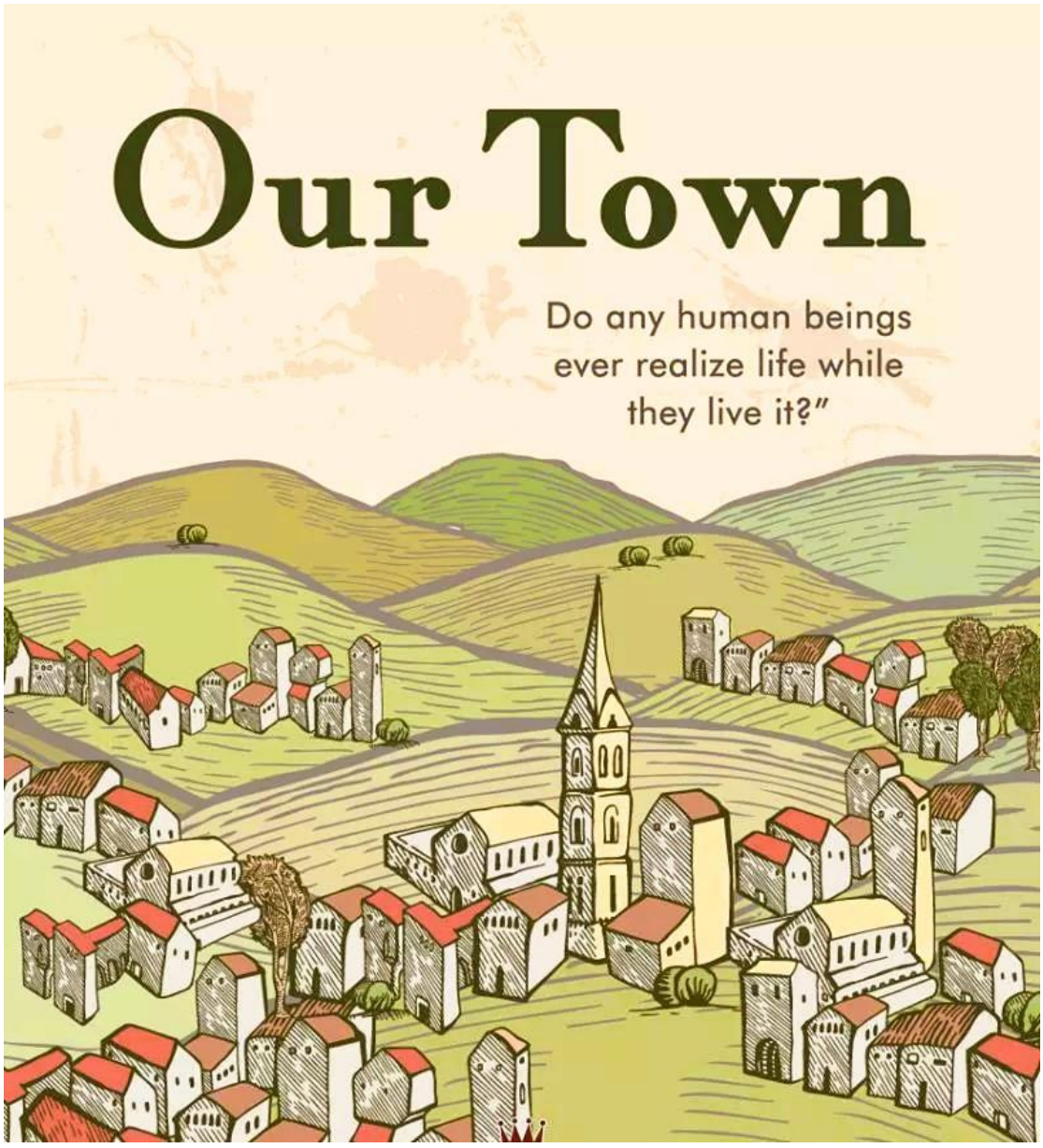
“WE LIVED THROUGH ALL OF THIS, BUT WE NEVER NOTICED IT.” THE BITTERSWEET TASTE OF ETERNAL EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE LIVED MOMENTS OF OUR SMALL LIFE.



“Our Town” (original title: Our Town) is a 1938 play by North American writer Thornton Wilder (1897–1975). It is considered a masterpiece of structure, poetic conception, and innovation, a hymn to life, which remains sweet despite all its hardships. It is a hymn to ordinary people, to their honest struggle to earn a living, to their moral and humanitarian values, to the sense of community and solidarity among the inhabitants of a socially egalitarian small provincial community, and a hymn to the “years of innocence” of the still-young, multiethnic American society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, just before the storm of the Great War. Using the story of a teenage love as its starting point, Wilder’s multi-award-winning play records the everyday life of a small town and all the little things that

make it up. Set in the fictional American small town of Grover's Corners—which the author probably drew from the town of Petersborough, New Hampshire, where he had spent many summers with his family—the play tells the story of the inhabitants of an ordinary town. Scenes from the town's everyday history between 1901 and 1913 are presented. For anyone seeking adventure, intense emotions, and great love affairs, "Our Town" is certainly not the play to choose. Throughout the work, Wilder uses metatheatrical techniques, such as narration by a stage manager, which define and elevate the play; it is a fine metatheatrical commentary, having been written with the explicit instruction that it be performed on an empty stage, without elaborate sets or costumes, as a rehearsal by a troupe rather than as a finished production. The combination of realism and expressionism, the bare stage (the play is performed almost without scenery, in the style of Japanese Noh theatre), the author's oblique gaze toward the audience through the play's dominant figure, the stage-manager-narrator, combined with its universal messages and tenderness of feeling, would prove to be an exceptionally enduring theatrical mixture. It was first performed at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1938. That same year, Wilder won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play remains popular today. As American critics jokingly like to say, every day somewhere in some American town, people are watching "Our Town."

In Greece, the play was first staged in 1945 by Katerina Andreadi's troupe, directed by Dinos Giannopoulos, and in 1954 by the Art Theatre, directed by Karolos Koun. In 1961–62 it was presented at the Dionysia Theatre, directed by Marios Ploritis, with Elli Lampeti as Emily Webb and Giannis Fertis as George Gibbs. At the same theatre, by then renamed "Dimitris Horn," Stamatis Fasoulis directed "Our Town" in 2003–04. Among other productions, our School's Theatre Group presented "Our Town" at the Altera Pars Theatre about five years ago.





In his understated way, Thornton Wilder was a radical writer who boldly experimented with literary forms and themes from the beginning to the end of his long career. Having deeply immersed himself in both classical and contemporary literature, he often blended the traditional and the modern in his novels and plays, continually exploring the cosmic within ordinary places. He is characterized by his unique “interplanetary” mind—the ability to write from a perspective that is at once American and universal. Wilder wrote theatre at a time when innovators of American modernism, such as Eugene O’Neill, had already prepared the ground

for the introduction of mainly European ideas beyond the boundaries of familiar realism. In 1935, Wilder met Gertrude Stein, the most important representative of American modernism, whose novel “The Making of Americans” deeply influenced him and led him to write “Our Town.” Wilder wrote theatre in order to celebrate innocence just before the violence of the Second World War would finally bury it. Without ideologically aligning himself with Brecht, Wilder handled his material in a “Brechtian” manner, seeking to move the audience of a “classless society,” the “common, the humble and the concrete,” as the poet Whitman and H. Melville in “Moby-Dick” also wrote. The “high” in Wilder’s works and mind does not wear cothurni. In a petty-bourgeois and middle-class society, he tells us, there are no special entrances for the rich and no special language. Everyone enters through the main entrance. What he completely failed to take into account was that a society with a few rich people and very many poor people, as America was at the time, could hardly be considered classless. In any case, and beyond whatever reservations one may have, both “Our Town” and his other works are a moving elegy of love for life on planet Earth, conveyed through pure theatrical means. Hence its resilience to the corrosive effects of time.

“Our Town” is the timeless hymn of everyday life. Divided into three acts, the text concerns an imaginary, typical American small town and the lives of its inhabitants, using simple and direct language that allows the spectator to relate to and identify with it, beyond place and time. Dawn and night, love and marriage, neighborhoods and gatherings, and walks in the moonlight are some of the small or great moments of the “heroes” of this town, which could be any town anywhere in the world. Human relationships, friendship, love, marriage, living together, death, the individual and collective dreams of a closed society, as well as the entire cycle of human life, are the themes explored by this text in a vivid and tender way. “Our Town” is a hymn to life, human dignity, and the precious value of every moment we live, however small and insignificant it may seem.

Through the relationship between two young people, Emily Webb and George Gibbs, the typical high-school boy of the period, Wilder records everyday life in their small town. Three acts at three different points in time. The introduction and presentation of the setting and its inhabitants at the beginning of the play, with emphasis on the stereotypical American families of the Gibbses (Dr. Frank, his wife Julia, and their children George and Rebecca) and the Webbs (publisher Charles, his wife Myrtle, and their children Emily and Wally), who live next door to each other, is followed by the love story and marriage between the children of the two families three years later. Then the third and final act, about a decade later (1913), refers to death, giving meaning to the “insignificant” everyday life that has

preceded it. The question that hangs over the play is whether there is anyone who actually lives their life. Does the ending determine the course, or the course the ending, or both?

The originality of the text lies less in the story it tells than in the way it is presented, through the use of the aforementioned metatheatrical techniques, establishing that what we see takes place within a theatrical performance by a troupe coordinated by the stage manager, who stands between actors and audience, breaking the fourth wall between them. In this way, spectators are brought closer to what is happening through the realistic theatrical illusion, into a fictional reality that they feel is also their own (thus justifying the "our" in the title of the play, which refers to both "sides" of the wall).



A scene from the production of the play featuring Elli Lampeti (Emily Webb) and Giannis Fertis (George Gibbs).

The play was written by its creator with the human being at its center, using the fewest possible stage elements and, as we see in the photograph above, employing mime to replace objects and their use, leaving "space" for the imagination, whose power the play celebrates. Wilder's own proposed minimalist approach highlights the protagonists and their relationships, with "abstraction" (in terms of the means and material used) freeing the work from the "confines" of time and place and helping its ideas and emotion to emerge.

Wilder breaks with the traditional notion of dramatic illusion. In a conventional theatrical performance, the dramatist hopes that the audience will become emotionally involved in fictional events and forget the surrounding theatre. Wilder, by contrast, makes no attempt to persuade the audience that the events of the play are real. Indeed, he constantly reminds the audience that they are in a theatre watching actors perform in a constructed world. His aim is to present, as much as possible, a performance of a typical day in a small town.

The dominant figure in the play is the stage manager, who, like the Chorus in ancient Greek drama, moves somewhere between the auditorium and the stage; he seats the audience, talks with them, provides information about the play, the dramatic characters, the town, the entire universe, while at certain moments he also participates in the action as a character.

Act One: Daily Life

The stage manager introduces the audience to the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, and its inhabitants as morning breaks in 1901. Joe Crowell delivers the newspapers, Howie Newsome delivers the milk, and the neighboring Webb and Gibbs families send their children to school. The stage manager guides the audience through a series of key moments in everyday life in the afternoon and evening, revealing the relationships and challenges of the characters. Beneath a bright full moon, Act One ends with siblings George and Rebecca Gibbs and Emily Webb looking out of their bedroom windows, enjoying the smell of heliotrope in the "wonderful (or terrible) moonlight," following Emily and George's earlier self-discovery that they like each other and their realization that both are trying to grow up in their own way.

From a radio adaptation of the play, adapted and directed by Kostas Bacas, we will hear, among other excerpts, the end of Act One and the stage manager's narration at the beginning of Act Two. In these radio excerpts, without the visual element to ground our imagination, we will surrender to the "ideal and beloved voices" of our older actors: Kostas Rigopoulos (as the stage manager), Grigoris Vafeias (Mr. Charles Webb), Louiza Podimata (Mrs. Myrtle Webb), Anna Venetis (Emily Webb),

Mimi Hrysomallis (George Gibbs), Lykourgos Kallergis (Dr. Frank Gibbs), and Maria Martika (Mrs. Julia Gibbs).

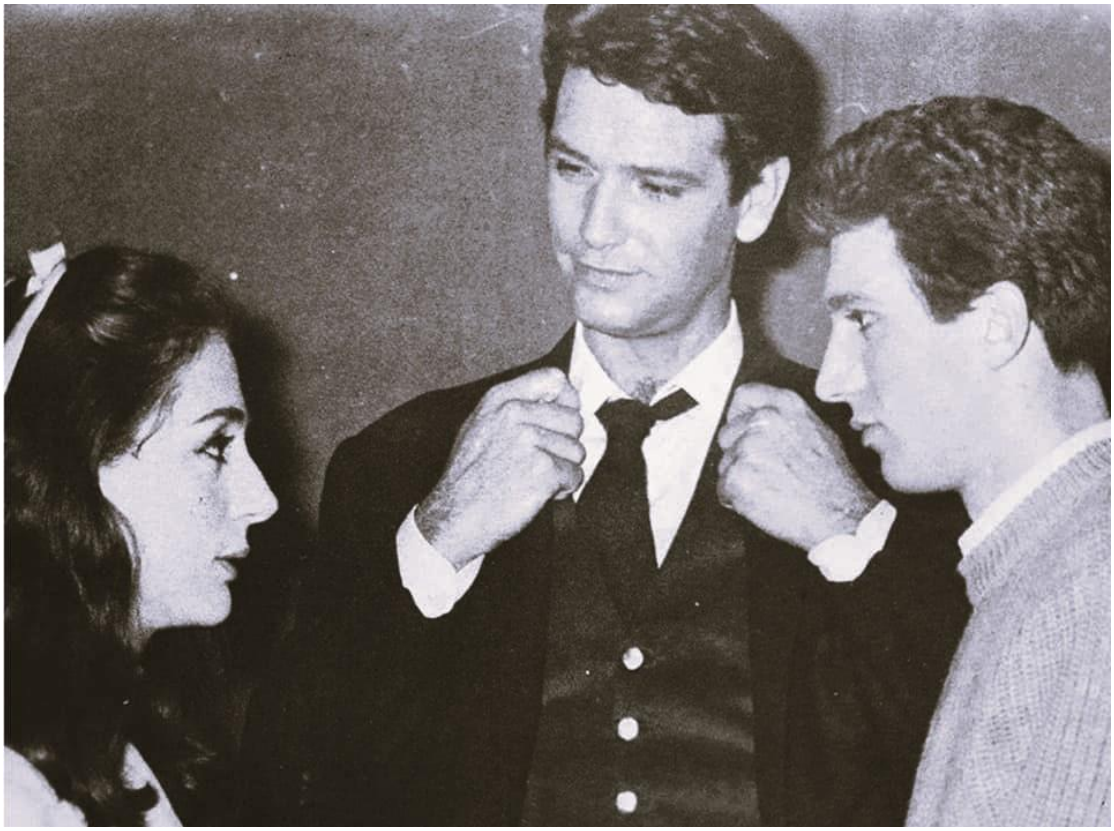


A scene featuring Kostas Rigopoulos, here as Charles Webb, and Elli Lampeti as his daughter (Emily Webb), from the 1962 production.

Act Two: Love and Marriage

Three years have passed, and George Gibbs and Emily Webb are preparing to get married. Howie Newsome brings the milk while it is raining, and his brother Joe Crowell, Si Crowell, is saddened that the baseball talent of his idol, George, will go to waste. The Gibbs couple, or perhaps mainly Mrs. Julia Gibbs, conveys in the following excerpt her mixed feelings about the forthcoming high point in their family life.

George Gibbs later makes an awkward visit to his future father-in-law, Charles Webb. Then the stage manager interrupts the action and takes the audience back one year. Emily accuses George of arrogance and, while eating ice cream, they discuss their future and their love. The scene gently balances tenderness with the almost comic quality found in the innocence of the young. George decides not to attend Agricultural College as he had planned, but to work and eventually take over his uncle's farm. The wedding follows, although beforehand George and Emily, in a moment of anxiety at the prospect of entering adulthood, have respectively confessed to their mother and father that they do not feel ready to marry. In terms of the work as a whole, it is a sincere love that develops out of everyday life and leads to a sensible, down-to-earth union between two people from the same background. For George and Emily, marriage is the culmination of their lives. For the spectator, however, it is simply another petty-bourgeois/middle-class wedding, no different from other similar ceremonies. Wilder's insistence on the rightness of marriage as a normal, commonplace expectation of life blends with the next act, in which the significance of insignificant things emerges against the backdrop of death, the natural end of life.



From the 1962 production, the wedding scene with Elli Lampeti, Nikos Kourkoulos, and Giannis Fertis.



The wedding scene from a 2015 production directed by Taine Rafaeli.

Act Three: Death and Eternity

The stage manager begins the act with an extended monologue emphasizing eternity and takes us to the cemetery outside the town and to the people who have died in the nine years since the end of Act Two: Mrs. Julia Gibbs (from pneumonia while traveling to visit her daughter Rebecca), young Wally Webb (from a ruptured appendix while at camp), Mrs. Soames, and the church organist, Simon Stimson, an alcoholic who died by suicide (hanging).

We meet the undertaker Joe Stoddard and the young Sam Craig, who has returned home from the funeral of his 26-year-old cousin. We learn that his cousin was Emily Webb-Gibbs, who died in childbirth while giving birth to her second child with George.

The funeral ends and Emily appears, meeting the dead. Although the dead sit quietly without moving, they radiate a sense of freedom through their voices and serenity. In contrast to their peace, the living are constantly struggling with problems. Wilder suggests that most people are so burdened by the problems of life that they cannot appreciate the simple fact that they are alive. Emily's mother-in-law, Julia Gibbs, tells her daughter-in-law that the dead must endure and forget the life that came before, but Emily refuses to listen to her. Despite the warnings of Simon, Mrs. Soames, and Mrs. Gibbs, Emily decides to return to Earth to relive just one day, the day of her twelfth birthday, with the routine we have already encountered in Act One of the play. She ultimately finds it too painful and realizes how much we should appreciate life "every single moment." Bitterly, she asks the stage manager whether anyone realizes life while they are living it and receives the answer, "No. Perhaps the saints and poets, a little." She then returns to her grave, beside her mother-in-law, watching with relative detachment as George kneels and cries at her grave. The stage manager concludes the play now that the circle of life has closed, speculates on the absence of life beyond Earth, and bids the audience good night. The simplicity of his departure accords with his overall purpose—to guide the audience through an unpretentious yet deeply moving meditation on what it means to be alive.

Three photographic snapshots from Act Three



Directed by Taine Rafaeli (2015)



Directed by Abigail Adams (2019)



From a production by the State Theatre of Northern Greece, directed by Giannis Vouros (2014).

Among the main characters of “Our Town” is Emily, whom many directors regard as the leading figure, given her dominant position in the third act, where she replaces the stage manager and becomes the voice of the play’s central ideas. In Act One, Emily falls in love with her classmate George; in Act Two, she marries him, and they live together for nine years, until her death during the birth of their second child. In Act Three, we encounter her in the Elysian Fields, the final destination of the virtuous according to Greek mythology, which Wilder uses here to broaden the timeless horizons of the events.

So far, there have been four Broadway revivals of the play, the best known being the 2002 production, directed by James Naughton, in which Paul Newman played the stage manager. The two excerpts from that production that we will watch include the wedding scene that concludes Act Two and the ending of the entire play in the heavenly setting of Act Three, where, when the dead Emily enters, she asks for one favor: to be given the opportunity to visit Earth again for just one day, a happy day (her birthday), so that she can see her loved ones again. Her wish is granted, but she hurriedly returns, disappointed, having realized that people have not learned to appreciate what they are given while they are alive.

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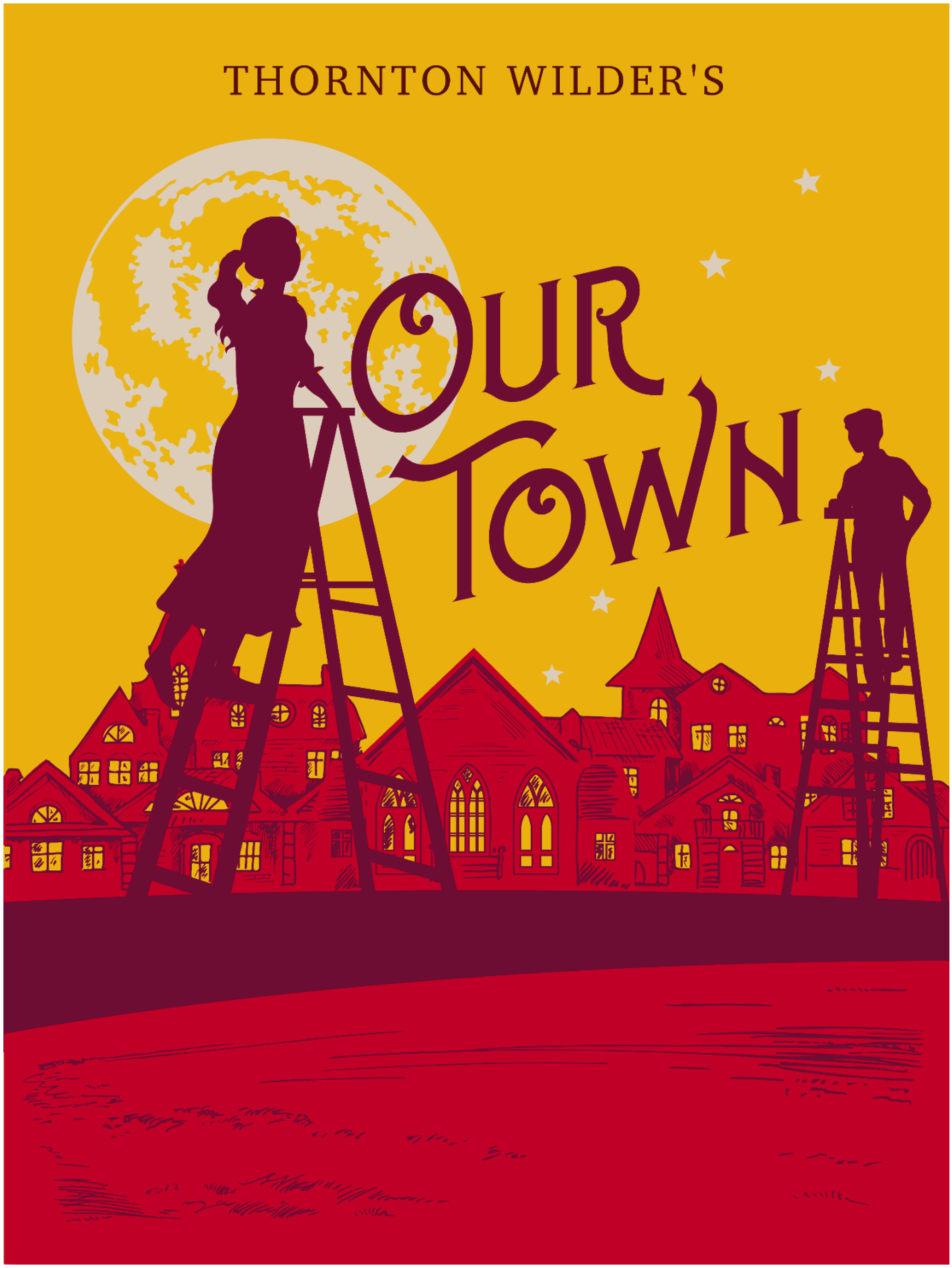
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Wilder's multi-award-winning work is not only "an attempt to assess the priceless value of even the smallest events of our everyday life," as the author himself stated, but also touches the essence of life with sensitivity and tenderness. Everyday and insignificant moments that time erases from memory as it passes are masterfully illuminated to reveal the magic hidden behind all that has determined and continues to determine, to a greater or lesser degree, the course and future of human existence. The play does not deal with great events or extraordinary characters. Its focus is on the utterly ordinary inhabitants of this quiet town, and especially on two families, those of Dr. Gibbs and publisher Webb. As we have seen, the narrator between stage and auditorium is the stage manager, who gives the audience various pieces of information and occasionally takes on supporting roles in the action. In general, the kindness of the characters, their mutual understanding, and their selfless solidarity are so strongly emphasized that they make them seem unreal. They are people who neither quarrel nor harbor intense desires. They do not dwell particularly on their past, nor on their future. Their ambitions, like their actions, remain within the limits of their safe little world.

Of course, the play may place great emphasis on human kindness, but that does not mean it sees everything through rose-colored glasses. There is also a melancholy side to everyday life in the small town. In the geography of the action, the prison, for example, is also present as a symbol of another, far from idyllic life. Nor is it rosy that most people are uneducated. Nor is there room in this microcosm for the sensitive artist, while boredom abounds, leading some, such as Simon Stimson, to alcoholism and suicide. Wilder does not fail to allude indirectly to the country's social problems, as he raises the unanswered question of whether these major social issues concern the inhabitants of the area. The people of Grover's Corners, however, are mainly concerned with their own lives. It is true, of course, that every human endeavor ends in death. That is why this work by Wilder, although it resembles a simple story, is much more, especially because of what is casually heard within it, such as the issue of social inequality and the "pointless" sacrifice of local people so that the country could continue to be called the "United States of America" and the fragmentation and autonomy of states could be avoided. People who had never strayed far from their own region were unjustly sacrificed simply for the unity of a diverse state. Yet all these darker colors of life, the author chooses to keep in the footnotes of the action, thereby giving more space to the optimistic messages to emerge. This is because his aim

is to highlight values capable of supporting human beings in the struggle for survival and coexistence with others. And he finds them, as we have said, in the smallest things, those that are beside us every day and that we essentially fail to see. Wilder holds the microscope in one hand and the telescope in the other: on the one hand he focuses on the particular, and on the other on the universal. He reminds us that, just as the inhabitants of the small town sit down to dinner after work, so did the inhabitants of ancient Athens hundreds of years ago, in their own way. And so will those who come after us. Just as the people of Grover's Corners wake up to go to work, so the stars continue their own eternal cycle of life. This is a brilliant attempt to inscribe the everyday, the familiar, the ordinary within eternal time, and a poetic effort to grasp the infinity of space and time as a whole made up of small, identical, individual common cases.

What is remarkable is that while great literature generally deals with extreme situations, great passions, and great adventures, here we have a rare example of a major work concerned with insignificant stories, the details of an insignificant everyday life. The author's message is clear: happy is the person who can move in the rhythms of life, who knows how to enjoy what it offers. The fundamental difference between this work and most American works inspired by rural America lies in the fact that Wilder does not try to convince his audience that what he presents is reality. Had he attempted such a thing with these premises and these characters, he would certainly have fallen into the trap of saccharine sentimentality and irritating provincialism. The fact that he observes the events from a position of omniscient controller helps him emphasize the theatricality of his undertaking, exploit the inherent possibilities of theatrical signs, and, above all, play with the various versions of time: historical time, theatrical time (the duration of the performance), dramatic time (the timeline of the story), and, of course, eternal time. It is no coincidence, moreover, that the play begins with sunrise and ends with sunset. With dawn, when life begins in the town, we also have the (symbolic) birth of twins, and with sunset we have the image of the town going to sleep. And as the stage manager tells the audience, "time for you to go to bed too." After all, in a way, we spectators are also inhabitants of the small town, and what happens there concerns us. Our time intersects with the time of the events on stage, creating a symbolic and universal whole that, overflowing with metaphysical optimism, sends us moving messages in favor of human communication and urgently calls us to seize each day.



The essence of the play lies in the fact that, through its very simple plot, it speaks about life itself and its cycle: everyday life–love–death. It devotes to the latter a deeply moving third act, as we have seen, which points to our tendency not to appreciate life's small, insignificant moments until it is too late, when we finally understand their value. The gentle pull of the monotony of days continuing one after another does not disturb the inhabitants of Grover's Corners. The safe routine of their small town is taken for granted. This theme of the predictability of each day appears in the final act, when the dead Emily returns to her past in order

to appreciate the simple routine of a single day, that of her twelfth birthday. She realizes then—only after death—that life is an invaluable opportunity. In every previous scene, the activities simply represented the normal, everyday life of ordinary people. These are the events that make up human life. They are the aspects of life that people take for granted and perform mechanically. As we grow older, we become increasingly aware of the value of these moments—and of how little we appreciated them then. After death, the moments will be gone forever. Wilder emphasizes these seemingly insignificant details in order to reverse the usual perception of what is important. Thus, he concludes that it is not momentous events but everyday routine through which life acquires meaning. After reliving her twelfth birthday, Emily sees that human beings are unable to recognize the transience of life and appreciate their lives while they last. And when Emily expresses her anguished desire to leave her birthday and return to the cemetery, the most important theme of the play is condensed: the transience of individual human lives in the face of the general human and natural stability and order. Both Emily's tragic death and her preceding joyful marriage are part of this natural order.

"Our Town" comes and unsettles our everyday lives, challenging us to make a different "reading," a different approach to and analysis of the everyday, individual moments of the inhabitants of rural America and of our own lives. Their behaviors, relationships, and the consequences of stagnation, at both the collective and individual level, in the small world of Grover's Corners. Life and death, past, present, and future, in a simultaneous chain reaction–equation entitled "Everyday Life – Love and Marriage – Death," allow the emotional climax of the play and enable us spectators to approach not only "the good life" but also inevitable dying, adorning the latter with the spell of "good." Wilder's poetry, in complete contrast to the ordinary and boring, elevates to infinity the unique experience of being alive. And the celebratory finale, through Emily's words, when, having passed to the "other side," she exclaims, "We lived through all of this, but we never noticed it," establishes the view that in life nothing should be taken for granted, but everything is worth claiming.

The performance, part of which we watched, raises questions about whether poetry and magic are ultimately hidden in the "small" everyday life of us all, and about how "small" and insignificant, yet at the same time immense, are the days, the nights, the moonlit hours, the loves, the marriages, the deaths in "our small town"—in whatever "small town"—anywhere in the world and in time. Yet, as we heard the narrator convey the words of the poet Edgar Lee Masters as the distillation of the work: "You must love life, to have life. And you must have life within you to be able to love life… It is what we call the 'vicious circle' of life."