

Spotlight on Learning

Our Town



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**GEORGE Q. MORRIS
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Approx. running time:
Two hours and 20 minutes, which includes two ten-minute intermissions.

Student Talk-Back: There will be a Student Talk-Back directly after the performance.

SPOTLIGHT ON LEARNING MARCH 2010

A Pioneer Theatre
Company Classroom
Companion

Directed by
Charles Morey

Our Town

Mar. 12 thru Mar. 27, 2010

Written by Thornton Wilder



Thornton Wilder

About the Playwright: Thornton Wilder

Thornton Niven Wilder was born on April 17, 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin. Wilder grew up with four siblings; his twin brother died shortly after birth. Thornton Wilder began writing as a young child and went on to win three Pulitzer Prizes; the second of which was for *Our Town*. He is the only American author to have the distinct honor of winning the Pulitzer Prize for both drama and fiction. All of the Wilder children were extremely successful and well educated. In 1906, Wilder's father, Amos

Parker Wilder was appointed the American Consul-General in Hong Kong and the family moved to China where Thornton Wilder attended boarding school.

Thornton Wilder's undergraduate education was interrupted by World War I and he left school for eight months to be a corporal in the Coast Artillery Corps. He then finished school with a bachelor's degree from Yale University. Wilder later joined the Army Air Force Intelligence in World War II. Throughout his life, writing and literature were extremely important to him. He wrote five novels and eight plays and collaborated on a number of films later in his career.

Although Wilder is known for his many contributions to literature as an author and playwright, he considered himself a teacher first and a writer second. Wilder taught at a number of universities including The University of Chicago and Harvard University. In 1934, he met the acclaimed feminist writer Gertrude Stein who became his mentor and friend. They remained friends and colleagues until her death in 1946 and the many letters exchanged between them have since been collected and published.

Other plays by Thornton Wilder include *An Angel That Troubled Waters* (1928), *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938), *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), *The Matchmaker* (1954), *The Alcestiad* (1955), and *Plays for Bleeker Street* (1962). He also penned the novels *The Cabala* (1926), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), *The Woman of Andros* (1930), *Heaven's My Destination* (1934), *The Eighth Day* (1967), and *Theophilus North* (1973).

Dramaturgical Notes



The MacDowell Colony is an art colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, founded in 1907. Marian MacDowell, pianist and wife of composer Edward MacDowell established the institution and its endowment chiefly with donated funds. Over the years, an estimated 5,100 artists, including Thornton Wilder, have been supported in residence. The colony accepts writers, poets, playwrights, artists and composers, who, among other awards, have received at least 61 Pulitzer Prizes. Our Town director Charles Morey is also a fellow of the MacDowell Colony.

Our Town, Thornton Wilder's 1938 play, has been produced more than any other American play of the twentieth century. In it, Wilder attempted "to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life."

Wilder had spent a number of summers at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and he had become immersed in the town's daily life, and used that as his starting point. Wilder himself had not had the settled small-town childhood of the play's Emily and George – he had grown up half in Asia, and all over the United States, moving every few years. He had however had a very close relationship with his mother, and he wrote her that "echoes of you are all thru the play" and that "one remark esp. that you made to us is in the Second Act and it radiates the whole play." That family affection is essential to the play, but it's only one strand of what Wilder was doing; as he wrote Gertrude Stein, "it's a little play with all the big subjects in it; and it's a big play with all the little things of life lovingly impressed into it."

Because of its basis in the small-town life of a now long-gone era, Our Town has come to be seen by many as a sentimental homage to small-town life, "an immortal tale of small-town morality" (NY Times) – and the numerous high school and community theatre productions which introduced most of us to the play are doubtless in some part responsible for that impression. Edward Albee once complained that "Our Town is one of the toughest, saddest plays ever written. Why is it always produced as hearts and flowers?" So far from wallowing in sentiment, however, Wilder cautioned against it. His main advice to directors of the play was "It is important to maintain a continual dryness of tone, – the New England understatement of sentiment, of surprise, of tragedy. A shyness about emotion. These significances are conveyed by the eyes and a sharpening and distinctness of the voice."

Wilder remains the only writer to have won Pulitzer prizes for both fiction and drama—both Our Town and his later play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) won Pulitzers, as had his earlier novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Heavily influenced by James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and his close friend Gertrude Stein, Wilder brought modernism to the American theatre. As Donald Margulies wrote in his introduction to a recent edition of the play, "with *Our Town*, Wilder exploded the accepted notions of character and story and catapulted the American drama into the twentieth century. He did for the stage what Picasso's and Braque's experiments in cubism did for painting and Joyce's stream of consciousness did for the novel. To mistake him for a traditionalist is to do Thornton Wilder an injustice. He was, in fact, a modernist who translated European and Asian ideas about theater into the American idiom."

The choices he made in doing so (a bare stage, direct address to the audience, somewhat archetypal characters) were new to the audience of his time, but were hardly invented by Wilder. He drew on the Greeks, and the Elizabethans, Lope de Vega and the Chinese when he chose to jettison the box set, and to call on the audience's own imaginations to fill the stage. Pirandello had already broken down many of these theatrical conventions fifteen years earlier, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the premiere of which Wilder had attended in Europe. By stripping the stage bare of scenery and props, Wilder was striving to create a theatrical immediacy that would move the audience as nothing he'd seen in America had moved him in years. "Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind," Wilder wrote, "not in 'scenery.'"

—Elizabeth Williamson, Dramaturg

TERMS TO KNOW

Below are a few terms and phrases used or referred to in *Our Town* that may be unfamiliar to you.

"Board of Selectmen": This is the executive branch of town government in many New England towns. Historically, the towns would choose a small group of men to make decisions about laws and budgets and other important topics affecting the town. This system is still in place today (although the role of selectman varies from town to town) and the board of selectman often includes both men and women.

Edgar Lee Masters: Wilder refers to Masters in *Our Town* as "...one of those Middle West poets" He quotes Masters as saying "You've got to love life to have life, and you've got to have life to love life." An American poet, Masters lived 1869 to 1950 and is best known for his book of poetry called *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), which described life in a small fictional town called Spoon River.



"Pince-nez": A style of eyeglasses that was popular in the 19th century. They did not hook onto the ears; instead the wearer would pinch them tight to his or her nose so that they would stay in place. The term is French for "pinched-nose."

A pair of antique pince nez.

"Highboy": The piece of furniture that Mrs. Gibbs is considering selling. Also called tallboy, it is a high or double chest of drawers. The name highboy is derived from a corruption of the French bois ("wood") and became common in English in the late 1600s.

An example of a Queen Anne-style highboy.



"OUR TOWN" POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What role does time play in *Our Town* and how does Thornton Wilder use symbolism to call attention to time?
2. What was the significance of Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb's conversation about selling the highboy and traveling to Paris? What does this tell us about Grover's Corners and how does this contribute to the main themes of *Our Town*?
3. Why might Wilder have chosen to include so few props in the show? In your opinion, would more prominent props and set design add to or detract from the show?
4. What decisions do the characters struggle with in this play on a large level and on a more minute every-day level? What do their decisions teach us about them?
5. Discuss the role of the Stage Manager. What does this character teach us about theatre and why might Wilder have chosen this character instead of having a townsman act as the narrator?

Director and Cast for OUR TOWN

CHARLES MOREY (Director) has been the Artistic Director for PTC since 1984 and has directed over 70 productions. He is pleased to direct one of his favorite plays of all time, one with which he has a personal and professional connection.

GLORIA BIEGLER* (Mrs. Gibbs) PTC audiences will remember Ms. Biegler as Rose in *Enchanted April*, Claire in *Proof*, Mercedes in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible* and Susannah in *Joyful Noise*. In addition to her stage work, Ms. Biegler has appeared on television in *Law & Order*, *Law & Order: SVU*, *One Life to Live*, *All My Children* and *The Guiding Light*. She was delighted to appear in New York on Broadway with Nathan Lane, and with Hal Holbrook.

CRAIG BOCKHORN* (Doc Gibbs) returns to PTC, where he has been in: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Julius Caesar*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Dinner with Friends*, *Laughing Stock*, *Art*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and more. Mr. Bockhorn was seen at the Kennedy Center, on Broadway, and National Tour of *On Golden Pond*. Other New York credits include *Prelude to a Kiss*, *The Seagull*, *The Hope Zone*, *The Truth-Teller*, and *Kit Marlowe*.

JOYCE COHEN* (Mrs. Webb) has appeared frequently at PTC, appearing in *Othello*, *Enchanted April*, *Copenhagen*, *Arcadia*, *Laughing Stock*, and last year's *Romeo & Juliet*. She has appeared on Broadway in *Once a Catholic* and off - Broadway at the Mint Theater, Playwrights Horizons, The Chelsea Westside, and others. Her TV and film credits include *Archie Bunker's Place*, *High School Musical*, *Read it and Weep*, *SLC Punk*, *Touched By An Angel*, *Everwood*, *Promised Land*, *The Dance*, *Pirates of the Great Salt Lake* and *The Adventures of Food Boy*. Regional credits include The Utah Shakespearean Festival, Plan-B Theatre, and Salt Lake Acting Company.

ERIC GILDE* (George Gibbs) returns to PTC after playing Benvolio in last season's *Romeo & Juliet*. New York Credits include *The Nosemaker's Apprentice* (The Brick), *Wedding Pictures* (EST), and *Edgewise* (Cherry Lane Studio). Other regional credits include *The History Boys* (St. Louis Rep), *The Mistakes Madeline Made*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *The Ladies of the Camellias* (Yale Repertory Theatre), and *Last Train to Nibroc* (The Kitchen Theatre Co.).

ANDERSON MATTHEWS* (Stage Manager) most recently appeared here as Papa Leroux in *Is He Dead?* Other PTC shows include *The Three Musketeers*, *As You Like It*, *Laughing Stock*, *You Can't Take It With You*, and *Noises Off*. Broadway credits include Pater Ustinov's *Beethoven's 10th* and *The Robber Bridegroom*. Off -Broadway credits include *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Ten By Tennessee*, and *Arcadia* at Lincoln Center.

AMELIA McCLAIN* (Emily Webb) is back at PTC after last year's production of *Romeo & Juliet*. Her New York credits include *Mine* (Slant Theatre Project), *A Doll's House* (Studio Tisch), *Dance Dance Revolution* (Les Freres Corbusier), *October/November* (Ensemble Studio Theatre), and *The Horton Foote Project* (Slant Theatre Project).

CRAIG WROE* (Mr. Webb) returns to PTC where he has appeared in *Macbeth*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Henry V*, *Dracula*, *The 1940s Radio Hour*, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, *Private Lives*, *Twelfth Night*, *Tartuffe*, *Inspecting Carol*, *Metamorphoses*, *Sherlock Holmes and the West End Horror*, *Alexandre Dumas and the Lady of the Camellias*, and *Uncle Vanya*. In London's West End, Craig played Dr. Douglas in *Miss Evers' Boys*. Craig's off - Broadway credits include *Catch-22*, *An Oak Tree*, *King John*, "2", *The Alexander Plays*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Richard II*.

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