Chapter Six

Conclusion

Wilder was one of the pioneers in showing the right path when the desire to bring social change was taking many forms in art in this century. The dream of the expressionists to transform mankind foundered in disillusionment after World War I. Some writers came to believe that society could be improved only by adopting a programme of concrete social and political action and in the theatre they sought to focus attention on the grave difference between human needs and existing conditions. Attempts to use theatre as a weapon of social action took several forms, but the most significant and fruitful from the aesthetic viewpoint was the use of alienation techniques, which Thornton Wilder used so effectively in his plays.

The modern scientific age has moulded our mentality in such a way that we are irritated by customary, obvious and never-questioned events and there is no reason why art should not take over so useful an attitude. In the alienation techniques used by Wilder, the modern theatre received its strongest and maturest expression. The use of a-
effects by Wilder is not a matter of qualitative improvement but of adaptation to an entirely different purpose. Even to dramatize a simple newspaper report one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen. It is impossible to explain a present day action by motives that would have been adequate even in the recent past.

In Wilder's theatre of alienation, the spectators are expected to dislodge certain generally accepted criteria from their present domination of our judgment. The ideas of tempo have to be revised. Mental processes, for example, demand quite a different tempo from emotional ones, and cannot necessarily stand the same speeding up as the illusionistic theatre. Part of the social transformation of the alienating theatre is that the spectator should not be worked on in the usual way. So Wilder's theatre is no longer the place where his interest is aroused but where he brings it to be satisfied.

Each of Wilder's full-length and many one-Act plays is strikingly different from all the others in place and time and mood. All the plays, however, attempt to bring social change by drawing upon the
deeper potentialities of theatre. In the realistic
convention the playwrights can show only the action
of the characters themselves. It is quite impossible
to supply the sociological background to their actions
or to comment on them from a higher viewpoint than
their own.

The orthodox playwright's objection to the
A-effects is that the dramatist ought to say everything
that has to be said in the action, that the text must
express everything within its own confines. The
corresponding attitude for the spectator is that he
should not think about a subject but within the
confines of the subject. This way of subordinating
everything to a single idea, this passion for propelling
the spectator along a single track where he can look
neither right nor left, neither up nor down, is
something that the new school of playwriting to which
Wilder belongs must reject. Footnotes and the habit
of turning back in order to check a point, need to
be introduced in playwriting too. The use of
alienation techniques by Wilder has helped him in
presenting the complexity of the human condition in
an age in which the life of individual could no longer
be understood in isolation from the powerful trend of social, economic or historical forces affecting the life of the millions.

The view that Wilder's plays are diametrically opposed to the plays of Stanislavsky's ideal of realism cannot be accepted. When he was young, even his greatest pleasure was to go to the matinees at Ye Liberty Theatre in Oakland. There the stock company put on a different play every week and he followed them avidly. They were for the most part 19th century plays, performed in 19th century staging, with elaborate sets and, very often, period plays in full costume. And he lapped up this first taste of the theatre all in one gulp, from the melodramas of Bronson Howard and James A. Herne and the comedy dramas of Clyde Fitch to the translated dramas of Ibsen with a thirst he never knew he had.

The plays that Thornton Wilder had seen in his youth had made a strong impression on him, particularly the productions of Ibsen. Wilder's dramaturgy consists of many alienation techniques which have already been used in ancient Sanskrit drama, Greek drama, medieval mystery plays, the Loh plays, Jacobean drama and even
in recent drama to overcome the limitations of the theatre of illusion. Wilder was influenced by Pirandello, the German expressionists and the oriental theatre, but that does not diminish his own contribution towards revitalization of the theatre. He skilfully uses several devices to alienate events of the play from the realm of the ordinary, natural and expected, and makes them surprisingly new and strange.

Our Town is a multi-faceted play, simple in tone yet complex in texture. It is an outstanding example of Wilder's use of alienation technique through which the events in the lives of the characters of the play are presented objectively. This play summarizes the totality of life in a small New England village with the help of some of the most sophisticated strategies of dramaturgy. Actors planted in the audience ask questions about the town. Sound effects include a rooster crow, a factory whistle and the town clock.

In The Skin of Our Teeth is a brilliant play in which unities of place and action are abolished and in which the accumulation of evidence permits the spectators to pass judgement, showing Wilder's use of
alienation technique. The three acts of the play, arranged to encompass different units of time, are concerned with the struggles of the human race to survive the periodic disasters that threaten it with extinction. The cleverness with which Wilder telescopes the segments of time creates a sense of distance as though these events actually occurred in some remote past. Wilder makes a subtle use of alienation techniques to lend novelty and uniqueness to the treatment of the theme of the play, that is, the ability of the human race to survive despite nature's destructive powers and man's own catastrophic folly, ignorance, cruelty and cowardice.

In The Matchmaker the use of alienation effects has helped in the production of total theatre in which dance, music and other related arts are given their due place. The play is a good example of Wilder's liberating use of alienation techniques which reinstated the anti-realist tendencies of the stage at the vital centre of the theatre. Wilder kept The Matchmaker, like his other plays, from being cluttered with the familiar elaborate scenery and infinite detail in properties in order to preserve its larger meaning. Wilder regards the physical accessories as the least
necessary for the theatre.

Wilder's one-act plays, such as *The Happy Journey to Camden* and *Trenton, Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *The Long Christmas Dinner*, try to capture not verisimilitude, but reality. These plays mark his opposition to the picture-frame stage which put the audience into a trance and gave them the illusion of witnessing real events at real time and place. By discarding the familiar techniques of realistic representation and avoiding all pretense, Wilder's plays achieve even greater illusion. These plays show him poised between life and theatre, and this not merely as a beguiling technician but as an observer of reality who does not hesitate to throw off the shackles of realistic play-construction in order to come closer to reality.

The illusionistic theatre cannot be just wished away as its illusions have an important social function. This theatre is just sold as evening entertainment and that puts definite bounds to all attempts to transform it. The drug has become almost irreplaceable; it cannot be done without. But the attitude which Thornton Wilder wants to curb through his A-effects is the obstinate clinging to the pleasure element and so little
concern with one's own interests as soon as one steps outside one's own home.

Art must make the natural incomprehensible in a certain way in order to make it all the more comprehensible afterwards. One must break with the habitual notion that the thing in question requires no elucidation. The great discoveries of mankind, Bertolt Brecht believed, were made by men who looked at familiar things as if they had never seen them before. The theatre public should be induced to look at the things with the critical, estranged eye of the discoverer so as to make the natural look surprising.

The technique of alienation is an effective weapon wielded by Thornton Wilder against an illusion-hungry audience. Audiences affect the theatre through their expectations. They become accustomed to certain techniques and subject matters and quite frequently resist change. Therefore, the audiences accustomed to the realistic theatre expect the theatre to furnish them with something like opium, cheap means of exchanging their daily, unbearable, broken world for a harmonious but illusory world. And to accomplish this, the actor himself must identify himself with the
character, and the spectator with the actor.

The major drawback of such a realistic theatre, according to Wilder, is that it involves the spectators in the stage action and that involvement with the illusory world destroys their own will to action. Empathy and illusion are poisonous because they make man, a rational being, lose his critical abilities and because they cloud his brain with wishful thinking and dreams of harmony founded on ignorance. Of course, there are elements in the illusionistic theatre which are not purely culinary. And yet these elements in this type of theatre are so subordinated to the culinary principle that their sense is soon absorbed in sensual satisfaction.

It is, however, wrong to regard alienation and realistic techniques as contradictory terms. Actually alienation techniques fill the gaps left by the realistic tradition in presenting the complexity of modern man's situation. Thornton Wilder is original, not because he creates a new world, but because he values an old world differently — the world of the drama of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov. This world stands purged of pity and acceptance in the plays of Thornton Wilder.
thatilder basically attacks the naturalist thesis of the illusion of reality, which creates an action so life-like that the verisimilitude absorbs the whole attention of both dramatist and audience. He has tried to free the critical faculties of the audience and he has made efforts to prevent the playwrights from being cramped by the narrow and rigid conventions which the pretense of presenting real happenings imposes on the dramatists.

The use of a-effects in the modern theatre has led to many changes. The actor has found new inspiration in the enlarged and deepened demand on his talents. Here performance had so often been an end in itself, it became a servant and helpmate of an idea — the playwright's. The Director has become a dominant figure, assuming a new importance. Contrary to the realistic technique, the alienation techniques help the directors in presenting the events and characters quite coldly and objectively.

Alienation effects show human relationships and events in a new light; they demonstrate that the world is changeable and keep the audience alert for action. The spectators become observers, capable of
reaching a verdict. With the use of alienation techniques the stage no longer finds it necessary to put real flowers into real flower pots or real food on the real dining table. In the theatricalist mode the audiences are reminded again and again that they are sitting in a theatre, watching a play, which is a finished product of the deliberate efforts of the producer, director, musicians, actors, stage-hands and others.

Although today more and more playwrights are making use of alienation techniques in harmony with the scientific temperament of the age, it may not be assumed that only the use of these techniques can guarantee a deeper and a more inclusive grasp of man and his fate. A great deal depends on the dramatic genius that determines how far the playwright using one or the other set of conventions penetrates the human situations. This is shown by the great plays of Ibsen and Hauptmann. Though entirely unconcerned with alienation effects, they offer deeply disturbing images of man tortured by the social circumstances.

The naturalist theatre is not necessarily
uncritical; the observed reality can also shock by its concentrated power and has often done so. But we cannot ignore the powerful liberating effect of these alienation techniques.

These alienation techniques have helped in the production of total theatre, a theatre in which dance, music and other related arts are given their due place. The realistic convention fashioned a theatre which does not disturb the consciousness of the spectators. Wilder's theatre aims at reducing the empathic response and intensifying the spectator's awareness of social, economic and political conditions and their shortcomings. He hopes that the spectators will be sufficiently moved by what they see to work for change outside the theatre. He recognises the anxieties that plague the world, but he relies on man to effect the solutions.

Wilder's theatre is for social change and his theatrical mode is so closely woven with the themes of his plays that it is an expression of them. Indeed, their effects could not have been achieved by any other means. Through his unconventional theatrical techniques he also reveals the extraordinary in daily life and the heroic in ordinary people.
Wilder's imagination went beyond the world of
make-believe that he saw on the stage to his own
world of fantasy—nubulous to begin with, but a faint
indication of the path he was to follow later. His
plays show his opposition to the picture-frame stage
which militates against belief and squeezes the drama
into a removed show-case. His was a courageous defiance
of Broadway commercialism and its reluctance to experi-
ment.

Wilder uses non-naturalistic devices to achieve
objective, didactic theatre. He makes the spectator
assume an inquiring, critical attitude towards events
presented on the stage by alienating these events from
him. No actor is allowed to influence the audience by
tightening his muscles or give it the illusion of
witnessing natural, unrehearsed events. No effort is
made to establish any contact between audience and stage
by means of empathy as the technique of the A-effect
is completely opposed to that by which empathy is produced.
Wilder estranges the events shown on the stage from
the spectator and makes him assume an objective and
critical attitude toward the play. Its action is set
before him but it does not involve him by means of
empathy, thus bringing him into closer contact with
the facts. His plays achieve the A-effect which aims at showing how the world works to the end that this world may be changed. His plays celebrate the worth of man and the eternity of human values.