Welcome Back to Grover’s Corners

‘Our Town’ never left the stage, but this season’s productions are finding sharp new angles

BY LORI ANN LASTER
ike many Americans, I first encountered Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* during my pre-teens. I was crammed into a middle school auditorium with a couple of hundred annoyed eighth graders to watch the great American classic be performed by fellow students—including my younger sister Amy in the role of Rebecca. Dressed in a blue gingham dress, in pigtails, gazing up at the construction-paper moon, bristling with excitement and nervousness, she called out, voice cracking: “Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America….Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that’s what it said on the envelope.” I immediately turned to the kid next to me and whispered, “What the hell does that mean?”

I wore dark eye makeup and had a penchant for rebellion. My response to Wilder’s “life of a village against the life of the stars” was to instantly dismiss it as just a sepia-toned postcard from an insignificant turn-of-the-century New Hampshire town—a dull portrait of laconic Yankees coming of age, falling in love, getting married and dying. Teenage courtship over ice-cream sodas and the provincial delight of the smell of heliotrope in the moonlight was a little too saccharine for my tastes, despite the intrigue of a magical Stage Manager who seemed to have the limits of time and space at his fingertips. A decade later, in college, I grimaced when I saw the play on the syllabus of my required English class. But when I picked up *Our Town* and read it beneath the flickering light of my dorm room, I was shocked. Was this bold, unflinchingly philosophical, intricate look at the human condition even the same play?

This season, I’ve talked to artists at a diverse group of six theatres across the country that are all producing *Our Town*—and, by virtue of a range of innovative approaches and interpretive twists, refusing to let audiences dismiss it as a nostalgic hymn to small-town life. This past fall the play ran concurrently at Two River Theater Company in Red Bank, N.J., helmed by artistic director Aaron Posner; Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis, directed by Peter Amster; and Connecticut’s Hartford Stage, directed by Gregory Boyd. Three more productions follow this spring and summer: The Hypocrites of Chicago mounts the play through June 8, directed by David Cromer; it opens at Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre Company May 22, overseen by artistic director Terrence J. Nolan; and Chay Yew directs the play at Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland June 4–Oct. 11.

“We’re in the dawn of this play’s golden age,” believes Tappan Wilder, the playwright’s literary executor and nephew, as he watches growing numbers of professional theatres rediscover the complexity of *Our Town* and the genius of its author. “Observers are finally discovering that, like an iceberg, two thirds of Thornton Wilder is under water.” Indeed, Wilder is the only writer to win a Pulitzer Prize both for drama (twice, for *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*) and fiction (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*), and his influence on acclaimed dramatists who came later—Lanford Wilson, John Guare and Romulus Linney, for starters—is profound. Yet, it’s not uncommon for the play to be disregarded as a dusty, sentimental classic and its scribe dismissed as a bathetic idealist.

When *Our Town* was first staged at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, N.J., in January 1938, in an otherwise negative review, *Variety* remarked, “It probably represents an all-time high in experimental theatre.” When it moved to Henry Miller’s Theatre in New York a month later, Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*, “Our Town has escaped from the formal barrier of modern theatre…. Under the leisurely monotone of the production there is a fragment of the immortal truth.”

A bare stage, no props, the use of mime, breaking the fourth wall, dismantling theunities of time and place—these were radically innovative devices that astounded audiences at a time when kitchen-sink realism dominated the serious stage, and boulevard comedies and melodrama proliferated. Influenced by his European counterparts and the techniques of Shakespeare and the Greeks, Wilder was eager to abandon the box sets and realistic props that were ubiquitous on the post-World War I American stage. “I began to feel that the theatre was not only inadequate,” wrote Wilder, “it was evasive; it did not wish to draw upon its deeper potentials.… It aimed to be soothing.” It was by removing the diversion of realistic clutter and tapping into the imagination of audiences that Wilder strove to make what was on stage reflect the verities of life: “Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind—not in things, not in scenery.”

*Our Town* was the vehicle Wilder used to not only eliminate the obtrusive bric-a-brac of scenery and props but to synthesize life to its barest elements: While projecting the façade of the specific—the quotidian lives of two young New Englanders, Emily and George, and their Grover’s Corners neighbors—*Our Town* uses its deceptively standard three-act structure to reflect the universal cycle of life. In the first act, “The Daily Life,” adolescent Emily and George get schooled and grow up. The second act is “Love and Marriage,” in which the two fall in love and are happily wed. Act 3—“I reckon you can guess what that’s about,” muses the Stage Manager, the play’s omnipresent guide, as the inevitability of death (and speculations about its metaphysical consequences) move to the fore. By constructing the play in this symbolic manner, Wilder was able to transcend the boundaries of the play’s specific world to give his audience a glimpse of the universal and eternal.

So how did such a pioneering and revolutionary work fade into picturesque Americana, reminiscent of Norman Rockwell? In some ways, the play is a victim of its own success. After its startling Broadway

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From left, Wynn Harmon, Joe Binder, Stephen D’Ambrose and Erin Weaver in *Our Town*, directed by Aaron Posner, at Two River Theater Company in Red Bank, N.J.
premiere, Our Town took on the patina of a beloved American classic, and when it became available for production in 1939, with its large cast and low budgetary demands, it exploded onto the amateur stage—the play was reportedly performed in more than 795 communities in less than a year. The show has also had a healthy life on the professional stage, enjoying regular revivals both on Broadway and at high-profile regional theatres—most recently at Connecticut’s Westport Country Playhouse in 2002, featuring superstar Paul Newman, and Lincoln Center Theater in 1988–89 in a Tony-winning production with actor and raconteur Spalding Gray. There are several film and TV versions (the first of which was produced by Sol Lesser just two years after the play’s premiere), and it has been transformed, under the same name, into such genres as opera, with music by Ned Rorem and libretto by J.D. McClatchy; ballet, by noted choreographer Philip Jerry; and a musical for television, with Frank Sinatra. According to Tappan Wilder, it’s widely believed that Our Town is performed “at least once each night somewhere in this country.”

BECAUSE OF THIS, MANY OF THE ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

I talked to weren’t surprised that the inclusion of Our Town in their schedules was met with rolling eyes, accusations of playing it safe, and the ever-popular objection, “I saw it in high school.” “People think they know the play, but they just don’t,” contends director Boyd, who, like his colleagues who are revisiting the play this season, is dedicated to dispelling misgivings about its relevance and acknowledging the nuances of its prismatic depth. Each of the six productions is, in fact, offering new angles of insight into this familiar script.

That was certainly the case in Indianapolis, where IRT guest director Amster delivered an enlightening exegesis of the play by staging the first act in the framework of a rehearsal for the original 1938 production. Resurrecting Our Town’s bare stage, with footlights down front and radiators lining the back wall, Amster’s production began with the cast playing actors of the 1930s, dressed to perform as Grover’s Corners characters and sitting at a large rehearsal table with scripts in hands, while the Stage Manager commented on the topography of the town and the background of its inhabitants—which, in the context of the rehearsal framework, took on new meaning as dramaturgical source material.

Amster craftily molded moments throughout Act 1 that solidified the rehearsal concept. When Mr. Webb (boisterously played by Charles Goad) arrived late to give his sociopolitical report on Grover’s Corners, a wigless Mrs. Webb (Manon Halliburton) ran on stage attempting to cover for her tardy co-actor. “He’ll be here in a minute,” she stammered, “he just cut his hand while he was eatin’ an apple.” This actual line of dialogue, usually uttered as a literal explanation, here became a clumsy comic excuse—revealed a second later when a toilet flushed offstage and the disheveled actor rushed on. At the end of the first act, the Stage Manager (Robert Elliott) abruptly stopped addressing the actors and turned his attention directly to the audience for the first time, describing how Our Town was going to be included in a time capsule. By breaking the fourth wall here rather than at the beginning of the play Amster ignited the profundity of Wilder’s text and made the trope of direct address powerful and immediate. For the rest of the evening, the audience listened to the Stage Manager’s words with new ears.

The rehearsal idiom honored Our Town’s Brechtian facets and Wilder’s aversion to realism. The pulling away of a layer of fabrica-

tion from the theatrical act reinforced the audience’s awareness that it was seeing a play, a symbolic representation of life, not life itself, and helped to crystallize Wilder’s allegorical microcosm of human existence. As a whole, Amster’s approach compelled audiences for whom the play lay cobwebbed in memory to greet it as an entirely different entity. “Audiences come with a certain nostalgia, but they also come with a certain condescension,” says Amster. “I wanted to see if I could find a way to make that empty space new again.”

Two River Theater Company’s Posner also strove to make audiences “hear it fresh.” His production featured bunraku-style puppets in the roles of the supporting townspeople and a thirtysomething
Stage Manager, played by Doug Hara—whom Posner describes as neither “anti–Stage Manager” (as he characterizes the late Spalding Gray’s performance) nor the “Mr. Pepperidge Farm” characterization that has sometimes diluted the impact of the role.

A dynamic seven-member cast worked as an ensemble to bring the villagers to life through puppetry. Professor Willard, for example—about three feet tall with a puff of wild white hair, wearing spectacles, a pinstriped vest and bow tie—was agilely manipulated by Joe Binder (who played George), while actor Stephen D’Ambrose (who doubled as Dr. Gibbs) gave him the idiosyncratic voice of a pedantic man enthused to hear his own thoughts out loud. Masterfully designed by Aaron Cromie, each puppet had distinct features that animated its character’s personality. Posner was able to use this ancient art form to serve Wilder’s modern goal of freeing the stage from the shackles of realism and to give the production, in Posner’s words, “a level of theatricality that breaks it open so that people can invest it with their own imaginations.” He adds that, after the performance, audience members would often insist they saw the puppets’ mouths and faces moving—“which, of course, they never did.”

The compelling imagery offered in the Two River production drew the eerie undertones of the play’s final graveyard scene to the surface, fully unveiling its pathos. Wooden hutches, representing tombstones, loomed in a corner of the thrust stage overgrown with grass. A stone-faced Mrs. Gibbs (Maureen Silliman) sat in front of her tombstone, and in the foreground, Emily (Erin Weaver) was dressed in her pristine wedding gown. The puppets, now sprawled lifelessly in front of their tombstones or posed on the angled sides of the hutches, no longer walked and talked as Emily does—with no one animating them, they were empty husks, corporeal symbols for the hopeful spirit that swiftly dwindles when one passes over to death. The use of puppetry gave this scene an uncanny resonance.

“Our Town” also presents a tailor-made opportunity for building stronger ties with a community. Now in his first season at Two River, Posner used the play as a way to literally shake the hands of his new neighbors. Before performances, actors in costume mingled with the audience. Actual audience members (instead of cast members) participated in the scene in which editor Webb takes questions from the audience after his sociopolitical report. “Our Town” also launched Two River’s 732 Project (named for Red Bank’s area code), a multiyear folklore enterprise that will use interviews from members of the community as source material for a living history of the region.

Hartford and IRT also amplified their productions with outreach operations. Both had well-attended student matinees and offered informational prologues and talkbacks. IRT initiated a new program of community readings and discussions in libraries, parks and community centers all over Indianapolis. “We really wanted to explore the sense of ownership that people have of this play,” says IRT artistic director Janet Allen.

Both Oregon Shakespeare Festival artistic director Bill Rauch and the Arden’s Nolan are looking to physical settings for an invigorated “Our Town.” In Ashland, it will be the first 20th-century (or, for

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that matter, American) play to be mounted on OSF’s outdoor Elizabethan stage. “It’s the right play to push the boundaries,” Rauch says, “because, like Shakespeare, Wilder put emphasis on the imaginative exchange between audience and the actors.” Sitting outdoors, amongst the rolling hills of the Rouge Valley, audiences will have “a more immediate connection to Wilder’s themes of human isolation and connection and the vastness of the universe,” Rauch believes.

The official title of the Arden production is Our Town in Old City—a reference to the historical section of Philadelphia marked by narrow streets of cobblestone and historical monuments such as the Betsy Ross house. Act 1 will take place at the Arden’s theatre (which was once the grounds of Ben Franklin’s bookshop); for the second act, audiences will walk next door through the churchyard (where Franklin is buried) into the majesty of Christ Church, one of the oldest sanctuaries in America (and where the pew of George Washington is diligently marked). Our Town in Old City will interweave Philadelphia’s actual historical legacy with events of the play, amplifying how its universal themes tangibly apply to the community in all its diversity.

The Arden production will feature the largest cast that the theatre has ever employed, using the natural accents of the actors. “I’m eager to have a wide range of our community represented on stage,” says Nolan. Local musical groups will be incorporated into each performance along with special local guests (newscasters, teachers and politicians). Governor Edward Rendell is an honorary producer.

The Hypocrites, a thriving non-Equity Chicago company known for offering alternative and sometimes explosive points of view, was still, as of press time, in the creative brainstorming phase of production. One idea currently on the table, divulges artistic director Sean Graney, is that director Cromer may also take on the role of the ruminative Stage Manager. “Stripping away some of the pretension of the character,” asserts Graney, “will endow the Stage Manager with a deeper level of honesty.”

The desire to blow dust off the play and resuscitate its shocking impact has led to some radical stagings in the past few years. A 2007 summer staging in Minneapolis by Girl Friday Productions eradicated the role of the Stage Manager completely, ascribing his prophetic words to various members of the cast. New York City’s Transport Group, in 2002, cast a 12-year-old girl as the Stage Manager while young lovers George and Emily were played by actors in their sixties. Going further back, the Wooster Group’s famous and controversial 1981 deconstruction of the play, titled Route 1 & 9, threw blackface and explicit sex into the mix.

By contrast, director Boyd’s laudable bare-boned approach at Hartford Stage attempted to celebrate the original intent of the author by handling the text of the play with reverence. “I think there’s a real purity in this production,” the company’s artistic director Michael Wilson says of the show, which ran last September and October. “It is daring for it to be purely what Thornton
Wilder wanted, which was actors, audience, blank stage and these words.” More than anything, Boyd felt his job was scraping off the coats of “Baskin-Robbins, Norman Rockwell and Disney” that have been lacquered upon the play over the years. His chief collaborator on the project was 82-year-old acting legend Hal Holbrook, who has a history with the play, having played the role of the Stage Manager twice before (at Connecticut’s Long Wharf Theatre in 1987 and 10 years earlier in NBC’s televised version, which earned him an Emmy nomination). Although Holbrook became ill a couple of weeks into the run, his contributions helped deliver an authentic and austere *Our Town*, unscathed by easy emotion or grandiosity.

Boyd and Holbrook were deeply in tune with the play’s occasionally dire melancholy. “If you ignore what lies in the depths of the text,” the director emphasizes, “you betray the play.” He likens its contradictory lesson to the ancient Sanskrit text *Mahabharata*: “We all know we’re going to die, yet we live as if we’re not.” Holbrook’s age and gravitas underscored how much the play revolves around mortality and loss.

The darker elements of *Our Town* were often lost during what Tappan Wilder calls the “Leave It to Beaver” phase of the play’s life (from the 1950s through the 1970s), which earned it an undeserved reputation for sentimental shallowness—epitomized by Sinatra singing “Love and Marriage” in the 1955 musical version.

**But ‘Our Town’ was written at** a time when hope was actually a precious commodity. The threat of war was building in the far east while at home social unrest and discord prompted by the Great Depression was still roiling. Dysphoric uneasiness, self-doubt and longing riddled the country even as Roosevelt’s New Deal seemed to promise light at the end of the tunnel. *Our Town* is set in a more tranquil time before the war—a time Wilder describes in his novel *The Eighth Day* when “every man, woman and child believed he or she lived in the best town in the best state in the best country in the world. This conviction filled them with a certain strength.” While summoning an idealistic time made the universal aspects of life more resonant and palpable, it also ended up serving a pressing sociological need: It helped satisfy members of the public’s desire for a simpler, more iconic America than the one they perceived around them.

Today’s America can be said to be experiencing equally trying times: Since the turn of the century a series of contentious elections have called democracy itself into question, and Americans have endured the tragedy of 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the torture at Abu-Ghraib, the Patriot Act, serious threats to civil liberties and free speech, questionable expansion of presidential authority and a polarizing split into “blue and red” states. So in today’s discordant America, do we not need again to be “filled with a certain strength”?

A number of the artistic directors I spoke to noted that the play’s ability to provide comfort in times of trouble was part of the appeal of producing it this season. Wilder’s portrait of Grover’s Corners “reminds us of what is eternal and good in the American psyche and captures that indomitable spirit of inquiry that even our polarized social and political conditions cannot dampen or deny,” says the IRT’s Janet Allen. “There is something about the play that is so inherently American,” reflects Wilson, “that we want to cling to it because somehow we feel like our innate goodness is within it.”

But it also yields insight into “who we are and what we mean by ‘American’ and ‘American values,’” says Posner. Wilder’s classic both extols and deeply criticizes the substance of broadly accepted American culture by exploring the nation’s issues with isolationism, xenophobia, gender stereotyping and the tragic consequences of war. “The trick is not to offer the play as a remedy,” says Allen. “It suggests that nothing is wholly good or bad. It doesn’t set forth any particular course of action.” Rauch agrees: “In such terrifying times, it is the play’s search for meaning” that matters.

Many of these artists, like myself, first met the play in their formative years of middle or high school—and it was only as they grew older that the play’s meaning became clearer and its themes richer. “As they say with any great art,” notes Wilson, “*Our Town* doesn’t change; it’s us who change.”

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