



THORNTON WILDER'S

OUR TOWN

STUDY GUIDE



CELEBRATING 40 SEASONS

VIRGINIA
STAGE
COMPANY
AT THE
WELLS THEATRE

OCTOBER 17-NOVEMBER 4, 2018 VASTAGE.ORG

#OurTown757

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM VSC EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Our Teaching Philosophy

We've witnessed firsthand what the creative process nurtures in children, teens and all lifelong learners:

- excitement, enthusiasm, and openness to explore their own creativity
- critical-thinking and problem solving skills
- enthusiasm for teamwork
- empathy and support toward peers
- strength in their ability to listen and express themselves effectively
- healthy self-image and awareness

Because it has such positive and far-reaching outcomes for our students, VSC's education model emphasizes process over product. We believe that students will emerge from their time with VSC's educational programs with skills that will serve them well in all areas of life.

Benefits for Students

Students enrolled in VSC's education programs will:

- develop leadership qualities
- enhance communication skills
- develop an appreciation for the creative process
- learn to take ownership of their own ideas and concepts
- increase their knowledge of theatre terms
- develop greater confidence through the creative play experience
- develop a spirit of curiosity
- learn to develop and appreciate the value of kindness
- develop or expand spatial awareness
- use dramatic prompts to create imaginative movement
- cooperate with others in group sessions
- learn how to use their voice safely and effectively
- learn how to use their bodies effectively with character development
- work with peers to write scripts
- explore characters and settings
- rehearse in a positive, supportive environment
- practice respectful critique of others' work
- put it all together to create original theatre for others.

Virginia Stage Company's production of **Our Town** adheres to the following Virginia's English Standards of Learning requirements for grades 5-12:

Reading and Writing – 5.4, 5.5., 5.7, 5.8, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.8, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.8, 8.5, 8.5, 8.7, 8.8, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, 9.6, 9.7, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7, 11.3, 11.4, 11.5, 11.6, 11.7, 12.3, 12.4, 12.5, 12.6, 12.7

Theatre Arts – 6.15, 6.16, 6.17, 6.20, 6.21, 6.23, 6.24, 6.25, 7.17, 7.18, 7.19, 7.20, 7.21, 7.22, 7.23, 8.15, 8.16, 7.17, 8.18, 8.19, 8.20, 8.21, 8.22, 8.23, 8.24, 8.25

Introduction to Theatre – TI. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

Theatre Arts II Dramatic Literature and Theatre History – TII. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM THIS STUDY GUIDE

Fun Facts about *Our Town*

Quotes



Vocabulary Building Block
terms and definitions



Info about supplemental
video content

Guide Compiled and Designed
by Crystal Tuxhorn

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"Our Town is almost this kind of warrior cry to remind us of the fragility of life. It reminds us to be present and to live moment to moment with one another and to look at each other, to really see one another. It's about community, helping other people, being compassionate, reaching across lines to lift somebody out of a tragic situation. It's all about human connectivity, and theater is all about human connectivity."

Scarlett Johansson

ABOUT OUR TOWN:

Our Town explores the relationship between two young Grover's Corners neighbors, George Gibbs and Emily Webb, whose childhood friendship blossoms into romance, and then culminates in marriage. When Emily loses her life in childbirth, the circle of life portrayed in each of the three acts of *Our Town*—growing up, adulthood, and death—is fully realized.

ACTIVITY

Take a look at the *Our Town* poster on the cover of this guide. Each building represents a different city in the Hampton Roads area. Can you name them all? Have groups of students research each structure and share with the class. How do the buildings represent their respective cities and how do they help tell the story of Hampton Roads as a community?

From left: Cape Henry Lighthouse, Virginia Beach; Hill House, Portsmouth, Victory Arch, Newport News; Hampton University Clock Tower, Hampton; City Hall Building, Chesapeake; Seaboard Station Railroad Museum, Suffolk; The Wells Theatre, Norfolk

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

There are simple rules that all audience members should follow to make the play as enjoyable as possible. Remember, a live theater performance can be very exciting. All of the people involved in the production, both cast and crew, work very hard to be sure they give a great performance. It is the job of the audience members to help the performers give their best performance possible. The audience can do this by practicing the rules of theater etiquette.

- Arrive to the theater on time.
- Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
- Turn off your cell phone or, if it must be on, put it on vibrate. Do not speak on the phone OR Text during the performance.
- Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to many shows about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
- Don't speak during the performance...whispering is still speaking, so only in an emergency. Remember that the Overture (introductory music) in Musical Theater is part of the performance, so be quiet when it begins.
- Do not take pictures during the performance. It is prohibited in this theatre and can be very distracting to the actors.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave, exit during intermission. In an emergency, wait for an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment...rude to the actors and your fellow audience members.
- Do not eat or drink in the theater. If you must have a cough drop, or something of that nature, do not make noise with the wrapper.
- Do not put your feet up on the seats or balcony and do not kick the seat in front of you.
- Do not angle your head together with your "special someone" as you obstruct the view of the people behind you.
- Don't put or throw anything on the stage.
- Do laugh when the performance is funny.
- Do applaud when it is appropriate during the performance.
- Do applaud when the performance is over...this tells the performers and crew that you appreciate their work.
- Stand and applaud if you really thought the show was great.
- Do not whistle or scream out to the performers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THORNTON WILDER

Thornton Wilder (1897–1975) was a pivotal figure in the literary history of the twentieth-century. He is the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction and drama. He received the Pulitzer for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and the plays *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). His other best-selling novels include *The Cabala*, *The Woman of Andros*, *Heaven's My Destination*, *The Ides of March*, *The Eighth Day*, and *Theophilus North*. His other major dramas include *The Matchmaker* (adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!*) and *The Alcestiad*. *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, and *The Long Christmas Dinner* are among his well-known shorter plays.

Wilder's many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Book Committee's Medal for Literature and the Goethe-Plakette Award (Germany).

Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897. He spent part of his boyhood in China and was educated principally in California, graduating from Berkeley High School in 1915. After attending Oberlin College for two years, he transferred to Yale, where he received his BA in 1920. His post-graduate studies included a year spent studying archaeology and Italian at the American Academy in Rome (1920–21) and graduate work in French at Princeton (Master's degree, 1926).

In addition to his talents as a playwright and novelist, Wilder was an accomplished essayist, translator, research scholar, teacher, lecturer, librettist, and screenwriter. In 1942, he teamed up with Alfred Hitchcock on the classic psycho-thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*. Versed in foreign languages, he translated and adapted plays by Ibsen, Sartre, and Obey. He read and spoke German, French, and Spanish, and his scholarship included significant research on James Joyce and Lope de Vega.

Wilder enjoyed acting and played major roles in several of his plays in summer theater productions. He also possessed a life-long love of music and wrote librettos for two operas, one based on *The Long Christmas Dinner* (composer Paul Hindemith) and the other based on *The Alcestiad* (composer Louis Talma).

One of Wilder's deepest passions was teaching. He began this career in 1921 as an instructor in French at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. During the 1930's he taught courses in Classics in Translation and Composition at the University of Chicago. In 1950–51, he served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard.

During WWII, Wilder served in the Army Air Force Intelligence. He was awarded the Legion of Merit Bronze Star, the Legion d'honneur and the Order of the British Empire.

In 1930, with the royalties received from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder built a home for himself and his family in Hamden, Connecticut. Although often away from home, restlessly seeking quiet places in which to write, he always returned to "The House The Bridge Built." He died here on December 7, 1975.

More information on Thornton Wilder and his family is available in Penelope Niven's definitive biography,

Thornton Wilder: A Life (2013) as well as on the Wilder Family website,

www.thorntonwilder.com



Thornton Niven Wilder Chronology



| | |
|---------|---|
| 1897 | Born in Madison, Wisconsin (April 17) |
| 1906 | Moves to Hong Kong in May and to Berkeley, California in October |
| 1906-10 | Emerson Public School in Berkeley |
| 1910-11 | China Inland Mission School, Chefoo, China (one year) |
| 1912-13 | Thacher School, Ojai, California (one year). First play known to be produced: <i>The Russian Princess</i> |
| 1915 | Graduates from Berkeley High School; active in school dramatics |
| 1915-17 | Oberlin College; published regularly |
| 1920 | B.A. Yale College (3-month service in 1918 with U.S. Army in 1918); many publications |
| 1920-21 | American Academy in Rome (8-month residency) |
| 1920s | French teacher at Lawrenceville School, Lawrenceville, New Jersey ('21-'25 & '27-'28) |
| 1924 | First visit to the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire |
| 1926 | M.A. in French literature, Princeton University <i>The Trumpet Shall Sound</i> produced off-Broadway (American Laboratory Theatre) <i>The Cabala</i> (first novel) |
| 1927 | <i>The Bridge of San Luis Rey</i> (novel- Pulitzer Prize) |
| 1928 | <i>The Angel That Troubled The Waters</i> (first published collection of drama—playlets) |
| 1930s | Part-time faculty, University of Chicago (comparative literature and composition); lectures across the country; first Hollywood screen-writing assignment (1934); extensive foreign travel |
| 1930 | <i>The Woman of Andros</i> (novel) Completion of home for his family and himself in Hamden, Connecticut |
| 1931 | <i>The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays</i> (six one-act plays) |
| 1932 | <i>Lucrece</i> opens on Broadway starring Katharine Cornell (translation of André Obey's <i>Le Viol de Lucrece</i>) |
| 1935 | <i>Heaven's My Destination</i> (novel) |
| 1937 | <i>A Doll's House</i> (adaptation/ trans.) opens on Broadway with Ruth Gordon |
| 1938 | <i>Our Town</i> (Pulitzer Prize) and <i>The Merchant of Yonkers</i> open on Broadway |
| 1942 | <i>The Skin of Our Teeth</i> opens on Broadway (Pulitzer Prize) Screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's <i>The Shadow of a Doubt</i> |
| 1942-45 | Service with Army Air Force in North Africa and Italy (Lieut. Col. at discharge –Bronze Star and O.B.E.) |
| 1948 | <i>The Ides of March</i> (novel); performing in his plays in summer stock in this period <i>The Victors</i> opens off-Broadway (translation of Sartre's <i>Morts sans sépulture</i>) |
| 1949 | Major role in Goethe Convocation in Aspen; lectures widely. |
| 1951-52 | Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard |
| 1952 | Gold Medal for Fiction, American Academy of Arts and Letters |
| 1953 | Cover of <i>Time</i> Magazine (January 12) |
| 1955 | <i>The Matchmaker</i> opens on Broadway starring Ruth Gordon <i>The Alcestiad</i> produced at Edinburgh Festival with Irene Worth (as <i>A Life in the Sun</i>) |
| 1957 | German Peace Prize |
| 1961 | Libretto for <i>The Long Christmas Dinner</i> (music by Paul Hindemith—premieres in Mannheim, West Germany) |
| 1962 | "Plays for Bleecker Street" (<i>Someone from Assisi</i> , <i>Infancy</i> , and <i>Childhood</i>) premiere at NYC's Circle in the Square Libretto for <i>The Alcestiad</i> (music by Louise Talma—premieres in Frankfurt, West Germany) |
| 1963 | Presidential Medal of Freedom |
| 1964 | <i>Hello, Dolly!</i> starring Carol Channing opens on Broadway |
| 1965 | National Book Committee's Medal for Literature |
| 1967 | <i>The Eighth Day</i> (National Book Award for Fiction) |
| 1973 | <i>Theophilus North</i> (novel) |
| 1975 | Dies in sleep in Hamden, CT on December 7. Buried at Mt. Carmel Cemetery, Hamden, Connecticut |

For more information, please visit www.thorntonwilder.com and www.thorntonwildersociety.org.

ABOUT THE PLAY

OUR TOWN

According to the Wilder Family Estate, a production of *Our Town* is being performed at least once a day somewhere in the United States or abroad.

Our Town is Thornton Wilder's most celebrated play. It opened on Broadway in 1938, received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and went on to become one of the most frequently performed American plays of the twentieth century. In Wilder's day, it was fashionable for plays to expose the hypocrisy of American life. With its focus on the precious moments in everyday life, *Our Town* deliberately departs from this perspective. The play follows the lives of two young neighbors in a small town, Emily and George, who fall in love. *Our Town*'s production coincided with political problems in Europe that would eventually become World War II. For audiences, Wilder's play was an escape from international conflict and a retreat to small town America.

Shmoop Editorial Team, "Our Town," Shmoop University, Inc., Last modified November 11, 2008, <https://www.shmoop.com/our-town/>.

Our Town explores the relationship between two young Grover's Corners neighbors, George Gibbs and Emily Webb, whose childhood friendship blossoms into romance, and then culminates in marriage. When Emily loses her life in childbirth, the circle of life portrayed in each of the three acts of *Our Town*—growing up, adulthood, and death—is fully realized.

www.thorntonwilder.com/

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Stage Manager – a narrator, commentator, and guide through Grover's Corners

Emily Webb – one of the main characters

George Gibbs – the other main character; the boy next door

Frank Gibbs – George's father, the town doctor

Julia (Hersey) Gibbs – George's mother

Charles Webb – Emily's father, editor of *The Grover's Corners Sentinel*

Myrtle Webb – Emily's mother

Joe and Si Crowell – local paperboys

Simon Stimson – the choir director and church organist

Howie Newsome – the milkman

Rebecca Gibbs – George's younger sister

Wally Webb – Emily's younger brother

Professor Willard – a rather long-winded lecturer

Woman in Auditorium – concerned with temperance

Man in Auditorium – concerned with social justice

Another Woman in Auditorium – concerned with culture and beauty

Mrs. Louella Soames – a gossipy townswoman and member of the choir

Constable Bill Warren – the policeman

Joe Stoddard – the undertaker

Sam Craig – a nephew of Mrs. Gibbs, businessman

Dead Man

Dead Woman

Mr. Carter

Farmer McCarty

Bessie – Howie Newsome's horse (visible to the characters, but not the audience)

In the 1940 film version of *Our Town*, many of the original Broadway actors reprised their roles, including Martha Scott, the young actress who played Emily Webb. In the movie, however, Emily lives at the end.



VOCABULARY

- AFFRONTED** - offended the modesty or values
- ALACRITY** - liveliness and eagerness
- ANTHROPOLOGY** - science of the origins and social relationships of humans
- BARREN** - completely wanting or lacking
- BELLIGERENT** - characteristic of an enemy or one eager to fight
- BURGLE** - enter and rob a dwelling
- CONTRIVE** - make or work out a plan for; devise
- CRESTFALLEN** - brought low in spirit
- DILIGENT** - quietly and steadily persevering in detail or exactness
- DRENCHED** - abundantly covered or supplied with
- GINGHAM** - a clothing fabric in a plaid weave
- HELIOTROPE** - green chalcedony (quartz) with red spots that resemble blood
- HIGHBOY** - a tall chest of drawers divided into two sections and supported on four legs
- LEGACY** - a gift of personal property by will
- LUGUBRIOUSNESS** - the quality of excessive mournfulness and uncheerfulness
- MEDITATIVELY** - in a meditative manner
- OMNISCIENT** - knowing everything
- PARLOR** - a room in a private establishment where people can sit and talk and relax
- PHOSPHATE** - a salt of phosphoric acid
- PINCE-NEZ** - spectacles clipped to the nose by a spring
- RADIANT** - emanating or as if emanating light
- RETIRED** - no longer active in your work or profession
- SAVANT** - a learned person
- SENTIMENTALITY** - the quality of being falsely emotional in a maudlin way
- TORRENT** - an overwhelming number or amount
- TRAIPISE** - walk or tramp about
- TRELLIS** - latticework used to support climbing plants
- UNOBTRUSIVELY** - in a way that is not conspicuous or attracting attention

Our Town was adapted into a 1989 Ballet, choreographed by Philip Jerry and a 1955 "Made for TV" musical starring Frank Sinatra.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Our Town is one of the most produced plays in the United States. Why do you think this play has endured for so long and appealed to so many people? Support your answer.

Over the course of the play, the Stage Manager examines some of the changes that take place in Grover's Corners between the years of 1901-1913. Discuss how life was different growing up in the 1900's versus today. How does the play speak to the questions, ideas or issues that faced Americans during the Great Depression?

Why do they think Wilder set his play in this particular town? Would the play work as well in a big city or a suburb? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES

Research other works that have won the Pulitzer Prize. What are the criteria for consideration for the award?

Research Thornton Wilder's other works. How are they similar to and different from *Our Town*? In what other literary forms did Wilder write, besides plays?

Our Town was inspired by Wilder's close friendship with author Gertrude Stein. Her piece *The Making of Americans* greatly influenced the play, which emphasizes the universality of the simple.

I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being. This supremacy of the theater derives from the fact that it is always 'now' on the stage."

— Thornton Wilder
(as told to a Paris Review journalist)



Watch videos about *Our Town* and Thornton Wilder online at: thorntonwilder.com/video

OUR TOWN IN CONTEXT

THE PULITZER PRIZE

Established in 1917, the Pulitzer Prize is considered the highest honor in the United States for literary achievement, musical composition, and newspaper journalism. Named after **Joseph Pulitzer**, a journalist, publisher, and US congressman, the prize is awarded yearly by Columbia University for twenty-one separate categories. Famous literary recipients of the Pulitzer Prize include Margaret Mitchell, Ernest Hemingway, Harper Lee, Saul Bellow, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, and Robert Frost. Only a few playwrights have been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama more than once, like Eugene O'Neill (4 wins), Edward Albee (3), while George S. Kaufman, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, and August Wilson have won twice. Arthur Miller, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Stephen Sondheim have also won the award.

1900-1913 THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Schoolteachers were usually unmarried women. If they wanted to marry, they could no longer teach. They often lived with local families.

"Century of Electricity" replaces the "Century of Steam".

The American League of Baseball is organized (1901)

People lived and worked in the same location. No place was too far away that a person couldn't walk to it. Horse and buggy was the principal transportation.

The first neon lighted signs appear
The first regular cinema is established in Pittsburgh, PA (1905)

Fountain pens become popular (1908)

The "week-end" becomes popular in the U.S. (1910)

Women rarely worked at a job outside the home. As the Stage Manager says in his opening monologue to Act Two: "both those ladies cooked three meals a day— one of 'em for twenty years, the other for forty—and no summer vacation. They brought up two children apiece, washed, cleaned the house—and never a nervous breakdown."

Magazines experienced a boost in popularity in 1900, due to the rapid expansion of advertising. The cover price fell to about 10 cents, lessening the financial barrier to consuming them. Another factor contributing to the dramatic upswing in magazine circulation was the prominent coverage of corruption in politics, local government and big business, especially by journalists and writers who were labeled muckrakers. ³

The 1930s GREAT DEPRESSION

As the country struggled with unemployment during the Great Depression, teaching positions were prized jobs for both single and married women. More men joined the ranks of teachers, mostly at the upper grade levels. Rural areas still had one and two-room schoolhouses.

Automobiles replaced the horse and buggy as the primary mode of transportation. The Great Depression forced mills and factories that once thrived in small New England towns to shut their doors, forcing people to either move away or to travel elsewhere to seek work.

During the euphoria of the Roaring Twenties many of the once "thrifty and prudent" American public adopted the modern philosophy of "Live now, pay later" and bought expensive products, like automobiles, on easy credit terms. The levels of debt effected the ability of many Americans to survive the effects of the Great Depression.

Most women were mothers and housewives, but the economic realities of the Great Depression dictated that whoever could, worked. When the country entered World War II just three years after Our Town opened, thousands of women took factory jobs while men went off to war.

By 1933 the number of unemployed reached the staggering figure of 12 million (25% of the population). 70,000 factories were closed by 1933.

Due to unemployment Americans were unable to pay their bills. Many unfortunate tenants were evicted by bailiffs. Homeless Americans had no alternative but to set up shacks on unused or public lands. These communities became known as 'Shantytowns' or 'Hoovervilles'.

WHEN THORNTON WILDER WROTE THE PLAY!

2000s NOW

Women still outnumber men in the teaching profession. Salaries have increased and people can support families on teachers' wages. In many rural areas, towns have joined with other towns to create a single regional school.

Thousands of people commute into cities everyday from nearby towns. Some drive their cars on multi-lane highways for nearly two hours each way, while others travel to an outlying train station and finish their commute into the city by rail. By 2011, the United States had 809 motor vehicles per 1,000 people ⁴.

Each American throws out about 4.4 pounds of trash every single day, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's latest 2012 figures. ⁴

By 2014, 71 percent of Americans owned a smartphones. ⁴

Women are in the workforce in larger numbers than ever before. Families juggle work schedules of the father, the mother, and the children. Take-out food has replaced the traditional family dinner, and eating in front of the television has replaced conversation at the dinner table.

Parallel Facts courtesy of the New Stage Theatre *Our Town* Study Guide:
<http://newstagetheatre.com/manage/wp-content/uploads/Our-Town-study-guide.pdf>

Progressive Era Facts courtesy of The Actor's Gang *Our Town* Study Guide:
http://www.finchpark.com/courses/drama/files/Our_Town_Study_Guide.pdf

³ Peter C. Holloran et al, eds. (2009). *The A to Z of the Progressive Era*. Scarecrow Press. p. 266.

⁴ Hadhazy, Adam. "20 Startling Facts about American Society and Culture"
<https://www.livescience.com/51448-startling-facts-about-american-culture.html>

OUR TOWN

A REVOLUTIONARY PRODUCTION

Our Town was one of the only plays of its time to incorporate some elements of storytelling that modern audiences may find familiar, such as:

ORDINARY DAYS, ORDINARY PEOPLE

Rather than epic stories of romance, politics, or adventure, Wilder chose to show day-to-day life in a small town, now known as a **kitchen sink drama**.

MINIMAL SET

BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL

PANTOMIME



Pantomime is a process of telling a story through movement—without sounds or physical props (“panto” means “all” and “mime” means “movement”). When using pantomime as a performance technique, the actors use their movement to communicate what activities they are doing and what imaginary props they are using.

Kitchen Sink Drama is a short performance that explores the drama of everyday life.

Breaking the Fourth Wall is when a character in a work acknowledges that there is an audience, typically by speaking to the viewers or narrating onstage action.

Thornton Wilder wrote a preface to *Our Town* which ran in *The New York Times* on February 13, 1938, but was not published with the play until 1979. In this preface, he explains many of his thoughts about and inspirations for *Our Town*:

...I wished to record a village's life on the stage, with realism and with generality. The stage has a deceptive advantage over the novel—in that lighted room at the end of the darkened auditorium things seem to be half caught up into generality already. The stage cries aloud its mission to represent the Act in Eternity. So powerful is the focus that it brings to bear on any presented occasion that every lapse of the author from his collaborative intensity is doubly conspicuous: the truth tumbles down into a heap of abject truths and the result is doubly trivial.

So I tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery. The spectator through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his own head...

The theater longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves. All the lies it tells—the lie that that young lady is Caesar's wife; the lie that people can go through life talking in blank verse; the lie that that man just killed that man; all those lies enhance the one truth that is there, the truth that dictated the story, the myth. The theater asks for as many conventions as possible. A convention is an agreed-upon falsehood, an accepted untruth. When the theater pretends to give the real thing in canvas and wood and metal it loses something of the realer thing, which is its true business.

OUR TOWN A REVOLUTIONARY PRODUCTION

ACTIVITIES

Brainstorm a list of basic physical actions from daily life (such as brushing teeth, pouring and drinking a glass of water, etc.) then pantomime these activities as a group. While they move, students should pay specific attention to: what physical steps are involved in the action, the shape, size, and location of any invisible objects, how they feel about the activity and what facial expressions and body language can be used to communicate their emotion.

Have students create and perform a brief “kitchen sink drama” by brainstorming a short dialogue about a real-life conflict that could exist between them in a household setting. (For example: A parent and child in conflict over the child’s refusal to eat his or her vegetables, siblings fighting over the bathroom mirror, a couple who disagree over interior decorating choices.) Use pantomime and minimal staging, i.e. a chair, for the performance. After each group performs, discuss the following: How was performing the chosen situation similar to and different from really living it? What is really happening in the scene? In each pair, what subtext was implied by the characters’ movements and actions? What deeper truths about the characters and their relationships are communicated within this “slice of life” interaction?

Ask students to write out a simple scene from their daily lives with one character that breaks the fourth wall. (Washing dishes with a family member, getting ready to go to school, doing homework with their friends, doing other chores around the house—anything that involves more than one person.) Audience interaction could include narration, details about character’s histories, the inner thoughts, wishes, hopes, and dreams of the characters involved in the scene, even entertaining asides or remarks.

Our Town takes place in a small town where the only regular source of news would be Mr. Webb’s paper, *The Grover’s Corners Sentinel*. Select a series of events from the play, and “cover” them in the style of a newspaper. For example, create a news bulletin or obituary for one of the characters in the cemetery, a social column on the wedding of George and Emily, or interviews with Doc Gibbs, Professor Willard, Simon Stimson or Howie Newsome about their jobs and families.

In 2017, during the filming of *Avengers: Infinity War*, actors from the Marvel Cinematic Universe performed a staged reading of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* as a benefit for hurricane relief in Puerto Rico. Robert Downey, Jr. played the Stage Manager, Scarlett Johansson played Emily, Chris Evans was Mr. Webb, with Jeremy Renner and Mark Ruffalo as George and Mr. Gibbs respectively. The event, which included a post-reading meet-and-greet with the cast, raised \$500,000 for the Hurricane Maria Community Relief & Recovery Fund.

Imagine that you are a movie director about to put together a new film version of *Our Town*. Choose the eight main characters (in your opinion) and list five words that describe each character. Using these descriptions decide what actor you would cast in each role. Defend your decision by explaining why that particular actor seems right for the character Thornton Wilder depicts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the unique acting challenges inherent in pantomime versus using props onstage? Why might a playwright choose to include this kind of action into his or her play? What does it change about the world of the play?

The Stage Manager suggests that one of Wilder’s purposes for writing *Our Town* was to document “the real life of the people” for future generations. Do you think social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr) is creating a record of “real life” that will accurately inform future generations?

Do you agree or disagree that a work of art can provide a realistic understanding of life? How does art help us understand the world we live in or process our experiences?

“This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.”

Our Town, Act I

THE STAGE MANAGER

NARRATING A JOURNEY

The character of the Stage Manager serves as a narrator in *Our Town*. He tells us about the characters and the setting, and sets the mood for the play.

In a theatrical production, **stage managers** typically provide practical and organizational support to the director, actors, designers, stage crew and technicians throughout the production process. They also are the director's representative during performances, making sure that the production runs smoothly. Some of their responsibilities include:

- scheduling and running rehearsals,
- communicating the director's wishes to designers and crafts people,
- recording all **blocking**, light, sound, and set change cues in the **prompt book**,
- calling cues and possibly actors' entrances during performance,
- overseeing the entire show each time it is performed,

and much more!

aact.org/stage-manager



blocking

the precise staging of actors in order to facilitate the performance of a play

prompt book

a master copy of the script that includes all cues and blocking for a production



For two weeks in its original 1938 run on Broadway, Wilder himself played the Stage Manager and later appeared in the role for many summer stock productions.

Thornton Wilder in *Our Town*
by thorton.wilder

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the traditional role of a stage manager? Why do you think Wilder uses the character of a stage manager as his narrator? How do the stage manager's actions reflect the role of a stage manager during the production of a play? How do they differ from the traditional understanding of what a stage manager does? What does Wilder's choice of a narrator suggest about the verisimilitude of the play?

Analyze the unconventional character of the Stage Manager. Compose a thoughtful argument regarding the way you believe his character should be interpreted. How does his presence in the play impact the development of plot and theme?

How is the Stage Manager different from the other inhabitants of Grover's Corners? How does this difference affect his function in the play? Do you think the play would be different without the Stage Manager? If so, how?

Thornton Wilder played the Stage Manager. Ask students to discuss the different jobs that exist in the theatre—playwright, director, actor, technician, designer—and talk about when it makes sense for some of these roles to overlap. Brainstorm the challenges of writing a play and then becoming one of the actors, as well as serving in the roles of both director and actor in a single production.

In Virginia Stage Company's production of *Our Town*, the Stage Manager is played by a woman. Does that change the character's function in the play? How does the gender reversal make an impact on the role?

OUR TOWN

AT VIRGINIA STAGE

DIRECTOR'S NOTE by CHRIS HANNA

Genuine artistic works act like floating anchors in our lives. They face us directly into oncoming storms as they hold us safely through the fiercest tides. Without the mooring of our greatest classics, society would be lost at sea.

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is such a classic.

I've had the privilege of staging Wilder's masterpiece twice in my life. On my first journey, exactly 25 years ago, I was starting out as junior faculty at Old Dominion University, setting up life in a new community and preparing to become a first time father. With my later journey, my son is now grown, I have directed nearly fifty subsequent shows in my adoptive region and I have felt death breathe closely across my shoulder. Although Wilder's play remains unchanged on the page, his words appear newly to me on this outing and I am able to weigh that difference to record changes to my life.

The most relevant of those changes for this performance involves my evolved understanding both of community and of Hampton Roads. Twenty-five years ago, this region had seemed an eclectic collection of zip codes, each rendered faceless by their distance from New York City. Now, I understand Tidewater (I love its authentic name) as a breathing organism of shared geography, concerns, and stories. Although my own ancestral roots lie far away in Western Europe, I've even developed a deep connection to the stones and souls of Tidewater's powerful graveyards that defies both logic and DNA.

In my previous telling of this play, I approximated the tight knit affinity of Grover's Corners through dialect, skin color, and physical circumstance. For this production, I embrace rich lessons I've learned from this diverse, itinerant, and spread out region. True community cannot be achieved through glorified history or regional dialect any more than it can be concocted through PR pitch and brochure branding. Legitimate community evolves through common pursuit, shared crisis, and joint creativity.

This production focuses little on crafting realistic details of a fictional New England village. Instead, it strives to build our appreciation for all that community can offer in a challenging global age. I am grateful that Tidewater extended its briny embrace in my life and encourage us all to make its history and camaraderie our own.

DIRECTOR - **CHRIS HANNA** SCENIC DESIGNER - **NARELLE SISSONS** COSTUME DESIGNER - **JANE ALOIS STEIN**
 LIGHTING DESIGNER - **AKIN RITCHIE** SOUND DESIGNER - **J.C. NIGH**
 STAGE MANAGER - **RAFI LEVAVY** ASST. STAGE MANAGER - **BRIANA VALDERREY**



Watch videos of VSC's *Our Town* actor
 Ellen Harvey discussing her role as
 the Stage Manager:
vastage.org/ot-sm-harvey



OUR TOWN

STAGING & SET DESIGN



The unencumbered stage encourages the truth operative in everyone. The less seen, the more heard. The eye is the enemy of the ear in real drama.
—Thornton Wilder

FROM THE SCRIPT:

ACT I

(no curtain)

(no scenery)

(The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light.)

*(Presently the **STAGE MANAGER**, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and three chairs downstage left, and a table and three chairs downstage right.)*

(He also places a low bench at the corner of what will be the Webb house, left.)

(“Left” and “right” are from the point of view of the actor facing the audience. “Up” is toward the back wall.)

(As the house lights go down he has finished setting the stage and, leaning against the right proscenium pillar, watches the late arrivals in the audience.)

(When the auditorium is in complete darkness he speaks:)

NOTE TO THE DIRECTOR IN THE SCRIPT:

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 that absence. There remain, however two ways of producing the play. One, with constant subtle adjustment of lights and sound effects; and one through a still bolder acknowledgment of artifice and make-believe: the rooster's crow, the train and factory whistles, and school bells frankly, man-made and in the spirit of “play”. I am inclined to think that this latter approach, though apparently “amateurish” and rough at first, will prove the more stimulating in the end and will prepare for the larger claim on attention and imagination in the last act. The scorn of verisimilitude throws all the greater emphasis on the ideas which the play hopes to offer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Wilder was very specific about the set design and staging of his play. How much control should an author have over the way that his or her text is interpreted and/or adapted? Do you believe directors and/or actors have a responsibility to honor an author's wishes, or do they have the right to interpret texts in their own way? Explain your answer.

The set for this play is evocative of an empty theatre with only a few suggestive set pieces to designate the various locations. How do you think a “realistic” or “modern” setting would alter your experience of the play? Be specific.

OUR TOWN STAGING & SET DESIGN

(The lights start to glow into a dawn effect, which is followed by a gradual morning light, which increases to noon through the action of the act.)

STAGE MANAGER. *(cont.)* The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn.

(Cock crows offstage.)

The sky is beginning to show some streaks of light over in the East there, behind our mount'in. The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go – doesn't it?

(He stares at it for a moment, then goes upstage.)

Well, I'd better show you how our town lies. Up here – *(that is: parallel with the back wall)* – is Main Street. Way back there is the railway station; tracks go that way. Polish Town's across the tracks, and some Canuck families. *(toward the left)* Over there is the Congregational Church; across the street's the Presbyterian, Methodist and Unitarian are over there. *(off down right)* Baptist is down in the holla' by the river. Catholic Church is over beyond the tracks. Here's the Town Hall and Post Office combined; jail's in the basement. Bryan once made a speech from these very steps here. Along here's *(Main Street, parallel with the back wall)* a row of stores. Hitching posts and horse blocks in front of them. First automobile's going to come along in about five years – belonged to Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen...lives in the big white house up on the hill. Here's the grocery store and here's Mr. Morgan's drugstore. *(pointing right and left behind him)* Most everybody in town manages to look into those two stores once a day. Public School's over yonder. High School's still farther over. Quarter of nine mornings, noontimes, and three o'clock afternoons, the hull town can hear the yelling and screaming from those schoolyards. *(He approaches the table and chairs downstage right.)* This is our doctor's house, – Doc Gibbs'. This is the back door. *(Two arched trellises, covered with vines and flowers, are pushed out, one by each proscenium pillar.)*

There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery. This is Mrs. Gibbs' garden. Corn...peas...beans...hollyhocks...heliotrope... and a lot of burdock. *(crosses the stage)* In those days our newspaper come out twice a week – the *Grover's Corners Sentinel* – and this is Editor Webb's house. And this is Mrs. Webb's garden. Just like Mrs. Gibbs', only it's got a lot of sunflowers, too. *(He looks upward, center stage.)* Right here's... a big butternut tree. *(He returns to his place by the right proscenium pillar and looks at the audience for a minute.)* Nice town, y'know what I mean? Nobody very remarkable ever come out of it, s'far as we know. The earliest tombstones in the cemetery up there on the mountain say 1670-1680 – they're Grovers and Cartwrights and Gibbises and Herseys – same names as are around here now. Well, as I said: it's about dawn. The only lights on in town are in a cottage over by the tracks where a Polish mother's just had twins. And in the Joe Crowell house, where Joe Junior's getting up so as to deliver the paper. And in the depot, where Shorty Hawkins is gettin' ready to flag the 5:45 for Boston.

(A train whistle is heard. The STAGE MANAGER takes out his watch and nods.)

ACTIVITY

Draw a map of the town from the description given by the Stage Manager in the beginning of Act I.

ACTIVITY

How would you design a set for *Our Town*? Would you keep the set entirely empty? What types of props would you incorporate throughout the play?

ACTIVITY

In Virginia Stage Company's production, the audience becomes a part of the set and the set has moved out into viewing areas. How does that change the audience's experience with the story? Do you think that this change supports or detracts from Thornton Wilder's intent with minimal staging? Explain your answer.



Watch a video of VSC's *Our Town* scenic designer Narelle Sissons: vastage.org/otset-sissons

OUR TOWN

ACTIVITY

Match the character to the line:

A "Gee, I wish a person could get married without all that marching up and down."

B. "Only it seems to me that once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don't talk in English and don't even want to."

C. "Oh, Ma! By ten o'clock I got to know all about Canada."

D. "Mama, do you know what I love most in the world, do you? Money."

E. "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?"

F "Yes. Now you know. Now you know: that's what it was to be alive."

G "Everybody's resting in Grover's Corners. Tomorrow's going to be another day. You get a good rest too. Good night."

H. "I was the scarest young fella in the state of New Hampshire. I thought I'd made a mistake for sure."

I. "Come on, Bessie!"

J. "A man looks pretty small at a wedding, George. All those good women standing shoulder to shoulder, making sure that the knot's tied in a mighty public way."

K. "Chew that bacon good an' slow. It'll help keep you warm on a cold day."

THE STAGE MANAGER

MR. WEBB

MRS. WEBB

EMILY WEBB

WALLY WEBB

DOC GIBBS

MRS. GIBBS

GEORGE GIBBS

REBECCA GIBBS

SIMON STIMSON

HOWIE NEWSOME

PROFESSOR WILLARD

MRS. SOAMES

CONSTABLE WARREN



Virginia Stage Company's *OUR TOWN*, Season 40 | Photos by Samuel W. Flint;
Justin Keyes as George, John Forkner as Mr. Webb, Kristi J. Meyers as Mrs. Webb
Missy Dowse as Emily, Ellen Harvey as The Stage Manager



A. George Gibbs B. Mrs. Gibbs C. Wally Webb D. Rebecca Gibbs E. Emily Webb
F. Simon Stimson G. The Stage Manager H. Doc Gibbs I. Howie Newsome
J. Mr. Gibbs K. Mrs. Gibbs

OUR TOWN

Resources and Further Reading

www.thorntonwilder.com

www.thorntonwildersociety.org

Thornton Wilder: A Life.
by Penelope Niven

"Our Town." *Shmoop University, Inc.*
www.shmoop.com/our-town

"Thornton Wilder and the Importance Of Being Optimistic;
The Optimism of Thornton Wilder."
by Alan Schneider
The New York Times, 6 July 1975

Original New York Times review of *Our Town*, February 5th, 1938:
www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/theater/OurTown.pdf

The A to Z of the Progressive Era
by Peter C. Holloran
Scarecrow Press, 2009

"20 Startling Facts about American Society and Culture"
by Adam Hadhazy
www.livescience.com/51448-startling-facts-about-american-culture.html

New Stage Theatre *Our Town* Study Guide:
newstagetheatre.com/manage/wp-content/uploads/Our-Town-study-guide.pdf

The Actor's Gang *Our Town* Study Guide:
www.finchpark.com/courses/drama/files/Our_Town_Study_Guide.pdf

"Inside the Avengers Cast's One-Night-Only Performance of *Our Town*"
by Christopher Campbell
www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/11/avengers-cast-our-town-reading



STUDENT MATINEES

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

THE WELLS THEATRE

NOVEMBER 29, DECEMBER 6, 13, & 20, 2018

AT 10:30AM

NOVEMBER 30, DECEMBER 5, 7, 12, 14, & 19, 2018

AT 10:00AM

TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE

THE WELLS THEATRE

MARCH 20 & 21, 2019 AT 10:30AM

ROALD DAHL'S MATILDA THE MUSICAL

THE WELLS THEATRE

MAY 29, 2019 AT 10:30AM

For more information, visit vastage.org/studentmatinees/

Discounted Student Rush Rates available for all Virginia Stage performances!

Tickets are \$15 one hour prior to showtime for FUN HOME and NATIVE GARDENS.

CLASSROOM OPPORTUNITIES

Shakespeare in Action Workshop – \$150 | 90 min.

This workshop goes beyond traditional analysis to show how iambic pentameter and poetic devices are actually secret codes that teach the actor how to make the text come alive for audiences.

Spontaneous Storytelling Workshop – \$150 | 90 min.

Using a variety of fun, interactive theatre games and improv exercises, we will practice various improvisational storytelling styles and formats in pairs, groups, and solo performance. Lesson points include ideas about creative collaboration, performance energy and connection, imagination and inspiration, discovering strong physical and emotional character choices, trusting your ideas, and working with cues from genre and music.

Playwriting Workshop – \$150 | 90 min.

Drama requires action and conflict. This workshop includes exercises that help writers create vivid, three-dimensional characters for the stage.

Adapting Literature to the Stage Workshop – \$150 | 90 min.

What is the process of making that thick, luscious novel into a theatre piece? How does one communicate period peculiarities to contemporary audiences? Focusing on *A Christmas Carol*, *Matilda*, and *The Bluest Eye*, this workshop takes us on the journey from page to stage.

Improv for the Classroom Workshop – \$150 | 90 min.

Freeing the mind, fostering collaboration and building positivity are just some of the by-products of Improv. Learn more about using this art form to team build, teach sharing, and create empathy.

Custom Workshop – \$200 | 90 min.

If there is a particular subject that would be helpful in your particular field, we are glad to work with you in utilizing the theatrical toolbox and our teaching artists in creating something just for you!

Email eertu@vastage.org for information.



Actor Ryan Clemens, descendant of Mark Twain (pen-name of writer Samuel L. Clemens), brings to life the celebrated American author and humorist in this theatrical, hour-long performance.

"...the performance was so spellbinding that my students were more than entertained, they were hooked! Ryan Clemens captured the dialect, the spirit, the sounds, the history, the culture of another era and mesmerized his audience with his one act play."

–Marianne, High School Teacher, Chesapeake, VA

A show for ages 10 to 110, MEET Mark Twain is a fantastic touring program for schools, libraries, churches, meetings, and fundraisers of all sorts!