

On Thornton Wilder and *Our Town*

By Dr. Kevin Rozman

Thornton Wilder has said of his 1928 Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Our Town*, "It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life." This was his second Pulitzer, having won his first for the 1927 novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. He said he wanted *Our Town* to show "the life of a village against the life of the stars" and to explore "the trivial details of human life in reference to a vast perspective of time, of social history, and of religious ideas." His third Pulitzer was awarded in 1943 for the drama *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Tom Perotta wrote in *The Atlantic*. This play "is one of the great democratic products of American literature. It gives you the sense that the same profound and horrible truths hold true whether you're a sophisticate in Paris or a farmer in Grover's Corners." Wilder set his play in Grover's Corners, a fictional town. Yet it was based on the town of Peterborough, New Hampshire where he spent his summers. He was a fellow of the MacDowell Colony which was an artist's retreat, established there in 1907.

In a celebration of the 275th anniversary of the town and the 75th anniversary of the play, the street intersection of Grove and Main Streets had additional street signs which read "Grover's Corners."

The play's direction calls for, "No curtain. No scenery. The audience arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light." Simple set pieces are used in the three-act play and the play's narrator is the "Stage Manager". The Stage Manager breaks the fourth wall and communicates directly with the audience and interacts with the characters. This staging was groundbreaking for the time. Wilder felt that extravagant sets and spectacular costumes began to get in the way of the written word of a play. He said, "I began to feel that the theatre was not only inadequate, it was evasive, it didn't wish to draw upon its deeper potentialities."

Brooks Atkinson in his review of the original production at Henry Miller's Theatre understood Wilder's motives.

He wrote: "Mr. Wilder has transmuted the simple events of human life into a universal reverie. He has given familiar facts a deeply moving, philosophical perspective. Staged without scenery and with the curtain always up, *Our Town* has escaped from the formal barrier of the modern theatre into the quintessence of acting, thought, and speculation...*Our Town* is, in this column's opinion, one of the finest achievements of the current stage."

In the spring of 1940, a film adaptation was released. It starred Martha Wright who had played the part of Emily Webb in the original Broadway production. Unlike the play, sets and props were included and the third act of the play was rewritten to be a dream sequence.

A 1955 television production of *Our Town* included a song with lyrics by Sammy Cahn and music by Jimmy Van Heusen. It was sung by Frank Sinatra. Many of us know the song which became a huge hit for Sinatra but not many know that it was introduced with, *Our Town*. The song was titled, "Love and Marriage."

Wilder had always refused requests to adapt *Our Town* into a musical. Perhaps it had something to do with the process of watching his play *The Matchmaker* be adapted into the musical, *Hello, Dolly!*. At any rate, it was only after his death in 1975, that his estate allowed *Our Town* to become a musical. The new show, entitled *Grover's Corners* had its premiere at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire, IL. The music and lyrics were by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt who also wrote the musicals *The Fantasticks* and *I Do, I Do*. There were issues with the show and it was not successful. Perhaps Wilder knew best.

In his preface to the play, Wilder wrote: "The response we make when we 'believe' a work of the imagination is that of saying: 'This is the way things are.' I have always known it without being fully aware that I knew it. Now in the presence of this play or novel or poem (or picture or piece of music) I know that I know it...of all the arts, theatre is the best endowed to awaken this recollection in us---to believe is to say "yes."