

THE PASSION TO KNOW WHAT LIFE MEANS TO US IN our town

BY ROSEMARY ERICKSON JOHNSEN

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Our Town is a landmark in American literature, and its innovations burst onto a theatre scene that aimed to be, as Thornton Wilder wrote, no more than “soothing.” In his preface to *Three Plays* (1957), the playwright asserted that “I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods and I hope a remover of obtrusive bric-a-brac,” pointing us toward an understanding of his aims and methods. Wilder, born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1897, was not only well-educated but also well-travelled, and these facts are reflected in the range of models he drew on to create this play. As Wilder scholar Paul Lifton summarizes, “Wilder simultaneously combines (for example) naturalistic, symbolist, existentialist, Brechtian, futurist, Pirandellian, ‘Chinese,’ Elizabethan, medieval, and ancient Greek elements in a single play; and in most instances the resemblances are intentional.” Wilder was also interested in Japanese

Noh drama, and was familiar with Japanese plays as well as adaptations of the form by writers such as W. B. Yeats. Not content merely to study German theatre in texts and through performances in translation, he went to Germany and Austria in 1928-29 to see it firsthand. In three months there, his journal records, he saw over sixty plays.

By the time he began working on *Our Town*, Wilder had already achieved critical and commercial success as a writer. His novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* had won the Pulitzer in 1927; after winning Pulitzers for *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), Wilder became the first writer to be honored with Pulitzers in both fiction and drama. He completed *Our Town* in lodgings near Zurich, Switzerland; he had been staying with Gertrude Stein, but decided he needed seclusion to fulfill his ambitions for the play. He described himself during this period as being “so happy I’m not even afraid of being happy.” Several years earlier, Wilder had promised producer-director Jed Harris the first look at his next full-length play. He sent scenes to Harris, who was excited by what he read, and then went to visit friends in Paris and London. He was summoned home from London by Harris for last-minute revisions prior to rehearsal. The play opened in January, 1938, in Princeton, N.J., to a less than enthusiastic reception. Wilder wrote to Gertrude Stein that “it’s been one long fight to preserve my text from the interpolations of Jed Harris and I’ve only won fifty percent of the time. . . . The play may be a failure.” But when it opened on Broadway a few weeks later, it was a rousing success. Biographer Gilbert A. Harrison notes that the play “would bring its author more attention and income—\$400,000 by 1964—than anything else he would write.”



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Such success produced two contradictory critical impulses, and the years of reviews and scholarly work reflect both: one is to dismiss the play as simple and sentimental, the other is to attempt to explain its evident staying power. Negative reviews of productions have echoed the complaints made when the play was first performed:

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it's nostalgic, it idealizes small-town life, it is little more than a "stunt." The occasional negative scholarly piece tends to focus on what the critic perceives to be the play's lack of political urgency. Scanning the bibliographies of Wilder reviews and criticism reveals plainly the continuing interest in Wilder's body of work although, curiously, many of these scholars lament perceived the lack of sufficient critical attention to Wilder. The production of scholarly work has been consistent, with spikes related to book publication (another Wilder book, the posthumous publication of his journals, a biography) and milestones like the centenary of his birth. There is a Thornton Wilder Society; it held the first international conference on his work in October of 2008. Scholarship on his work draws on approaches from across the spectrum: biographical interpretations, comparative studies with other dramatists, analysis of his sources, thematic readings, and analysis of Wilder as a Christian writer, among others.

Wilder's profound understanding of how theatre works its magic on playgoers is reflected in his choice of a deliberate simplicity to foster audience engagement with his universal themes about the human experience, even as his "any town" moves farther away in time from the towns we see around us. Literary and cultural study is currently undergoing a shift toward ambitious, universalizing theories; Wilder's achievement in *Our Town* is a fitting counterpart to models like René Girard's mimetic hypothesis for understanding common patterns of imitation and conflict in universal human behavior. In the most vital areas of human behavior, we take our cues from others, as *Our Town* demonstrates clearly. For example, when Emily tells George "I always expect a man to be perfect and I think he should be," she paves the way for his decision not to go away to college. She invokes not one but two models for George—"Well, my father is [perfect], and as far as I can see your father is. There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be, too"—and so he chooses to imitate them in the most immediate way available to him, by marrying Emily and setting up the same kind of home those "perfect" men have.

His Pulitzers in both fiction and drama show that Wilder understood the potential power of both genres: "the novel" he argued, "is pre-eminently the vehicle of the unique occasion, the theatre of the generalized one. It is through the theatre's power to raise the exhibited individual action into the realm of idea and type and universal that it is able to evoke our belief." The clarity and strength of his conception of theatre led him to acquiesce to filmmaker Sol Lesser's idea that Emily should live in the movie version. Why? "In the theatre [characters] are halfway abstractions in an allegory; in the movie they are very concrete. So, insofar as the play is a generalized allegory, she dies—we die—they die." Wilder as a dramatist understood the power of live theatre, and *Our Town* is the triumphant product of his understanding: "Yet the more one is aware of this individuality in experience (innumerable! innumerable!) the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to repetitive patterns. As an artist (or listener or beholder) which "truth" do you prefer—that of the isolated occasion, or that which includes and resumes the innumerable? The theatre is admirably fitted to tell both truths."

The frequent revivals of *Our Town* mean that for many playgoers, the surprise of earlier audiences at the daring technique—the stage manager's role, the lack of scenery and props, the dead sitting on their chairs in Act 3—may not transpire. And yet that need not matter for, as Wilder noted, "The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us." Wilder meant this play for all of us; it is *Our Town*, and Lookingglass Theatre's compelling production shows that this is not the play you may remember from high school.



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LOOKINGGLASS THEATRE COMPANY ON OUR WEBSITE AT lookingglasstheatre.org.**

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