

Prime Stage Theatre

presents...

OUR TOWN

Written by Thornton Wilder

Directed by Mark Calla

October 17—25, 2009

New Hazlett Theater

Generously funded and by the PA Council on the Arts, the Heinz Endowments, the Laurel Foundation,



THE GRABLE FOUNDATION
dedicated to improving the lives of children



and supporters like you!

Our Town Resource Guide

Welcome to Prime Stage Theatre: *where literature comes to life!*

Dear Educator,

Welcome to the 2009-10 season at Prime Stage Theatre! It is my absolute pleasure to be joining the Prime Stage team as Education Director and to be working on this remarkable season of classic literature. My background encompasses both the theatre side and education side of Prime Stage's mission. I recently received an MA in Theatre Arts at the University of Pittsburgh and before that double majored in English and Theatre at the University of MN, Morris. My coursework and production experience focused on theatre-in-education and theatre for youth. I will never forget playing Gollum in UMM's 32nd

annual children's theatre production, *The Hobbit*, or my recent portrayal of the title role in Shakespeare-in-the-Schools' production of *Tomato Plant Girl*. For the last two years, I have also been a teaching artist in the Pittsburgh area through such organizations as the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, City Theatre, Gateway to the Arts, and the MGR Foundation. I look forward to truly blending my passion for innovative education and high-quality theatre artistry at Prime Stage Theatre and to working with other passionate educators like you who understand and realize the potential that live theatre—and all arts—



Of Mice and Men, PST 2007

has on breaking down barriers and opening doors in our young people's minds and hearts. I am pumped for what is sure to be a great year—starting with *Our Town*, then *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and ending with one of my favorites, *Romeo and Juliet*. Where else can *literature coming to life* be this much fun?

~Alyssa Herzog
Education Director

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Did you know...

- **Prime Stage Theatre** has been in existence for over 13 years.
- In that time, **Prime Stage Theatre** has served over 30,000 students.
- **Prime Stage Theatre** is the region's nationally awarded theatre that addresses adolescent literacy.

Check out what's inside!

<i>Before the Show</i>	2
<i>Thornton Wilder</i>	2
<i>Pre-Show Activities</i>	3
<i>House Rules</i>	4
<i>During the Show</i>	4
<i>Post-Show Activities</i>	5
<i>Additional Resources</i>	6

Curriculum Connections Corner

Prime Stage Theatre is committed to directly correlating our programs to the PDE Academic Standards. *Our Town* and this resource guide may be used to address the following curriculum content standards:

Arts and Humanities:
9.1-9.4

Reading, Writing, Speaking, & Listening:
1.1-1.8

History:
8.1, 8.3

Geography:
7.3



Before the Show

Our Town in 30 seconds...

Our Town takes place in Grover's Corner, New Hampshire between the years 1901 and 1913. Our journey through these years is led by the Stage Manager, a wry and insightful character. In the first act, "Daily Life," the Stage Manager introduces us to the town and people of Grover's Corner, including Dr. Gibbs and his family, the local newspaper editor Mr. Webb and his family, and other colorful locals. The day begins with gossip about the town, a milk delivery, and breakfast at the Gibb and Webb homes. In the afternoon, we meet George Gibb and Emily Webb as they walk home from school.

Later in the evening, we see alternate scenes of the children doing their homework and the local church choir practice. Act Two, "Love and Marriage," leaps forward three years to the impending nuptials of George and Emily. We are shown the moment that they became an item over a phosphate soda in the local drug-store, their moments of fear and hesitation right before the wedding ceremony, and the moment when they finally tie the knot. Lastly, the third act, "Death and Eternity" begins with the funeral procession for Emily who recently died in childbirth. Emily is reunited in the cemetery with other residents of Grover's Corner who died over the years. Emily struggles to

come to terms with her new surroundings, and only after reliving the most unimportant day of her life over again does she realize that "living people don't understand." The play ends with Emily saying goodbye to the world while a grieving George throws himself onto Emily's grave.

...or less!

Wilder sums up the play's central question as "What is the relation between the countless 'unimportant' details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, history, and current religious ideas, on the other?"

Thornton Wilder: International Man of Mystery

It's little wonder that Thornton Wilder became a writer. He was born into a family headed by an Editor father, Amos, and an arts-loving mother, Isabella, on April 17, 1897. He had one older brother and three younger sisters—all of whom would go on to college and lead successful lives as writers (and one scientist, his sister Janet!). For a time, Wilder lived in China during his father's tenure as the U.S. consul general to Hong Kong, but within two years he and his family moved back to California, where he graduated from Berkeley High School in 1915. He then moved across the country to attend Oberlin College in Ohio before finishing his B.A. at Yale. The early 1920s saw Wilder teaching French at an elite prep school and studying for his MA in French from Princeton. Through all this he was writing, finally publishing his first novel, *The Cabala*, in 1926. Wilder broke into the mainstream only one year later with the publication of his second novel, *The Bridge to San Luis*, which garnered him his first Pulitzer Prize and critical acclaim. It was only in the late 1920s that Wilder seriously began to dabble in playwriting.

*What do we do with this man who was a playwright, novelist, actor, teacher, musician, essayist, translator, adaptor, opera librettist, and screenwriter...
-- playwright John Guare*

His first successful production, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, was produced off-Broadway in 1926. He shortly thereafter published several of his short plays in the volumes *The Angel That Troubled The Waters* (1928) and *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other One-Act Plays* (1931). In this latter volume, he began to experiment with his trademark style: a bare, minimalist stage for actors. His next plays consisted of translations of famous European plays. His reputation as a playwright soared, however, with the publication and Broadway production of *Our Town* in 1936. This play won another Pulitzer Prize for Wilder, as did his later, more daring play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, in 1942. He served in the military during WWII, winning many medals of distinction. Throughout his later life, he taught at



the collegiate level and continued to write plays and novels. His farcical play, *The Matchmaker* (1954), would be turned into the Broadway hit musical, *Hello Dolly!*, in the 1960s. In 1963 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Wilder died in his sleep at his home in Hamden, Connecticut at the age of 78 on December 7, 1975.

Pre-Show Activities

Prime Stage's mission, *bringing literature to life*, encompasses not only students' interaction with a literary piece of theatre, but also with the text itself. Prime Stage encourages all teachers to incorporate our production's text (in its original or dramatized form) into the curriculum. The activities below presume that students have read the text.

Map it Out: After you've read the play, ask students to visualize Grover's Corner based on the description given by the Stage Manager in Act One. How is the town laid out? Where is the cemetery, the churches, the school, etc.? What businesses are on main street? What colors and textures do they see on the buildings and landscape? Have students sketch out what they see "in their mind's eye." Then have students compare drawings, noting similarities and discussing differences—why might one color or texture be more fitting to Grover's Corner based on what we know about it?

PDE Academic Standards 1.3, 7.3, 8.1

Community Journal: Ask students to journal about "their" town and community. What makes it a community? What are the makeup of its members, and how do they relate to one another? How has it changed since they have belonged to that community (for better or worse)? Anonymously exchange journals in the class and have students respond to the posts—what intrigues them about the community they are reading about? What do they want to know more of? Do they agree with the author's definition of community? Why or why not? *PDE Academic Standards 1.4-1.5*

Community profile: Ask students to gather "hard facts" about their community, similar to what the Professor cites in Act I. Assign students to interview at least two community members to discuss their town, why they live there, what they like/dislike about their community, etc. Have students report back on their findings and discoveries in a "community profile." This could be a traditional report, a chamber of commerce-type brochure, a poster, or a monologue similar to that given by the Stage Manager at the beginning of *Our Town*. *PDE Academic Standards 1.4-1.8, 8.1*

GHOST LIGHT

In our production, we make use of a theatrical practicality (and superstition) known as the "ghost light"—a single light bulb on a pole left on stage when the theatre has ended for the night. It prevents injuries if anyone comes into a dark theatre, but is also said to scare away any ghosts!

TIME

Wilder manipulates our sense of time in the play by moving back and forth throughout the 13-year span of the play's action. The Stage Manager is responsible for this time shifting in the play. Why might Wilder have done this? Is this playing with time effective in telling the story? How does it widen the story's meaning?

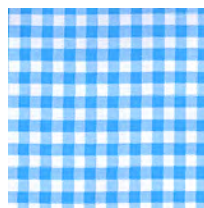
What is...what!?!?

The time period that Wilder set the play in—the early 20th century—might seem very foreign to people used to automobiles, cellular telephones, and the internet. Familiarize yourself with the world of the play before you see it by doing Google scavenger hunts or using a dictionary—and find both the differences and similarities with our modern world!

PDE Academic Standards 1.7-1.8



- Phosphate Sodas and Soda Fountains
- Plants: hollyhock, burdock, heliotrope
- Gingham fabric
- Rheumatism



- Spool
- Livery stable
- Highboy
- Cicero's orations
- Pince-nez
- Board of Selectman
- Home milk delivery
- Snapping beans



House rules (...and we don't mean your mama's house!)

It goes without saying that when most children today hear the word “theatre” they think “oh, MOVIE theatre.” And with that thought comes all of those things that we do at movie theatres: eat popcorn, drink noisily from soda cups, put feet on the seat, text message—and the list goes on from there. But live theatre is just that: it's LIVE with LIVE HUMANS who react and respond to the audience, something that we at Prime Stage think is the beauty of the theatre experience. Because of this, live theatre requires a higher level of respect between the audience and performer in order for the experience to be a positive one.

Please review the following “house rules” with your students prior to attending *Our Town*:

—Please stay together with your group and wait for the ushers to help you all find your seats.

—Please turn all cell phones and pagers **completely off** before the performance. If you are texting during the performance, you will be asked to leave.

—No photography or video taping.

—No eating, drinking, or chewing gum during the performance or inside the theatre house.

—While we encourage active listening and appropriate responses to the play such as laughing or clapping, please do not talk to your neighbors during the performance.

—Please stay in your seat until the intermission or the end of the show.

—Be polite and attentive. Show your appreciation by clapping—the actors love to see how much you enjoyed the show!

PDE Academic Standards 1.6, 9.1

ARENA STAGING

Most theatre productions take place in a proscenium theatre. The audience views the action of the play as if through a picture frame; they are the outsiders looking in. This production of *Our Town* uses arena staging, or “theatre in the round.” How does it make you feel to be an audience member in this type of staging? Does it change your relationship with the play?

During the Show

Read the following questions before the show.

Think about the questions as you're watching the show and write your answers in a notebook or journal during intermission or on the bus ride home.

Write a critique of the show based on your responses.

PDE Academic Standards 9.1-9.4, 1.4-1.5

“I would rather be attacked than unnoticed. For the worst thing you can do to an author is to be silent as to his works. An attack upon a town is a bad thing; but starving it is still even worse.” ~author Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

1. Actor choices—How did they move and speak? Did they seem like people we know? How did they relate to other characters?
2. Designer choices—What design element captured your attention the most—the set, costumes, lights, or sound—and why? How did the design elements work together to support the entire production? What choices did the designers make in materials, colors, intensity, detail, etc.? Were the design elements more descriptive or suggestive? What symbols did you find in the design elements?
3. Director choices—What was the style, pace, and rhythm of the play? What stage pictures helped to tell the story? How did the director unify all the elements of the production?
4. Interpretation—Did the director make a statement about life now? How did the characters, design, and play make you feel? What did the play mean to you? What might it mean to others?
5. Evaluation—Why do you suppose the playwright wrote the play? Why was the play produced now? When were moments where the storytelling was very clear? When were moments you were confused about the story? Who would enjoy the play and why?
6. *Our Town* specific questions—How is time defined in the play and how did the production highlight this? How was the weather portrayed in the production and why was it important? How was the theme of memory explored through the staging and design elements?

Post-Show Activities

Timeline: Ask students to research significant events during the change/transition in the 20th century (1890 to 1910) and into the 21st Century (1990-2009) in the United States. Encourage students to also include any additional world events from around the world. What changes do you consider to be the most important and why? How were cultures and societies changing as a result of these events and innovations? Which era do you think more radically redefined life in the United States and why? What things do you think seem unchanged between the two eras? Next, using the Stage Manager's speech at the beginning of Act Three as an example, write a monologue about the most important changes that you've seen in your life. Explain the changes that you selected. *PDE Academic Standards 8.1, 8.3, 1.4*

Time Capsule: The Stage Manager discusses at the end of Act One a list of items that the town will put into the cornerstone of the new bank. The reason: "So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were." In small groups, have students brainstorm and decide upon five items to put into a time capsule from 2009. These items should represent the present historical moment and help people in the future understand our contemporary way of life. Have the groups explain their choices and share their opinions about the objects' relationship to the present and how someone in the future might engage with particular items. If possible, actually have groups create a time capsule and with permission, plant it (in the ground, a building under construction) or store it (in the principal's office, at a bank) to be found or opened at a designated date in the future. Additionally, ask students to write a personal narrative to include in the time capsule, using either the exercise below, a more general description of themselves and their lives, or a compressed version of their world view similar to the Stage Manager's sentence near the end of Act Two: "The cottage, the go-cart,...once in a thousand times it's interesting." How do their capsules compare to that of Grover's Corners? What are the similarities and differences? *PDE Academic Standards 1.3, 1.4, 8.1*

Change Over Time: Wilder reminds us in *Our Town* about the transitory nature of life—nothing is permanent. The Stage Manager at the beginning of each act points to the small changes that have occurred over time. Ask students to reflect upon and jot down words or phrases that come to mind when they hear the word "change." Have students share some of their responses with the classes, which may include: necessary, sad, difficult, fun, etc. Then lead the class in a discussion about the nature of change, using open-ended questions like:

- Can we avoid change? Is it inevitable?
- What are some positive changes that adolescents experiences?
- What kinds of difficult changes do you face in the near and distant future?
- How has the recent shift in national government changed your lives, if at all?

Next, have students brainstorm personal changes that they've experience in the last year, like physical changes (growth, teeth, hair), social changes (friends, interests), internal changes (values, attitudes), and external changes (new school, move). Have students select the one change that has had the most significant impact on their life and write a personal narrative about the specific change they've selected, including a description of the change, a reflection on the change and its impact on their life, and feelings about the change (from their point of view and the view of others).

PDE Academic Standards 1.4-1.5, 8.1

Our Town In Translation: Since it was first produced in 1939, *Our Town* has been performed all over the globe in numerous different languages—legend has it, at least one performance of *Our Town* occurs every day somewhere on Earth! Ask students to relocate the play to a foreign country or the country of their origin. What changes might be made in the casting, set, or plot? Would the play work as well? Why or why not? (Note: More adventurous students may be willing to perform a scene from the "translated" play.) *PDE Academic Standards 1.2-1.3*

From Springfield to Grover's Corners: In the longest-running television show in history, *The Simpsons*, characters live out their daily lives again and again in Springfield, a town as unique as Grover's Corners. What do you think Wilder would have thought of *The Simpsons*? Write a memo or letter from Wilder to Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*, imagining what Wilder's comments might be about. *PDE Academic Standards 1.2-1.5*

Here comes the Bride Mrs. Gibbs calls weddings "farces," and Mrs. Webb says sending girls into marriage is "downright cruel." Although the Stage Manager says theirs is "a good wedding," both George and Emily have second thoughts before they exchange vows. How do students think marriage was viewed at the turn of the 20th century or when Wilder wrote the play? How have conventions and attitudes about marriage changed since then? Ask students to interview their parents, grandparents, relatives, or friends about their weddings. Then have students interview one another about their own expectations. List the similarities and differences students discover.

PDE Academic Standards 1.3, 1.6, 8.1

Prime Stage Theatre

Where Literature Comes to Life

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WILDER QUOTES

I am interested in the **drives** that operate in society and in every man. **Pride, avarice, and envy** are in every home. I am not interested in the ephemeral. I am interested in those **things that repeat and repeat and repeat** in the lives of millions.

I am not an innovator but a **rediscoverer of forgotten goods.**

We live in what is, but we find a thousand ways not to face it. **Great theatre** strengthens our faculty to face it.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the purpose of Professor Willard's and Mr. Webb's direct addresses to the audience.
2. Examine some of the characters' regrets and complaints: Mrs. Gibbs laments never having been to Paris; the Stage Manager regrets Joe Crowell's death in World War I ("All that education for nothing"); Simon Stimson is an unhappy alcoholic. Why did Wilder include these sentiments? Does it make the play realistic or just gloomy?
3. Who do you think the Stage Manager is? Is he realistic? Human? Divine?
4. When *Our Town* was revived in 2002, Donald H. Wolfe wrote in *The New York Times*, "Thornton Wilder's play [*Our Town*] may have more to say to a contemporary audience than it did when it opened in 1938." What do you think he meant? In the same article, Paul Newman commented that the play was "appropriate in these times." Considering recent world events, do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
5. At the end of Act 3, Emily says "We don't have time to look at one another." Interpret what she means using your own observations and experiences as supporting evidence.
6. What are some of the recurring words in *Our Town*? What is their purpose and how do they reflect the play's overall message?
7. Choose the most important line in the play to you and explain why.

PDE Academic Standards 1.3, 1.6

WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK!

Teacher and students can now fill out their own feedback forms on Prime Stage's website: <http://www.primestage.com/education.htm>. Fill out a survey and be entered to win 2 free tickets to the next Prime Stage production!

Resources for your Classroom

BOOKS

Byrner, Jackson R., ed. *Conversations with Thornton Wilder*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.

Castronovo, David. *Thornton Wilder*. New York: Ungar, 1986.

Haberman, Donald C. *Our Town: An American Play*. Boston, MA: Twayne, 1989.

Harrison, Gilbert A. *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder*. New Haven, CT: Ticknor & Fields, 1983.

Simon, Linda. *Thornton Wilder: His World*. New York: Doubleday, 1979.

Smith, Joel A., ed. *Wilder Rediscovered: Brown-Forman Classics in Context Festival*. Actors Theatre of Louisville, 1997.

Videos

Videos can be found in the Carnegie Library system.

Our Town (2003); PBS productions

Our Town (1940); FOCUSfilm Entertainment

WEBSITES

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~wilder/index.html>
The official Thornton Wilder Society website

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=772
"Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*: Reader as Writer" lesson plan with many links to other resources and pictures

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/>
Includes rich teacher guide and information about the film version

<http://www.coterietheatre.org/resources.aspx>
Resource guide from Coterie Theatre's 2008-09 production

http://www.ferndale-rep.org/study-guides/Our_Town.pdf
Extensive, in-depth study guide from Ferndale Rep