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Dining Out, Entertainment & Arts

A visit to 'Our Town' is a trip worth taking

By LISA KRISTOFF

Come Friday, April 29, when the lights go up at the Poe Theater, the famed Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, population: 2,642, will come into view. And when a man under those lights introduces himself as the Stage Manager, you'll know that Heartwood's production of "Our Town" is about to commence. And, I don't mind telling you right at the top of this review that it is a delight from start to finish.

Thornton Wilder's first Pulitzer Prize winning play, "Our Town," is a timeless piece of theater that remains relevant despite the milkman making home deliveries with his horse or the horses tied up on Main Street. Why? Because it's about the importance of relationships — the ones between family members, husbands and wives, friends, coworkers, choir members and such. It's also about the importance of "realizing time." That's what Wilder calls it. Actively being in each moment of your life, because all lives are gifts and that the gifts that really matter are love and time. We might call it becoming Zen-like in our day to day living.

The story mainly focuses on the Webb and Gibbs families and how they end up becoming one family when Emily Webb weds George Gibbs. Their romance is charming. Innocent. Real.

Grace Experience and Vincent Hannam are so very talented, and so very right for the roles of Emily and George. Hannam is so incredibly well, adorable, as a young man falling in love with the girl (practically) next door. He is eager, charming. Hannam and Experience are a delight to watch and be part of their courtship ... you feel and see the awkwardness, the anticipation and slight nervousness right from the first act, "Daily Life" — like they just know on some level that they are destined, yet it blows their minds that love came to town — for them.

One particularly lovely scene takes place on a moonlit night. George has set up some kind of telegraph for them to talk to each other any time from their upstairs bedroom windows. In the play, they stand on ladders.

"I can't work at all. Isn't the moonlight terrible?" Emily asks George. Emily sounds as enamored by the moon as she is by George. Behind them, under dim light, a church choir is rehearsing "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds," the music and voices in the background — so much life and love all around.

Then there's their first "fight." Emily tells George he's gotten pretty full of himself as a baseball player

and it's not a good thing. And all the girls say so. He thanks her for pointing out this "character flaw" saying that a guy can't be perfect. Emily says men can so be perfect, "... My father is, your father is — and there's no reason why you can't be either." A tender sweet moment that ends in their going for an ice cream and having "the" conversation. The one that establishes their destiny as a couple. The ice cream shop owner is also the Stage Manager (Stephen Shore).

Shore is perfectly cast as the Stage Manager, who speaks directly to the audience and to the characters, I mean residents, of Grover's Corners. He has a warm countrified accent and welcoming demeanor, and the way he tells the audience about the place, the people and times (1901-13), you are convinced of his fondness for Grover's Corners and the simplicity of life there. But he is also concerned, sometimes angry about the shortsightedness of the human condition.

If there was a way, Stage Manager would make sure folks 'realized life' — before they found themselves in the cemetery.

The third act, "Death and Dying," is deeply moving. The light comes up on the folks we meet in Grover's Corners who have passed on. The actors sit on chairs as their graves — Mrs. Gibbs, Emily's brother Wally whose appendix burst when he was quite young; the choir master, Simon Stimson (Stephen Wallace) who had an alcohol problem and hung himself; and, the latest addition, Emily Webb Gibbs who died while giving birth to her second child, age, 27 or 28.

As her graveside service ends and folks begin to leave, Emily's spirit joins the others in the cemetery.

Stage Manager says, "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."

Emily is having a hard time adjusting to the fact that she has died because she still feels as though she was alive. She wants to go back and relive her days. The dead tell her not to do it, that the experience will not be as wonderful as she thinks it will. She won't be able to interact with them at all. Emily insists on one day, just one day to return to. That day is her 12th birthday, Feb. 11, 1899.

Stage Manager cautions Emily's spirit saying, "And as you watch it, you see the thing that they, down there, never know. You see the

future."

Still, Emily chooses to return to her childhood home on her birthday. She watches her mother moving about, getting breakfast that will join the presents on the table. Emily tries to speak to her mother, but a Mrs. Webb is always in motion and b. Emily cannot be seen. The hustle, bustle, love and overall emotion of that morning in her home just becomes too much for Emily's spirit.

Crying she says, "I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back... up the hill... to my grave."

Before she returns to her resting place, she says goodbye to the town, her family, sunflowers and hot baths, sleeping — and waking up. All those things living folk tend to take for granted.

"Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you," she says and then asks Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it ... every, every minute?" "No," he replies. "The saints and poets, maybe — they do some."

Gives new meaning to the adage, "You can never go home again" (derived from Thomas Wolfe's book of the same name), doesn't it?

The ensemble cast of this beloved classic are genuine. Involved in tune. True to their characters. They are: Allison Eddyblouin, Elizabeth Chasse, Grace Experience, Nick Miaoulis, Steven Hufnagel, Stephen Shore, Nick Buck, Izzy Peterson, Laine Catalino, Garrett Martin, Vincent Hannam, Mike Rowe, Andrew Lyndaker, Mary Boothby, Riley Stevenson, Susie Stedman, Thalia Eddyblouin, Kent Cooper, John Reinhardt, Sam Bailey, Scott Peterson, Stephen Wallace, Jonah Daiute, and JoJo Martin.

Some characters appear from the audience for a scene while others bring some of their scene work into the audience. This direction increases the atmosphere of intimacy both with the space (Poe Theater) and the characters.

"Our Town." An intimate look at being human, about relationships, about living each moment as if it was our last rather than as though we had all the time in the world. See this show with people you love and be present in each and every blessed minute.

"Our Town" is directed by the gifted Griff Braley. The show opens Friday, April 29. For ticket pricing and show times, call Heartwood at 207-573-1373, visit www.heartwoodtheater.org or email: boxoffice@heartwoodtheater.org.



THE WEDDING of Emily and George is cause for change and celebration in Grover's Corners from Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." Heartwood Regional Theater Company's production runs April 29 and 30, May 5-7. LISA KRISTOFF/Boothbay Register



EMILY IS THE NEWEST SOUL in the cemetery after dying while giving birth to her second child. LISA KRISTOFF/Boothbay Register