

Coastal Culture

Experience 'Our Town' as it was intended, at Heartwood

Stage Door Diva

NEWCASTLE — Heartwood Regional Theater presents its version of "Our Town," opening this weekend, and continuing May 5-7, at Poe Theater.

Written by Thornton Wilder and first presented in 1938, the play takes the audience on a visit to Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, led by Stage Manager, portrayed for Heartwood by professional actor Steven Shore.

The Stage Manager is invested in telling this tale, and wants you to be fully invested as well. If you have not seen the play before, there's a part of me that wants you to stop

reading now, but my job is to share what I experienced, so continue on if you're OK with a little spoiler.

The play is presented in three acts (with one intermission) representing Daily Life, Love and Marriage, and Death.

As the Stage Manager says to open Act III, "There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being."

Earthling spoiler alert: Everyone dies.

A friend told me he didn't remember a lot about the play, but he remembered not liking the second part. I told him since the message is a whole



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lot about death being inevitable, I would imagine that is why.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, and there's a whole lot of play and a whole lot of living before we get there.

Act I sets the scene of small town America. Early morning light, deliveries, births, breakfast, family rituals, daily chores. Work, school, church, community.

We meet teens George and Emily, whose lives provide the timeline for this story, despite being no less or greater of importance than the other characters in the town and in the play.

George is played in a genuine manner by professional actor Vincent Hamman.

Emily Gibbs is portrayed by pro actress Grace Experience.

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Courtesy photo

Visiting actress Grace Experience (Emily Webb) remembers the lovely, ordinary moments of her life, while John Reinhardt of Wiscasset (Professor Willard) looks on in a scene from "Our Town."

'Our Town'

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ence, who is expressive as a nervous friend, an inquisitive child, and an exuberant member of her community. Her grace of movement belies a dancer and ... she cries on cue. This is not an easy task and it removes any ability of the audience to remain aloof.

Act II finds the town and the families a few years down the road, on the cusp of George and Emily's marriage. The vignettes that make up "Our Town" are

brief and yet palpably real: Comfortable discourse between spouses, parent-child interactions over getting to school on time, chores and marriage, cold feet, celebration, love and tiny moments with neighbors that are nothing special and everything wonderful about life at the same time.

When the show began, I thought it would be a slice-of-life story, and at first I compared that life to today. These folks lived their lives in their tiny community, many eschewing foreign travel, college or life outside what was known.

It's not only because it's set in a long-ago time, before our modern conveniences of express transportation and communication. The real truth is that we still have our daily habits and rituals and desires and beliefs that carry us through our lives as if there will always be another day, despite the fact that we know full well there may not be.

I was apprehensive about Act III. It begins in the cemetery, almost a decade beyond Act II. Some of the townsfolk we've met previously now reside there. They are awaiting the arrival of the newest of their ranks.

By and large, they rest serenely, commenting on the sky and the weather and reminiscing a bit. But instead of bemoaning what is lost, they are forward-looking and gently judge the living for wasting life on mourning and fussing about with daily rituals instead of being present in the gift that is every moment.

The players, professionals and local amateurs alike, are well cast and engaging. I wanted to know about their lives, their history and what became of them. Yet I recognized that each one was the equivalent of a grain of sand in time, of so many lives lived in ritual and by rote, and gone so quickly, making room for the next generation and the next.

Even so, it's not a sad play; it ends with a great deal of peace.

Heartwood is once again presenting a story with high production value, a depth of talent and some very nice artistic touches - the players entering the audience, the deceased emerging in light from the dark umbrellas of mourners, effective yet subtle lighting, clever use of set and props.

If you've seen it before, you will not be disappointed in this production, which brings the story in a fresh light.

If you've never seen it, I'm excited for you to experience it now.

Many students who were assigned to read "Our Town" were done a disservice. You can study the themes that way, but this is a story best experienced as it was meant to be, on stage.

When I entered the theater, Director Griff Braley was speaking to his cast. He told them to get more comfortable with moving in the space freely, as we do in life, instead of standing still during dialogue.

"Be present in the space," he said.

That message was echoed and still resonated with me through to the end of the show.

Be present in your life. Be present.

For reservations, contact Heartwood by email at info@heartwoodtheater.org or by calling 563-1373. Times and tickets available at heartwoodtheater.org.

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