Girl Friday Productions
June 29-July 23, 2017
Performing at Park Square Theatre
Andy Boss Thrust Stage

Directed by Craig Johnson
Play guide prepared by Kit Gordon
About the play
Robert Sherwood wrote *Idiot’s Delight* in the mid-1930s, as Fascist forces grew in strength in Europe. It was produced in 1936, ran for 300 performances, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama that year. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne played the leading roles of Harry and Irene.

The story is set in a resort hotel in the Italian Alps, where a diverse group of travelers find themselves as war approaches. The group includes Harry Van and his small troop of lovely entertainers, an arms merchant and his mistress, a French socialist, a German doctor/researcher, a honeymooning British couple, representatives of the Italian air force, and members of the hotel staff. Over a two-day period, these characters reflect on life, love, politics, and war as imminent disaster looms.

Sherwood’s post-World War I stance as a pacifist was beginning to shift as he followed current events, but the play brings together multiple viewpoints and asks us to consider the inevitable costs of war as well as the importance of responding actively to threats to freedom.

About Robert Sherwood
Robert Emmet Sherwood was born in New Rochelle, New York in 1896 to a reasonably well-to-do family. He attended Milton Academy and Harvard University, though he was an indifferent student. His activities at Harvard included the Harvard Lampoon and the Hasty Pudding Club. During World War I, he attempted to join the U.S. military, but was rejected. Instead he joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force, with which he fought in Europe, where he was wounded and gassed. The horrors of the trenches led to his embrace of a pacifist stance after the war.

Back in the U.S., he pursued a writing career as a film critic for magazines such as *Life* and *Vanity Fair*, and was one of the founding members of the Algonquin Round Table along with Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley, his colleagues at *Vanity Fair*. His work in theater and film began in the 1920s: his first play, *The Road to Rome*, opened in 1927. While his career was in the arts, Sherwood was always alert to the on-going political issues of his day, and his pacifist
inclinations were challenged by the rise of Fascist movements in Europe, though with many others he supported neutrality and negotiation as the best way forward. His changing political perspective can be seen in his three Pulitzer Prize-winning plays, *Idiot’s Delight* (1936), *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938), and *There Shall Be No Night* (1940).

Once war began in Europe, Sherwood felt compelled to become active in politics in the United States. He met Harry Hopkins, one of Franklin Roosevelt’s trusted advisors, in 1938, and by 1940 he was involved as a speechwriter for Roosevelt’s re-election campaign. Once the United States entered the war, he was involved with the Foreign Information Service, and with a group of others created the Voice of America.

At war’s end, he continued to work in both theater and film: his screenplay for *The Best Years of Our Lives* won the Academy Award in 1946. He also wrote about his experiences in the Roosevelt years in *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (1948), a book that
brought him his fourth Pulitzer Prize. In his later years, he was conflicted politically: in favor of world government, yet deeply concerned about the communist governments in the U.S.S.R. and China; his artistic work was not successful, though he continued to write for film, television, and the theater. He died of a heart attack in 1955 at the age of 59.


The first part of the article is available here: http://minnesotaplaylist.com/magazine/article/2017/the-algonquin-round-table.

**TIMELINE 1914-1945**
(for much more detail see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_modern_history)

1914-1919
- World War I begins
- Panama Canal opens

1915
- Sinking of the Lusitania
- Armenian genocide begins in the Ottoman empire

1917
- U.S. enters War
- Robert Sherwood, rejected by U.S. armed forces, joins the Canadian Expeditionary Force; he was wounded in 1918.
- Russian Revolution

1918
- World War I ends
1919
- Treaty of Versailles redraws European borders; German Revolution ends with the collapse of the German Empire and the establishment of the Weimer Republic; Italian National Fascist Party established by Benito Mussolini.

1920s U.S.
- Prohibition enforced in the U.S. (until 1933)
- Walt Disney Company founded
- FBI founded (under J. Edgar Hoover)
- *The Jazz Singer*, the first “talkie” is released
- Lindbergh’s flight to Paris
- Wall Street Crash (1929)
- Broadway extremely active with large cast comedies, dramas, musicals, and vaudeville; Robert Sherwood joins ranks with O’Neill, Elmer Rice, Kaufman & Ferber/Connelly/Hart, etc. Lunt and Fontanne among rising popular stage stars

1920s Europe
- Adolph Hitler becomes Führer of the Nazi Party
- Coup brings the Pahlavi dynasty to power in Iran
- Mussolini comes to power in Italy
- Howard Carter discovers Tutankhamen’s tomb
- James Joyce publishes *Ulysses*
- Republic of Turkey established
- Power struggle between Trotsky and Stalin in the Soviet Union
- *Mein Kampf* is published
- Hirohito becomes Emperor of Japan
- Coups in Greece, Poland, and Portugal install new dictatorships
- Stalin becomes leader of the Soviet Union

1930s U.S.
- Roosevelt elected to the first of four terms (1932); New Deal begins
- Bonnie and Clyde shot in police ambush
- Drought and dustbowl
- The arts become more socially conscious (Group Theater, Odets, Hellman, Sherwood; novelists Steinbeck, Dos Passos,
Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Stein). Federal Theatre Project and Federal Writers Project established (1935)
• Rise of talkies, radio, and economic depression ends vaudeville and touring shows (why Harry’s touring the Balkans!)
• 1936: Sherwood writes *Idiot’s Delight*, starring Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne; it runs for 300 performances, and is awarded the Pulitzer Prize (the first of three Sherwood receives). A film adaptation is released in 1939 (much of the original play censored due to pressure from Fascist Italy).

1930s Europe and beyond
• Second Spanish Republic declared (1931); Spanish Civil War begins (1936); Civil War ends and Franco becomes dictator (1939)
• Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany (1933); declares himself Führer in 1934
• Edward VIII becomes King of England, then abdicates to his brother George VI.
• Japanese invasion of China (1937)
• Pius XII becomes Pope
• Freud dies
• Nazi invasion of Poland marks the beginning of World War II.

1940s
• War continues in Europe; U.S. enters the war in December 1941 following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. War continues on multiple fronts until 1945. The Nazi holocaust kills twelve million people, including six million Jews. Sherwood serves as a speechwriter for Roosevelt, is involved in the creation of Voice of America.
The play is set in the lounge of the Hotel Monte Gabriele in the Italian Alps, near the frontiers of Switzerland, Austria, and Germany/Bavaria.

Some notable quotes from the play

**Quillery:** The long view is not easy to sustain in this shortsighted world.

**Harry:** I’m just in favor of any revolution. Anything to wake people up, and give them some convictions.

**Harry:** It was illuminating. It taught me what is the precise trouble with the world today. We have become a race of drug addicts—hopped up with false beliefs—false fears—false enthusiasms....
Dumpsty: But it doesn’t make much difference who your masters are. When you get used to them, they’re all the same.

Weber: There will be no war. They’re all much too well prepared for it.

Harry: I’ve remained an optimist because I’m essentially a student of human nature...

Quillery: In every part of the world, the good desire of men for peace and decency is undermined by the dynamite of jingoism. And it needs only one spark, set off anywhere by one egomaniac, to send it all up in one final, fatal explosion. Then love becomes hatred, courage becomes terror, hope becomes despair.

(jingoism = extreme chauvinism or nationalism marked especially by a belligerent foreign policy)

Weber: Ask yourself: who are the greater criminals—those who sell the instruments of death, or those who buy them, and use them?

Irene: You believe in the goodness of human nature, don’t you?

Harry: And what if I do? I’ve known millions of people, intimately—and I never found more than one out of a hundred that I didn’t like, once you got to know them.

By and about Robert Sherwood
Postscript from the first published edition of Idiot’s Delight

During the past two weeks (this is March 16, 1936) the Italians have made a great offensive in Ethiopia; there has been an outburst of assassination and hara kiri by Fascists in Japan; the British Foreign Secretary, Mr. Eden, has said in the House of Commons that the current situation is “dreadfully similar to 1914”; a mutual assistance treaty has been ratified between republican France and Soviet Russia, and the German army has occupied the Rhineland, thereby shattering all that remained of the treaties of Versailles and Locarno.

What will happen before this play reaches print or a New York audience, I do not know. But let me express here the conviction that
those who shrug and say, “War is inevitable,” are false prophets. I believe that the world is populated largely by decent people, and decent people don’t want war. Nor do they make war. They fight and die, to be sure—but that is because they have been deluded by their exploiters, who are members of the indecent minority.

Of course, this delusion may still go on. If decent people will continue to be intoxicated by the synthetic spirit of patriotism, pumped into them by megalomaniac leaders, and will continue to have faith in the “security” provided by those lethal weapons sold to them by the armaments industry, then war is inevitable; and the world will soon resolve itself into the semblance of an ant hill, governed by commissars who owe their power to the profundity of their contempt for the individual members of their species.

But I don’t believe this will be so. I believe that a sufficient number of people are aware of the persistent validity of the Sermon on the Mount, and they remember that, between 1914 and 1918, twelve million men died in violence to make safe for democracy the world, which we see about us today. That awareness and remembrance can be strong enough to resist the forces, which would drive us back into the confusion and the darkness and the filth of No Man’s Land.

The megalomaniac, to live, must inspire excitement, fear and awe. If, instead, he is greeted with calmness, courage and ridicule, he becomes a figure of supreme insignificance. A display of the three latter qualities by England, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States will defeat Fascism in Germany, Italy, and Japan, and will remove the threat of war, which is Fascism’s last gesture of self-justification.

By refusing to imitate the Fascists in their policies of heavily fortified isolation, their hysterical self-worship and psychopathic hatred of others, we may achieve the enjoyment of peaceful life on earth, rather than degraded death in the cellar.

Robert E. Sherwood

To be able to write a play, a man must be sensitive, imaginative, naïve, gullible, passionate: he must be something of an imbecile,
something of a poet, something of a liar, something of a damn fool... He must be prepared to make a public spectacle of himself. He must be independent and brave.

Robert E. Sherwood, introduction to *The Queen’s Husband* (1928)

Sherwood’s specific brand of pacifism grew out of his abhorrence of the injuries, death, and destruction of World War I, which he could make no sense of. The entire enterprise, which at first appeared to be an adventure in “saving the world for democracy,” had ended in chaos and despair.


Bob felt able to venture into political waters because audiences of the 1920s believed that serious plays on and off Broadway, works that showed the reality of American life and questioned society’s social, religious, and moral principles, were worthwhile viewing.


In 1955 Bob told the drama critic Walter Kerr that *Idiot’s Delight* was “about the outbreak of a second world war.” In it, he “meant to express the conviction that the responsibility for such a potential tragedy was shared by everybody who was complacent about the upsurge of tyranny.” He claimed that the seeds of the plot had been planted as early as November 1933, when his friend Harry Carr of the *Los Angeles Times* told him about “the supreme hotspot” he had visited in Harbin, Manchuria. The hotel in question featured a “dramatic mixture of nationalities,” including one permanent fixture, “some beautiful phony, White Russian girl, who was formerly a Grand Duchess.” In addition, Carr noted that “all” the people in Manchuria seemed to be “continually looking up into the skies for the bombers that would herald the start of the Second World War,” which they assumed would erupt over the competition between the Soviet Union and Japan for land in the northeastern-most regions of Asia. Inspired by this tale, Bob decided to write a play, but somehow the ideas did not fall into place until 1935, when in Budapest he stopped in at the
Club Arizona and saw “battered-looking American chorus girls doing an act.” When he asked about them, the proprietor replied, “O, they have been touring the Balkans for years.” Bob immediately saw that the women could provide “the line on which the whole play could be strung.”

Harriet Hyman Alonso, Robert E. Sherwood: The Playwright in Peace and War (p. 169)

[following Sherwood’s death] Perhaps Sam Behrman summed up everyone’s feelings best when he wrote, “In a unique way, Sherwood combined [a] sense of fun with the most inexorable determination and self-discipline in behalf of any cause he believed to be right.” Behrman considered him “one of the most remarkable and admirable men I have ever known. His integrity was inviolable; on any question of principle he would be burned at the stake rather than abdicate an inch.”

Harriet Hyman Alonso, Robert E. Sherwood: The Playwright in Peace and War (p. 323)

John Mason Brown in his review of [Idiot’s Delight] felt that Sherwood managed to do his job so well as a result of his “ability to mix aphrodisiac with allegory, flesh with spirit, sunshine with sermons, comedy with tragedy and good showmanship with interesting thinking.”

Joseph E. Mersand, editor, Three Dramas of American Realism

Tidbits from “Best Plays of Modern American Theatre,” John Gassner, 1947, second series:

“Sherwood later described Idiot’s Delight as ‘completely American in that it represented a compound of blank pessimism and desperate optimism, of chaos and jazz.’”

“He became one of the leaders of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, he locked horns with Charles Lindbergh and other isolationist leaders, and he uttered battle cries with noteworthy
eloquence. ‘It was a bitter moment for me,’ Sherwood admitted, ‘when I found myself on the same side as the Big Navy enthusiasts.’”

**And a little miscellany, just for fun**

*Idiot’s Delight: the card game*

This is the card game that is commonly known as Solitaire. The name Idiot’s Delight refers to the time consuming nature of the game, or as Irene says “The game that never means anything, and never ends.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetual_Motion_(solitaire)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxUcN3EPLpI

*Idiot’s Delight: the recipe from the American Civil War*

Food was scarce for the South, but they tried to celebrate Christmas and holidays. Here is a frugal recipe used for party cakes in the South.

http://hearth-hardship.blogspot.com/2013/12/holiday-food-civil-war-idiots-delight.html

*Idiot’s Delight Resources*

**Print**


**Websites**

Robert E. Sherwood
American theater in the 1920s & 1930s
http://www.talkinbroadway.com/bway101/5.html

Algonquin Round Table
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algonquin_Round_Table

Vanity Fair magazine

Life magazine
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_(magazine)

*Idiot’s Delight* Recent Productions:
Soulepper Theatre, Toronto 2014
http://torontoist.com/events/event/idiots-delight-not-exactly-theatre-for-dummies/

Vital Theatre Company, New York, 2004
http://www.juliehamberg.com/pages/IdiotsDe.htm

Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland Oregon, 2002