.

“[This production of] *The Seven Deadly Sins*,” Savick commented, “is a special occasion to shed new light on one of the greatest literary and theatrical minds of the American 20th century. . . . [The] seven short plays in this ambitious cycle constitute a prophetic and kaleidoscopic vision of our inability to be fully alive in life as we live it, will live it, and have always lived it” (BWW News). The performance lasted about two and half hours without an intermission. Afterward, it was clear from postshow conversations that audience members were quite pleased. Perhaps Rosey Strub said it best: “[This show] just blew me away” (Discussion). Suffolk Theatre’s *The Seven Deadly Sins*, indeed, was outstanding and an excellent reminder of the importance of Wilder’s more

neglected work and how these plays continue powerfully to speak to the unfinished business of human nature.

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