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THE HAPPY JOURNEY TO TRENTON AND CAMDEN
AND WILDER'S DRAMATIC ART

When one thinks of Thornton Wilder /1897-1975/ the playwright, one immediately remembers Our Town /1938/. With this play Wilder has secured a permanent place in the world theater repertory. Sometimes he is remembered as the author of The Skin of Our Teeth /1942/ and The Matchmaker /1955/. But only few people remember that Wilder wrote some fifteen one-act plays. Those plays are rarely produced and all but forgotten by professional companies. Occasionally an experimental theater will select The Long Christmas Dinner /1931/ or Plays for Bleecker Street /1962/ for a short run. The reasons for this lack of popularity of Wilder's oneacters is twofold. First, as much as they may be good literature, the plays make poor theater. Secondly, in sentiment they seem alien to the modern temper. As they require no expensive sets or large casts, they vie better with small non-professional university or community theaters. But that does not mean that they are popular.

With drama critics their popularity is not great either. For the most part they are passed by. Even more extended studies, sometimes aiming at comprehensiveness, treat them only superficially. Critics concentrate on Wilder's acknowledged classics and forget about the oneacters that landmark his progress. This essay is written in the belief that this gap in Wilder criticism should start filling out.

Although The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden /1931/ is not a great play, it had better luck with theater than most of Wilder's oneacters. Besides, and this is the

decisive reason, it seems to mark the beginning of Wilder's experiments with the dramatic form. I shall concentrate on these features of Wilder's dramatic art which foreshadow his latter dramatic techniques and explorations. I will concentrate mainly on the means Wilder uses to communicate his message to the audience. It is an aspect of Wilder's constant preoccupation with the nature of the theatrical event and of his use of different character structures.

Nothing very interesting happens in The Happy Journey. The Kirbies finally go on the trip to see Beulah, their married daughter, in Camden. As the play opens there is the usual bustle of preparation and the small talk with the neighbors. Then the Kirbies get in the car and go off. As they travel they comment on the things that catch their attention; flowers, the car in front of them, adds by the roadside, and so on. In Elizabeth, New Jersey, they are stopped by a funeral procession. This launches Ma on a long sermon about being prepared for death. Arthur offends her by telling her that she must have gotten a letter from God that she talks about Him so much, and she threatens to break up the excursion. Fortunately Pa placates her and they go on. The longer the trip takes, the more the atmosphere clogs with sentimentality, gentility and profusion of family feelings. When the Kirbies finally meet Beulah the reason for the trip becomes apparent. Beulah's child was stillborn and she herself barely escaped death. "Are you glad I'm still alive, Pa?" /78/¹ marks the peak of emotional tension in the play.

This tension is dissipated when the women /Beulah and Ma/ get busy with dinner. As this peak of tension comes with denouement, is very low-keyed and not sustained, it almost fails to register with the audience as the play's /evidently/ intended climax. Thus the play seems to fail both as a formal structure and as means of capturing the audience's attention. All the same it is considered one of Wilder's most stageworthy oneacters. This discrepancy between the theory- and practice-based judgments warrants

a closer examination of the play's form.

The only purposeful and goal-oriented action in the play is Kirbies' trip to Beulah. The play's many chance happenings, although interesting in themselves, are simply inconsequential and lead to nowhere. No matter what happens, the course of action is irrevocably set. The plot and characters seem to be in permanent stasis. The Kirbies' actions contribute nothing towards shaping their characters, their fates or the direction the plot takes. Thus, their activities exist as if for themselves. Since the occurrences are in no way mutually interdependent, they stop only because the travellers end their journey. This reveals the purpose of "trip as plot" Wilder uses here. It functions as a formal check on the number of incidents presented. It provides the play with some vestigial--but necessary--unifying principle.

The events organized by the "plot" demonstrate how the Kirbies take their trip. They demonstrate what may happen during a family trip to visit relatives. On the stage is presented only this situation. The activities demonstrate not a process of becoming or change, but provide an extensive and exhaustive description of a single static situation. Thus Wilder approaches the Maeterlinckean stasis, the type of drama he himself criticized /cf. Wilder, 1970:92/. And in spite of his disavowals, this is one of the characteristic features of his dramaturgy. At the center of his plays there always is a static situation, which is the embodiment of the "general idea" that the play is to communicate.

In The Exploding Stage Norris Houghton /1971:14/ defines as action "the dramatic movements /which; AC/ proceeds by a series of changes of equilibrium. Any change of equilibrium constitutes an action. A play is a system of actions, a system of major and minor changes of equilibrium."

But in The Happy Journey there are no contending forces; nothing which could create or threaten equilibrium. The

question of equilibrium seems irrelevant here. Thus, with Houghton's definition of action for a yardstick one arrives at the absurd conclusion that there is no action in the play. To the same conclusion leads Touchard's and Bentley's definition of action as "the general movement that brings it about that something is born, develops, and dies between the beginning and the end." /Bentley, 1971:15/ With such a discovery there is but little surprise that one cannot pinpoint such other traditional elements of action as exposition, rising action, climax, crisis, etc. Absence of the devices building up expectation, engineering suspense or bringing about surprise convince us that there is nothing that traditionally was used to hold the audience's attention.

By pursuing certain analogies between The Happy Journey and Racinean dramaturgy we can discover some other features of Wilder's dramatic art. As Francis Fergusson points out /cf. 1949: 56-80/, Racine presents an aspectual analysis of a situation. The subject matter of his plays is: a working of a human mind in a pre-set situation. Racine presents all the information the audience needs to follow the dramatic action with full understanding and appreciation. The physical action exposes some unknown /or hidden/ aspects of the static situation. Human behavior in a predetermined situation is of paramount interest.

To a large extent the same is true about The Happy Journey. Here too what is presented and important is a situation. The various incidents simply disclose what usually happens during such a trip. The incidents follow one another without necessity or sense of direction. The story they tell provides the audience with no "moral message" and hence seems to be told only to make feasible the theatrical spectacle based on this "scenario".

Why are Wilder's plays devoid of the kind of "moral" that Racine's plays provide? A comparison of, for example Phédre with almost any play by Wilder readily reveals the reason. Although both playwrights present a story or situation already known to the audience /Racine uses a well-known Greek myth and Wilder a familiar situation/,

Racine presents the crucial situation of a highly organized moral action. Racine's dramatic situations yield a "moral" because they are parts of a larger moral action. Since Wilder's plays are independent of such a connection, they are incapable of setting forth any such message. This may explain another point about Wilder's plays: the apparent lack of "thought" in the actions presented.

Even Wilder's characters cannot hold the audience's interest. They are purely "reactive" beings; they only register and respond to external stimuli. Only as reactions to the same stimuli are their activities interconnected. The characters often speak in long tirades which, although triggered off by these stimuli also, do not contribute to the general action. As manifestations of individual psyches their responses make erratic and inconsistent patterns. Profuse weeping, excessive reactions to innocent behavior, clogging childishness, paternal benevolence and maternal protectiveness are jarring and unconvincing. If, however, one construes these actions as manifestations of typical, generalized behavior of parents and children, the patterns yielded are less erratic and provide the characters with some consistency. Stereotype characterization appears, then, to be the third general characteristics of Wilder's dramaturgy.

Thus, it seems, Wilder maximally generalizes this "characterological" aspect of The Happy Journey's meaning. In a way he also intellectualizes it. But, as Elder Olson observes /1966:149-169/ such a procedure lowers the level of interest the play generates. Hence, The Happy Journey, like many other of Wilder's modernistic plays, seems to hold the audience neither by means of "thought" or "moral", plot nor character. When these are not exploited, left are only the "materials" normally used in the "actualization" of the thought, plot and character in a play. Left is "language", "spectacle" and "mood". These are the only resources on which Wilder can rely. In this way what usually is but a means of conveying the "message" becomes the message itself: the "representing level" becomes the

play's subject matter.

Then, what are the merits of the play? I propose to reverse the normal procedure and present the answer first and justify it later. The merits of The Happy Journey consist in the fact that it is an experiment in dramatic writing. It explores the limits of drama and of the theatrical event as its aesthetic basis. It tries to find how a play's formal structure affects its meaning. It is an exercise in exploring the hidden recesses of dramaturgy: How far can one push the limits of drama before the very form of a play gives way and a play is transformed into something else.

The Happy Journey does not make any comprehensive statement about life. Its interest lies not in the "message", but in what Aristotle calls "spectacle"² and Olson /1966:89/ calls "representation"; in the activity imitated on the stage. Since the play tests the significance and the thematic relevance of its formal structure, "plot" as a "system of actions of a determinate moral quality"/ibid.:37/ and the very term "plot" are irrelevant. We have said that the play tells its story as a check on its length. But there is an even more important reason. The story is told in order that the audience may be shown how any story is told in the theater; what is it that the audience actually perceives. This is the play's "thought".

Though thematically it may not be very significant that the play is about a theatrical event, this fact introduces a very interesting theoretical problem. In a play like The Happy Journey the element of representation become "opaque" /cf. Warren, 1958/. As the ultimate reality behind which there is no other, these elements activate their "poetic function" /Jacobson, 1961:356/; they make the audience perceive them as poetic devices. In this way every element of representation becomes a comment on itself. The play becomes perforce autothematic and an exposition of a theory of drama. Like the more traditional plays it tries to make the experience of participating in a dramatic performance "significant". "There is a difference between having an

experience simply and grasping the meaning of the experience" /Olson, 1966:156/. Any play may be a source of even an intense theatrical experience. But only a play with theatrical experience as its subject matter can make this intense experience "significant". "I shall say, therefore /says Olson/, that a work possesses significance or meaning as it promotes perceptions--perceptions based on feelings--which are conducive to practical wisdom; which would, if acted upon, eventuate in such wisdom." /1966: 159-160/. Since The Happy Journey tries to fulfill the requirement with reference to dramatic experience, in its essentials it does not differ from any other play.

How does Wilder go about infusing the experience of participating in a theatrical event with significance? Here it seems necessary to turn to one of the most important facets of Wilder's dramatic art: to the Stage Manager.

In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden the Stage Manager appears for the first time, and in its most rudimentary form. He is a property man who helps other actors set up and remove the very few props used in the play. He substitutes for several actors who would have to play a number of minor roles sometimes only a line or two long. In delivering these bit parts he uses the manuscript without any attempt at actorial characterization. But doubling for the actor playing the filling station attendant he actually impersonates the character. Here he joins the five other actors playing the Kirbies and justifies his presence on the stage. These are the limits of his functions.

His behavior onstage could suggest a director during a rehearsal for which some actors fail to appear. Although the text calls him "stage Manager", he seems not to function as one. Thus the justification for such a name must be looked for in the origins of this figure.

A lot has been written about the Oriental sources of Wilder's dramaturgy /cf. Lewis, 1969:60; Burbank, 1961, 82-112/. His use of pantomime, of stylized actions, of the stage manager and of some of his other dramatic devices have all been said to derive from the Oriental theater.

Wilder himself substantiated these views when in "A Platform and a Passion or Two" he wrote:

"In Chinese drama a character, by straddling a stick, conveys to us that he is on horseback. In almost every No play of the Japanese an actor makes a tour of the stage and we know that he is making a long journey."

/Wilder, 1959:305/

Wilder had a chance to experience the Oriental theater firsthand when he was attending the German High School at Cheefoo in China. Later, already in the United States, he could broaden his knowledge of the Japanese drama through reading of the first translations of No plays which appeared in 1921.

The figure of the Stage Manager seems to have its origins in the Black Actor, the Kurombo of the Chinese and Japanese theaters. In the Japanese theater Kurombo was a member of the actors' troupe who during the performance, in full view of the audience, could move about the stage and set up the props the characters were using. The conventions and the aesthetics of the Oriental theater made Kurombo, as a non-participant in the "imitation of action" presented in the play, not only invisible but simply "non-existent". Alien to the action presented, his presence was simply ignored; Kurombo was not a source of meaningful signals. Besides, he was mute and the conventions say that a character must use language.

To a person reared on the Western tradition of the theater every thing on the stage is a source of meaningful signals communicating the play's "structure of meanings." To such a person the Black Actor could be an aesthetic shock. Kurombo subverts the well-ingrained expectations that a play presents life-like behavior of "real" characters in "real" situations. A play with a Kurombo in it becomes blatant theatricalism, a manifestation of the fact that, as Wilder puts it, "the theater is a world of pretense." /1970:93/. Most probably Wilder himself had experienced such a shock and the Stage Manager was to produce a similar aesthetic shock for the audience.

Whatever Wilder's initial intentions, it remains a fact that the influence of the Oriental theater permeates his efforts at revitalizing the American Theater.

In The Happy Journey the Stage Manager-Kurombo, just like the Kurombo of No plays, is mute in his capacity of a property man. /Later in Our Town, he is given speech. Arranging the trellis pushed onstage he says: "There's some scenery for those who think they have to have some scenery." /Wilder, 1957: 7/ / But Wilder introduced the Kurombo figure only after modifying it. He couples the duties of a Kurombo with those of a jack-of-all-trades member of the cast whose duty is to help the principals by delivering the lines of the supporting characters. But Wilder explicitly indicates that he does not "act", does not "impersonate" characters. The Stage Manager

"reads from a typescript the lines of all the minor characters. He reads them clearly, but with little attempt at characterization, scarcely troubling himself to alter his voice, even when he responds in the person of a child or a woman." /57/

He is at most to inform the audience about the responses of the characters with whom the Kirbies converse audibly. Audibility is a criterion here because there is still another group of "non-existent" characters. Existence of other characters is revealed only in the Kirbies' reactions to them. Thus, although there is nobody visible on the stage besides the Kirbies, they react as if some other characters actually existed. This group of characters lacks even the "reality" that the Stage Manager provides by reading the character's lines.

Through such a use of the Stage Manager Wilder gains first of all the perceptual shock. The audience expects to participate in an artistic transaction in which the complex of the signalling codes is known in advance. Wilder destroys this expectation by introducing the Kurombo figure. This forces the audience to enter the transaction on the dramatist's own terms.

What are the terms?

First. The play's structure demands that the audience separates the communicative functions of stage signals and signs from their expressive and autotelic functions. Secondly, it dictates that in order to understand the play the audience performs only the functional translation³ of the objects presented on the stage. In theater practice it means that The Journey's audience understands that the four chairs and the low platform are "the best little Chevrolet in the world" /62/. The separation of the signs' different functions directs the audience's attention to the method of communicating meanings. The stress on the conventionality of the communicative channel reveals the essential incompatibility of the base /the signifiant/ and the "meaning" of the theatrical signals /the signifié/. Hence the audience's recognition that it is confronted with two "realities" simultaneously: the reality of the material objects and the "reality of imagination" built over them. This way Wilder forces the perception of the fact of pretense in the theater. This is not the only polemical and educational use to which the device is put. Wilder's treatment of objects, props and actors is his way of stressing the fact that a dramatic spectacle /as different from a drama/ is a collective product.

Wilder's other way of stressing such origins of theatrical signals is the structure of his characters. In The Happy Journey he presents four types of characters, four types of artistic signs differentiated by the modes and the degrees of their actualization. The first type may be called "non-existent". Although these characters do not appear on the stage, their behavior is immediately registered by the Kirbies as if they did. The Kirbies respond to them in either of two ways. Caroline's behavior exemplifies the first kind of response. At the rise of the curtain she "is at the remote back, right, talking to some girls who are invisible to us" /57/. This means, as we learn from Arthur, that "She's out waitin' in the street talkin' to the Jones girls" /58/. Wilder's second method of letting us know that there are some silent characters

on the stage is by having the Kirbies comment on their behavior.

"Elmer: Here, you boys, you keep away from that car.

Ma : Those Sullivan boys put their heads into everything." /61/

The second type of characters is actualized by the Stage Manager who reads their lines. Here Wilder tries to evoke characters through, as he says, "highly characteristic utterances" /Wilder, 1970:89/. But in reality his means are even more restricted. He tries to create characters by means of linguistic fragments which, technically speaking, are not even utterances. The lines are not utterances because they are purposefully divested of the suprasegmental features characteristic for utterances. The lines are read "clearly, but with little attempt at characterization" /57/. An example may elucidate the point. Immediately before the Kirbies set out on their journey there is the following scene:

/Ma comes down to the footlights and talks toward the audience as through a window./

Ma: Oh, Mrs. Schwartz!

The Stage Manager: /Consulting his script./ Here I am, Mrs. Kirby. Are you going yet?

Ma: I guess were going in just a minute. How's the baby?

The Stage Manager: She's all right now. We slapped her on the back and she spat it up.

Ma: Isn't that fine! --Well, now, if you'll be good enough to give the cat a saucer of milk in the morning and the evening, Mrs. Schwartz, I'll be ever so grateful to you. --Oh, good afternoon, Mrs. Hobmeyer!

The Stage Manager: Good afternoon, Mrs. Kirby. I hear you're going away.

Ma: /Modest./ Oh, just for three days, Mrs. Hobmeyer, to see my married daughter Beulah, in Camden.

/58-59/

Here all the lines spoken by the Stage Manager are supposed to be remarks made by actual characters, Mrs. Schwartz and Mrs. Hobmeyer. Those lines could be "utterances" if they were uttered "realistically" i.e., if there was any degree of imitation of the hypothetical suprasegmental features as realized by these two ladies. But Wilder explicitly demands that such a rendition be avoided. Thus he resigns from "spoken language". He uses the stylistic variant of the literary language which Vinogradov calls "read written language" /1970:385-90/.

The third type of character structures is represented only by the figure of the gas station attendant. By having an idle actor hanging around the stage assume, for a moment only and without any special characterization, the role of a dramatic character, Wilder creates a "poetic" character. It is "poetic" in the sense of directing the audience's attention to the artificiality of this metamorphosis. Thus he functions on two levels: as a character and as a comment on himself--and by extension--on other characters.

The Kirby family are characters of type IV. These are Wilder's most conventional character structures; they approach the structure of "realistic" characters. /I am not speaking of their relative psychic or social complexity/ Like any "realist" Wilder builds these characters of:

/1/ highly characteristic utterances, /2/ concrete occasions in which the character defines itself under action and /3/ a conscious preparation of the text whereby the actor may build upon the suggestions in the role according to his own abilities.

/Wilder, 1970:89/

Any dramatist could accept a rule so general. But this generality leaves out the things which make for the stylistic differences between plays by different dramatists. From his recipe for a dramatic character Wilder leaves out a description of the type of behavioral signals used for characterization. The acts his characters perform are

"natural" to start with, but the fact that they are often performed with non-existent objects makes them artificial, created. This differentiates them from actions used by other dramatists.

With those four types of character structures Wilder seems to dramatize different "truths" about the nature of dramatic characters, allotting one "truth" per one dramatic character structure. With Type I Wilder dramatizes the fact that dramatic characters do not exist "in reality" It makes the audience experience perceptually that a character is an imaginative entity construed by the audience itself on the basis of signals "fed out" from the stage. Characters of Type II dramatize the fact that a character's identity is a playwright's exclusive responsibility. Wilder shows here that ultimately only the playwright is responsible for a character's crystalization or failure. At the same time he points to the creative use of language in structuring a play. Type III dramatizes the fundamental aesthetic incongruity of actor and his role, the character he "creates". An actor is defined here as a mere "executant" of the playwright's will. As a person he can never submerge himself in the character to the point of becoming it. Thus a stage character is always a mixture of actor's features and of his character's features. Since the playwright cannot influence the actor's features, he shouldn't be blamed for all the deficiencies of a stage character. Type IV, on the other hand, shows that an actor may creatively contribute to character. These characters are structured in such a way that it is immediately visible how much the actor through his craft contributes to the character's crystalization. Wilder shows here how much the play's final shape depends on the actor's stage actions. He demonstrates experientially that a stage character is a joint product of the dramatist providing the language aspects and the actor, who provides the "spectacle" aspects.

The integration of specific linguistic and spectacle

signals for stage representation of a character Fergusson calls "actualization" /1949:48-9/. In The Happy Journey both elements of actualization are activated thematically by the trick of the different character structures. Their employment and inherent possibilities are the play's subject matter. They are the play's major theme and the ultimate reason for the spectrum of the character structures presented. This theme is suggested to the audience in the course of presenting the manifest, but ultimately only vestigial and secondary, theme of going for a visit.

The theme is realized by an unorthodox deployment of elements of language and spectacle in the various character structures. I have arranged the types in the order of growing fullness of actualization. Characters of Type I seem not actualized at all: they are accessible only indirectly. They have to be inferred as the invisible stimuli of the Kirbies' visible behavior. Characters of the second type are actualized as interlocutors; only the linguistic factors work towards their existence. Thus, Types I and II differ in the choice of the medium in which the characters are built. Types III and IV balance the linguistic and spectacular aspects of actualization. This balance and the resulting realistic effect is, however, undercut by the direct demonstration /in Type III/ of the artificiality of even such characters.

What is, in this connection, the Stage Manager's role? Actually "Stage Manager" seems an accidental name for a conglomerate of six different minor characters /Mrs. Schwartz, Mrs. Hobmeyer, Mrs. Adler, Helen, Mildred, garage hand/ and two theater functionaries /stage hand and an unidentified reader of bit parts/. Seen as a constructed object he reveals his nature of a metaesthetic signal. His multiply shocking behavior makes the audience concentrate on unravelling the meaning of this figure. This in turn leads to an understanding of the otherwise equally shocking behavior of the Kirbies.

Before the Stage Manager reads Mrs. Schwartz's lines

the Kirbies' behavior /talking to invisible people, etc./ seems a disorganized medley of signals. This moment is crucial for understanding the play. Here the first explicit metasignal, a signal explaining the method of decoding other signals, is given. The scene is very short:

Ma: Oh, Mrs. Schwartz!

The Stage Manager: /Consulting his script./ Here I am, Mrs. Kirby. Are you going yet?

/57/

The "Here I am, Mrs. Kirby" is the basis for an immediate recognition that the Stage Manager, a male actor, plays a female role. "Here I am" means that he is a woman, a case of transvestitism possibly only in the theatrical world of make-believe. The Stage Manager, this Kurombo-cum-actor, never lets the audience forget that it is participating in an artistic transaction of which the rules were set down by the playwright.

Thematic activation of language and spectacle Wilder achieves also by his equally unconventional structuring of the dramatic time and space. By confronting the audience with an amorphous acting space he forces it to accept such its organization as can be inferred from the action taking place in it, Wilder says that "No scenery is required for this play. Perhaps a few dusty flats may be seen leaning against the brick wall at the back of the stage" /57/.

Thus, at the rise of the curtain the audience is confronted not with a dramatic place but with a stage, an acting space. Like the Tennessee landscape without Stevens' jar in it, it is amorphous, unorganized, meaningless. The acting space organizes itself around the human beings immersed in it. The dramatic place coalesces around the characters moving around in it. Thus, it is virtually created by the characters. Its shape is known to the audience only indirectly: through the characters' reactions to it, through their physical and verbal behavior.

In the moveable space surrounding the characters there

are cities through which they pass, gas stations, streets, buildings, etc. And although no stage props indicate that to get to Beulah's house you have to go "A few blocks after you pass the big oil tanks on your left.../then AC/ you come to a corner where there's an A and P store on your left and a firehouse kitty-corner to it..." /76/ and so on, the audience is kept alive to the reality of this landscape by the frequent "There they are!" confirming the imagined landmarks. This way Wilder creates a space with a dual quality of a construct and a pre-existing environment. As a construct it comes into being through the reactions of the characters who in their questions, answers and exclamations register its /imaginative/ landmarks. Thus, even before the Kirbies got there, there must have been a hot-dog stand because they react to it. But for the audience it is this reaction which creates the dog-stand. Remarks like:

Caroline: Ma, I love going out in the country like this. Let's do it often.

Ma: Goodness, smell that air, will you! It's got the whole ocean in it.

/66/

inform the audience not only that the characters react to the landscape but primarily how they do it. Thus Wilder's major means for creating the space seems to be the imaginative and evocative use of language. That the dramatic place is not created in the usual medium /props and scenery/ directs the audience's attention to language and its use in the theater.

But if Balcerzan and Osiński /1974:240-41/ are right, Wilder derives additional advantages from this substitution of media. In "Spektakl teatralny w świetle teorii informacji" they claim that a substitution of communicative subcodes is aesthetically highly effective because it stimulates the imagination by suggesting the subcode /here scenery/ which has been eliminated. And suggestion,

they say, in the theater is more effective than direct presentation.

The great versatility and malleability of the dramatic place results not only from Wilder's ingenious shaping of the lines. It results also from releasing the stage from the "fixing" effects of props. In The Journey there are no props to contradict the momental reality of the evoked space. The car appears only after the family has left the house and disappears when the women enter Beulah's bedroom; it gives place to a bed, which suggests a new dramatic place.

The dramatic space exists only around, and is totally dependent on characters. It has no independent existence of its own. Hence the characters have to be onstage all the time. Wilder cannot use the curtain to change the props; it has to be done in full view of the audience. Here again the Stage Manager with his Kurombo prerogatives is of unestimable value. By placing the four chairs midstage or by pushing a bed onto the stage he fixes the space. This way he relieves the characters of the duty of constant revitalizing the space by reacting to it and allows them to concentrate on each other. Thus, by creating and annihilating the material object determining the space Wilder can instantaneously "fix" and "liberate" the dramatic space.

The many functions the Stage Manager plays in the play make him the major source of metasignals. His method of actualizing dramatic characters is a metasignal in itself. It facilitates the task of organizing all the other signals into a coherent message. In this he appears as a dramatization of the principle of artificiality and conventionality inherent in theatrical events. He is the embodiment of the extemporaneous agreement between the playwright and his audience on the ways of transacting the play's meaning.

Over twenty years after publishing his one-acters Wilder wrote that he "began writing one-act plays that tried to capture not verisimilitude but reality" /1957: XII/.

Reality for him is the quality of work which causes the audience to believe what it is shown.

"The response we make when we 'believe' a work of the imagination is that of saying: 'this is the way things are. I have always known it without being fully aware that I knew it. Now, in the presence of this play... I know that I know it. /.../ It is this form of knowledge which Plato called 'recollection'.

/Wilder 1957: VIII/

When one looks at The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden in the light of this statement, one other interesting feature of the play becomes apparent.

Someone said that The Happy Journey is built around a pantomime exercise for actors. The only thing missing from this pretty good description is the reason for the noted stageworthiness of this "étude for actors". The secret, it seems, lies in the fact that this "exercis" produces in the audience exactly the kind of knowledge Wilder is talking about: it triggers off a Platonic "recollection". In the pantomimes and the imitation of a family going on a trip Wilder embodied the images of situations familiar to everybody.

The Journey's Platonism consists also in this that as a whole the play seems to project for the audience the situation of prisoners in the cave of ideal images. The situations, actions and the characters are shadows projected against the bare backstage walls. All the projected images are so generalized and so devoid of any individualizing features that they may be images of anybody's own experiences. The audience perceives the images as, on the one hand, less real than reality --because they are the playwright's and the actors' creations-- and on the other hand, somehow more real because they project only the essence of those situations. The Happy Journey is the only of Wilder's plays in which the concept of the Platonic "recollection" and of the Platonic cave is realized so thoroughly. In other plays

it is superseded by other images projected by the plays' structures.

This last fact is due to this, that in the later plays Wilder started tacking the problem of narration in the theater. Here he still observes the traditional requirements of "neutral narration" or "dramatic presentation". The relations projected by the play for the communicative situation are those of the traditional theater. Like in any traditionally structured play the author, the play, and the audience are mutually independent. The spheres of their existence, though tangential, do not penetrate each other.

Such mixture of tradition and innovation in the structure of the play raises a number of interesting theoretical and critical problems which this essay tried, at least partially, to illuminate. The manifest interest in plays that would teach theater places The Happy Journey at the beginning of Wilder's career of an educational dramatist, midway between such entertaining but hardly interesting oneactors like The Queens of France and the more accomplished ones, like The Long Christmas Dinner.

NOTES

- ¹ All quotations from the text of The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden are taken from the same edition: Ten Short Plays, ed. by Jerry Weiss /Fell Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1969/ and hence throughout the essay only the page number is indicated.
- ² This term is rendered also as "mise-en-scene"
- ³ For a discussion of conceptualization and translation in the process of theatrical perception see Edward Balcerzan, and Zbigniew Osiński, "Spektakl teatralny w świetle teorii informacji" In: Wprowadzenie do nauki o teatrze. T.j. Dramat-Teatr, ed by Janusz Degler, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Wrocław, 1974, pp.238-253, esp. pp. 242-246.

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Streszczenie

Przez bardzo wiele lat krytyka zajmowała się tylko garstką sztuk Wildera sugerując w ten sposób, iż teatrykalizm /lub konwencjonalizm/ Naszego miasta czy O mało się zdarzyło pojawił się nagle i bez zapowiedzi. Starając się choćby częściowo skorygować ten obraz przedstawiam analizę jednoaktówki Wildera "Szczęśliwa podróż do Trenton i Camden". Ta "etiuda aktorska", jak ją niektórzy nazywają, posiada w zasadzie wszystkie cechy charakterystyczne dramaturgii Wildera. Pewne z nich ujawniają się przy porównaniu z Maelinckiem czy Racinem. Jednakże większość staje się uchwytna dopiero w perspektywie semiotycznej: gdy sztukę ujmie się jako motywowany ciąg znaków uzyskujących swój sens na tle i przez odrzucenie naiwnej realistycznej estetyki teatru pre-modernistycznego. W tej grupie cech należy podkreślić tematyzowanie środków komunikacji teatralnej /sceny, postaci scenicznych, faktu uczestniczenia przez widownię w spektaklu, gestu, itd/, deprecjacji akcji dramatycznej na rzecz akcji scenicznej, uwypuklenie konwencjonalnej natury widowiska kosztem werystycznego naśladowania życia", itd. Ponieważ w tej sztuce sygnały Wilderowskiego stylu są najczytelniejsze w konstrukcji i zachowaniu postaci scenicznych, a szczególnie Stage Managera, nimi zajmuję się najobszerniej.