



Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



*Our
Town*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Our Town

Contents

Information on the Play

Synopsis	4
Characters	5
About the Playwrights	6

Scholarly Articles on the Play

Life Is a Gift	8
A Modest Work, Modestly Conceived	9
Groundbreaking Theatre	11

Synopsis: *Our Town*

Early one morning in 1901 Dr. Gibbs returns to his home in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. He had just been across town to deliver twins. On the street he meets Joe Crowell, the paper boy, and Howie Newsome, the milkman. Mrs. Gibbs has breakfast ready when her husband arrives, and the family eats a pleasant breakfast. Then the children, George and Rebecca, leave for school with the neighbor children, Wally and Emily Webb. Afterward Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb step outside to do chores and to chat. The day's work is beginning.

The day passes, and the children begin the walk home from school. George, on his way to play baseball, stops to talk to Emily and tell her how much he admires her success at school. He could not, he insists, imagine how anyone could spend so much time over homework as she did. Flattered, Emily promises to help George with his algebra. He replies that he doesn't really need schoolwork because he is going to become a farmer as soon as he graduates from high school.

The seeds of young romance have been sown, and Emily rushes to her mother to ask if she is pretty enough to make boys notice her. Grudgingly, her mother admits she is but tries to turn her mind to other subjects. That evening, while their mothers are at choir practice, George and Emily sit upstairs studying, their bedroom windows facing each other. George calls out to Emily for help on algebra, but Emily is more interested in the moonlight.

The mothers come home from choir practice gossiping about their leader, Simon Stimson. He drinks most of the time and for some reason he could not adjust himself to small-town life. On his way home, Mr. Webb, the editor of the local paper, had also met Simon roaming the deserted streets and now wondered how it would all end.

Time passes, and, at the end of his junior year in high school, George is elected president of his class and Emily is elected secretary-treasurer. After the election, George walks Emily home, but she seems cold and indifferent. When George presses her as to why, she tells him that all the girls think him conceited because he cares more for baseball than for his friends. She expects all men to be perfect, like her father. George said that men could not be perfect, but that women could--like Emily. Eventually George buys them sodas and the two find out they had liked each other for a long time. George concludes that he may not go away to agricultural school after all. When he graduates, he will start right in working on the farm.

Soon, Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs learn that George wants to marry Emily as soon as he leaves high school. At first it is a shock for them: they wonder how he could provide for a wife, whether Emily could take care of a house. However, they then remember their own early years of marriage, and realize that the youngsters can work it out.

The day of the wedding soon arrives, and, at the church just before the ceremony, both Emily and George experience jitters and wonder if they are making a mistake; however, the music starts, their nerves are calmed, and the wedding ceremony is soon over.

Now, nine years pass; it is the summer of 1913. In the graveyard above the town the dead lay, resting from the cares of their lives on earth. There is also an open grave, prepared for Emily who died in childbirth, leaving George with a four-year-old son.

It is raining as a funeral procession winds its way up the hill to the new grave. Then Emily appears shyly before the other dead. Solemnly they welcome her to her rest. But she does not want to rest; she wants to live over again the joys of her life. It is possible to do so, but the others warn her against trying to relive a day in her mortal life.

However, Emily chooses to live over her twelve birthday. At first it is exciting to be young again, but the excitement wears off quickly. The day holds no joy, now that Emily knows what is in store for the future. It is unbearably painful to realize how unaware she had been of the

meaning and wonder of life while she was alive. Simon Stimson, a suicide, tells her that life is like that, a time of ignorance and blindness and folly. He is still bitter, even in death.

Emily, dejected, returns to her resting place. When night falls, George approaches, full of grief, and throws himself on Emily's grave. She feels pity for him and for all the rest of the living—for now she knows how little they really understand of the wonderful gift that is life itself.

Characters: *Our Town*

STAGE MANAGER: a type of chorus, is a device Wilder uses to explain and comment upon the action and the characters as the play unfolds.

DR. GIBBS: the father of George and Rebecca, is the local physician. He is shocked when he finds that his son wants to marry and become a farmer, but finally realizes the youth is really no longer a child, any more than the doctor was when he married. Dr. Gibbs is a hard-working man whose hobby is the American Civil War; his idea of a vacation is an excursion to some battlefield of that conflict.

MRS. GIBBS: the mother of George and Rebecca, is a hard-working woman who loves her family, even though she does not always understand them. She has found joy in her marriage and hopes her son will find joy in his.

GEORGE GIBBS: a typical young American boy who loves baseball, gives up going to college to marry Emily, whom he dearly loves. When his wife dies he is filled with grief and goes to sob at her grave, not realizing that she pities him for not valuing the life he still enjoys.

REBECCA GIBBS: George's sister

MR. WEBB: Emily's father, is the editor and publisher of the local newspaper. He writes editorials every day, yet he cannot bring himself to advise his son-in-law on marriage, though he tries.

MRS. WEBB: the mother of Emily and Wally, is a good-hearted woman. On Emily's wedding day she finds herself unable to give her daughter advice on marriage, though she had meant to do so.

EMILY WEBB: a sweet young thing, falls in love with and later marries George Gibbs. She dies in childbirth while still young and shyly takes her place among her relatives and friends in the little graveyard. She tries to live her twelfth birthday over, only to discover that to relive is no joy, that the dead can only pity the living who don't know what joy they have in life.

WALLY WEBB: Emily's brother

SIMON STIMSON: the local choir director, has become an alcoholic because he cannot find happiness in the small town. Even in death, after committing suicide, he believes life is ignorance and folly.

About the Playwright: Thornton Wilder

By Ace G. Pilkington

From *Insights*, 1993

It is ironic that Thornton Wilder, who in *Our Town* created one of the clearest visions of small-town America, was one of the most cosmopolitan authors this country has produced. On 17 April 1897, he was born in Madison, Wisconsin, where his father edited and published a newspaper. However, what might have been a typical midwestern childhood changed when Wilder's father, a supporter of Theodore Roosevelt, was rewarded with an appointment as consul general to Shanghai and Hong Kong in Roosevelt's second term. Thornton Wilder attended mission schools in China, high school in Berkeley, California, and studied at both Oberlin College and Yale University. In 1920-21 he studied archaeology at the American Academy in Rome.

Between 1921 and 1928, he taught French at a boys' school at Lawrenceville, New Jersey. At the time Wilder was working at Princeton on a master's degree in French, which he completed in 1925. Also during this period he took a year for travel in Europe and completed his first novel, *The Cabala*, a work influenced by Henry James and the fantasy writer James Branch Cabell. Published in 1926, *The Cabala* demonstrates Wilder's deep interest in classical languages and culture. The characters, who are ostensibly modern Romans, are actually stand-ins for the Olympian gods, and "the spirit of Virgil pervades the scene and finally appears to the narrator as he departs for New York" (Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder [College and University Press, 1961], 37). In *The Ides of March* (1948), Wilder abandoned modern Rome altogether, writing a historical novel set in Julius Caesar's time.

Nor were Greece, Rome, and France the limits of Wilder's interests. His Pulitzer-prize-winning novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) is set in Peru in 1714, and his play *The Matchmaker* (1954) is largely based on Johann Nestroy's drama *Einen Jux will er sich Machen* (1842).

In an odd way it is Thornton Wilder's very cosmopolitanism, his distance from small-town America, that made it possible for him to visualize it lovingly in *Our Town*. While other writers of his generation such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald felt alienated from the America where they grew up, Wilder "had never lived in one place long enough to grow attached to it, and he seems to have felt at home wherever he went" (Burbank 22). He did not experience the love-hate relationship that develops when one place and its values appear to be all the world. As a result, Wilder kept his optimism about America, and to a large extent he continued to share its religious values, though he examined them carefully in his novel *Heaven's My Destination* (1935).

There was, however, one part of his middle class, middle American heritage with which Wilder became more and more dissatisfied. In his preface to *Three Plays by Thornton Wilder*, he wrote, "Toward the end of the twenties I began to lose pleasure in going to the theatre" (vii). He went on to say, "The tragic had no heat; the comic had no bite; the social criticism failed to indict us with responsibility" (viii). The culprits for this devitalization of the theatre were, Wilder believed, the members of the middle class. "They were," he argued, "pious, law-abiding, and industrious. They were assured of eternal life in the next world and, in this, they were squarely seated on Property and the privileges that accompany it" (ix). They wanted theatre to be "soothing" (viii), and they controlled it by putting it into the box of the proscenium stage, which was "loaded with specific objects, because every concrete object narrows the action to one moment in time and place" (x).

Wilder wanted a return to the theatre of Shakespeare, a theatre that he was coming to think was the best equipped of all the arts to show the way the world truly is. For Wilder this world truth emerged from theatre's unique ability to demonstrate the particular and the universal at the same time, to show one actor but to suggest behind him the general and generalizable situation. As he said, "the theatre is admirably fitted to tell both truths" (x).

Our Town (1938) was not Wilder's first attempt to create a play for his ideal theatre (see *The Long Christmas Dinner*, 1931), but it was certainly his most successful, achieving a more complete fusion of form and theme than his other Pulitzer-prize-winning play, *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942).

Our Town tells a simple story of a day in the life of Grover's Corner, and of how George and Emily fall in love and marry, and of Emily's death, and what it feels like for her to be dead and looking back on her life. The simple story is told with simple means, with chairs and ladders for scenery and sometimes nothing but the audience's imagination to create the props and the action. But Thornton Wilder has woven into his web of pastoral nostalgia threads of history, myth, and even glimmers of the future. George and Emily's life is their own, but it is also an amalgam of many other lives. As Wilder says, "The recurrent words in the play . . . are 'hundreds,' 'thousands,' and 'millions'" (xi).

He has also built into the play an extra layer of unreality with the Stage Manager, who starts and stops scenes, skips between years and roles, and tells us of the deaths of people we have only recently met. The result is just what Wilder had wanted, particular actors on an individual stage become universal, a small New England town expands its significance until it is emblematic of humanity, and the theatre tells a truth it is especially well suited to tell. It was also a truth that Thornton Wilder was especially well suited to tell.

Though he knew the particulars of many places, his wide knowledge of the world and of many languages, his love of history and his religious faith kept him constantly aware of the large message behind the small facts, of the human race behind the individual. At last it is, as he said, "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life" (xi).

Our Town: Life Is a Gift

By David Kranes

From *Souvenir Program*, 1993

Thornton Wilder seems the sly old man of American theatre. Half the critics see him as optimist; half, as pessimist. Half see him as apple-pie American; half, as deeply rooted European. Half see him as romantic; half, as cynic. The critic Malcolm Cowley, speaking of Wilder in “The Man Who Abolished Time,” says: “[It is as if] he were looking sometimes through one end of the telescope and sometimes through the other.” In Wilder’s 1930 novel, *The Woman of Andros*, we read: “I have known the worst that the world can do to me . . . nevertheless, I praise the world and all living.” In *Our Town*, Emily Webb does the same thing. She—in extolling its stunning beauty—will praise the world and all living. But she will qualify that praise. She will hope and doubt in the same breath: “Oh World, you are too beautiful for anyone to realize you.”

Life is a gift. It is given. It is taken away. Thornton Wilder was born a twin. His twin brother, Theophilus died at birth; Thornton lived. A grimmer playwright than Wilder, Samuel Beckett, has said, “We give birth astride the grave.” Again and again, in *Our Town*, life is given—only to be taken away. If you listen carefully, you will hear that paradox taking place within a single sentence. We are given the paperboy Joe Crowell, only to be told—upon his very entrance—that he died. Births and deaths are reported in the same daily news. Life is framed—here in Grover’s Corners—as if it were a mere moment: bright-shining as a star then, as quickly, dark. We are told of the evening star: that it is always “wonderful bright . . . just before it has to go out.” Light. Light extinguished. Hello. Good-bye.

If we can, so quickly, have life then lose life within the same breath, within the same blink of the eye, how fully do we value what we have? Emily asks: “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?” The Stage Manager’s answer is less than heartening: “Saints and madmen.”

Saints and madmen--the first luminously; the second darkly--transcend Time. Most of us don’t; we live in it. We have this moment. We have this brief Time. And that urgent reality compelled Thornton Wilder. He was Time’s student, not simply in his own life, but as a reader of literature, of philosophy, of theology, of astronomy and geology.

Time telescopes and multiplies in Wilder’s plays. It contracts to “Daily Life” only to spiral out, through Love and Marriage into the vast infinities of Death. Listen to the numbers increase: from tens to hundreds to thousands to millions. So, whether we value any of our daily moments--as they enact themselves backdropped by the infinite—depends upon how we see them: with the eyes of a vain child looking in a mirror or from the centuries-old perspective of a star-canopied hilltop, above and beyond life and vanity.

At the threshold of marriage, Emily wishes she were dead. Only moments later (though in the next act), we see her, not only having been given her wish but now, having crossed the threshold of Death, wishing this time for a return to life. When we don’t value Time, we wish carelessly. When we see the gift of time, we wish longingly.

“Blessed Be the Tie That Binds” Simon Stimson tries to get his choir to sing convincingly. “It’s a question. Make it sing!” he instructs them. And what is that Tie? What is it that binds any of us in that breath of a moment--now light-flooded, now dark--that we might share, in our town? It’s a question. Make it sing.

A Modest Work, Modestly Conceived

By Jerry L. Crawford

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 1993

Thornton Niven Wilder (April 17, 1897-December 6, 1975) had the double distinction of being a successful novelist and a successful playwright. Born in Wisconsin, he spent his childhood in California and China; he served in World War I; he earned a degree in archaeology at the American Academy in Rome; he taught at Harvard and the University of Chicago; he was with Air Force Intelligence during World War II; his greatest novels were *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *The Ides of March*; his greatest plays were *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*; and his comedy, *The Merchant of Yonkers*, became the great musical, *Hello Dolly*!

At its writing, *Our Town* seemed a modest work, modestly conceived by its author who consistently referred to it as his “little play.” But, in the tradition of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the play celebrates the commonplace, the not unusual, the daily life. It defined the dissatisfaction, the empty places, the frustrations inherent in American living, but it also illuminated our democratic vistas and provided a sense of national identity.

Sadly, the initial 1937 rehearsal preparation for the famous 1938 opening in New York was a miserable experience for Wilder. He and producer/director, Jed Harris, developed deep resentment over deletions and revisions; worse, at the first reading, Harris banished Wilder from the theatre for disturbances that distracted the actors. However, when Wilder returned shortly before the opening, he was relieved, even exhilarated, by the performances. Regardless, reviews of previews in New Jersey and Boston did not praise the work. Additionally, a woman staff assistant committed suicide over personal problems. Harris had failed to help the woman when she called him for assistance, and her death engulfed Harris in guilt and grief.

Wilder freed himself from resentment and devoted days to allaying Harris’s guilt and sorrow. The two men grew closer than they would ever become again, and their unity provided *Our Town* with its final thrust.

The play opened Friday, February 4, 1938. The immediate response was only modest, save the great critic, Brooks Atkinson, who wrote a glowing tribute. John Mason Brown and Joseph Wood Krutch aligned with Atkinson. However, Richard Watts, John Anderson, and Wilella Waldorf claimed they were “uninvolved” in the experience of the play. Nevertheless, the play did not close. Later, John Steinbeck’s dramatization of his novel, *Of Mice and Men*, was awarded the Drama Critic’s Circle Prize as Best American Play, and Wilder was depressed and exhausted.

However, his spirits rose when *Our Town* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize later that spring. Gradually, as years passed, *Our Town* would attract the greatest number of performances, audiences, and readers in this century, rivaled only by Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Today, *Our Town* is generally considered the quintessential American drama, surpassing even the best of the “Father of American Drama,” Eugene O’Neill.

While *Our Town* is clearly not autobiographical (Wilder was raised far from New England, had no teen-age courtship or marriage, and had a far different family than either the Webbs or Gibbs), Wilder did hale from New England stock. There is a kind of nineteenth century American Victorianism rooted in the play regarding sexual matters, all of which aligns well with New England of the time. The play is no sentimental idyll: the church organist commits suicide; young Gibbs dies on a camping trip; family members take one another for granted; the most promising boy in the village graduates from M.I.T. only to be killed in a remote war; and, of course, Emily dies in childbirth. Regardless of all these dark happenings, the play contains a

spiritual uplift in its basic fabric of perseverance and faith. *Our Town* is a play about belonging—to a family, a country, a nation. The inherent optimism of the play derives from its native soil.

Using the Stage Manager/Narrator motif, a character who steps in and out of the action of the play, was considerable innovation in 1938. However, this role is rarely portrayed as Wilder intended. Ask any theatre person to describe a “stage manager” and the words you will likely hear include, “efficient, even officious or dutiful, cold, indifferent, stern, or dominating.” You rarely hear, “warm, charming, pleasant, engaging”—words which often describe how the role is performed. Wilder, generally known to be a cool and efficient, almost ministerial personality, played the Stage Manager once just to get it right.

Our Town breaks with “fourth wall” or proscenium convention. The essence of the play is spontaneity—an ease or joyful improvisational quality. There is nothing of the virtuoso visible. No *Cyrano* is among us, no *Tartuffe*, no *Juliet*, no *Lear*, not even a flamboyant Willy Loman. The author and any major hero or heroine simply disappear. Only the ensemble matters—the group, the town, the county, the state, the country. While there is sadness, there is no meanness of small town life; no social ills or corruptions are dwelt upon; rather, the outward behavior of unexceptional people in rural America at the turn of the century returns to haunt our collective childhood memories.

We see *Our Town* again and again because it returns us to our roots and reminds us of what it is to be an American in an America of countless family units. Some count; some do not. We cannot classify or stratify the characters in *Our Town*. They reject tribalism and a state religion. *Our Town* is non-illusionistic, presentational drama. There is, as designer/director Gordon Craig once noted, “a noble artificiality” about the play. Yet, what remains in our minds and hearts after seeing the play? Visions of acute, homely reality—snapping beans, a newspaper tossed on a lawn, drug store sodas, a moon over ladders, coffee brewing, and umbrellas at a rainy funeral. Locating the play historically and exploring its form, style, and structure remain less important than experiencing the play. It is a work of love and wisdom.

The content of the play is so simple that it is momentous. The play deals primarily with the life in living. Wilder reminds us of our mortality. Therein lies the burden of the great playwright, the playwright who observes life as he or she lives it. Wilder saw that life and death were the same thing, even the same moment (he saw this well before the great absurdist, such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet). In *Our Town*, as Brooks Atkinson wrote, “There go all of us, not ‘but for the grace of God,’ but by the grace of God.” For all that *Our Town* could not and does not encompass, it provides that shock of recognition to all of its heterogeneous audiences, enabling us to see that we are, in fact, race and creed aside, a nationality and people.

A telling anecdote regarding a dream he had while teaching at Harvard, typifies Wilder. The dream concerned his mother and father, both dead, yet awake and talking to him. Wilder said that, upon awakening, he rose to a level of consciousness never attained before and he thought: “How wonderful it is that people die.” This astonishing thought evolved from an atmosphere of contentment and a joyous moment of illumination (such as Emily encounters in her famous speech in *Our Town* prior to returning to the dead). Wilder had not the faintest shade of resentment or repudiation of life—no weariness of life, no tragic protest against life’s difficulty, no dread of declining years. Rather, Wilder released in *Our Town* some deep, purely natural acceptance of the given assignment of youth, maturity, age, and death. The Stage Manager’s simple farewell says it all to each of us: “You get a good rest, too. Good night.” We might add, “Love, Thornton.”

Our Town: Groundbreaking Theatre

From *Insights*, 1993

Our Town is one of the plays of the American theatre that is likely to be cherished longer than any other written during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Yet, this now firmly established play came close to being stillborn, and arrived at its first presentation in New York only through the never-say-die persistence of its original producer, Jed Harris.

Prior to its New York opening, Harris had sent the play to Boston for a three-week shake-down. Its novelty offended Boston critics, and Boston play-goers simply stayed away. Ordinarily in a situation like that, when reviews are thumbs-down and box office response is nil, plays close during their pre-Broadway tryouts and are never heard of again. Jed Harris would not take no for an answer. He curtailed the Boston engagement after one week, brought the show to New York for two weeks more of rehearsal and a few previews, then opened it formally on 4 February 1938.

On that chilly evening, when the first-flight dramatic critics of the New York newspapers gathered to witness the opening performance, they did not quite know what to expect. They were aware that Wilder was a novelist of some reputation, having in fact won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928 for his book *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. They may have known, or been informed, that he had written quite a number of short plays, but never a full-length one and never one that had reached Broadway. And when they opened their Playbills in Henry Miller's Theatre, they discovered that the play they were about to witness would deal with three great adventures of living, sub-captioned as "Life," "Love," and "Death."

Yet, when all was said and done, Broadway was a bit awed by *Our Town*. Although a majority of the reviews the next morning were frankly ecstatic, a few were modestly doubtful of the complete applicability of Wilder's statement. And one or two mildly questioned the effectiveness of the scenery-less stage and of the story told in a unique combination of pantomime and Greek chorus recital by a Narrator performing as Stage Manager.

One of the few who was accurately able to gauge the profound effects of what he was seeing was Brooks Atkinson, critic for the New York Times. In his review the next morning, Atkinson wrote: "One of the finest achievements of the current stage. Mr. Wilder has transmuted the simple events of a human life into universal reverie. He has given it a profound, strange, unworldly significance--brimming over with compassion. *Our Town* has escaped from the formal barrier of the modern theatre into the quintessence of acting, thought, and speculation. A hauntingly beautiful play."

The New York World-Telegram added more insight: "Mr. Wilder and *Our Town* have struck another blow at conventional theatre. *Our Town* is a theatrical experience I would not like to miss. A beautiful and affecting play."

The truth was that *Our Town* was a trailblazer for a whole new school of playwrights who were going to attempt for the first time--at least in any concentrated and determined effort--to circumvent the boundaries of the traditional stage setting. True, there had been other plays produced without scenery, and a number had been shown without the curtain that, in the tradition of the theatre, acts as the fourth wall of an interior, of the fourth boundary of such landscape as may be revealed.

But overall, attendance at *Our Town* provided a genuinely new experience in play-going. Entering the theatre for one of its performances, the spectator's first view is of a completely bare stage, exposed in semi-darkness. The side walls of the stage are remote and hazy. The rear wall is piles of flats from old stage sets.

Presently, without any formal notice that the play has begun, the Stage Manager, hat on

and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and several chairs around the stage. Then he saunters casually down to the footlights, leans against the proscenium pillar, looks a little patronizingly over the audience, watches a few late arrivals slide apologetically into their seats, takes the pipe out of his mouth and begins to speak. And--just like that--the play is under way!

Audience response to that opening night back in 1938 was highly favorable. The theatre-goers may not have known exactly what they were seeing, but they knew they liked it. And in the spring, *Our Town* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the best play of American authorship, giving new impetus to the run, which finally reached the imposing total of 336 performances.

But it was only after the play had closed in New York that it began to achieve the unique eminence it has enjoyed every since--an eminence that continues and gains added stature with each passing year. Since 1938, the judgment of those first audiences has been resoundingly vindicated around the world.

For example, when in 1973 the Soviet government invited the United States government to send a two-play repertory to Moscow showing the American theatre's best and most representative plays, *Our Town* was inevitably chosen by the State Department as one of them. Similarly, an American Theatre Festival in Bochum, Germany, in 1955, designed to show Europeans examples of the best of the American stage, included a production of *Our Town*.

In road show, in hundreds of stock and amateur productions in this country, in translations into nearly every translatable language that man speaks on this earth, *Our Town* has gradually won for itself a secure place as one of the very few authentic dramatic "classics" this country has ever produced.