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### Moving Into *Our Town*

When one moves into a new house, the first step in making that house into one's very own home is of course the furniture, followed by paint, and usually pictures or paintings of some sort. All this clutter is added to the framework of the house in order to customize and somehow make it one's own. In Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*, there is little furniture, no paint job, and no decorations: barely any scenery at all. So what makes Wilder's play about "our" town and not the Stage Manager's, Emily Webb's, or George Gibbs's town? In fact, the lack of scenery in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" is precisely what makes Grover's Corners so believable and real to the audience.

Consisting of only two tables, four chairs, and two stools, the scenery in Vanderbilt University Theater's fall 2008 production of *Our Town* does not exactly fascinate the audience. In addition to an almost barren stage, the little dining sets are painted completely black, thereby practically blending them into the all-black stage. One might think such a setup to be dull and boring, but the very fact there is so much to be desired is Wilder's first reach into the audience's mind and imagination. As

opposed to elaborate scenery, which presents a lot of information to the audience regarding what they are about to see, the sparse scenery gets the audience to ask questions about what they will soon experience. Instead of sitting back and absorbing a grand façade, the audience seems to be actively analyzing what lay in front of them, perhaps looking for some hidden piece of scenery, and all the time wondering, "Is this all I will see?" They are not kept waiting long. After a short while the lights dim and out comes the Stage Manager, the main narrator of the play, who, addressing the audience directly, begins to show them that the scenery in *Our Town* is actually rich and elaborate, they just are not looking hard enough.

The first descriptions of the Stage Manager reveal that the audience itself creates Grover's Corners, thereby making the town more real than any set ever could. After reminding the audience to silence their cell phones, the Stage Manager launches into a broad, yet brilliantly detailed description of Grover's Corners, the fictional town in which *Our Town* is set. Everything is described in detail, from the glow of the morning star to each plant in the Gibbs's and Webb's gardens. In this way, the audience is not completely left to its own devices in the construction of the town. If the play launched immediately into the daily life of the characters then each audience member would have their own entirely distinct idea of what Grover's Corners is and looks like; instead, the audience is given the framework of the town, so that while the end result is painted within each

audience member's mind, the whole audience is united by a singular general concept of the town. The result is not only the unification of the audience, but the transformation of Vanderbilt students, faculty, parents, and total strangers into neighbors in the tiny New Hampshire town that is Grover's Corners.

The interesting reality that the audience's perception of Grover's Corner relies solely on the narration of the Stage Manager is possibly the most powerful force in the unification and transformation of the audience. Due to the scarcity of scenery, the image of Grover's Corner is transmitted to the audience not from every angle of the stage but straight from the mouth of the Stage Manager. While this provides the audience with a uniquely common experience-- after all everyone hears the same words-- the other result is that the realization of Grover's Corners relies solely on how the Stage Manager speaks his part. An example: In this particular production, when the Stage Manager describes Mrs. Gibbs's garden he projects the presence of Burdock in a disdainful manner, whereas he describes Mrs. Webb's garden as very similar but adds the presence of Sunflowers with a refreshing, satisfied inflection. This choice of description casts a less favorable light upon the Gibbs household compared to the Webb, a situation that could have been totally opposite had the Stage Manager had a particular fondness for Burdock and a peculiar disdain for Sunflowers. Even though the Stage Manager in many ways controls the perception of the town by the audience, because he cannot recite the same line with two inflections at

once, the audience absorbs whatever tone and opinion he offers, resulting in a cohesive view of Grover's Corners by the whole audience. Thus, each person is transplanted into one town, not 100 separate ones, and Grover's Corners becomes not only the Stage Manager's town, the Gibbs's, or the Webb's town, but "our" town.

The reason the lack of scenery makes Grover's Corner so real is that the audience is forced to constantly picture in their mind's eye what is happening right in front of them. If the scenery, aside from the tables and chairs, existed in material form, then it would be that much easier for the audience to ignore. With each character acting in such a specific way, the audience is forced to put pictures to the actions. This makes the act of viewing much more *active*; that is, a lot more effort is required on the part of the audience, while in many other plays the audience passively takes in the surroundings. In this way, the audience is forced to be in the moment, in the town, because each member must think subconsciously to himself, "If I were in Grover's Corners, witnessing this happen, what would I see?" This process is quickly established in the first minutes of the play and happens so naturally after a short time that what could turn out to be too much aesthetic distance becomes immersion into the world of the play.

In the audience's inability to physically see Grover's Corners, we are in essence forced to truly see the town, which is the very theme of Thornton Wilder's play. The main theme of *Our*

*Town* is the reality that we humans strain so hard worrying about every little detail of life that we never really see one another for how beautiful we are. In the play, Emily Webb realizes this after her death and subsequent journey back to observe the living. Once she is removed from the bonds of life her eyes are truly opened to the blindness of the living, and she realizes that they never really pay any attention to one another. In this same way, Wilder removes the scenery of his play so that we may appreciate his world more fully. In removing physical objects we as an audience would otherwise attach ourselves to, Wilder forces our imaginations wide open so that we may more fully experience the play.

Thornton Wilder's approach to immersing the audience into the world of *Our Town* holds firmly to the principal "less is more." By giving less to the audience he requires us to give more of ourselves to Grover's Corners. The culmination of *Our Town* is naturally a combination of all traditional elements of theatre, but this approach to set and scenery is a true mark of Wilder's genius. In the end our imaginations, not any scenery, is what turns Grover's Corners and all its residents into our family, our friends, our town.