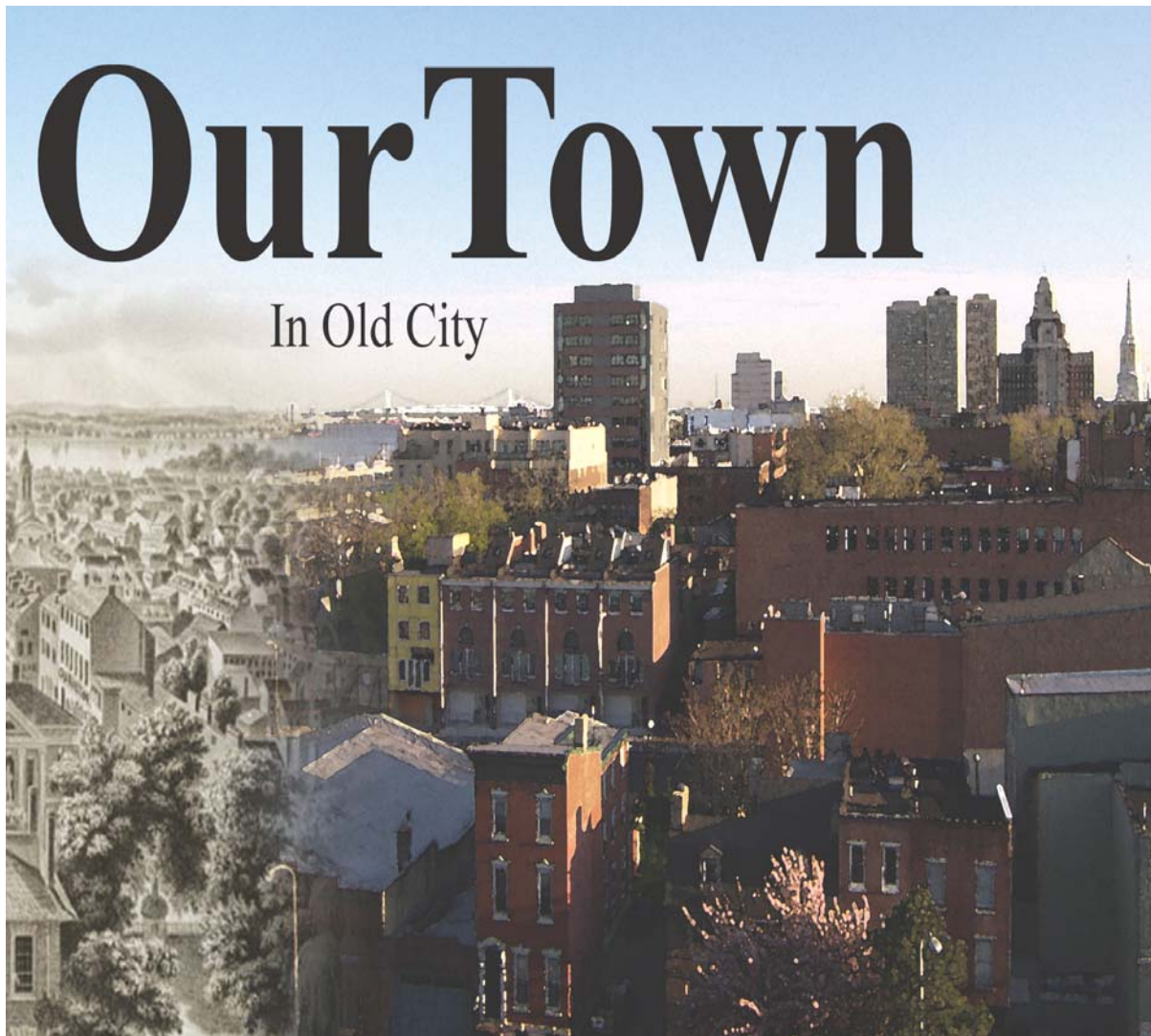


Arden Theatre Company and
Historic Christ Church Present



Our Town in Old City

By Thornton Wilder

Directed by Terrence J. Nolen

On the F. Otto Haas Stage & Historic Christ Church

May 22nd - June 22nd 2008

Our Town in Old City

Written by Thornton Wilder

Directed by Terrence J. Nolen

Associate Producer..... Matt Decker
Assistant Director..... Ed Robins
Set Designer..... James Kronzer
Lighting Designer..... Justin Townsend
Costume Designer..... Richard St. Clair
Sound Designer..... Troy Herion
Production Stage Manager..... Thomas Shotkin
Assistant to the Stage Manager..... Thomas Choinacky

Cast

Stage Manager..... Eric Hissom
Dr. Gibbs..... Kevyn Morrow
Joe Crowell..... David Corenswet
Howie Newsome..... Brian Anthony Wilson
Constable Warren..... Damien J. Wallace
Mrs. Gibbs..... Sherri L. Edelen
Mrs. Webb..... JoAnna Rhinehart
George Gibbs..... Peterson Townsend
Rebecca Gibbs..... Chioma Dunkley
Wally Webb..... Jordan Johnson
Emily Webb..... Rebecca Blumhagen
Professor Willard..... Bev Appleton
Mr. Webb..... Greg Wood
Simon Stimson..... Fred Andersen
Mrs. Soames..... Carla Belver
Si Crowell..... David Corenswet
Sam Craig..... Nathan Edmondson
Joe Stoddard..... Oberon Adjepong
People of the Town..... Krista Apple
Robert Bauer, Katrina Yvette Cooper, Juanita Frederick,
Dylan Jackson, Andy Joos, Brian Kurtas, Harry Philobosian,
Erin Read, Wendy Staton, Tara Van Ness

This study guide will be your companion in learning about the “fragile elegance of everyday life” created by Thornton Wilder. Though written many years ago, his themes and messages still ring true today and come to life in a unique way here in Philadelphia. Keep reading on to get inside glimpses into this play and this production at the Arden Theatre Company. Enjoy!

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Summary

Our Town, by Thornton Wilder begins in 1901 in a fictional New Hampshire town called Grover's Corners. The play examines everyday life in three acts; each one describing events in the lives not only of the people who lived in this small New England town at the beginning of the twentieth century, but of people today and in towns all over our country and the world.

ACT ONE is called "Daily Life". We first meet the Stage Manager, who guide and narrates the story. The set is bare and we meet the townspeople as they go about their day. Dr. Gibbs greets some of his neighbors, and the play begins with a celebration as we learn that he has just delivered twins in the town.

The children in the town are getting ready for school and we are introduced to Dr. Gibbs' family – his wife, Mrs. Gibbs, and their children, George and Rebecca. We also meet the Webb family – Mr. and Mrs. Webb and their children, Emily and Wally. After the children have rushed off to school, Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs chat while they feed the chickens. Mrs. Gibbs discusses a furniture salesman that offered her three hundred and fifty dollars for a piece of her furniture. She tells Mrs. Webb that she would like to sell it and use the money to go on a vacation to Paris. The only problem would be getting Dr. Gibbs to agree to it. Mrs. Webb encourages her to sell the furniture and try to convince her husband to go on a trip. She says that she repeatedly hinted to her husband that she wanted to see the Atlantic Ocean and it worked for her.

The Stage Manager returns to interrupt the ladies and he introduces Professor Willard who gives us some historical and scientific background on the town of Grover's Corners. We learn that the population of the town is now 2,640 (including the new twins). Then the Stage Manager turns the subject to town politics, introducing Mr. Webb who is Publisher and Editor of Grover's Corners *Sentinel*, the local paper. Mr. Webb describes the town as a "very ordinary town" and a little dull, but one where people who live there seem to like it.

The Stage Manager asks the audience if they have any questions for Mr. Webb. From the audience's questions, we learn that there is not much alcohol consumption in the town. One person asks about awareness of inequalities and Mr. Webb replies that people in the town are aware of social inequalities and enjoy gossiping about the topic but in general they just go on with their lives and hope that one day things will even out for them. The last question is about culture in the town. Mr. Webb tells the audience that there is not much beauty and culture in an artistic way, but people in the town are always recognizing beauty in the nature around them.

The Stage Manager turns our attention back to the townspeople and as school lets out for the day, Emily Webb and her friends come walking down the street. George Gibb runs down the street throwing and catching a baseball. George and Emily talk to each other about their school day, and George compliments Emily on the speech she made in class that day. It is clear she is very smart and likes school. George tells Emily about his plan of becoming a farmer on his uncle's farm one day and suggests that when he gets stuck on a problem in his math homework, Emily should give him hints out of her window.

When Emily and George part ways, Emily helps her mother in the kitchen and tells her all about the speech she made in school. Emily is a teenager and it is obvious by the questions that she asks her mother that she is interested in boys and dating.

Again the Stage Manager appears. He tells us about the new bank that is being built in Grover's Corners and that he is writing this play in order to preserve the history of Grover's Corners and to show future generations how ordinary people lived in the early 1900s.

It is now evening in the town and the town choir, lead by Simon Stimson, is rehearsing. After the rehearsal, three women – Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Soames – gossip about Mr. Stimson who seemed to be drunk at choir practice that evening. The ladies leave for the night and around 9:30 pm the town is quiet. Various townspeople admire the beauty of the moon and the Stage Manager announces the end of the first act.

ACT TWO is called "Love and Marriage" and takes place three years later, on July 7, 1904. In the Arden Theatre production, Act Two is set next door in historic Christ Church where George Gibbs and Emily Webb get married. They have both just graduated from high school and the Stage Manager tells us that this is a popular time in Grover's Corners to settle down and get married.

It is the morning of the wedding and it has been raining in Grover's Corner. Mrs. Gibbs goes about her morning and chats with neighbors about the wedding, receiving well wishes from all of them. The two families meet in the kitchen, Mr. Webb offers advice to George and although George would like to go visit Emily, the adults agree that the bride and groom should not see each other until the wedding.

The Stage Manager gives us some background on how this wedding came to be and takes us back to one afternoon after high school when George asks Emily to go out for ice cream. As they walked, Emily candidly told George that many people, including herself, think that he has become conceited since becoming a baseball star in the town. George appreciates Emily's honesty and insists that he will change. As they eat their ice cream, they discover that they both have feelings for each other and George decides that rather than going away to agricultural college, he would like to stay in Grover's Corners with Emily.

We then come back to the day of the wedding as the ceremony is about to begin. The Stage Manager officiates the wedding and, as the minister, gives a short speech on marriage. Mrs. Webb confides in the audience that she is upset about her daughter leaving her home and not knowing what to expect from marriage. When George appears upset as well, he tells Mrs. Gibbs that he feels pressured to grow up too quickly. Mrs. Gibbs then also gets upset about her son growing up and George comforts her.

As the choir sings, we realize that both George and Emily are nervous about this marriage. Emily requires some comforting from her father as she becomes anxious about leaving her parents' home. George ensures Emily that he will love her forever and the couple proceeds to the pulpit for the ceremony. During the ceremony, Mrs. Soames gossips and the minister debates with himself on his views of marriage. It is

clear that although marriage seems to him like a very ordinary thing, something about it is also very special.

ACT THREE returns to the theatre. It is now the summer of 1913. The stage manager explains that the town has gone through some gradual changes but in general, Grover's Corners has not changed very much. The Stage Manager is in a cemetery on top of a hill overlooking the town. He takes us on a tour of the cemetery and we learn of the townspeople who have passed away since we met them, years earlier: Mrs. Gibbs, Mr. Stimson, Mrs. Soames, and Wally Webb, to name a few. The Stage Manager points out the old and the new graves and calls attention to the "*something*" that exists within all human beings. He confronts the gravity of death and then turns back to the story of the people in the town, most of whom are attending the funeral of Emily Webb, who died during childbirth.

The members of the town, including Emily, who have died since the beginning of our story are also in attendance and converse with Emily over life and death. Emily realizes that the living people are in the dark about life's joys and she decides to go back and relive a day in her life. Mrs. Gibbs warns her not to go back to a day that was too important. Emily chooses to revisit her twelfth birthday where she watches all of the townspeople – her neighbors and family – go about their daily routines. Emily is struck by how fast life has changed around her and is moved by the beauty of everyday life. She says goodbye to what was her own life.



About the Playwright: Thornton Wilder

Thornton Niven Wilder was born on April 17, 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin. Wilder grew up with four siblings; his twin brother died shortly after birth. Thornton Wilder began writing as a young child and went on to win three Pulitzer Prizes; the second of which was for *Our Town*. He is the only American author to have the distinct honor of winning the Pulitzer Prize for both drama and fiction.

All of the Wilder children were extremely successful and well educated. In 1906, Wilder's father, Amos Parker Wilder was appointed the American Consul-General in Hong Kong and the family moved to China where Thornton Wilder attended boarding school.

Thornton Wilder's undergraduate education was interrupted by World War I and he left school for eight months to be a corporal in the Coast Artillery Corps. He then finished school with a bachelor's degree from Yale University. Wilder later joined the Army Air Force Intelligence in World War II. Throughout his life, writing and literature were extremely important to him. He wrote five novels and eight plays and collaborated on a number of films later in his career.

Although Wilder is known for his many contributions to literature as an author and playwright, he considered himself a teacher first and a writer second. Wilder taught at a number of universities including The University of Chicago and Harvard University. In 1934, he met the acclaimed feminist writer Gertrude Stein who became his mentor and friend. They remained friends and colleagues until her death in 1946 and the many letters exchanged between them have since been collected and published.

Other plays by Thornton Wilder include *An Angel That Troubled Waters* (1928), *The Woman of Andros* (1930), *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938), *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), *The Matchmaker* (1954), *The Alcestiad* (1955), and *Plays for Bleeker Street* (1962). He also penned the novels *The Cabala* (1926), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), *Heaven's My Destination* (1934), *The Eighth Day* (1967), and *Theophilus North* (1973).

About the Director: Terrence J. Nolen

Terrence J. Nolen is the Director of *Our Town* in *Old City* as well as the Producing Artistic Director and co-founder of Arden Theatre Company. Favorite Arden productions include all-Philadelphia casts of *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Hedda Gabler* and such musicals as *Sweeney Todd*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Falsettos*, *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*.



Terry directed the inaugural production of Arden Children's Theatre, *Charlotte's Web*. He has directed six world-premiere plays by Michael Hollinger, three by Dennis Raymond Smeal, and Michael Ogborn's *Baby Case*. Terry has been nominated for 18 Barrymore Awards, and was recently honored with awards for both Outstanding Direction of a Musical (*Winesburg, Ohio*) and Outstanding Direction of a Play (*Opus*). His short film *The Personal Touch* was nominated for an Emmy Award. Terry directed Michael Hollinger's *Opus* at Primary Stages last summer.

On the collaboration between the Arden and Christ Church for this production Nolen says, "I have wanted to produce *Our Town* at the Arden and Christ Church ever since we moved to *Old City* in 1995. This is one of my favorite plays. It speaks to those issues that are most important to me: finding meaning in the lives we lead and in our connection to one another. Theatre and churches have much in common. We both value community; we both explore the wonder and mysteries of the living, and we both enjoy a good song."

Welcome to Grover's Corners...



Population: 2,642 in 1901

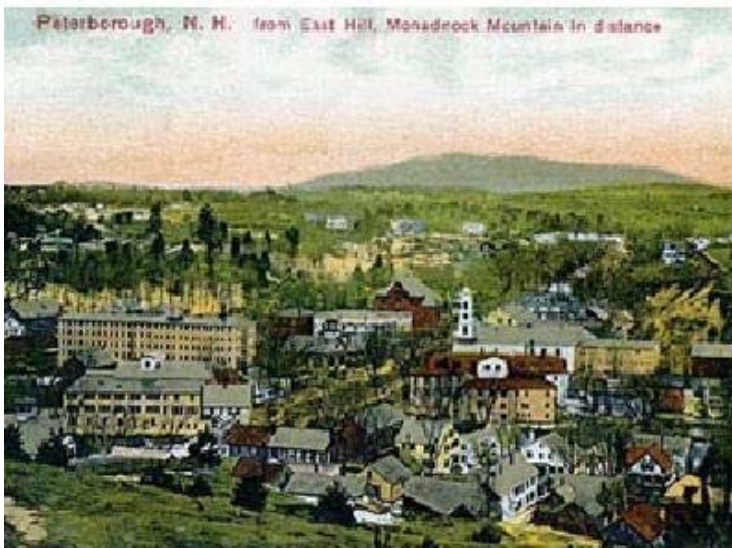
Religious Views: 85% Protestant, 12% Catholics, "rest, indifferent"

Political Views: 86% Republican, 6% Democrats, 4% Socialists

Culture and Arts: There is not so much in the way of the arts. People here have not heard of many artists or plays.

Sights of Beauty: We may not have much art, but there is plenty to look at. Our townspeople enjoy watching the sky and the beautiful birds that live here. We find beauty in simplicity.

How we get around: We mostly get around by horse drawn carriage, but we also have a few automobiles, the first one coming to the town in 1906 was owned by Banker Cartwright.



Wilder spent some time in Peterborough, New Hampshire and it is said to have been the inspiration for the fictional town of Grover's Corners.

Welcome to Old City, Philadelphia...



Population: 22,218 and growing! According to 2000 U.S. Census data, Old City's population was just 8,359 eight years ago.

Religious Views: Christ Church was founded in what is now Old City in the year 1695 and it was the first Episcopal parish in Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin's tomb is located in the Christ Church Burial Ground. Old City is also the home of the largest Quaker Meetinghouse in the world. The land for the Arch Street Meetinghouse was donated by William Penn himself.

Political Views: Old City residents represent a number of political views and this neighborhood is also the proud home of the National Constitution Center.

Culture and Arts: We are a neighborhood of art. Every first Friday of the month, our galleries open their doors for the public to enjoy. We are also the proud home of Arden Theatre Company!

Sights of Beauty: We are right next to Penn's Landing and the Delaware River. Independence Mall is beautiful at all times of year.

How we get around: We mostly get around by automobiles but we also have horse drawn carriages, usually ridden by out-of-town visitors to our neighborhood. We have subways and buses and even an amphibious boat that drives on both land and water.

Christ Church in Philadelphia Founded in 1695

No other church has played a more significant role in our nation's birth", according to historian David McCullough. Christ Church was founded in 1695 as a condition of William Penn's Charter. The current building dates to 1744, and has been cited as "our finest Early American church." Its steeple (1754) is the work of Robert Smith, one of America's earliest architects; Thomas U. Walter, later architect of the U.S. Capitol, redesigned the interior of the sanctuary (1832-36). At Christ Church, 25% of Philadelphia's free and enslaved Africans were baptized, a school was created to educate slaves, and the first black priest, Absalom Jones, was ordained. During the Revolutionary Era, Christ Church welcomed the Continental Congresses. Benjamin and Deborah Franklin and Betsy Ross were parishioners. Later, George Washington and John Adams attended services while they were the nation's Chief Executives. Here, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States was created from the ashes of the Church of England. Christ Church is a privately managed historic site that is an official component of Independence National Historical Park (INHP).



Every year 250,000 tourists visit Christ Church and its Burial Ground, putting it among the ten most frequently visited sites in the Philadelphia region. With seven signers of the Declaration of Independence and five signers of the Constitution buried here, Christ Church is a national shrine open to all, regardless of creed, giving inspiration and hope today as it did to the Founding Fathers centuries ago. Christ Church is not a museum or historical house, but an "authentic site", still doing what it began doing 311 years ago. This provides a particular resonance, linking early American lives with the interests of visitors. Stories about "religious tolerance" and "freedom of religion" have real meaning for visitors sitting in the pews of George Washington, Benjamin Rush and Sally Franklin Bache.

Town Terms

Below are a few terms and phrases used or referred to in *Our Town* that may be unfamiliar to you.

“Board of Selectman”: This is the executive branch of town government in many New England towns. Historically, the towns would choose a small group of men to make decisions about laws and budgets and other important topics affecting the town. This system is still in place today (although the role of selectman varies from town to town) and the board of selectman often includes both men and women.

“Highboy”: this is the piece of furniture that Mrs. Gibbs is considering selling. It is a tall shelf that people keep in a living room or bedroom.

“Pince Nez”: a style of eyeglasses that was popular in the 19th century. They did not hook onto the ears; instead the wearer would pinch them tight to his or her nose so that they would stay in place. The term is French for “pinched-nose.”

Edgar Lee Masters: Wilder refers to Masters in *Our Town* as “...one of those Middle West poets” He quotes Masters as saying “You've got to love life to have life, and you've got to have life to love life.” An American poet, Masters lived 1869 to 1950 and is best known for his book of poetry called *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), which described life in a small fictional town called Spoon River.

Our Town Discussion Questions

1. What role does time play in *Our Town* and how does Thornton Wilder use symbolism to call attention to time?
2. What was the significance of Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb's conversation about selling the highboy and traveling to Paris? What does this tell us about Grover's Corners and how does this contribute to the main themes of *Our Town*?
3. Why might Wilder have chosen to include so few props in the show? In your opinion, would more prominent props and set design add to or detract from the show?
4. What decisions do the characters struggle with in this play on a large level and on a more minute everyday level? What do their decisions teach us about them?
5. Discuss the role of the stage manager. What does this character teach us about theatre and why might Wilder have chosen this character instead of having a townsman act as the narrator?

Information collected from:

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~wilder/biography/frame.html>

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/ei_wilder.html

<http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/orient/mod9.htm>

<http://www.oldcitydistrict.org/indexFlash.php>

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