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Mammoth Task

Lord Leebrick wrestles with Wilder's absurd epic.

The *Skin of Our Teeth* is the kind of production one wishes one could study in print before watching on stage. Challenging and full of incongruities, *Teeth* is a play-within-a-play that's too baffling to see only once, too long to see again, too dark to be funny and yet too meaningful to dismiss.

Fully aware of its own absurdity, *Teeth* frequently stops itself while the "actors" debate the script. "I don't understand a word of this play," frets the beautiful Miss Somerset (Victoria Blake), an irked actress playing the maid Sabina. "Why can't we have plays like we used to have?"

In a fabulously flamboyant yet sympathetic performance, Blake's character preemptorily calls for time-outs, stopping the action onstage while struggling to understand and then explain the play to the audience. It's a complicated set-up held together by strong chemistry between Blake and Ken Hof, and supported by solid performances from most of the cast. This meta-theatre is what gives *Teeth* its comic bite, but its overarching theme is of human destruction and renewal.

Director Craig Willis presents the Antrobuses as a "typical" American family with two kids and a house in the suburbs. The Antrobuses survive thousands of years through the Ice Age, a biblical Great Flood, and a shattering world war. Each time they face extinction only to circle back, armed with the same skills as before, to make a new try at living.

Thornton Wilder wrote the Pulitzer-prize winning *Teeth* during World War II, a time when everything depended on people's ability to start over. The worry that the lessons of wartime would dissolve in the frivolity of peacetime underscores the play.

"When we're at war, we think of a better world," explains Hof as Mr. Antrobus. "When we're at peace, we think of a more comfortable one."

In a wonderful performance, Hof plays the red-faced, volatile Mr. Antrobus with barely concealed impatience. Ariel Pearlson as Mrs. Antrobus suffers it all with brittle dignity.

Things get weirder when a baby mammoth (Sarah Fischer) and a dinosaur (Elena Stylos) frolic in front of their fireplace. The amateurish animal costumes and some coarsely lettered wooden sets provide the main quibbles with an otherwise skilled production.

The Antrobus children nicely juxtapose the dual potential of human nature in the face of adversity. Teresa Koberstein glows with innocence and vulnerability as daughter Gladys, growing into a young protective mother. Johnny Ormsbee as son Henry —



The Skin of Our Teeth, Lord Leebrick, through April 17.

formerly known as Cain — matures dramatically from a slingshot-happy boy to a bitter killer in army fatigues.

"Every good and excellent thing in the world stands on a razor's edge of danger and must be fought for," says Mr. Antrobus. *The Skin of Our Teeth* plays at Lord Leebrick through April 17. **ew**

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