This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts, and to encourage essential questions that lead to an enduring understanding of the play’s meaning and relevance.

Inside you will find information about the plot and characters within the play, as well as articles that contextualize the play and its production at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Oral discussion and writing prompts encourage your students to reflect upon their impressions and to analyze and relate key ideas to their personal experiences and the world around them. These can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives. We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way to best fit the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website: ActorsTheatre.org. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshops, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

Our Town student matinees and this play guide address specific EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

- Students will identify or describe a variety of roles needed to produce a dramatic performance.
- Students will analyze the use of repetition in creating humor.
- Students will explain how a variety of perspectives creates greater insight into a field or endeavor.

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding our play guides, please contact Steven Rahe, Director of Education, at 502-584-1265 ext. 3045.
OUR TOWN PLOT SUMMARY

Day in and day out, Grover’s Corners is Any Town, USA. The paper is delivered, the milkman visits, time passes and life continues. It is only when such routines are interrupted that the fleeting beauty of the everyday is brought more clearly into perspective. The Stage Manager guides us through this elegant portrait of the ordinary but remarkable joys and sorrows that define our lives. *Our Town* is the greatest American play celebrating the magic that makes a community.

SETTING

Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, 1901-1913.

CHARACTERS

**STAGE MANAGER**—Narrator who guides the audience through the show.

**DR. FRANK GIBBS**—The town doctor, George and Rebecca’s father.

**MRS. JULIA GIBBS**—Frank’s wife, George and Rebecca’s mother.

**GEORGE GIBBS**—Frank and Julia’s son.

**REBECCA GIBBS**—Frank and Julia’s daughter.

**MR. CHARLES WEBB**—The newspaper editor, Wally and Emily’s father.

**MRS. MYRTLE WEBB**—Charles’s wife, Wally and Emily’s mother.

**WALLY WEBB**—Charles and Myrtle’s son.

**EMILY WEBB**—Charles and Myrtle’s daughter.

**JOE CROWELL**—Paperboy, Si’s brother.

**SI CROWELL**—Paperboy, Joe’s brother.

**HOWIE NEWSOME**—The milkman.

**PROFESSOR WILLARD**—Lecturer at local university.

**SIMON STIMSON**—Choir director.

**MRS. SOAMES**—A member of the choir.

**CONSTABLE WARREN**—Local police constable.

**SAM CRAIG**—Mrs. Julia Gibbs’s nephew.

**JOE STODDARD**—The undertaker.

**FARMER MCCARTHY**—Local farmer.

**ENSEMBLE**
Ever since its 1938 premiere, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* has been beloved by audiences everywhere. Lauded by fellow playwriting luminary Edward Albee as “the finest American play ever written,” Wilder’s portrait of small-town life in the early twentieth century has enjoyed four acclaimed runs on Broadway, several musical and television adaptations, and countless productions at theatres across the country—indeed, all over the world. (It’s said that a performance of *Our Town* occurs somewhere in the world almost every night of the year.)

*Our Town*’s ongoing success is no surprise; it’s a play about things we can all relate to. It’s a story of budding romance between two young people. It’s a story about the ties that bind together a community. And it’s a story about the inevitability of change, and death, and the seeming smallness of individual human experience in the face of a vast, mysterious universe. With heart, humor, and an unflinching gaze, Wilder shows us everyday people going about their everyday lives—and in doing so, poignantly illustrates that sometimes, the most ordinary moments can be the most remarkable. Artistic Director Les Waters, who is helming Actors’ production, reflects, “I find Wilder’s masterpiece deeply moving in a very quiet, honest way.”

The play chronicles the goings-on in the fictional farming community of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, from 1901 to 1913. The action centers around the families of George Gibbs and Emily Webb, two teenagers whose camaraderie as next-door neighbors and classmates evolves into more than friendship. We watch George and Emily fall for one another over ice cream sodas; we watch their wedding; we watch their vain attempts to fight against the inexorable passage of time. And all the while, new babies are born, new meals are served and then cleared, and new technological inventions alter old routines. Over three acts, we watch life continue for the Gibbeses, the Webbs, and the rest of the town’s varied inhabitants. If this all sounds intimately familiar, it’s because it is; we’re living it ourselves.
Although *Our Town* presents a familiar tale, less expected are the ways in which it’s told. The story is introduced and facilitated by the Stage Manager, an omniscient narrator who addresses the audience directly with awareness that he’s part of a play (played in this production by Bruce McKenzie, a veteran of such shows as *At the Vanishing Point* and last season’s *Romeo and Juliet*). In keeping with this theatrical style, Wilder’s stage directions don’t call for many props or a set. He felt that “Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind—not in things, not in ‘scenery.’” So actions and particular locations are loosely suggested, rather than re-created. To converse from the windows of adjacent upstairs bedrooms, George and Emily speak to each other from the tops of ladders placed side-by-side. We’re thus reminded that we’re watching a performance—an experience which may not faze modern viewers, but was considered avant-garde in 1938, when theatregoers were accustomed to lavish scenery. Waters plans to honor Wilder’s spare aesthetic: “This *Our Town* will be very very stripped back,” he says, “and may have the feeling of bringing the rehearsal room onto the Pamela Brown stage.”

With its wholesome romance unfolding in an all-American small-town landscape, it’s tempting to look at *Our Town* as the theatrical equivalent of a Norman Rockwell painting. As Waters puts it, however, “It’s not as cozy as people may think.” Certainly, the play is a celebration of what’s wonderful about ordinary life. Yet life can be both joyful and sorrowful, which Wilder’s protagonists acknowledge. When a character looks back on her past, she’s beset by the bittersweet irony that we so often don’t appreciate the beauty of what we have until it’s gone. *Our Town* also evokes a palpable and warm sense of community, through its snapshots of casual interactions among the citizens of Grover’s Corners. But communities can be sources of alienation as well as support. Waters reflects, “I’m from a small neighborhood of a small town, and one of the things that interests me about *Our Town* is how a distinct community can shape us. There are strengths in having that distinct community, but there are also downsides—people flee communities, too.” Even in tiny Grover’s Corners, existence isn’t idyllic; after all, Grover’s Corners is part of a much larger world.

*Our Town* remains an enduring classic because Wilder’s story transcends the particulars of its quaint setting and its characters’ early-1900s sensibilities. The meaning of *Our Town* isn’t found only in George and Emily’s romance, or the quiet triumphs and tribulations of the Gibbs and Webb families and their friends. For just as Wilder uses a ladder to represent an entire house, his portrayal of these specific people’s journeys from childhood to adulthood, through love and loss, is a beautifully simple gesture towards something far bigger: the macrocosm of shared human experience throughout history. In the words of the Stage Manager, “There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.” That’s why *Our Town* moves us with each retelling; we can always use a reminder of that.

—Hannah Rae Montgomery
Thornton Wilder believed in humanity as few men of his day could. Despite living through two World Wars and the Great Depression, Wilder (1897-1975) maintained an unbroken belief in the human spirit that made itself apparent in his body of work. A multi-talented and prolific writer, Wilder completed five full-length plays, numerous short plays, and seven novels over the course of his lifetime, among other varied literary pursuits. Throughout his career, his work celebrated the quiet but undeniable power and universal importance of everyday experience.

Wilder’s breakthrough came with his 1927 novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the story of a Franciscan friar’s efforts to uncover the secrets of five people slain in a Peruvian bridge collapse. Believing that the collapse was an act of Providence, the friar seeks a cosmic reason for their deaths. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* garnered Wilder a Pulitzer Prize, along with financial success; he used the proceeds from the book to build a large home for his family in the small town of Hamden, Connecticut, which likely inspired *Our Town*’s fictional setting of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire.

Wilder continued *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*’s investigation into the significance of ordinary lives in what would become his best-known play, *Our Town* (1938), in which he applies a magnifying glass to the joys and tragedies of the quiet lives lived in Grover’s Corners. *Our Town* expands upon theatrical elements from Wilder’s 1932 one-act play *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, which also features a Stage Manager character who narrates and pushes the action, and a nearly blank stage devoid of the detailed props and scenery that characterized the realist theatre of the day. Wilder’s dramatic work draws heavily from his background as a novelist. The bare stage allows audiences to imaginatively fill in the world of the play as they might while reading a book, and Wilder described the Stage Manager as a “hang-over from a novelist technique.” This approach clearly succeeded: *Our Town*’s New York production met with critical acclaim and a second Pulitzer.

In his later, almost equally famous masterpiece *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), Wilder drops the nostalgia of *Our Town* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, but maintains their stylized stagecraft and simultaneously minute and sweeping examination of human existence. The play pits the Antrobus family against an impending ice age, a great flood, and the ravages of war. The characters are identifiably Biblical in origin, and exemplify the strength of human resilience by continually finding the will to rebuild the human race despite the catastrophes that overtake their world. Again, we’re guided through the play by a modified version of the Stage Manager, now named Mr. Fitzpatrick. Leaping effortlessly between times and bounding seamlessly across genres from naturalism to farce and burlesque, the play poses big questions about the individual’s place in a macrocosmic universe. Though early audiences were resistant to Wilder’s avant-garde staging and walked out in droves, the play earned Wilder a third Pulitzer Prize and is recognized today as a singular achievement in American drama.

Wilder’s later literary endeavors varied widely. He wrote the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock’s 1943 thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*, though he rarely dabbled in film afterwards. His 1955 play *The Matchmaker*, a commercial success in its own right, became the basis for the wildly popular 1964 musical *Hello, Dolly!* He also penned libretti for a pair of operas and eventually returned to the novel, winning a National Book Award for *Fiction with The Eighth Day* (1967).

Wilder is remembered for his bold theatrical experimentation, which placed him in the American literary canon alongside the likes of Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, as well as for his faith, optimism, and fondness for humanity. He remains a force in American drama, both in his influence on contemporary playwrights, from Lanford Wilson to Paula Vogel to Will Eno, and through the frequent revivals of his plays. Wilder’s close examination of the power of his characters’ lives invites contemporary audiences to appreciate the impact of our own lives and decisions, and will extend the same invitation to generations of theatregoers to come.

—Sam Weiner
“*Our Town* is not a play about the evaporated glory of simpler yesteryears. On the contrary, it whispers to us the urgent necessity of living in the here and now—which is all anybody in Grover’s Corners ever had, all anybody anywhere really has... Wilder sought to make sacraments of simple things. In *Our Town* he cautioned us to recognize that life is both precious and ordinary, and that these two fundamental truths are intimately connected.”

—*New York Times*

“*Our Town* demonstrates in the most gentle and plain way, without a lot of fireworks or anything, how difficult it is to be a human being... You could flip through it once a week for the rest of your life and, in some mysterious way, something would leap out at you that you needed that week.”

—Playwright Will Eno

(*Gnit*, 2013 Humana Festival of New American Plays)

“This is one of the greatest American plays, and it’s an extraordinary play about community, which seemed to me an apt choice for a season celebrating Actors Theatre’s 50th Anniversary. *Our Town* is about the tiny things we do in our daily existence that constitute a life, and simultaneously, the bigness of everything—we’re all so small in the grand scheme of things, but incredibly meaningful to one another. I’ve only seen *Our Town* once, so to me it feels like a new play, a blank slate. I find Wilder’s masterpiece deeply moving in a very quiet, honest way.”

—Les Waters, Artistic Director
BRIDGework
Building Connections Between Stage and Classroom

The following exercises combine creative drama, theatre concepts and core content to connect the theatre experience with drama activities in your classroom. By exploring drama as a mode of learning, students strengthen skills for creative problem solving, imagination and critical thinking.

At Your Desk

1. *Our Town* looks at many of the inhabitants of Grover’s Corners, but is unable to explore every townsperson’s story. If you were to write a play like *Our Town* set at your own school, who would be the essential characters? Write the list of whom you would include and why they would be in the play.

2. In Emily’s famous monologue at the end of *Our Town*, she questions if “human beings ever realize life while they live it?” Write a letter to yourself about something that you would like to remember that’s happening in your life right now. Either give it to your teacher to get back at the end of the year, or put it somewhere where you’ll find it later (perhaps at the bottom of a drawer at home, or in a scrapbook).

Away From Your Desk

1. Some activities are mimed in *Our Town* because the play is performed with a minimal set and no props. With a partner, create a mime for a simple action. Try to break the action down into its simplest parts so that each movement is very clear. Share your mime with the class and see if they can guess your activity.

2. *Our Town* is set in between 1901-1913. The three acts are broken up into these major themes: “Daily Life,” “Love & Marriage,” and “Death & Dying.” Break the class into three groups and stage what you think would be important to include in these topics today. What are some important routines in your daily life? What does love and marriage look like now? How would you show the important rituals of death and dying?

Discussion Questions

Pre-Show Questions

1. In his suggestions for the director, Thornton Wilder writes that “it has already been proven that absence of scenery does not constitute a difficulty and that the cooperative imagination of the audience is stimulated by the absence.” How do you think it will affect the production that there are little to no set pieces or props used during the performance? Why do you think calling upon the “cooperative imagination of the audience” would be important to Thornton Wilder?

2. *Our Town* is narrated by the character of the Stage Manager, who guides the audience through the play and introduces characters and information about Grover’s Corners. A stage manager is a key role in the production of any play. The stage manager assists the director during rehearsal and is in charge of making sure the show runs smoothly during performances. Why do you think Thornton Wilder would include a character called the Stage Manager? What can you assume about the role from what you know about stage managers?

Post-Show Questions

1. The cast and much of the crew were onstage throughout the show. How did this affect the performance? Why do you think the director would choose to have everyone onstage for the entirety of this production?

2. This show was intentionally cast with actors of multiple races and mixed abilities. How did having a diverse cast affect your understanding or appreciation of the play? Why do you think the director would choose to cast the play in this way?
WRITING PORTFOLIO

Narrative: CCRA.W.3

In Our Town, the Stage Manager presents the routines of Grover’s Corners. He points out the regular comings and goings of the town’s inhabitants and the general predictability of life. In seeing these seemingly ordinary moments onstage, the audience is asked to examine the meaning and beauty in their own ordinary lives. Think about one of the routines in your life, perhaps getting up or going to bed. Why is that your routine? How do you feel about these tasks that you do on a daily basis? Do you take any pleasure in your routines? Why or why not?

Argumentative: CCRA.W.1

Our Town is intended to have almost no set and much of the action and props are mimed, making it a very sparse production that relies on the audience’s imagination and willingness to engage with the story. Actors Theatre’s production goes even further by having the cast, as well as much of the backstage crew, onstage for the entire performance. How do you think being able to see all of the actors and much of the backstage action that is usually hidden will affect the performance? What benefits and complications do you think could occur?

Informative: CCRA.W.2

Write a review of the performance of Our Town that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Which parts of the play (the actors’ performances, the set, props, costumes, lighting and sound design, etc.) were most effective? Which parts were least effective? Back up your claims with evidence and details from your experience of watching the performance.
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