

A man and a woman are shown in profile, smiling and embracing each other. They are lying down on a thick layer of golden straw or hay. The woman is on the left, wearing a black top, and the man is on the right, wearing a grey sweater with a yellow flower pinned to his chest. The background is a dense field of straw, creating a warm, golden atmosphere.

Lookingglass  
STUDY GUIDE

Our town

By Thornton Wilder

Co-directed by Anna D. Shapiro and Jessica Thebus

For more information about Lookingglass Theatre Company and our production of *Our Town* visit [lookingglasstheatre.org](http://lookingglasstheatre.org)



**“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.”**

**-THORNTON WILDER**

**AS HUMAN BEINGS, WE LONG FOR COMMUNITIES.** We long for whispers through a tin-can telephone, for mothers to make us fried eggs in the morning, for a companion to come home to. We long for a group of like-minded people to help us grow. Twenty-one years ago, Lookingglass Theater Company formed because of just that desire: to create a community.

Everyone can relate to the need for a home or community, whether you’re an artist, teacher, construction worker or business person. Thornton Wilder so astutely recognized this need that his play, *Our Town*, is more popular today than when it was first performed. Although Mr. Wilder eventually settled down in his childhood home in Connecticut, he spent most of his life meandering the globe: Madison, Wisconsin; Yanti, China; Hollywood, California.

What would such a man know about small-town life?

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**Upon reading *Our Town*, co-directors Anna D. Shapiro and Jessica Thebus recognized this same, universal longing for community—as well as theatre’s role in meeting that need. Ms. Thebus explains, saying that theatre gives the audience:**

“...the blessing of a communal space to gather and tell stories—to do the only thing we really can do for each other: which is to witness. To collectively witness life, death, and struggle... The play is about what it’s like to live and die together.”

Indeed, it was their interest in our unique kind of theatre community that inspired Ms. Shapiro and Ms. Thebus to bring *Our Town* to Lookingglass.

# HISTORY

Lookingglass Theatre Company was founded in 1988 by Eva Barr, David Catlin, Thomas J. Cox, Lawrence E. DiStasi, Joy Gregory, David Kersnar, David Schwimmer, and Andrew White. Their first production, *Through the Lookingglass*, was directed by David Kersner and took place at the Shanley Pavilion on the Northwestern University campus in the fall of 1988. For these three performances, they were in rehearsals for eight months.

The process of creating *Through the Lookingglass* was as important to the Ensemble as the production of the show itself. This dedication to the process of theatre is why the Lookingglass Ensemble regroups in Chicago every year to discuss proposals for the new season. This process takes a week and draws members from across the country.

Until *Our Town*, the ensemble hadn't reunited onstage in years, in certain cases, as long as eighteen. So, when Ms. Shapiro and Ms. Thebus approached the Lookingglass Ensemble, they couldn't resist exploring the state of their own community through this particular play.



LOOKINGGLASS IN THE WATER TOWER WATER WORKS

# DESIGN



CO-DIRECTOR JESSICA THEBUS SITS IN DURING CONSTRUCTION

As a theater company founded on physicality and imagery, Lookingglass encounters specific challenges when producing *Our Town*— Mr. Wilder famously stated in the stage directions that the set have “No curtains, no scenery.”

Director Anna Shapiro agrees with Mr. Wilder's aesthetic, reminding the actors that “this is all about you. We want you to be acting your heads off.”

Stripped of its spectacle, the Lookingglass designers are forced to carefully construct their designs to highlight the crucial moments onstage with as little intrusion as possible.

To what extent should the playwright's wishes figure into the director's concept? Does it change things when you're dealing with a play like OUR TOWN?

# THE COMMUNITY

**Being part of a community means realizing that we share many of the same secret dreams, hopes, fears, and sorrows. The distinction between small, intimate moments and the overtly theatrical ones in this play is also recognized by directors Anna D. Shapiro and Jessica Thebus.**



**CO-DIRECTOR JESSICA THEBUS**

Jessica elaborates on this idea: “one of the great tensions in the play”

“On the one hand, it’s really presentational—“Ms. Eason will be playing Emily.” On the other hand, by the time we get into the wedding scene, we don’t care about the millions of other girls in the world—we care about her and George and about what’s going to happen to them in particular.

And the play takes us in such an elegant and bracing way back and forth. These scenes are really intimate and real—and at the same time, the Stage manager says, “Thank you, thank you, you guys were great, now the next scene is...”

And we can do both. So we’re really trying to find the places where it is presentational and public and being performed very openhandedly for the audience with you all watching. And on the other hand, there are also really intimate scenes that aren’t intruded on by a whole bunch of people.”

**Mrs. WEBB:**

I’ve already told you, yes. Now that’s enough of that. You have a nice, young, pretty face. I never heard of such foolishness.

**EMILY WEBB:**

Oh, Mama, you never tell us the truth about anything.

*As a director, how would you differentiate between these intimate moments and the moments experienced by the whole community?*



**THE ENTIRE CAST MEET WITH THE CO-DIRECTORS TO DISCUSS THE PLAY IN DEPTH**



**ENSEMBLE MEMBER DAVID SCHWIMMER WITH CO-DIRECTOR ANNA D. SHAPIRO**

*Why would one differentiate between these moments in OUR TOWN?*

# THE COSTUMES



CO-DIRECTOR ANNA D. SHAPIRO

In theatre, every costume piece is first made from muslin, a cream-colored, stiff fabric used to sculpt the piece without wasting bolts of expensive material. Costume designer Janice Pytel took her inspiration for the *Our Town* designs from that process, using this simple palette normally only seen backstage.

Co-director Anna Shapiro elaborates on this choice:

“What was really critical to Jess and me was that we want to see the people. We don’t want to disguise the body. But we also wanted the theatricality of the period-appropriate silhouette.”

**MRS. GIBBS:** It washed and ironed the blue gingham for you special.  
**REBECCA GIBBS:** Ma, I hate that dress.  
**MRS. GIBBS:** Oh, hush-up-with-you.

*Is having a common color palette unifying or boring? Would you keep this costume aesthetic for the jarring third act, or change it?*



ENSEMBLE MEMBER JOEY SLOTNICK AS THE STAGE MANAGER  
(INSET) JANICE PYTEL'S ILLUSTRATION



ENSEMBLE MEMBER LAURA EASON  
AS EMILY WEBB



JANICE PYTEL'S ILLUSTRATION

# THE SOUND

**EIMLY GIBBS:**

Papa remembered that that was my favorite hymn.



**SOUND DESIGNER AND COMPOSER**  
**KEVIN O'DONNELL**

**When one first reads “Our Town,” the hymns stand out as the main musical presence in the play.**

But religious hymns about specific figures, as sound designer Kevin O'Donnell points out, don't feed into the theme of universal community:

“If we're going to sing a hymn, I'm a big believer in, 'let's alter the words,' because everyone I know is either confused or Jewish, so I don't want to sing about Jesus. Or if we do, we do it knowing that some people step back from that. But you can always talk about life or light or something like that—just change one word to make it more universal. So I think if we're going to sing hymns, we should alter them a little bit, so that they're 'our' hymns.”

*Does it make a religious song meaningless, or more meaningful, to replace specific titles with general ideas?*

# THE LIGHTS

**STAGE MANAGER:**

This is certainly an important part of Grover's Corners. It's on a hilltop—a windy hilltop—lots of sky, lots of clouds—often lots of sun and moon and stars.



**LIGHTING DESIGNER J.R. LEDERLE**

**While describing the set, directors Anna Shapiro and Jessica Thebus explain how throughout the show, a certain prop will be “woken up” by illumination. This clearly emphasizes the link between the action onstage and the deep history of Lookingglass. This concept, however, is starkly turned on its head at the end of the show.**

John Musial explains J.R. Lederle's concept:

“Above the collage of objects, it's sort of revealed that there's a starfield up on the ceiling. So the entire ceiling will be filled with Italian lights, and that will illuminate the space and produce the last moment of the show.”

*Why would Lederle end the show with that image? How do stars connote community?*

# THE SET

**STAGE MANAGER:** There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery.

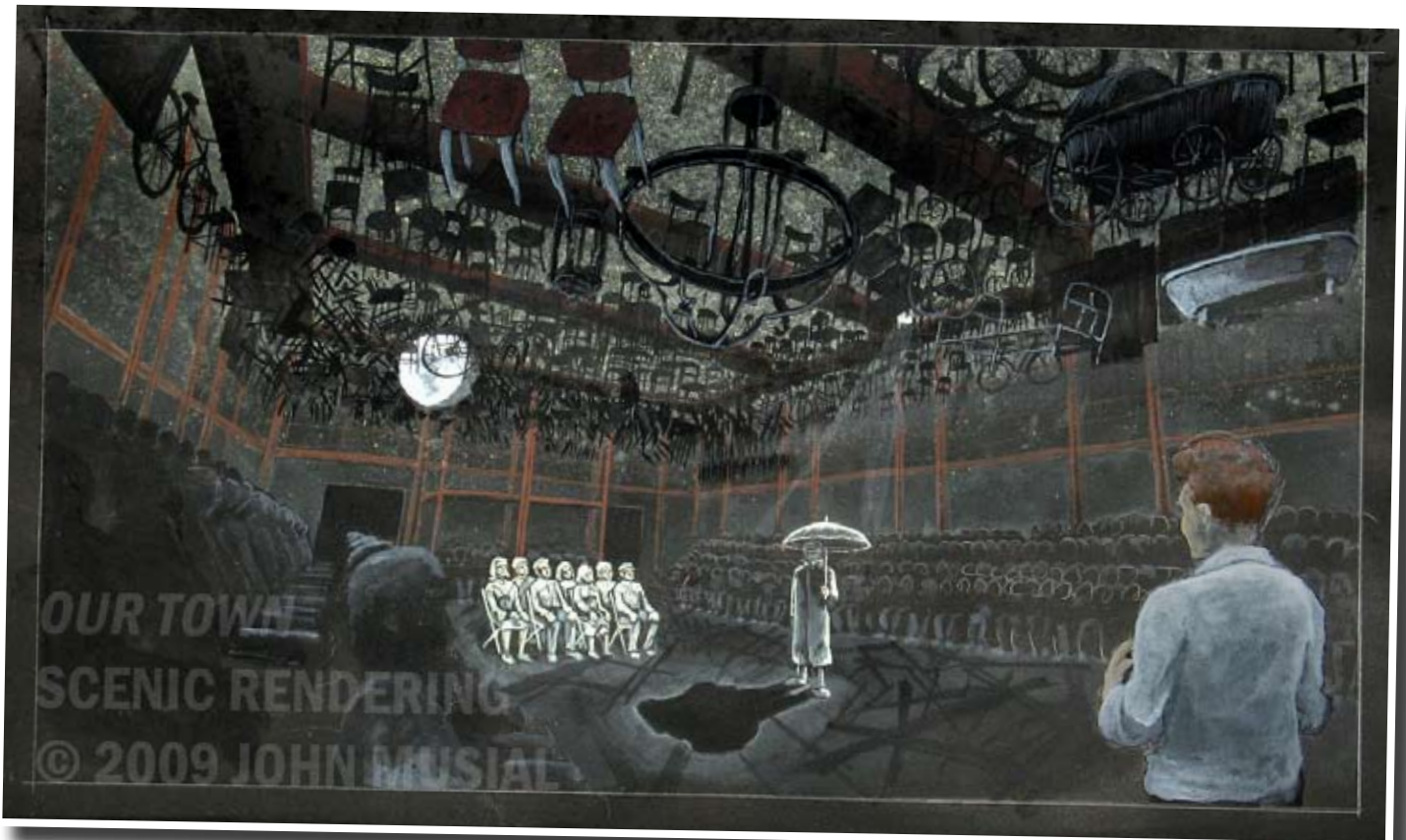


**Chairs, radiators, tables, lamps, moons, tree branches, picture frames—all of these props and hundreds more dangle over the audience ins set designer John Musial's design. He explains:**

"The basic idea is that the stage floor is entirely open, and that all of the props that are the detritus of our lives—that are the potential shows, shows of the future, shows that we've done in the past, and shows that almost every community college has done everywhere in a twenty-mile radius, is going to be pressed up into the air."

*What do the Lookingglass props hanging from the ceiling have to do with the audience members below? Do the props serve to include the audience members in the production, or to isolate?*

**SCENIC DESIGNER AND ENSEMBLE MEMBER  
JOHN MUSIAL**



**JOHN MUSIAL'S SCENIC RENDERING**

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

BY ROSEMARY ERICKSON JOHNSEN

ENSEMBLE MEMBER JOEY SLOTNICK



*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.”



ENSEMBLE MEMBERS HEIDI STILLMAN  
AND DAVID SCHWIMMER

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.



ENSEMBLE MEMBER DAVID SCHWIMMER

**YOUR JOURNEY DOESN'T HAVE TO END HERE. YOU CAN LEARN MORE ABOUT *OUR TOWN* AND  
LOOKINGGLASS THEATRE COMPANY ON OUR WEBSITE AT [lookingglasstheatre.org](http://lookingglasstheatre.org).**

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