

The best American play, Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," is also the most popular American play. While this is a nice coincidence—if you want to call it that—Wilder's other full-length plays don't get done much nowadays, in part because everybody does "Our Town" instead of "The Skin of Our Teeth" or "The Matchmaker," which ran on Broadway for 486 performances but hasn't returned there since it closed in 1957.

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companies. In addition, "The Matchmaker" has the further disadvantage of having been turned into a musical, Jerry Herman's "Hello, Dolly!" The colossal success of Herman's brassy simplification of

Wilder's play inevitably pushed "The Matchmaker" still further into the wings, where it seemed fated to remain until Sarasota's Asolo Repertory Theatre came along. Asolo Rep is a professional theater company that is also a drama school, meaning that it can cast student actors in smaller parts. This allows it to produce rarely seen large-cast Broadway plays like "Once in a Lifetime," which it mounted to splendid effect in 2012. "The Matchmaker" is another natural choice for the company, and I'm overjoyed to report that Asolo has done right by one of the sweetest and smartest romantic farces ever written.

"The Matchmaker," like Tom Stoppard's "On the Razzle," is freely based on "Einen jux will er sich machen," an 1842 comedy by the Viennese farceur Johann Nestroy. If you've seen "Hello, Dolly!" (and who hasn't?) then you know the plot, in which Horace Vandergelder (Steve Hendrickson), a grumpy businessman-widower of a certain age, seeks the counsel of Dolly Levi (Peggy Roeder), an impecunious matchmaker of like vintage, and ends up popping the question to her instead of the much younger milliner (Olivia Williamson) with whom Dolly purports to be setting him up. This being a farce, what Dolly really has in mind for the unwitting Horace is—of course—exactly what happens as the curtain falls, though not before an ensuing snarl of comedic chaos has unspooled before the audience's delighted eyes.

According to Wilder, "The Matchmaker" is a parody of the stock-company farces that he saw as a boy. But it's also a wholly serious restatement of the theme that he first explored in "Our Town," which is



Peggy Roeder and Steve Hendrickson in "The Matchmaker." Photos by Gary W. Sweetman

In both cases, scale is also part of the problem: It takes 16 actors to do "The Matchmaker" and more than two dozen for "The Skin of Our Teeth," on top of which "The Matchmaker" requires four sets, thus putting it out of the reach of cash-conscious drama

the importance of making the most of the “world full of wonderful things” in which we live. All of the characters have been spiritually cramped by their pursuit of security, and all are in need, whether they know it or not, of what Wilder calls “a fuller, freer participation in life.”

That’s where Dolly comes in—and that’s what got lost when “The Matchmaker” was turned into “Hello,

Dolly!” For “The Matchmaker” is tough-minded to the point of Trollope-like harshness about the place of money in most people’s lives. Dolly, who hasn’t any, gets right to the point when she speaks of Horace’s “idle, frozen money... 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 little and that, also, can shatter the world.” Horace is an all-American Scrooge who has measured out his life in rolls of pennies and though he brags about being “free of foolishness,” the truth is that it will take a stiff dose of foolishness—administered, naturally, by Dolly—to bring him back to life.

Peter Amster, who staged Asolo’s excellent 2013 revival of “You Can’t Take It With You,” another budget-busting Broadway hit, has done comparable justice to “The Matchmaker,” taking Wilder’s script seriously (though always with the lightest of touches) rather than using it as a point of departure for directorial



Paul Herbig, Steve Hendrickson and Brian Owen in “The Matchmaker.” Photos by Gary W. Sweetman

foozling. [Mr. Hendrickson](#), whose booming, raspy voice and hair-trigger irascibility recall George C. Scott, is ideal as Horace, and Ms. Roeder’s no-nonsense Jewish-grandma Dolly is just the woman to awaken his shriveled soul. They are surrounded by a lovely supporting cast (Ms. Williamson is a peach) and framed to perfection by Russell Methane’s sets, which might have been designed by Norman Rockwell, and Virgil C. Johnson’s turn-of-the-century costumes, which are convincing in every

way. Greg Coffin’s waltzes-and-rags incidental score is no less evocative of its time and place.

“The Matchmaker” is being performed n Asolo’s Mertz Theatre, an uncommonly well-proportioned 500 seat house whose elegant interior was transplanted to Sarasota in 1990 from Scotland, where it was originally built in 1903. I can’t imagine a more appropriate venue for so winsome a play.



Steve Hendrickson and Peggy Roeder in “The Matchmaker.” Photos by Gary W. Sweetman