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Our Town



"Of all sad words of mouth and pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been,'" writes John Greenleaf Whittier in his homage to a friend undiscovered, "Maud Muller." "It might have been" is how the past residents of Grover's Corner reminisce about life after they've gone to their graves in a nostalgic production of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" by the Actor's Gang of Culver City.

Director Justin Zsebe makes it immediately clear that the play is about people. As the day begins, an imaginary cow is led to the stage by a burly Howie Newsome, as the Gibbses and the Webbs have imaginary breakfast on an imaginary table. George Gibb even takes his imaginary backpack to school. A rope serves as a ladder at one point, while swings replace gravestones. The minimal props in "Our Town" serves to remind us that this town could be any town, because the people in a town are sufficient to tell all the stories; in particular, the town could be Culver City.

Although Wilder intended for the play to have an interactive element, this production of "Our Town" makes it especially relevant to us by using audience participation to dissect both the social forces of Our Town and how we could relate to it.

It all starts with the character of the Stage Manager, played by Steven M. Porter, and his inviting smile and matter-of-fact style of speaking. At one point, he holds a question-and-answer session with the audience and the town's newspaper editor Charles Webb. After Mr. Webb gives some demographic data suggesting that Grover's Corner is "86 percent Republican, 6 percent Democrats, 4 percent Socialist, and the rest indifferent," the audience members step up to ask him about the social situation in Grover's Corner. A man asks if there's any culture in the town, and a woman asks if there's much drinking. Editor Webb's quaintly dismisses the questions, and tells us all that the people of Grover's Corner have little interest in social justice. The tone set by Charles Webb is evident throughout the first two acts of the play, in which people mill about doing their daily work, unconcerned about anything that lies beyond themselves.

The town's treatment of the drunken church choir director Simon Stimson is typical of the attitude engendered by the characters in the play as well as the Stage Manager himself. While no one actually goes out of her way to alienate Stimson, everyone dismisses him as a lunatic by virtue of his drunkenness. Just as there is no movement for social justice in Grover's Corner, there is no acceptance of, nor help for those with psychological or addiction problems. Even as the women talk behind Stimson's back, no one steps up to sing at Fred Hersey's wedding when Stimson asks for help. It's no wonder that at the end of the play, the dead

Stimson is prompted to call the happy existence of Our Town the result of "ignorance and blindness."

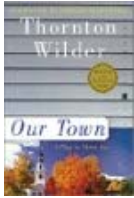

A successful performance of "Our Town" relies on being able to lure the audience into a complete sense of security during the first two acts. The Actor's Gang production does this by playing with humor that is not specifically ordered by Wilder. For instance, the Stage Manager ushers in Professor Willard to give a physical description of Grover's Corner. What comes across from the script of the play is the caricature of a academics type who doesn't understand what the audience is after, but Scott Harris's performance provides much more than that. First, he enters gingerly as if on tip-toe, sweating like a nervous wreck. When he tries to speak, he ends up muttering "er, er, anthropological data..." Perhaps the funniest moment is when Professor Willard describes the fossils found in Silas Peckham's cow pasture that "may be seen in the museum at the University at any time—er, er, that is, er, at any, er, reasonable time." When we laugh at Dr. Willard we lose that security barrier we form around plays that give a moral message. While watching, we feel like the play really is just as advertised, the simple narration of small town life. We don't probe the small details that emerge as important elements later in the work, and we lose the sense of urgency that comes with death.

"Our Town," as much as it invites us to reminisce about life, is about death and the regret that comes with death. Perhaps the most frightening thing about death is that it can occur so quickly without us ever being aware of its possibility. Just when everything is going well in Grover's Corner and new families like that of Emily Webb and George Gibbs are formed, we are hit with the fact that at some point, they all died. We learn that Emily died in child birth; Wally Webb died of an appendix burst; Simon Stimson committed suicide. Newly dead characters enter the stage to sit on a swing, a metaphor for their stay in Purgatory. All of a sudden, we are reminded of our own mortality.

Perhaps death wouldn't be so bad if we never regreted. When Emily Webb goes back in time to witness her own twelfth birthday celebration, she bursts out crying. "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?" she asks. Perhaps a few saints and poets, suggests the Stage Manager. Amidst all these deaths, the people of Grover's Corners have perished without ever realizing what they could have gotten out of life.

The Stage Manager urges us to go home and sleep, causing one member of the audience to wonder what "it might have been," both for the people of Grover's Corners and for ourselves.

"Our Town" is playing through July 11 at the Ivy Substation in Culver City.

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