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Our Town

Lyric Arts Main Street Stage

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Our Town is one of the best known and best loved of American plays. Written by Thornton Wilder, it was produced in 1938, at time when the long tails of the Great Depression continued to be a drag on well-being in America. The over-riding message of the play, that human beings are oblivious to the beauty and joy that resides in the mundane experiences of daily life, might well have been gratefully received by a public who more often found escapist entertainment in the form of brash Hollywood musicals, screwball comedies, and sophisticated stage shows by the likes of Cole Porter or Rodgers and Hart, nurturing the fantasies of long-deprived audiences with depictions of wealthy, debonaire ladies and gentlemen. *Our Town* nurtured something else, something within the human core that spoke to the ability to survive a calamity like the Great Depression.



**Jake Sung-Guk Sullivan, Noah Hynick,
and Kendall Kent**

Photo by Molly Weibel

Clearly, *Our Town* continues to strike a chord in the hearts of theatergoers and producers, as year after year it is remounted by non-profit theater companies, community theaters, universities and high school theater departments, and in the occasional commercial production. Lyric Arts Main Street Stage in Anoka is now presenting a thoroughly gratifying production of *Our Town*. It is the second local staging of the classic this spring, following a mounting by Open Window Theatre that closed just two weekends ago.

In the Lyric Arts production, directed with elan by Scott Ford, we feel the bountiful love at the foundations of two ordinary middle-class families, animating these families through such routine occurrences as cooking and eating breakfast, sending the kids off to school, tending to the garden, falling in love, a wedding, a death—things that happen all the time in families, but given a burnished glow by Wilder's elevation of these events into something akin to miracles. Life becomes a string of pearls; each pearl is one of life's ordinary occasions, precious in itself but laced together, they glow as bright as the powerful full moon seen in the night sky above rural Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, between 1901 and 1913, the setting for *Our Town*. The town is a

compact, self-contained community stocked with Yankee heritage, and a place for newer arrivals in "Polish Town," across the tracks. The town offers the necessities needed for folks to get by, but nothing more.

Menu

The play breaks all kinds of theatrical conventions—certainly for its time—by having a character called the Stage Manager act as the organizer of the play we are about to see and set up scenes for us, add their own spin on things, interrupt scenes to move on to the next, call upon guests to fill us in on the geological, anthropological and sociological aspects of the town, and even dismisses us for intermission.

Further, the play is, famously, meant to be staged without scenery and barely any props, with actors pantomiming such things as stroking the nape of a horse, washing dishes, or tossing a baseball in the air. When high school students Emily Webb and George Gibbs, lifelong next-door neighbors, begin their journey toward falling in love, they converse across the yard between their houses from their bedroom windows, signified by nothing more than each climbing a ladder.

The Gibbs are Doctor Gibbs, his wife Julia, their son George, and daughter Rebecca. Next door are the Webb family, comprising Charles Webb, editor of the local newspaper that comes out twice a week, his wife Myrtle Webb, their daughter Emily and their son Wally. Through numerous scenes we see husbands and wives who build long marriages infused with both tolerance and love, parents who guide their children without dictating to them, and how siblings can bicker without losing loyalty to one another.

Jake Sung-Guk Sullivan has the key role of the Stage Manager, the character whose choice of what we need to know about the town and its inhabitants is akin to a chef deciding what dishes to set out for a banquet. Sullivan is notably younger than other Stage Managers I recall, which at first feels somewhat off, as I arrived with the expectation that the Stage Manager would proffer an elder person's perspective—nothing riles them up too much, this too shall pass, and it's all as it's meant to be. With Sullivan in the role, as the play progresses, the Stage Manager unleashes the enthusiasm and sense of discovery of a young man, expressing joy and delight in every morsel of life in Grover's Corners. His sense of wonder invites us to join him in absorbing the beauty and energy of life's bounty viewed, not in hindsight but as it is revealed. When Emily discovers how little of the joy of life people grasp as they are living it, we understand that this has been the Stage Manager's point from the beginning.

The four actors who play George and Emily's parents are all excellent. Jennifer Inderlee captures Julia Gibbs' wish to live—if just briefly—beyond the confines of Grover's Corners, Eric J. Knutson depicts the stoical Doc Gibbs' commitment to the life of service to his community that he has chosen, Don Maloney is wonderfully expressive as Charles Webb, a newspaper editor often finding himself at a loss for words, and Katie Wodele is a winning blend of droll and effervescent as Myrtle Webb. All four convey genuine love for their spouses, their children and their community.

On opening weekend, Emma Schuld, who is cast as Emily, was sidelined by illness. Kendall Kent stepped into the role on short notice and played it beautifully. Kent expressed Emily's intelligence and confidence, along with uncertainties so common among teenage girls, plaintively asking her mother, "Am I pretty?," and her yearning for something she couldn't yet name as she gazed at the bright full moon. In fact, Kent's performance overshadowed Noah Hynick's as George. Hynick presents George with a kind of cluelessness and an absence of adolescent swagger that makes him seem unlikely as a leader among the school baseball players, let alone as young man whose feelings about the girl next door shift from schoolboy crush to mature love before our eyes.

Other members of the ensemble who made strong impressions in smaller roles are: Andrew Newman as a troubled choir master, Simon Stimson; Rick Wyman as the irrepressibly cheerful milkman, Howie Newsome; Steven Ramirez as Constable Warren, who maintains order with a measured hand; and Michael Quadrozzie as Simon Craig, a man who had gotten away from Grover's Corners—moved "out west" to Buffalo—and waxes nostalgic on his return. As the Stage Manager, Sullivan takes the roles of the druggist who whips up ice cream sodas for Emily and George at the soda fountain while they have an all-important conversation, and later as the minister who conducts their wedding vows, giving him the privilege of delivering to us a sermon on the sanctity of marriage. Sullivan brings a sparkle to both.

This production includes brief ballet sequences as a prelude to several scenes. These are gracefully performed by Andrew Newman and Rae Wasson to Lauri Kraft's tender choreography but, in all honesty, feel more like intrusions than enhancements to the play. Ben Emory Olson composed original music for transitions between scenes, performed by Jenny Liang on erhu (a traditional Chinese stringed instrument), Steven Ramirez on guitar, Jake Sung-Guk Sullivan on accordion, and Rae Wasson on cello.

The elemental scenic design—the structural frame of a simple house hung over the proceedings, a pair of intersecting burnished wood ovals on the stage floor, and a projected full moon—is the work of Greg Vanselow. Lucas Granholm's lighting design makes a significant contribution toward illuminating the journey through life taken by the folks of Grover's Corners. For the most part, the actors appear in simple modern dress peppered with aprons and other period trappings, with the costumes designed by Alyssa Olsen.

Our Town is a beautiful play, extending its heart out to anyone willing to spend a couple of hours with ordinary folks in Grover's Corners. Scott Ford's staging is brisk and draws focus to the notion of infinite joy that is bound up, like atomic energy, connecting the particles of experience that comprise life. This is an altogether worthwhile, enjoyable, and uplifting production of a truly great play.

Our Town runs through June 25, 2023, at Lyric Arts Main Street Stage, 420 East Main Street, Anoka MN. Tickets from \$33 - \$39; seniors (60+) and students with ID: \$31 - \$37; Unsold seats, if any, are available as rush tickets for \$20 starting 30 minutes before curtain time, in person only. For information and tickets call 763-422-1838 or visit lyricarts.org.

Playwright: Thornton Wilder; Director: Scott Ford; Scenic Design: Greg Vanselow; Costume Design: Alyssa Olsen; Lighting Design: Lucas Granholm; Sound Design: Julie Zumsteg; Choreography: Lauri Kraft; Composer: Ben Emory Larson; Additional Music: Jenny Liang; Stage Manager: Joe Black; Assistant Stage Managers: Nina English, Claire Frederick.

Cast: Noah Hynick (George Gibbs), Jennifer Inderlee (Mrs. Gibbs), Christy C. Johnson (Mrs. Soames, ensemble), Kendall Kent (Standby, Emily Webb), Eric J. Knutson (Doc Gibbs), Jenny Liang (Erhuist, ensemble), Lexi Neumann (Rebecca Gibbs, ensemble), Andrew Newman (Simon Stinson, ensemble), Don Maloney (Mr. Webb), Emma Schuld (Emily Webb), Jake Sung-Guk Sullivan (Stage Manager), Michael Quadrozzie (Sam Craig, ensemble), Steven Ramirez (Constable Warren, ensemble), Rae Wasson (Cellist, ensemble), Katie Wodele (Mrs. Webb), Rick Wyman (Howie Newsome, ensemble).



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CONTACT: WEBMASTER@TALKINBROADWAY.COM

DESIGNED BY 3A.PL

PROGRAMMED BY DAN FOLEY

