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## Review

### 'Our Town': a timeless classic

By Eleanor Cade Busby

"Our Town" opens Friday, April 29 at the Poe Theater in Newcastle. Heartwood's production of the play, under the direction of Griff Braley, strives to bring the production directly into the audience. It has an inclusive quality that welcomes the attendees into the story.

Thornton Wilder began his 1938 play "Our Town" with some of the most famous stage direction in American theater: "No curtain. No scenery." He could have added "no props" as, nearly without exception, all props are imagined in each production of this timeless classic.

In "Our Town," Wilder highlights the importance of communication and human connection, literally bringing his audience into contact with his characters by breaking the fourth wall and defying the theatrical convention of separating the actors from the audience.

"Our Town" insists on a lack of artifice, both in pared-down staging and in the person of the Stage Manager, who speaks directly to the audience much as an interlocutor does. Its emotional transparency - no hidden meanings, no brooding silences - and its spare, realistic dialogue are its greatest assets.

Its evocation of life in a small New Hampshire town in the early 1900s seems idyllic; the only deviant in this righteously decent community is a drunken choirmaster.

Even Wilder's formal innovations have been picked up by others: his portrayal of a bride's inner panic was brilliantly exploited by Stephen Sondheim in a number in "Company" called "Getting Married Today."

"Our Town" is really every town at any time. The story is simply told: a boy and a girl in a small New Hampshire town and the people of that town go through an ordinary day in the first act. It all revolves around Emily and George, the children of the town's newspaper editor and the town's doctor, and how they go through life, and death, in their small town.

The cast is perfectly suited, both in talent and in appearance, to their parts in this ode to the quieter life we all need to revisit at times. Braley and his crew have brought Grover's Corners to life, a tribute to the dedication of the actors as

well as the determination of the director.

Grace Experience captures all of Emily's smarts and exuberance, her joyousness and openness, and her pained acceptance of a new reality.

It's a smaller moment, but there's a scene where a teenage Emily stares out her window at the moon, while George, across the way, does the same. The actors are perched atop stepladders, and Experience stares out into space with such palpable yearning and intensity, marveling at the beauty of the world, that the audience can't help but absorb her wonder.

Vincent Hannam, as George, is a find. He persuasively plays a dreamy, naive adolescent living in 1900s rural New England, without resorting to condescension. He is uncertain and awkward and utterly charming.

The final scene, with Hannam leaning on Experience's gravestone, is heartbreaking with his understated grief.

The "Ice cream soda" scene has the Stage Manager (Stephen Shore) doubling as the shopkeeper. (Shore, Experience, and Hannam made a field trip to Waltz's Soda Fountain in downtown Damariscotta on Sunday to see how the drinks are made.)

Kathleen Creamer, who served the three, was impressed at the dedication to be realistic. "They watched every move I made," she said, "and then watched each other carefully." The lesson in making an imaginary ice cream soda looks real with no props at all; drinking from invisible straws from absent glasses must have taken as the three did an admirable job at preview.

As Julia Gibbs, Allison Eddyblouin catches her character's insecurities and anxiety, her pride in being a small-town wife and mother, and her frustration that she is probably doomed never to achieve her fondest wish, to see Paris.

Garrett Martin, as Doc Gibbs, epitomizes the man's decency and integrity, and also his obtuseness where his wife is concerned.

As Charles Webb, the newspaper editor, Steven Hufnagel strikes the right notes of mildly jaundiced skepticism, acerbic humor, and, in his scenes with Experience, the kind of paternal affection and



Emily (Grace Experience) and George (Vincent Hannam) are a bit hesitant after their wedding in "Our Town." The Heartwood production is true to Thornton Wilder's timeless story of a small town. (Photo courtesy Jenny Mayher)

wisdom that make their scenes very affecting.

Mary Boothby, in the role of Myrtle Webb, Emily's mother, has a no-nonsense, pragmatic humor and generosity. Anyone who has ever lived in a small town will know her, and that her gruffness is a shield for a soft heart.

The two mothers, Eddyblouin and Boothby, are perhaps the most

credible characters onstage. They never "act," they simply offer up these hardworking women with matter-of-fact ease.

Stephen Wallace, as the dyspeptic Simon Stimson, has some lines of pointed dialogue but conveys, in a way that no dialogue could, that there is often a heavy price to be paid for so much small-town intimacy, so much judgment, so

much knowledge.

As the Stage Manager, Shore has a comforting gravitas, a self-deprecating manner, and an easy way of letting important lines sit lightly before they sink in. Once in awhile, a resemblance to Hal Holbrook appeared. He is the glue that holds "Our Town" together and Shore's charm extended into the audience.

In the smaller roles of Howie Newsome, the milkman; and Mrs. Louella Soames, the town gossip; Mike Rowe and Susan Goodwillie Steadman, respectively, make vivid impressions. Sam Bailey, Nick Buck, Lainey Catalino, Elizabeth Chasse, Kent Cooper, Jonah Diaute, Thalia Eddyblouin, Andrew Lyndaker, Nick Miaoulis, Isobel Petersen, Scott Petersen, John Reinhardt, and Riley Stevenson ably round out Wilder's assortment of townspeople.

In the opening of act three, as the Stage Manager looks over the cemetery, he says, "Now there are some things we all know, but we don't take 'em out and look at 'em very often. We all know that something is eternal ... everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being." There is something eternal and appealing about this production of "Our Town."

"Our Town" opens Friday, April 29 at 7:30 p.m. The show runs April 29 and 30 and May 5-7 at 7:30 p.m. and May 1 at 3 p.m. Student tickets are \$10, adult tickets \$30. On Thursday, May 5, adult tickets are \$25. Reservations are suggested. To make a reservation, call 563-1373.



Allison Eddyblouin as Mrs. Gibbs (left) and Mary Boothby as Mrs. Webb are the heartbeat of "Our Town," opening Friday at the Poe Theater. They are delightful as two mothers who keep their families running in 1901 Grover's Corners. (Photo courtesy Jenny Mayher)