OUR TOWN BY THORNTON WILDER: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF ITS PRODUCTION MODES

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines selected stagings of Thornton Wilder's Our Town as presented in the production modes of the legitimate theatre, film and television. The study consequently focuses on six of the many productions staged since 1938: Jed Harris' 1938 Broadway premiere, Jose Quintero's 1959 off-Broadway revival, Alan Schneider's 1981 mid-western thrust staging, Sam Wood's 1940 motion picture, Delbert Mann's 1955 live television production, and George Schaefer's 1977 video-taped production.

These six productions serve as models for a variety of approaches to staging Our Town. Directors often use one or a combination of these three common interpretations when presenting the play: 1) Austere and detached objectivity; 2) Romantic and sentimental reverie; 3) Casual caricature focusing on farce. The many presentations of Our Town hold several production concerns in common. The technical realization of the play gives emphasis to the use of light and shadow and to varying degrees of stage realism. Each of

the productions presented in this study were staged with a conscious effort to establish as intimate a relationship with the audience as the mode would allow. Significant to this is that the playing space, whether defined by the stage and auditorium, or by the camera and screen, influenced each production. The progression of the time itself also affected the critical evaluation of the various productions through the ever-present and changing social values of restraint and response.

Thornton Wilder's Our Town maintains its vast and popular appeal because of its simplicity, dramatic irony, actor/audience relationship, and because of its beneficent view of death. From the boldness of reaching out beyond the proscenium arch in Harris' 1938 production to the novel media montage multiple reality of the Schechner inspired Wooster Group's 1981 treatment, Our Town stands up against its many detractors as it continues to challenge producers, directors, and audience members with its unique invitation to open and creative theatrical collaboration.

To

CONNIE

For and With Love and Understanding

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study stands as a tribute to its subject through the collaborative assistance of many people.

To begin with, the advice and counsel of Frank C. Rutlege, chairman of the guidance committee, was invaluable not only in shaping the outline of this study, but also in encouraging the work of the student. Next, the committee members themselves--John Baldwin, Joyce Ramsay, Farley Richmond, and Donald Treat provided the support required for such an undertaking. Then, the collective assistance of those special individuals who agreed to be interviewed added integrity to the examination: Boyd Gaines, Richard H. Goldstone, Delbert Mann, Theodore Mann, Adam Redfield, Ken Ruta, George Schaefer, Alan Schneider, and Isabel Wilder.

No academic endeavor could ever be adequately realized without the aid of efficient libraries staffed by competent professionals. Two Michigan State University librarians, Anita Evans and Linda DeWitt, consistently offered their services to the intent of this research. David Schoonover and his staff at Yale University's esteemed Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library must be acknowledged for their sterling commitment to academic scholarship. Other university libraries also offered helpful assistance: University of California at Los Angeles, University of Southern California, and University of Michigan. Lanell Pruett was of particular assistance in the preparation of this dissertation.

The photographs appended here are reproduced through the permission and courtesy of several sources: The Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York City Public Library's Performing Arts Research Center, The Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts at Yale, the Arena Stage, Bruce Goldstein of the Guthrie Theatre, Delbert Mann and Isabel Wilder.

Finally, to the casual reader the specter of Thornton Wilder may appear to loom over this study as a mythic-like patron seeking his share of recognition. If so, so be it; for Mr. Wilder certainly affected his bold and novel influence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF APPENDICES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to present a descriptive examination of Thornton Wilder's Our Town as represented in selected productions from 1938 to 1981.

The study will deal with the following:

1. How has Our Town been staged within the various production modes of the legitimate theatre, film and television?

2. What directorial influences contributed to the realization of these selected productions?

3. What has been the critical response to each of these presentations?

Justification

Our Town is the most often produced play in this country[1] and as such deserves its own attention in scholarship. Following its 1938 Broadway opening the play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, subsequently enjoying countless productions in professional, academic and community threatres. In 1940

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[1]Personal interview with Isabel Wilder, September 14, 1981.

Our Town was made into a major motion picture and has since had no less than six different television interpretations. In 1946 the U.S.O. presented Our Town to American G.I.'s stationed in Europe. In 1958 the New York Times published a survey of leading theatre personalities indicating their preferences for a national repertory of American drama.[2] Our Town was on that list more than any other play. In 1973 the United States Department of State sent a production of Our Town in cultural exchange to Russia as the first American play to be presented in that country. Three years later, as Americans were enjoying their Bicentennial festivities, hundreds of producing groups across the country elected to present Our Town as a part of their cultural heritage celebrations. Wilder's play had established its place in the annals of American theatre history. To date the script itself has been included in over two hundred anthologies. Richard H. Goldstone commented on the historical significance of Our Town by writing that it "has in effect become our national play--or come as close as any play has come thus far".[3]

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[2] New York Times, November 9, 1958, p. 18. The six people polled were: Tyrone Guthrie, Helen Hayes, Norris Houghton, Elia Kazan and Cornelia Otis Skinner.

[3] Richard H. Goldstone, Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1975) p. 138.

Yet, Our Town began without immediate or complete success. In fact many theatre critics vascillated in their estimation of Wilder's unconventional play. Its bare stage simplicity, static if not plotless dramatic structure, and its seeming sentimental reverie have provoked a great deal of critical consternation. Reviewing its first out-of-town try-out in Princeton, Variety's critic reported that it was "hard to imagine what the erstwhile wonder boy of Broadway [Jed Harris] saw in this disjointed bittersweet affair of small town New Hampshre life---for once the novelty has been worn thin, the play lacks the sturdy qualities necessary to carry it on its own".[4] Following the New York opening of Our Town less than two weeks later, Variety modified its earlier analysis of a production not appreciably changed[5] by saying that, "Box office criticism has a tough one in Our Town because its simple, sincere, philosophical and literary nature does not suggest the commercial wallop that is beautifully written, staged and acted fine points warrant".[6] John Gassner reviewed the 1938 New York premiere remarking that:

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[4]Variety, January 26, 1938, p. 58.

[5]Personal interview with Isabel Wilder, September 14, 1981.

[6]Variety, February 9, 1938.

> I shall continue to insist that for all its affecting qualities Our Town is devoid of developed situations and hence its effect is one vast blur of kindly sentiment. For a collective drama Our Town lacks a core of dramatic action. It is the outline of a drama rather than the finished product. One may also question the completeness of the outline. I should hardly call the totality of effect a major dramatic experience. [7]

Twelve years later in his preface to the play for its inclusion in his Treasury of the Theatre anthology, Gassner presented his revised insights.

> Locating Our Town historically and explaining its style is, however, less important than experiencing the play. Once we become acquainted with a dramatic style, it rapidly loses novelty and ceases to have any value apart from the life and feeling it conveys.... It is a work of love and of wisdom. [8]

Brooks Atkinson, however, is one of the few original laudatory critics whose opinion remained unchanged during later revivals of the play. In 1938 he wrote that, "With about the best script of his career in his hands, Mr. Harris has risen nobly to the occasion. He has reduced theatre to its lowest common denominator without resort to perverse showmanship... Our Town is a microcosm. It is also a hauntingly beautiful play".[9] Twenty-one years later, Atkinson had not changed his

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[7]John Gassner. "Our Town", One-Act Play Magazine, February, 1938, pp. 226-227.

[8]John Gassner. A Treasury of the Theatre. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1950) pp. 926-927.

[9]New York Times. February 5, 1938.

mind about the beauty of Wilder's play when he reviewed Jose Quintero's 1959 off-Broadway revival: "Our Town is one of the loveliest dramas of our time....Thank Mr. Quintero for preserving its faith and wisdom. And its universality, for Our Town is the chronicle of everyman."[10]

Literary scholars, too, have debated the merits and scope of Wilder's play. These scholars seem concerned with discovering the literary point of view from which Our Town can be academically categorized. Arthur Ballet called the play a tragedy comparing it to Classic ancestors: "Like Oedipus before her, Emily finds a place in dramatic literature as a tragic figure of enormous dimensions, for in her blindness, or death, she gains, the true ability to see and understand."[11] George Stephans argued that Ballet's discussion was inconsistent with the precepts of Aristotelian criticism, stating his own views that the play more appropriately belongs to the literary genre of nostalgic Romanticism so popular with the middle class:

> Our Town is popular...because it is not tragic.... In addition, the 'truths' about life discovered by Emily...--that the living and the blind, troubled, etc., are just the observations as would impress the average audience. Emily's pathetic death, popularly

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[10] New York Times. March 24, 1959.

[11] Arthur H. Ballet. "In Our Living and In Our Dying," English Journal, 1956, XLV, p. 249.

> mistaken for tragedy, is evocative of tender feelings of pity...it is not, in my opinion, a play which ranks with the great tragedies--not, in fact, a tragedy at all.[12]

Robert Corrigan countered both scholars' arguments with a compromising analysis of Wilder's tendency toward a tragic vision of life:

> It is this tendency consistent with his Platonism, to reduce the dimension of eternity so that it can be encompassed by life itself, that has led me to believe, although he has written no tragedies, that Wilder has essentially a tragic rather than a Christian or even a religious view of life. To be sure, Wilder has not created any Ahabs or Lears, but this is not because he lacks a tragic vision. He happens to believe, as did Maeterlinck, that there are times in each of our lives when we are conscious of moving into the boundary of situations of the tragic realm, and that furthermore, life tragedies can be best seen in the drama of the everyday, in life's smallest events.[13]

Francis Fergusson[14] and C. Wixon [15] both attempted to define Our Town as an allegory in the manner of technique of Brecht

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[12]George D. Stephans. "Our Town--Great American Tragedy?" Modern Drama, 1959, I, pp. 258-264.

[13]Robert W. Corrigan. "Thornton Wilder and the Tragic Sense of Life," The Theatre in Search of a Fix. (New York: Delcorte Press, 1973) pp. 239-246.

[14]Francis Fergusson. "Three Allegorists: Brecht, Wilder and Eliot," The Human Image in Dramatic Literature. (New York: Anchor Press, 1957) pp. 41-71.

[15]C. Wixon. "Dramatic Techniques of Thornton Wilder and Bertholt Brecht: A Study in Comparison," Modern Drama, Summer, 1972. pp. 112-114.

and Eliot. Winfield Townley Scott[16] and T. E. Porter[17] each expanded the allegory idea to include their respective contentions that Wilder's play is a significant work of literature for its mythic elements reflecting the spirit and values of the American ideal.

Our Town continues to puzzle critics, analysts, and therefore many producers for its refusal to be neatly categorized. Investigation into other related areas offers only implicit answers concerning the play's production potential in whatever mode. The several published critical and biographical treatments of Wilder are included in the bibliography appended to this study and while they are adequate by degrees to the general subject of the writer and his work, they do not focus on the production aspect of his plays. Of the fourteen dissertations listed in Dissertation Abstracts dealing with Wilder, only three are specifically concerned with his plays; two of them are of a literary analysis nature. The one study concerned with theatrical production relates the events leading up to the initial performance of each of Wilder's major plays and the critical responses to the opening night performances.

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[16]Winfield Townley Scott. "Our Town and the Golden Veil," Virginia Quarterly Review. January, 1953. pp. 103-107.

[17]T. E. Porter. Myth and Modern American Drama. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969).

In spite of the fact that a great volume of material on the history, technique, and aesthetics of cinema exists, only those motions pictures which have been accorded classic stature in their own right have received significant attention in film studies. Discussions of less monumental films, such as Our Town, have been limited to popular magazines. Television, still quite young, is just beginning to assess its own historical perspective in technology and programming. Research materials on television productions are scant, sporadic and often non-existent. Information regarding specific presentations must be gleaned from personal interviews.

Hence this study. It proposes to be the first to examine a specific American play as it has been staged in the various production modes of the legitimate theatre, film and television.

Definition of Terms

The term study is intended in its general meaning suggested by Webster's New World Dictionary as "careful attention to, and critical examination and investigation of any subject, event, etc.".[18]

Descriptive is essentially a detailed accounting of the facts of the events.

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[18]Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, (1980), s.v. "study".

Production modes are those entertainment mediums of the legitimate theatre, motion pictures and television, each with their own unique presentation styles and techniques.

Limitations

1. Three major legitimate productions are included: Jed Harris' 1938 Broadway premiere, Jose Quintero's 1959 off-Broadway revival, and Alan Schneider's 1981 regional production; the one motion picture version of 1940; two television presentations: Delbert Mann's 1955 musical adaptation and George Schaefer's 1977 Bell Special. There may be references to other legitimate or television productions of Our Town, but no academic or community theatre presentations are included.

2. The criteria for the selection of the productions included in this study are:

   a. the uniqueness of the particular production
   b. the reputation of the director
   c. the availability of adequate documentation concerning the production.

3. The attention and emphasis on a literary analysis of Our Town will vary with production, the director, and the critical responses, and may be noted, but a literary analysis as such is not a consideration of this study.

4. In evaluating critical responses to productions of Our Town, reviews are emphasized with support from criticisms in magazines and journals.

Method

The three production modes covered in this study are discussed in the context of six selected presentations as previously indicated. The specific productions have been chosen for their distinct and unique staging approach to the play.

The legitimate theatre mode details the premiere production originally written and staged for a large Broadway proscenium theatre. The second legitimate staging considers the intimate space used by an off-Broadway arena. The third production of Our Town discussed is the staging of the play on a large midwestern thrust stage.

The film mode, of course, is limited to the single 1940 production by virtue of the fact that only one motion picture of the play has been produced to date. However, it is particularly relevant to a descriptive study of Our Town productions because of the naturalism of the film mode and the "Hollywood star"[19] mystique.

Of the six television productions of Our Town that have been aired, two are examined here because of their

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[19]Isabel Wilder, op. cit.

particular approaches to the script. The 1955 "Producer's Showcase" musical adaptation was televised live as one of the first color broadcasts. In 1977 the NBC Bell System presented a video-taped production attempting to reflect the style of a television documentary.

The discussion of translating the meaning and intent of Wilder's Our Town will include those elements unique to that particular production mode. Each specific production will be reported in a narrative manner with particular focus given to the fundamentals of modern theatre practices and the biographical circumstances surrounding these selected stagings.

Procedure

Each chapter dealing with a specific mode will consider those selected productions in chronological order. Comments about the demands of the mode imposed upon the script will be made when necessary to clarify the unique elements of that production. Discussion will include consideration of producers, directors, and other contributing staff members. Each chapter will be reviewed from the context of critical responses for indications of those elements used in the specific productions which were translated effectively within the given mode.

Each individual production will be introduced with an overview of the circumstances leading up to its final realization

in performance. Examination of each production will give attention to the particular director's approach to the play and its visual presentation. Productions which depart from the 1938 Samuel French acting edition of the script will be noted.[20]

The final chapter will summarize the study, present conclusions based on the findings of this examination, and provide implications for further research.

Appendix A includes a chronology of significant productions of Our Town presented in the three modes. Appendix B provides a playbill format listing of those people involved in each of the presentations considered in this study. Appendix C offers biographical sketches outlining the lives and careers of many people who worked on the various productions of Our Town. Appendix D contains photographs of selected productions.

Sources

An initial compilation of major legitimate, film, and television productions of Our Town was made from an investigation of two sources:

1. The biographical studies of Thornton Wilder
2. Related biographical studies of the various personalities who worked with the play during their careers.

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[20]Three published versions of Our Town exist: The 1938 Samuel French acting edition, the Coward-McCann reading edition published in 1938, and Wilder's "definitive" edition published in 1955 by Harper and Row in Three Plays by Thornton Wilder.

The Thornton Wilder Collection at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library at Yale, the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of New York Public Library's Research Center for the Performing Arts, and the film and television collection at the University of Southern California were the primary sources in collecting data on the productions included in this study. Other facilities used were The Performing Arts Library at the University of California at Los Angeles, and various libraries throughout the Inter-Library Loan System. The three published versions of Our Town are available in most libraries. Type-scripts, screenplays, and teleplays are available among the special collections mentioned above.

The background preparation for this study included an investigation of several sources to determine general attitudes surrounding the productions. The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and The New York Times Index were checked from 1937 to 1981 for articles relative to Our Town, Thornton Wilder, theatre, motion pictures, television and those personalities involved with the specific productions. The New York Times was stressed as a source because of its location and its reputation as a chronicle of American entertainment.

A general knowledge of twentieth century theatre modes was obtained from a variety of sources: Oscar Brockett and

Robert Findlay's A Century of Innovation, Lee Simonson's The Stage Is Set, Norris Houghton's The Exploding Stage, and Alexander Bakshy's The Theatre Unbound. Allardyce Nicoll's Film and Theatre and Nicholas Vardac's Stage to Screen offered valuable insights into dealing with the realism of the film mode. Because television is still such a young production mode, comprehensive sources are more elusive. However, a general sense of television aesthetics was gained from A. William Bleum's Television: The Creative Experience.

A major source for this study grew out of a series of personal interviews and correspondences with a number of key people in the production history of Our Town: Richard Goldstone, Delbert Mann, Theodore Mann, Raymond Massey, George Schaefer, Alan Schneider, and Isabel Wilder. Their acquaintance with Thornton Wilder as well as their own professional experience with the several productions make them a most valuable source in this study. Of the six productions being examined this writer observed four:

1. The 1940 motion picture
2. The 1955 television musical adaptation
3. The 1977 television Bell System special
4. The 1981 Guthrie Theatre production.

Finally, a brace of published reviews from many different periodicals serve to demonstrate the critical response to each of the productions.

CHAPTER II

LEGITIMATE THEATRE

This chapter will study Our Town as staged in the production modes of the legitimate theatre. Three specific presentations have been selected for this examination:

1. Jed Harris' Broadway premiere at the Henry Miller Theatre in 1938.

2. Jose Quintero's off-Broadway revival at the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre in 1959.

3. Alan Schneider's regional theatre production at The Guthrie Theatre in 1981.

These productions represent three unique staging approaches to Our Town; large Broadway proscenium theatre, intimate off-Broadway arena, and large regional thrust stage. The study also provides an implicit reflection on the work of three eminent directors in the American theatre.

Each particular production will be discussed in the light of those background circumstances leading up to its final realization in performance. Biographical sketches of the playwright and director will be presented. The director's rehearsal techniques and his staging of the play in the given

theatre space will also be considered. Finally, each production will be studied for its unique theatrical effectiveness through a comparative analysis of published critical reviews.

Broadway Premiere

Thornton Wilder wrote Our Town in 1937 for the proscenium theatre with the hope of having it produced and directed by the reigning "boy-wonder" of Broadway, Jed Harris.[1] Wilder biographer Richard Goldstone details many of the influences and events that led to the play's eventual Broadway premiere on February 4, 1938. According to Goldstone's accounting, several theatrical and literary influences came to bear on Wilder's creation of Our Town; certainly the production modes of the Greeks, the Elizabethans, and the Orientals. More contemporaneously he was influenced by the theatres of Reinhardt, Copeau and Pirandello.[2] Wilder, himself, admits to the profound literary influence of the Classics,

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[1]Both men, former Yale students, had worked together that same year on a moderately successful revival of Ibsen's A Doll's House for Ruth Gordon; Wilder as translator and adaptor of the script and Harris as producer and director.

[2]During the late teens and throughout the twenties Wilder spent a great deal of time in Europe where he witnessed much of the early works in progress of these men and their respective companies.

of James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein on his own writing.[3] However, since Our Town is the particular concern of this study, Wilder's own early exercises in dramatic writing, which Alan Schneider calls "sketchbook" pieces, must also be viewed as influential on Wilder's later writing.[4]

It is interesting to note from Goldstone's study that in spite of the subject matter, if not the setting, of Our Town and Wilder's frequent trips to the Monadnock region of New Hampshire, that most of the play was not written in the United States. He began writing it in 1936 during a visit to the Virgin Islands. Wilder was always working on several projects at the same time. The next year during a trip to Europe he continued his "little masterpiece" project which he had tentatively entitled Our Village. He worked on the play in Innsbruck, Salzburg and Zurich. Then, in late October of 1937 he met with Jed Harris in Paris and offered him Our Town. Harris was ecstatic.

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[3]Goldstone suggests Theodore Dreiser's anti-naturalistic one-act play The Blue Sphere as having particular influence on Wilder's ideas on staging multi-levels of reality.

[4]Walter Beaver presents an extensive analysis of these short plays in his dissertation, A Critical Study of the Apprenticeship Plays of Thornton Wilder and Their Relationship to His Major Dramatic Works.

> He was drawn to Our Town because the play fulfilled all his dreams as a director: its spaciousness was for him a liberation, freeing him of furniture, props, drawing rooms, and doors--in fact, the whole three-hundred year old Western theatre tradition. The play would enable him to work exclusively with language, gesture, movement, light and shade.[5]

Both men were exhilerated and anxious to begin working at once to produce Our Town for the Broadway stage. Harris left immediately for New York with Wilder arriving there shortly afterwards. Much was yet to be done. Harris' reputation as the enfant terrible of Broadway still echoes along the Great White Way. He was a major force in New York professional theatre for nearly twenty years.[6] "At the age of 28 he had (counting road companies) seven productions on the boards at once, and an income of $40,000 a week".[7] Time magazine referred to him as a man of "drive and mettlesomeness (as both producer and director) that acted like ozone, even if at times they were only shots of dope. A meteoric manager,

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[5]Goldstone, op. cit., p. 128.

[6]Patricia Lynn Borroughs' dissertation, The Theatrical Career of Jed Harris in New York, 1925-1956 and Harris' own autobiographical books, Watchman, What of the Night? and Dancing on the High Wire seem to be the only sympathetic studies of this "meteoric" giant of the twentieth century American theatre. In 1979 Harris was interviewed by Dick Cavett in a five-part televised series presentation produced by WNET and the Public Broadcasting System. Shortly afterward he died, according to Goldstone, in poverty.

[7]Time, February 19, 1945, pp. 69-70.

Harris is a volcanic man."[8] The same Time article quoted a nameless Harris friend as remarking that, "Jed will quarrel with you, he will embarrass you, he will break your heart, he will drive you crazy--but he will be good for the show".[9]

What Harris brought to the show was not so much innovation as it was discipline, a commitment to a tight cohesive script, and an uncanny ability to gather together the right cast and crew for that particular production. Harris' rehearsals, aside from being tedious and overlong, were conducted in the traditional manner; read-through, blocking, polishing and technical. He seldom left his seat during rehearsals to work among the actors. Just how bombastic or intimidating he actually was while rehearsing is a controversial issue that cannot be answered.

In later years he reflected on his analysis of the play and his approach to the production. According to Burroughs, Harris felt Wilder's script was contrived.

> Of the play, he says, 'The critics say it was phony, and it is phony. Our Town is far from an interesting play. It was an academic, scholarly cribbing from all sorts of places'. He [Harris]

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

> even agrees with George Jean Nathan's statement that there is no interesting line in the play. He views all the characters as stereotypes--the good mother, the good father, the good children. 'What I loved was the opportunity for me to do something like free-hand drawing. How I welcomed it, if only to get away from the usual trappings of the realistic theatre.'[10]

Even though Wilder and Harris had worked together on A Doll's House just a year before with only minor personal differences, such was not to be the case with their new project. The stories surrounding their conflicts during the preparations of Our Town are now legendary and certainly two-sided. And while it is not the purpose of this study to distill legends, they are, in fact, a part of a production that its actors were later to fondly remember as "a transcendent experience, differing from anything they had undergone before or afterward".[11] Indeed, the script was and is Wilder's, but because of Harris' keen sense of the theatre, both as its producer and its director, Our Town might never have made its Broadway premiere, much less into the annals of American theatre history. It

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[10]Patricia Lynn Burroughs. "The Theatrical Career of Jed Harris in New York, 1925-1956." (Unpublished Ph.D. disseration, Louisiana State University, 1978), p. 274.

[11]Goldstone, op. cit., p. 130.

must be remembered that Wilder wanted Harris to direct his play. Therefore, all stories of the conflicts between them must be understood as the emotional outbursts of two extremely talented men of genius who were both intensely committed to their work, each in his own way.

The first major conflict between the two occurred when Harris demanded Wilder cut certain lines from his script and add an entire scene between Mr. Webb and George Gibbs.[12] Harris rented an apartment on Long Island for Wilder and told him not to come out until he had finished rewriting the script. Not without a small degree of resentment Wilder obligingly moved into the apartment and made the required adjustment to his play.[13]

That obliging quality of Wilder's would one day become his trademark. In 1953 Time magazine featured him as the subject of their cover story article.

> On my grave, says Thornton Wilder, they will write: "Here lies a man who tried to be obliging." And he gives a nervous bark of laughter--the laugh, slightly louder than the occasion warrants, of a man accustomed to putting people at their ease.

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[12]The 1938 Harper & Row reading edition of Our Town contains many of the lines Harris wanted cut from the production.

[13]He later acquiesced to Harris' judgment. In 1955 Wilder published his definite copy of Our Town in Three Plays. It read more like the Samuel French acting edition than the Harper & Row version.

> No one could mistake this faintly fussy, professorial-looking character for a man of the people. Yet he has written some of the most authentic Americana of his time, and numbers among his friends prizefighters, Chicago gunmen, waitresses, and a gambler who is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Full of bubble and bounce, he has the ready grin of the seasoned meeter-of-people. He puts on no airs, and has an immense interest in human beings, young and old, whom he treats with fatherly didacticism.[14]

The second major conflict between the two men occurred when Wilder came to observe one of Harris' rehearsals for the play. The playwright was naturally anxious, nervous, and also relatively inexperienced in the ways and means of the rehearsal process and became increasingly frustrated by what he thought was a complete misunderstanding of his play. His nervous gestures and mannerisms so distracted the actors that Harris banned Wilder from attending rehearsals until a few days prior to the show's out-of-town try-out; a sort of final dress rehearsal, according to Isabel Wilder, at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. Whether or not Harris and his actors understood Wilder's play at those early rehearsals, the play was a failure in its first public performance. Wilder was distraught. Variety reviewed this try-out production in less than "cool" terms, refusing to take the play seriously.

> As theatre fare, it is not only disappointing but hopelessly slow---and it will probably go down as the season's most extravagant waste of fine talent.

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[14] Time, January 12, 1953. pp. 45-47.

> Play's chance will rest solely on the novelty of the production. It's the type of stuff put on here every now and then by the Princeton Theatre Intime, university experimental group, and other serious collegiate organizations. Our Town should never have left the campus.[15]

Goldstone attributes much of the failure of Our Town's first performance to inadequate lighting and poor acoustics. Isabel Wilder, who was present at that production, agrees with this evaluation and adds that these problems could have been easily remedied had the McCarter Theatre been available for a longer set-up and rehearsal period of time.[16] She also indicated that the company was not allowed into the theatre until after 1:00 P.M. and that Harris with his technical director, Raymond Sovey, spent most of the afternoon working on the lighting. There was no time for a rehearsal.

Undaunted by the Princeton performance and Wilder's disappointment, Harris continued with his production plans for the play's next try-out--two weeks in Boston. But the critical response there was no better and the show closed one week short of its scheduled run. Harris, never a man easily discouraged by overwhelming odds, forged ahead with his plans for a New York opening as soon as possible. Our Town had been contracted to play in a Shubert Organization house, but since an adequate one was not currently available, Harris

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[15] Variety, January 23, 1938.

[16] Isabel Wilder, op. cit.

negotiated with Gilbert Miller for a week's run at the Henry Miller Theatre. The producer in Harris speculated that if Our Town were to succeed, another Broadway house would become available. After its week's run at the Henry Miller Theatre, Our Town moved to the Morosco Theatre for 336 performances. In addition to the problems of finding a suitable theatre in New York, Harris was also troubled by the stagehands' union over actors moving furniture during the performance. According to Variety, the issue caused a minor skirmish backstage.

> Harris insisted that as the script called for actors to move chairs and other props (there is no scenery) there was no need for more than a skeletonized crew. Vincent Jacobi, business agent for the deckhand union, demanded that men be engaged anyhow. There was some pushing around backstage and several poorly-aimed punches were thrown, but the jam was finally cleared.[17]

The union conceded to Harris' explanation that only for artistic reasons were the actors and not the stagehands to handle the scenery; the additional crew members were not engaged.

While making his final preparations for the February 4, 1938 Broadway premiere of Our Town, Harris had a chance meeting with Brooks Atkinson, respected drama critic for the New York

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[17]Variety. February 9, 1938.

Times. The outcome of this chance meeting offers another example of the Harris "chutzpah" as Broadway producer. He invited Atkinson to a rehearsal of Our Town, thus providing the esteemed critic ample time for academic reflection before the demands of journalistic deadlines forced a less than meaningful critical analysis for its writer. It is, of course, impossible to say whether or not Atkinson would have had the same impressions of Our Town had Harris not offered and he not accepted the invitation. Nor is it possible to conclude that the play would have succeeded without Atkinson's glowing praise.

> Taking as his material three periods in the history of a placid New Hampshire town, Mr. Wilder has transmuted the simple events of human life into universal reverie. He has given familiar facts a deeply moving, philosophical perspective. Staged without scenery and with the curtains always up, Our Town has escaped from the formal barrier of the modern theatre into the quintessence of acting, thought and speculation. In the staging, Jed Harris has appreciated the rare quality of Mr. Wilder's handiwork and illuminated it with a shining performance.[18]

Only speculation itself, or perhaps a circle of critics, would dare attribute the success of Our Town to Brooks Atkinson. But it is appropriate to suggest that he

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[18]Brooks Atkinson. New York Times, February 5, 1938.

helped to establish Thornton Wilder as a popular American playwright and to add another hit to Jed Harris' already long list of Broadway victories.

Atkinson's critical response, while not singular in its praise for Our Town, was not without its opposing opinions. The one critical concern consistently directed against the production was its experimental, bare-stage, scenery-less novelty. John Anderson of the New York Journal-American wrote that the play offered little more than "another brand of hokum that is obligingly abetted by the audience. There is at the moment, a sort of intellectual chi-chi about having no scenery in the theatre".[19] What Anderson perhaps knew but refused to acknowledge was that Wilder and Harris seemed to have accepted the challenge offered by a member of that "intellectual chi-chi"--Lee Simonson. In his book, The Stage Is Set, published in 1932, Simonson made the following challenge to his colleagues in the American theatre:

> Let me go on record as offering a standing challenge to Sidney Howard, Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill, Philip Barry, S. N. Behrman, Paul Green, or any other American playwright who dares accept it. Namely: Let one of them write a play in which lines and business are so independent of scenery that it can be played on a bare stage, with no more furniture than three chairs, one couch, and one table, and with no more dependence on doors and

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[19]John Anderson. New York Journal-American, February 5, 1938.

> windows than a comedy by Moliere. An open air scene will be allowed two potted plants of any description, or lef shadows cast by a stereopticon. I'll gladly offer my services free to light the show. But I'm making a safe offer. It won't be taken up. If it is, what you will see will be, not a new school of stage setting, but a new school of playwrighting.[20]

Wilder had, in fact, written such plays for his anthology of one-acts, including The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, which he published a year before Simonson's book. Wilder had also spoken out on the issue of unemcumbered stage spaces as early as 1933. In an article published in the Honolulu Star Bulletin he remarked on the element of audience imagination as a means to their active participation in the total theatre experience. "I look forward to the time when actors will be able to play not only without scenery, but without specific costumes--perhaps using a sort of Guild uniform--and thus the imagination of the audience can clothe the actors in their fitting garb as well as the stage with its fitting scene."[21] However, it would take another five years before American audiences would be introduced to the realization of Simonson's challenge as it came in Harris' staging of Wilder's Our Town.

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[20]Lee Simonson. The Stage Is Set. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company) 1932. p. 124.

[21]Star Bulletin. November 4, 1933.

If much of the bare stage concept and floor plan arrangement was Wilder's,[22] Harris' great contribution to staging the play was in his use of lighting. According to Burroughs, Harris invested $44,000 in producing Our Town. Even with a cast of fifty-five, the costumes executed by Helene Pons studio cost under $1,000. But Harris committed himself to almost $30,000 in electrical equipment from Century Lighting for his production.[23] Harris and Sovey spent endless hours installing the two lighting boards, hanging, focusing, and setting over 100 lighting instruments in order to establish the right atmosphere and mood for Our Town which they felt, in the absence of scenery, could only be created through the power of plastic lighting.[24]

It is curious, however, that in spite of all the expense, time and detail spent on painting the "scenery" of

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[22]Early typescripts of Our Town in the Wilder Collection housed in the Beinecke Rare Books Library at Yale indicate this to be true.

[23]Burroughs. op. cit., p. 273.

[24]For the producer interested in recapturing the look and feel of that original proscenium theatre production, he need only turn to and follow the 1938 Samuel French acting edition of the script. It is the published version of the production stage manager Edward P. Goodnow's production book which is now located in the Harvard Library Theatre Collection. Most of the production elements are included in noted detail: "Suggestions for the Director", "Curtain Call Routine", "Note on Pantomime", "Note on Wedding Entrance", "Doubling and Understudy Plot", "Property Plot", "Carpenter's Plot", "Publicity Ideas", "Costume Plot", "Scene Design" floor plans for each act, and an extensive "Lighting Plot".

Our Town with light from "the wings, overhead, and from the rear of the Henry Miller Theatre"[25] that such efforts went practically unnoticed by the watchful eyes of nearly every critic. One reviewer rather cursorily commented that "there was 'technical direction' by Raymond Sovey, who having no scenery to design, presumably took care of such eerie effects as the sun rising over the steam pipes".[26]

Whatever the critical responses to the Broadway premiere of Our Town might have been, the production demonstrated that the 300-year old tradition of the proscenium theatre was ready for a change.

> Our Town showed that realistic-naturalistic theatre had pretty much exhausted itself and that realism now properly belonged to the realm of films and radio plays. Further, it was clear now that the legitimate theatre, if it were to survive, would have to address itself to a---more discriminating audience and devise new modes of presentation.[27]

Indeed, Our Town had done its part to free American theatre practices from the shackles of convention. Wilder had created a more intimate theatre experience. As Norris Houghton suggested, Wilder

> offered us a character like the Stage Manager of Our Town who smashed the barrier of the footlight

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[25] Variety. February 9, 1938.

[26] Wilella Waldorf. New York Post. February 5, 1938.

[27] Goldstone, op. cit., p. 138.

> and held out his hand inviting the audience to commune with him and the performers. 'Not versimilitude but reality' its author was seeking,[28] and by this means he caught it superbly.

Off-Broadway Revival

Thornton Wilder's circle of acquaintances in 1937 New York did not include those people committed to the intimate and experimental spirit of the burgeoning off-Broadway theatre. Had that been the case, the revival of his play there over two decades later might never have taken place at all; much less become the recipient of such sensational critical acclaim. Even though Jose Quintero's staging of the play was not the first New York revival of Our Town since its Broadway premiere,[29] it was, however, the first professional New York revival to play for an extended run. The production opened on March 23, 1959, at the original off-Broadway Circle-in-the Square Theatre and closed 375 performances later on February 21, 1960, after having been transferred to the Circle's new facilities five blocks away.

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[28]Norris Houghton. The Exploding Stage. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971). p. 140.

[29]The first New York revival of Our Town opened at the City Center on January 10, 1944, and closed after a limited run engagement of 24 performances on January 29, 1944. The production was again staged by Jed Harris and included many of the original performers. However, Marc Connelly played the Stage Manager.

The story of Our Town under Quintero at the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre is perhaps its best story. All three had proven their success: Our Town had had over twenty years of popular stagings in academic, community and regional theatres. It had been made into a major motion picture, broadcast on radio, and produced for television with no less than five different interpretations.[30] Quintero's reputation as a director of breathtaking sensitivity was firmly established. He ostensibly became recognized as a major interpreter of Eugene O'Neill's work and ultimately credited with much of the renewed critical interest in this renowned American playwright. Quintero's intuitive and dance-inspired utilization of the intimate arena-like stage space and his poignant revivals of such plays as Summer and Smoke and The Iceman Cometh helped to make the Circle-in-the-Square off-Broadway's leading theatre.

Often what is most important about a particular production is the unique combination of those elements outside the given script itself. To study a script produced by an off-Broadway company, it is also essential to view the group, its personalities involved, and their corporate philosophy of

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[30]One of these television interpretations was directed by Quintero. It was aired November 13, 1959, on the CBS David Susskind Presents.

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That off-Broadway theatre experience, according to Martin Esslin, "is more adventurous in producing plays of literary merit or social relevance, and more experimental with staging techniques".[31] While Esslin's description does not account for those Broadway exceptions like Jed Harris, the general rule remains; the difference between Broadway and off-Broadway theatre is more than the distance from Times to Sheridan Square. Francis Fergusson's brief sketch of the Broadway theatre details what the off-Broadway scene, particularly the work of the Circle, refused to be until more recently when the inevitability of fiscal responsibility pushed that "downtown" ideal further off-Broadway. Fergusson essayed the Broadway ideal.

> The producer is a key figure in the Broadway set-up. Anyone who has, or can find, the money can be a producer....As entrepreneur, he is between the investor (or angel) and the show. But he cannot afford his own acting company, theatre, director, designer, or musician;...He shops around for stars with "names", directors and designers with good reputations, orchestrators who have, as nearly as possible, the infallible touch; and out of

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[31]Martin Esslin, Illustrated Encyclopaedia of World Theatre (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1977) p. 204.

> these elements (often quite strange to each other) he puts together a show.[32]

Quintero spoke of the off-Broadway experience of putting a show together in more simplistic terms. "We have a sense of belonging....We have a base. We're not a migrant pack like Broadway producers."[33]

Indeed, the off-Broadway phenomenon is in itself a vital subject for study. Several cogent and insightful sources are available and provide adequate historical perspectives and analyses of the movement. The most pervasive work to date on the topic is Stuart W. Little's Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theatre. He begins his book with a tribute to the revitalization of the off-Broadway spirit by Ted Mann, Leigh Connell, Jose Quintero and their Circle-in-the-Square Theatre company. Lewis adds that for historical purposes off-Broadway "may be said to have begun in Sheridan Square on the evening of April 24, 1952, when Summer and Smoke with Geraldine Page opened at the Circle-in-the-Square and became the first major theatrical success below 42nd Street in thirty years".[34]

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[32]Francis Fergusson. The Human Image in Dramatic Literature (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957).

[33]Stuart W. Little, Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theatre (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1972) pp. 43-44.

[34]Stuart W. Little, loc. cit. p. 14.

Much of the critical acclaim for the success of the Circle's revival of Williams' play was attributed to its "sensitive" direction. How Quintero got to that point and the ensuing development of his sky-rocketing career as one of America's leading stage directors in given full treatment in his autobiography, If You Don't Dance They Beat You. The sensitive directing style which consistently marked the Circle's intimate productions soon became recognized as the Quintero signature. It was the signature of an intuitive, brooding, passionate man. Where Harris' public display of passion was bombastic and often denigrating, Quintero's passion was tacit and always reassuring. The personality of both men naturally permeated their rehearsal work. For Harris, the rehearsal was a process activity--an administrative exercise. For Quintero, the rehearsal was a communion of souls--a spiritual exorcism. Neither Harris not Quintero was born of temperate spirits and while both artists were greatly influenced by their separate gods[35] each man was troubled by the fear of failure and non-acceptance.

Quintero's approach to the playwright's script differed greatly with that of the elder director. Harris looked for a

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[35]Harris was Jewish; Quintero was Roman Catholic.

script with production potential but one that he could "doctor"; one that he could "possess".[36] For Harris the production script was of primary importance. That is not to say his concerns were always literary. They were not. He was concerned with the theatrical stage-worthiness of the script and if the play had been produced unsuccessfully before, the challenge of the exercise was his inspiration. Quintero, too, liked to revive old scripts that had proven less than successful under another director's touch. But his approach to the script was not to rewrite it as Harris did, but to direct the focus of the play more sharply and more personally into the intimate thoughts and feelings of the characters. In his book Quintero spoke about his mission as a director of stage plays. "When you direct, you're after that shy inner thing hidden in the woods of your being. But it is not technique that I was ever searching for, but rather the treasure of the blind heart."[37]

In directing Our Town for its premiere performance Harris was preoccupied with the play's unique staging opportunities for himself. In directing Our Town for its first major legitimate theatre revival since 1944, Quintero was

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[36]Personal interview with Isabel Wilder, September 14, 1981.

[37]Jose Quintero, If You Don't Dance They Beat You. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974) p. 182.

committed to discovering the essence of the play. Breathing, he felt, was the essence of life. "People inhale and in that inhalation are the most powerful of man's expressions of his innermost soul's longings."[38]

Quintero was an actor's director. Jason Robards, Jr. once commented about Quintero's direction: I don't remember Jose actually telling me anything. He was always acting with us."[39] And so he was. Quintero was ever an active participant in his rehearsals playing every part and every moment right along side his actors. He seldom remained seated for more than a few minutes at a time. He would pace around the theatre talking to the actors; questioning, probing, expanding, helping them to discover the treasure of their character's blind heart. He often conducted rehearsals with improvisational techniques allowing, if not encouraging, his actors to create their own additional dialogue; which, of course, was never used in the actual performance, but which always helped the actors create deeper and richer characterizations. This improvised dialogue approach Quintero admitted was a great distraction to his stage managers who kept flipping prompt script pages in an effort to stay with the director and his actors.

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[38]Quintero, op. cit., p. 154.

[39]Steve Lawson, "Jose, Jason, and Gene", Horizon, September, 1978, p. 79.

Whatever Quintero's directing approach was, it was personal; it was intimate. Jose Quintero and his space at the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre was indeed a fortuitous marriage of the artist and his medium. The physical structure of the Circle only enhanced his spontaneous style. "The openness of the Circle stage--the absence of the picture frame proscenium--made for extreme simplicity in the physical production....The only structure was the work itself."[40] Lewis also suggested:

> Theoreticians are tempted to give Quintero and the Circle credit for the concept of three-quarter arena staging, for finding the way to break out of the dimensionality of the proscenium box. But the shape of the stage and the style of the playing derived less from theory than necessity; given a nightclub, Quintero created a theatre. He saw how actors would enter and leave and how they would play to a nearly surrounding audience. The proscenium stage dictated the horizontal movement, one that more nearly fitted the contours of the human body. Quintero could feel the motion in his own body, how to fill the space and make it live, the actors not as paintings to be studied from one perspective but as sculpture to be viewed from all angles. It was this dance-derived sense of sculptured movement that was to give a distinctive shape to future Circle-in-the-Square productions.[41]

A description of the theatre's facilities by Richard Cordell and Lowell Matson give a more complete picture of the intimate

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[40]Lewis, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

[41]Ibid.

actor-audience rapport that was possible at the Sheridan Square renovated nightclub. "The theatre still resembles a nightclub with horseshoe seating, a ring of small tables and a snack bar in the lounge. It seats 270 people and has a small art gallery with changing shows".[42] Lewis described the future site of the Circle as Quintero might have seen it.

> ...the vacant nightclub once known as the Greenwich Village Inn at the bottom of two joined brownstones at 5 Sheridan Square....On the initial inspection trip Quintero stood on the rectangular nightclub floor with its low ceiling and supporting columns...Yes, he thought, these supports could be used as part of the set--as trees, as umbrellas, as anything at all. He began to imagine patterns of stage movements flowing in and around the three-sided rectangular stage.[43]

With the open "congenial" ambiance of the theatre and the intimate directing style of Jose Quintero, it is not surprising that Our Town was such a resounding success. Ted Mann, one of the Circle's co-founders, essentially its business manager and the driving force behind the company's survival, considered the success of the play to be in the "very simple, honest, and direct playing of Wilder's script".[44] He reported on the day after the show opened that "lines of between ten and

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[42]Richard A. Cordell and Lowell Matson, eds., The Off-Broadway Theatre (New York: Random House, Inc., 1959) pp. xvi-xvii.

[43]Lewis, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

[44]Personal interview with Ted Mann, September 16, 1981.

fifteen persons formed all day yesterday to purchase tickets for as far ahead as June".[45] Mann also speculated that Our Town could well prove to be as successful as the Circle's previous hits, The Iceman Cometh and its history making production of Summer and Smoke, both directed by Quintero. Mann's speculation was accurate. After an impressive run of 375 performances in two different theatres, Our Town closed its most critically successful professional production. The critics had been kind.

Perhaps it was Wilder's script, or Quintero's directing; or perhaps it was the theatre itself, but nearly every drama critic of the New York dailies wrote favorable reviews. In its eight-year history of producing primarily revivals, the Circle had seldom so captured the complete and unmitigated support of both critics and patrons. Robert E. Rhodes, filling in for vacationing Newsday drama critic George Oppenheimer, reported the production's special and endearing appeal.

> It is such a personal thing that one does not watch Our Town; one participates in it. This participation has never been so intimate as it is in the Circle-in-the-Square's production....The arena presentation is made to order for Our Town. With only about 200 in the audience, with everyone

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[45] New York Times, March 25, 1959, p. 40.

> sitting almost close enough to touch the players and with the warmth and folksiness of the narrator as he talks directly to the audience, it is as if each person has been personally invited to come and get to know the people of Grover's Corners.[46]

Whitney Bolton of the Morning Telegraph agreed with Rhodes' assessment, writing as he did that the Circle's production of Our Town had seemingly come home; that the arena production mode served the play more effectively than the proscenium theatre.

> Oddly the arena floor of the Circle seems a perfect place for the retelling of the familiar and human events of Thornton Wilder's deceptively simple play. Although one medium of entertainment even presented it with sets (the movies), in a proscenium theatre it always has been somewhat of a wrench to the mind to discard concerns with stages, back walls and similar adornments of the average play. In an arena style presentation, there is no such impediment and one can accept the play forthwith and wholly.[47]

Even though the major focus of the critical response to Quintero's staging of Our Town at the Circle centered on the appropriateness of the arena playing space, critics did point to other production elements. John McClain of the New York Journal-American simply noted, "The lighting and costumes deserve praise; they were achieved by David Hays and Patricia Zipprodt".[48] Frank Aston of the New York World-Telegram wrote:

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[46]Newsday, March 25, 1959.

[47]Morning Telegraph, March 25, 1959.

[48]New York Journal-American, March 24, 1959.

"The women's high necks and long sleeves gave Patricia Zipprodt a good time with her needle. The lighting by David Hays is smooth."[49] And Robert Rhodes in his Newsday review also made special mention of the effectiveness of the lighting. He wrote, "The lighting by David Hays, particularly in the third act cemetery scene was imaginary and fitting".[50] Like Harris' premiere production in 1938, so it was in 1959 at the Circle that the production's elements of costumes and lighting were significant in their separate contributions to the staging of Our Town.

Of course, the critics reviewed once again the literary merits of Wilder's script. Walter Kerr of the New York Herald-Tribune reported that, "Our Town is still the enchanting play Mr. Wilder wrote, perhaps even more valuable for having become a piece of archeology".[51] Jerry Talmer of the village Voice spoke glowingly in tribute of Wilder's enduring masterpiece.

> I have been seeing or reading or re-reading Our Town for something like two decades now, and not once on any of those occasions has Mr. Wilder's calm, stupendous Declaration of the Artist failed to send shivers up my spine. Obviously we are either

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[49] New York World-Telegram, March 24, 1959.

[50] Newsday, op. cit.

[51] New York Herald-Tribune, March 24, 1959.

> to think him a madman stuffed with delusions of grandeur or, which happens to be the case, the most exceptional sort of writer who has had at least an intimation of how close he has come to producing a masterpiece for the ages.[52]

Wilder's play had been revived and staged successfully by Quintero on the intimate off-Broadway Circle-in-the-Square Theatre. Critics and patrons alike responded with enthusiastic support. Even Wilder himself was pleased.[53]

Ironically, Our Town marked a transition in the history of the Circle. During the seventh month of the show's long run, Mann received a notice that the building was being sold and that they would have to move out by October 31. The Sheridan Square building was to be demolished to provide space for a 17-story apartment complex. Mann knew that the task of locating a new home for the Circle would not be an easy job. So many of the once available facilities had been taken by producers who came to the Village inspired by the Circle's success. After a frantic search, Mann acquired the Amato Opera Theatre a few blocks away, still in Greenwich Village at 159 Bleeker Street. Our Town was moved from the old to the new in a matter of hours. According to the New York Times the new theatre would maintain the same ambience as the old.

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[52] the village Voice, April 1, 1959.

[53] Wilder expressed appreciation by giving the Circle his brace of one-act plays, Plays for Bleeker Street, for production in 1962.

"Again there will be a long open stage with 200 seats on ramps surrounding three sides. Since the Amato Theatre is wider and longer than the Sheridan Square building, the stage will be a little wider and longer and also free of posts. The seats, thank the Lord, will be comfortable."[54] Lewis described the move as having taken place with ease and precision.

> The changeover in the theatres was accomplished in January, 1960, without skipping a beat, thanks to Mann's precise planning. Our Town played its 333rd performance on January 8 at Sheridan Square and the following evening gave its 334th performance in the new Circle on Bleeker Street five blocks away.[55]

McClain commented that the excellent production of Our Town seemed a fitting and "suitable requiem" for the old theatre.

That fitting and final performance in the old Sheridan Square theatre gave occasion for celebration. In his autobiography Quintero recalled that evening, not only for its particular meaning in the history of the Circle, but also for its moment of transition in his own life and career.[56] It was a

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[54] New York Times, September 6, 1959, p. II, 1.

[55] Lewis, op. cit., p. 73.

[56] Quintero left the intimate space of the Circle to direct in a variety of other places. Fourteen years later on Broadway he was awarded the Tony for his outstanding direction of O'Neill's Moon for the Misbegotten.

champagne farewell party with many of the people who had worked with the Circle during its eight-year history of eighteen productions. Various performers from among them did short scenes from the plays that they had presented there. Colleen Dewhurst, Geraldine Page, Jason Robards, Jr., and George C. Scott were a few of the notable actors present. Tennessee Williams was there and Thornton Wilder. The last scene to be performed that night was the drugstore scene from Our Town by the show's current stars, Jane Arthur and Clinton Kimbrough. Quintero recounts his final moments at the Circle with fond memories.

> After the scene was over, Jane and Clinton removed their chairs and the board, so the stage was empty. And then Thornton said: "Well, folks. There's the eleven o'clock train. A woman in Polish town has just had twins. I think it's time for us to go home and go to sleep. And so, good night."
>
> I came up on the stage.
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> I agree with Thornton. It is time to go home. But I want to thank you for coming not only tonight, but for all these years and instead of goodnight, I say---goodbye.[57]

Even though Quintero was saying goodbye to the Circle, Our Town still had nearly fifty more performances to play before it would say farewell to the off-Broadway theatre company in which it had been given such a glorious rebirth. If Wilder had

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[57]Quintero, op. cit., p. 296.

written his play to demolish the barriers of Harris' two-dimensional proscenium theatre, Quintero's sculptural openness of the intimate arena stage gave full and complete proof to Wilder's intent. But it took twenty years to accomplish that feat.

Regional Staging in a Thrust Mode

Thornton Wilder considered himself a Broadway playwright in 1937 and so gave little thought to what Edith Isaacs and her Theatre Arts magazine called the "tributary theatre." But it remains that a satisfactory definition of the classification seems wanting. Edith Hartnoll describes tributary theatre as "the theatre outside New York which has also been called nation-wide theatre, and on the suggestion of Kenneth McGowen... 'local theatre'".[58] In his "Foreward" to Joseph Wesley Zeigler's expansive book on the subject, Regional Theatre, Alan Schneider comments on this dilemma of classification semantics.

> Once upon a time groups of theatre people met and talked and dreamed about something we called, for lack of a better phrase, the tributary theatre. At that point we thought of ourselves as serving the once-flourishing theatre in New York City as a river's tributaries serve the mainstream by spreading their most sparkling waters surging into it. Then the tributary theatre became the regional theatre,

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[58] Edith Hartnoll, ed. The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) pp. 562-563.

> a phrase nobody liked and everybody used, and the regional theatre eventually came of age or at least began to fill the growing vacuum of Broadway. As our theatre kept dying in one place and springing up in new forms and new rhythms in lots of other places, we came to think of it as a resident professional theatre, although it was too rarely resident and too often not nearly professional enough. Repertory theatre we called it in shorthand, although it usually wasn't repertory either, and we knew it wasn't. And non-commercial or nonprofit theatre, which it usually was and we didn't want it to be. Progressively inaccurate descriptions for the same geographical and psychological phenomenon: the spread of the American theatre outside the steadily-growing-colder canyons of Times Square--or at least the growth of a theatre bound not up in New York's traditional processes and attitude, what Zelda Fichlander has labelled the "whaddaya-call-it" theatre.[59]

Whatever label best distinguishes this theatre outside New York, for the purposes of this study the phrase "Regional Theatre" will be used.

It is precisely here in the regional theatres of America where untold productions would support Goldstone's thesis that Our Town had come as close as any play had come to being our national drama. The intent in this section of the study focuses on Wilder's play as produced by one of the leading regional theatre companies in this country, the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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[59]Joseph Wesley Zeigler. Regional Theatre. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973) pp. vii-viii.

However, before getting to the specifics of the Guthrie and its production of Our Town, a few remarks regarding the activities of another leading American regional theatre, the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., must be addressed. While the Arena does not hold the reputation of the first major professional regional theatre in this country, (that distinction belongs to The Alley Theatre of Houston) it has given much inspiration, if not talent, to many Guthrie productions. It is significant to note that prior to the 1981 presentation of Our Town at the Guthrie, its director, Alan Schneider, directed the play twice at the Arena Stage where he had also served in various directorial capacities beginning in 1951. He first directed the play at the Arena in 1953 and then again twenty years later. The 1973 production was also invited to tour Russia as the first American non-musical production to be performed by American artists in that country. A few cursory comments concerning that tour are worth mentioning here.

When the United States State Department determined to participate in a cultural exchange with Russia they invited the Board of Directors of regional theatre groups across the country to apply for the honor. In a personal interview Schneider recounted the reason behind the ultimate selection of the Arena and Our Town. During the period of time while

final decisions were being made, the wife of a Russian envoy in Washington attended a performance of Our Town then appearing at the Arena. Her simple response to the play was decisive. Even though certain unnamed people on the selection committee were pushing for a more contemporary script by a producing group yet unchosen, the Russian lady's reaction sealed the course of events.

> As it happened, Arena Stage, right smack in our nation's capital, was doing Thornton Wilder's Our Town...and the wife of the Soviet cultural attache saw the production and was moved to tears (and a cable) because "it was just like our Chekov".[60] So that's how this particular exchange was born.

The final selection was to be made from three of the country's leading regional theatres of the time: The Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, The American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, and the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. Schneider continues that the Russian delegation did not care for the Guthrie selection of Of Mice and Men. The San Francisco company did not have anything intrinsically American and that city's symphony orchestra had gone to Russia just the year before. The choice of the Arena's production of Our Town proved inevitable.

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[60] New York Times, November 18, 1973, p. II, 1.

Ironically, Schneider's initial problem in staging the play for its Russian tour was in converting the production back to the proscenium from the arena mode. None of the Washington area critics commented on the appropriateness of Our Town to the intimate playing space of the Arena as happened with the Circle's production. The major changes Schneider made, beyond adjusting the actor's movement patterns and creating new pictures, was in his set design and his handling of the script. It is these two aspects which seem to remain constant in Schneider's staging of Our Town; aspects that also were evident in his 1981 production for the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

The designer for the 1973 Arena production of Our Town was Ming Cho Lee. Since the theatre operates in the round, no backdrops or rear walls are possible. But Schneider conceived of a way to use Lee's talent and also bring a unique visual approach to Our Town. Even though he selected a minimum of set pieces, they were, in fact, designed with great detail. He avoided in all his productions the use of rehearsal furniture. The tables and chairs, church pews, pulpit, and drug store counter were all authentic and historically accurate looking pieces. Actors used some props: real but empty soda glasses with real straws; real coffee cups but an imaginary coffee pot.

In designing the production for its proscenium tour of Russia, Schneider and Lee created instead of a bare brick back wall as for the Harris presentation, a suspended collage-like backdrop of early pieces of Americana; a real rocking chair, phonograph, spinning wheel, butter churn, and so on. Nearly twenty years later the same visual spirit would be represented in Schneider's production in Minneapolis. For the thrust stage of the Guthrie Theatre, Karl Eigisti, who had also worked at the Arena, designed for Schneider a setting which the Minneapolis Star Tribune described as an "evocative weathered wood setting, complete with antique furniture and clapboard cutouts of a New England home and church..."[61]

The Guthrie Theatre itself was built thirteen years after the opening of Washington's Arena Stage. The story behind the creation of a new regional theatre in Minneapolis is given full treatment in Sir Tyrone Guthrie's book, A New Theatre. Guthrie, Oliver Rea, and Peter Zeisler, all three astute men of the theatre, found themselves bored with Broadway. According to Guthrie, "All of us felt considerable dissatisfaction with the theatrical set-up as we found it in New York, and for very similar reasons. But dissatisfaction is a negative state

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[61] Minneapolis Star Tribune. July 13, 1981., p. 7B.

of mind. About the positive steps which we should take we were neither clear nor unanimous."[62]

The many steps the three men did eventually take brought them to the destination they were seeking. They were looking for a "city which felt deprived of live theatre and would take us under its wing".[63] They were looking for an area that was "large enough to support a theatre, and small enough to enable us to be a big frog".[64] After narrowing the field of such hinterland Shangri-Las from seven to three, the men decided upon Minneapolis, Minnesota for three reasons. Minneapolis was the most remote from the theatrical world of New York in its social and psychological condition. Minneapolis was a growing city with little culture and therefore a first-class theatre set up there might just "be a very big frog". Minneapolis and the mood of its people reflected a zest for life like none of the other cities being considered. And so in 1960 the drive to build a theatre in Minneapolis began. Three years and $2,250,000 later the Minnesota Theatre Company celebrated the gala opening of their new Guthrie Theatre building.

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[62]Tyrone Guthrie. A New Theatre. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) p. 10.

[63]Ibid., p. 10.

[64]Ibid., p. 56.

True to their staged purpose, "To present classical repertory theatre and serve as community resources to our region", the Guthrie began its premiere season with a modern dress version of Hamlet opening night, followed the next evening with a production of The Miser. As one of the current leading regional theatres in this country, the Guthrie and its paid staff of over 200 employees have remained committed to that ideal. Each season the theatre serves as a community resource by bringing outstanding internationally known artists to The Guthrie in an effort to help enrich the cultural atmosphere not only of Minneapolis but also of the entire Midwest region.

Alan Schneider was first brought to the Guthrie in 1964 to direct their production of The Glass Menagerie,[65] after his having just become the only director ever to receive the Tony and Obie Awards in the same year. In 1963 he earned the Tony for his direction of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and the Obie for his staging of The Collection and The Dumbwaiter. Schneider's first visit to the Guthrie Theatre and Minneapolis proved propitious; his production of The Glass Menagerie went well, he made many friends and contacts for future references, and he served as an effective and valuable resource to the region.

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[65]He directed the same play for his first production at the Arena Stage.

Schneider has been variously described as bearing a somewhat Brechtian resemblance, "the same wistful sanity in a lunatic world, the same alert smile not fully masking some fierce ideals, the same cynical intensity".[66] One of the most articular[67] directors of the American stage, he approaches his craft from those ideals not terribly unlike those of Brecht. In an interview with a New York Times reporter, Schneider spoke about what it is that he is after when directing a play. "I'm interested in the theatre theatrical, which extends and enhances the resources of the stage."[68]

Schneider is no less articulate in discussing his experiences with Our Town, his interpretation, and theatrical staging of the play. In a personal interview Schneider shared the wonder of his first experience with Our Town. He saw the original 1938 Harris Broadway premiere and remembered that the production confused, startled and knocked him dead. "I fell in love with Martha Scott, but I didn't like the play",[69] he began.

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[66] New York Times Magazine. October 20, 1963. p. 27+.

[67] Schneider has written for various newspapers including the New York Times.

[68] New York Times Magazine. October 20, 1963. p. 27+.

[69] Personal interview with Alan Schneider. September 20, 1981.

He went on to express his concern at the time for the play's lack of traditional dramatic structure--no conflict, tension, no beginning, middle and end. Then he continued by saying that he saw the play several years later and responded to it much differently. In 1938 and until after he had studied the idea of the open stage and presentational theatre put forth in Alexander Bakshy's little book The Theatre Unbound, Our Town remained alien to his artistic sense of what a good play and therefore good theatre should be. In Schneider's words, he "had to learn to think theatrical".[70] As soon as he came to understand, as Gassner did, that "the play written for theatricalism was so constructed as to present a view of life rather than a literal copy of it",[71] then Our Town began to take on new levels of meaning for him. He admits to discovering new levels each time he directs the play. Schneider details his understanding and love of Wilder's "little masterpiece" for an article published in the 1981 Guthrie Theatre playbill that reflects the play's mythic elements suggested by Porter and Scott and mentioned earlier in this study.

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[70] Ibid.

[71] John Gassner, ed. A Treasury of the Theatre. (New York: Simon Schuster, 1950) p. 927.

> Wilder's dramatic masterpiece has never been and it is not now a piece of journalism whose validity is altered by each shift in social values, urban redevelopment or economic growth--or decline. It was always meant to offer up not sociology but a metaphysical demonstration. Even back in less complex and cynical days, we knew that its gentle, lyrical compilation of daily life, love and marriage and death was mythic rather than literal, that it dealt less with facts than with truth. That it was a poem about essentials and essences of the human condition, not so much concerned with the way we happened to be living on the northeast coast of the American mainland as about what it has always meant to be human.[72]

Schneider attempts to bring his particular understanding and interpretation of a play to his actors through various techniques during the rehearsal process. He prefers to begin with a traditional sit-down reading of the script by the actors during which he "enhances" the playwright's work, often changing or modifying lines in the script. For the Russian tour he translated the first part of the Stage Manager's opening speech that introduces the play, its producing group, author, and actors into the native language of its audience. For the Guthrie production he changed lines to help the play seem more contemporaneous. He modified "...more than the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh flight" to read as "...more than the Salt II Treaty and the Columbia flight". After he has made

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[72]Guthrie Theatre Playbill, 1981.

what he considers the essential line alterations, he discusses the essence of the play with his actors in an effort to discover the core of what he calls the play's "inner truth". And he often likes to move next to using improvisation to help the actor find elements of that core of truth within himself. Schneider felt that in the specific case of the Guthrie cast the improvisation work "didn't help much".[73] In fact, according to actors and director, there seemed to be less than a close working relationship between those involved. Three actors of the cast were interviewed immediately following their performance in the play.[74] All three indicated their dissatisfaction with Schneider's interpretation and indecisive direction. They argued that his interpretation presented the play in too much of a cavalier manner and that he kept changing his mind on directing choices. Schneider, too, indicated a sense of disunity when he remarked that he had had a greater feeling of actor ensemble at the Arena.

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[73]Personal interview with Schneider, September 20, 1981.

[74]Ken Ruta who played the Stage Manager, Boyd Gaines who played George, and Adam Redfield who played Joe Crowell--the same role created by his father in the 1938 Broadway production.

Whatever Schneider's professional relationship with his actors, he easily communicates his ideas to the technicians. In fact, he often insists on working with the same people. Three such technicians worked with Schneider on the Guthrie production of Our Town: scenic designer, Karl Eigsti, lighting designer, Richard Riddell, and costumer Marjorie Slaiman.[75] If Quintero is an actor's director, Schneider seems to be the technician's. His several production of Our Town imply this to be so. In his Russian proscenium production he not only added his collage backdrop of realistic pieces of Americana, but he also used follow spots, an element he had wanted in his Guthrie production as well. Schneider's technical presentation of Our Town has remained relatively constant given the various modes of staging. An interesting and perhaps contradictory statement outlining his production concepts appears in the Guthrie playbill. And while it is addressed to the specific presentation at the Guthrie, evidence such as photographs of other productions and remarks made by Schneider in a personal interview suggest that the playbill statement reflects his approach to the visual presentation of Our Town. It also suggests that the influence of the Group Theatre's drama of

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[75]Actually Schneider had Marjorie Slaiman's costumes for the Arena Stage's 1973 production of Our Town borrowed and shipped to Minneapolis.

social realism, in which he was originally trained and caused him to reject that first production of Our Town, still affects his thinking. Although his statement is rather lengthy, it is significant to a better understanding of his productions and is therefore quoted here in full.

> The Guthrie production of Our Town with its physical emphasis on what is beautiful and true and lasting in our American past, is intended to mirror the real meaning of the play. The production concept is to present the play as simply and as clearly as possible without gimmicks or "special effects". As the theatre is the art of the living of life, so Our Town should simply stress the value of that living in each moment and in every aspect. We are using American antiques for the furniture and props instead of the usual rehearsal chairs and tables. And for the bare walls and exposed radiators of the proscenium stage, we have substituted some simple outlines of a New England clapboard house, a New England church steeple, that metaphor of all our American small towns, even for those who have never lived in one--or gone to church. On the Guthrie stage, with its own simplicity and directness, its particular warmth and texture and glow, we believe that such a visual image should feel at home. And the performances, we hope, straightforwardly thrust into the very heart of the audience, will serve to reinforce that glow. For the truth of Our Town lies neither in geography nor in detailed reproduction. It lies in our imagination.[76]

Schneider's great contradiction seems to lie in his conviction that the truth is best represented simply and without gimmick,

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[76] Guthrie Theatre Playbill, 1981.

yet he chooses to use ornate antique furniture and clever cut-out drops in the color and detail of Andrew Wyeth, all of which works to limit the imagination of the audience.

The two critics who saw the Guthrie production of Our Town each responded to the play somewhat differently. T. E. Kalem of Time magazine reviewed the Guthrie's entire opening season of three shows in a positive manner. Specifically regarding Our Town Kalem honored the craftsmanship of Wilder and describes Schneider's direction as "pellucid". "We hear the playwright's earthly voice and--something rarer--the splashless echo of pebbles of speculation dropped into a metaphysical well....In this luminous rendering, Director Schneider and his solid troupe unveil the soul of Our Town."[77] A little less esoteric and positive, Mike Steel, critic for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, takes a more thorough and objective point of view. He, too, salutes Wilder's masterpiece and assumes a generally positive posture toward the production giving special mention to the setting and costumes. However, Steel also recognizes a few of the production's weaknesses.

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[77] Minneapolis Star Tribune. July 13, 1981. p. 7B.

> The Guthrie production under Alan Schneider's direction is traditional and thoroughly competent and, once the cast loosens up, could possibly be more than that. Right now there's a certain lack of spontaneity and openness to it all, a stiffness that may be the result of Schneider's decision to play with New Hampshire accents. At this point the actors seem more involved in getting it right than in acting it out.[78]

This last critical concern about the obtrusiveness of awkwardly delivered accents also appeared in the published reviews of Schneider's 1973 Arena staging. And if there is indeed any similarity between the two productions, an examination of those Washington critics might be helpful in presenting insights into the critical response to Schneider's productions of Our Town. David Richards of The Evening Star and Daily News commented that he kept being jolted out of Wilder's world. "Accents are problems to begin with. Just about everyone in the large cast succeeds in saying 'Jawg' for George. Otherwise Emily... has an Irish lilt; George tends to the cockney; his mother, Mrs. Gibbs...obviously had a Southern upbringing, and so on down the line".[79] Clifford A. Ridley of The National Observer also felt distracted by the inconsistent sounds suggesting that "most of the New England accents would be incomprehensible in

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[78] Minneapolis Star Tribune. July 13, 1981. p. 7B.

[79] The Evening Star and Daily News. December 21, 1972. p. D1.

Boston".[80] But Ridley also points out that Schneider's directorial contribution to the play is "in his mine of humor he discovers lodged just beneath the surfact of so many scenes. It is this...that saves Our Town from sentimentality."[81] Goldstone agrees that Schneider's metier is his capacity to enrich a play with elements of humor and farce; perhaps a talent more suited to Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth, which Schneider also directed.

If Schneider's Our Town is anything, it is unsentimental. He distinguishes that there is a difference between sentiment and sentimentality. He says that a sentimental play is one where everyone and everything is so exaggerated and "one-sidedly good",[82] that sentiment is merely a simply honest feeling of emotion. If Schneider's Our Town is anything, it is casual; particularly his Guthrie production according to the critics. Kalem sees the Stage Manager presented as the "playgoer's friend and guide".[83] Steel describes the production as "a

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[80]The National Observer. January 20, 1973.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Personal interview with Schneider. September 20, 1981.

[83]Time. July 27, 1981. pp. 74-75.

sort of casually unsentimental rendering delivered with a clipped Yankee wryness that steers the production away from the arch".[84] Perhaps such response to the play's seeming casualness could be in part due to the atmosphere of the interior of the Guthrie Theatre. Where the austerity and innovation of Harris' production was evoked by the environment of a proscenium theatre, so, too, did the intimate playing space of an off-Broadway cabaret influence the playing and response to Quintero's sensitive interpretation of Our Town. The interior of the Guthrie is unique; larger than either the Henry Miller or Morosco Theatres where the play first appeared and had its run on Broadway.[85] Time magazine published a description of the Guthrie house and stage after the manner of a baseball stadium.

> The stage itself juts forward like a mammoth home plate with a blunted tip....Around this arena stage sweeps a C-arc of 200°, some tiers of the 1437 seats rising as steeply as bleachers, others sloping more conventionally, none more than 52 feet from the playing stage: the seats come in twelve shades of color.[86]

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[84] Minneapolis Star Tribune. July 13, 1981. p. 7B.

[85] Both the Henry Miller and the Morosco Theatres had seating capacities less than 1,000.

[86] Time. May 17, 1963, pp. 87-88.

Richard Gilman in Commonweal also comments on the festive ambience of the Guthrie auditorium saying "the whole thing gives rise to an atmosphere of bright, self-confident, non-competitive vigor and casual expertise".[87]

While published critical responses are public domain for the most part, no evidence exists to indicate Wilder's reaction to Schneider's casual approach to Our Town. In 1981 Wilder had been dead for six years and in 1973 when the Arena production was staged, Wilder was in failing health and missed the performance. In 1953 when Schneider first staged the play at the Arena, both director and theatre group were of no major theatrical consequence. However, that indistinction soon changed and both men became well acquainted with one another.[88] It can only be surmised the extent to which Schneider was willing to abide by his own doctrine of "fidelity to the script".

The ambiguity of such a doctrine is only exceeded by its potential for artistic license. Schneider's regional theatre production of Our Town on the arena/thrust stage in the large festive Guthrie auditorium was modestly successful.

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[87] Commonweal. May 31, 1963. pp. 282-83.

[88] Wilder and Schneider spent fourteen days together aboard a steamer bound for Europe and a meeting Wilder had arranged between Schneider and Samuel Beckett.

He approached the play with casual humor using unique visual metaphors for his production concepts.

CHAPTER III

FILM

This chapter will study Our Town as presented in the production mode of motion pictures. Since only one commercial film of the play has been produced to date, that singular effort will necessarily serve the purpose of this examination. The film to be studied here is Sol Lesser's United Artists release of 1940. The presentation of Our Town in the film mode suggests certain unique approaches to the play that will be discussed in this chapter. The study further provides a reflection on the life and work of selected motion picture artists connected with the film. The film itself will be discussed in the light of those background circumstances leading up to its final realization in presentation. The process of transferring the script from its intended mode on the formalistic stage of the legitimate theatre to the "realistic" screen of the picture house will be explored. The producer and director's approach and commitment to the filming of Wilder's play will also be considered. Finally, the film production will be studied for its particular effectiveness

at the time through a comparative analysis of published critical reviews.

The Motion Picture

Thornton Wilder consented to the 1940 film-making of Our Town with resignation and reserve. Jed Harris, as its Broadway producer, retained production control of the play so that when the opportunity to sell the film rights came along, according to Isabel Wilder, her brother was consulted only for his opinion not his permission.[1] However, the accurate details of this issue are somewhat cloudy. Goldstone avoids the point in his biography by referring to the "independent Hollywood producer who had secured the film rights to Our Town".[2] Ms. Wilder remembered that Harris sold the rights and that "there was nothing that Thornton could do".[3] She further commented that Harris gave her brother a check for five hundred dollars as his share of the film sale. Yet a letter in the Wilder Collection at Yale University's Beinecke Library, written by Wilder, indicates the playwright's request to buy the motion picture rights from Harris. Unfortunately no other

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[1] Personal interview with Isabel Wilder.

[2] Goldstone, p. 132.

[3] Wilder interview.

supporting evidence exists at the Beinecke concerning the fact whether or not such a transaction did ever take place. The Our Town Hollywood film pressbook on file in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of New York Public Library's Performing Arts Research Center only confuses the issue more by reporting that the film's producer had paid its playwright the sum of "$45,000 for production rights". Whatever the financial aspects of securing the play, it is understandable that Wilder felt the formalistic style of Our Town hardly appropriate material for the demands of what Allardyce Nicoll had recently referred to as "the camera-cannot-lie realism of film".[4] Also an earlier experience of Wilder's work on film had been less than satisfactory for the writer. The 1929 film version of his novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, had been reviewed as "vague" and "uncinematic".[5] Nevertheless, motion picture rights to Wilder's Our Town were sold in the summer of 1939 to Hollywood producer Sol Lesser.

Prior to that time Lesser's reputation as a producer of motion pictures was founded on the box office success of his "B" grade films including the popular Tarzan series.

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[4] Allardyce Nicoll, Film and Theatre. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1936.) p. 168.

[5] The New York Times. March 23, 1929.

Lesser's decision to immortalize Our Town on film marked the beginning of his career as a Hollywood producer of serious stature. His decision to take on the project was inspired by his daughter. She had seen the Broadway premiere and asked her father to produce it on film for her as a gift. He acquiesced, went to New York to see the play for himself, and later remarked that, "From the moment I first saw Jed Harris' beautifully evocative play, I felt the urge to transfer it to the screen".[6] The task of making that transfer began to take place almost immediately after Lesser had completed his New York negotiations.

Work began on the film with Lesser's return to California. The initial task that lay before him was to adapt Wilder's proscenium theatre script to the mode of motion pictures. The Hollywood producer had at hand the services of Harry Chandlee, a studio writer for United Artists. Frank Craven, now in Hollywood had signed on to recreate his role as the Stage Manager, also assisted in adapting the screen-play.[7] But Lesser was committed to his "determination to carry

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[6]Sol Lesser. Comment by Mr. Lesser included in the program for the film's Hollywood press review held at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, May 9, 1940.

[7]Craven also had previous experience writing for stage and screen.

this script through to its finality in as faithful a translation of its original as it is possible in our medium".[8] He spent a week of September, 1939, in New York conferring with Wilder about the translation. Goldstone suggests in his book that Wilder was unhappy with the screen treatment of his play by Lillian Hellman and so offered his services to Lesser gratis. When questioned about this point in a personal interview, Goldstone responded that Wilder had given him that information. However, an examination of Hellman's bibliographic resources offers no such evidence that she ever wrote an Our Town screenplay. During the next nine months the two men "exchanged more than one hundred twenty letters...adapting the story to the screen". A substantial portion of these letters appeared in the November, 1940 issue of Theatre Arts magazine. These letters are significant not only for their "illuminating insight both personal and technical into the translation of an excellent play into an excellent motion picture,"[9] but also for their revelation of Wilder's own thoughts about his play.

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[8] Theatre Arts, "Our Town--From Stage to Screen". November, 1940. p. 817.

[9] Theatre Arts, p. 815.

The correspondence was "lively and friendly" between the two; Lesser was sincere and Wilder helpful. They shared a common concern that although the film was addressed to an audience of forty million people, it should maintain both the "boldness" and the "novelty" of the stage version. Not, Wilder wrote, "for their own sakes, but merely as the almost indispensible reinforcement and refreshment of a play that was never intended to be interesting for its story alone, or even for its background..."[10] Throughout their correspondence Lesser continued to seek counsel on a number of details in adapting the screenplay. Often his questions were nothing more than tactfully stated suggestions for the enhancement of Wilder's original script.

January 9, 1940

> Dear Thornton:
>
> Does it occur to you that we should expose as a premise early in the picture 'that human beings do fairly move about in self-pre-occupied matter-of-factness--admitting that human beings are inadequate to experience'--all as demonstrated in the last act? If this could be accomplished subtly, yet thoroughly understandably to the forty million, perhaps the third act will take on a still added value.
>
> As an example, Craven says: 'And there comes Howie Newsome and Bessie delivering the milk--adding--'Howie, you know, does one of those services that we just naturally take for granted'.

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[10] Ibid., p. 816.

> While I realize that this premise 'cannot be taken as a motto for this picture', do you feel as I do, that it is an important collateral--which when exposed should have everyone in the audience right where we want him?
>
> Think this through for me, and let me hear.
>
> Cordially,
>
> Sol Lesser[11]

Wilder's immediate and academic reply reflects two important items: the influence of Chekov on Wilder's thinking and his "obliging" willingness to consider the possibility of Lesser's suggestions.

> January 13
>
> Dear Sol:
>
> Re planting unobtrusively the notion of everybody's inevitable self-pre-occupation.
>
> I should suggest that the idea is not so much suggested by the service a Milkman renders...but by some picture of a person's not noticing another's need or claim or call. (Chekov's plays are always exhibiting this: Nobody hears what anybody else says. Everybody walks in a self-centered dream.) Children perpetually feel it as a rebuff:
>
> "Mama, mama, look what I found--isn't it <u>wonderful</u>?"
>
> "Yes, dear, now go and wash your hands."
>
> It is certainly one of the principal parts that the Return to the Birthday makes; when I read the script today I'll be thinking over a way to incorporate some advance indications of it in the earlier part of the picture.
>
> All my best,
>
> Thornton[12]

Other letters communicated a variety of details concerned with the process of adapting and creating the

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[11] <u>Theatre Arts</u>, p. 822.

[12] <u>Ibid</u>.

screenplay of Our Town; such details as finding substitute events for the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh Flight which Wilder wrote into the original version as contemporary reference points. No satisfactory substitute was found. The line was eliminated. A great deal of thought was given to the characterization, or what Allardyce Nicoll called the cinematic "individualization" of Emily and George. According to Nicoll, a major distinction between cinema and the legitimate theatre is that the characters in a film become more personally associated with the actor playing the role, whereas these same actors on the live stage can more easily sustain the abstract levels of the playwright's larger meaning.[13] Lesser wondered if the character relationship between Emily and George would be concrete enough for film. He asked Wilder if a continuing conflict between the brighter Emily and the reticent George might not heighten her later regret for having taken him so much for granted and therefore be more appealing to the masses. Wilder responded strongly and rationally "against showing Emily returning to her fifth wedding anniversary and regretting that she had been an unwise wife".[14] Lesser conceded. The initial relationship between Emily and George

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[13] Nicoll, op. cit.

[14] Theatre Arts, p. 818.

was retained, but instead of her twelfth birthday, she returned to her sixteenth. The time-frame was also changed from the 1901-1913 period of the stage script to 1919-1923 for the screenplay. The implication of the time change was to avoid any oblique comparison to the years before World War I and the contemporary world situation of growing military unrest.

However, perhaps the most significant change in the script was in its ending. In the original production Emily dies giving birth to her second child. She is buried among her people, chooses to relive her twelfth birthday, then returns in revelation to the grave. The presentation of this ending in the realistic mode of motion pictures puzzled Lesser. He confessed to Wilder his own inability to decide whether Emily should live or die. Wilder's response, ironically dated "Easter Night", conveyed the spirit, if not the words, of Nicoll's views concerning film.

> ...I think Emily should live. I've always thought so. In a movie you see the people so close to that a different relation is established. In the theatre they are halfway abstractions in an allegory, she dies--we die--they die; insofar as it's a concrete happening, it's not important that she die; it's even disproportionately cruel that she die."
>
> Let her live. The idea will have been imparted anyway.[15]

[15] Theatre Arts, p. 824.

And so Lesser did. In the film Emily suffers through a painful labor during which she becomes delirious. In this fevered state of delirium she experiences an expressionistic nightmare of death in which she relives her sixteenth birthday and then returns to the grave as in the original production. However, in the film Emily survives the agony of childbearing and as the nightmare subsides, she cries out, "I want to live. I want to live." The shadow of a doctor slapping the newborn child is shown as the sounds of the crying infant are heard. The camera lens zooms in for a closeup of George, the living Emily, and their new child. The film ends with the Stage Manager/Narrator's final scene presented against a realistic hillside backdrop of Grover's Corners.

Of course, much attention was given to the visual presentation of the story on film because the medium seemed to demand a departure from the play's original production style. Therefore, Lesser gathered together a group of highly talented motion picture artisans to create a novel and bold look for his new film. The producer's first choice for director was William Wyler, but finding him unavailable Lesser signed Sam Wood to take the job. William Cameron Menzies was hired as production designer and Harry Horner as his design associate. Actually Horner was to do most of the design concept sketching himself; Menzies was merely to coordinate the visual aspects

of the film with producer, director, designer, costumer, and cinematographer. The combined expertise of these major creative forces was impressive. Wood's recent direction of Good-bye Mr. Chips had received critical praise. Menzies' design co-ordination of Gone With the Wind won him a special Oscar. And although Our Town was Horner's first Hollywood design commission, he had been a student of architecture and an associate of Max Reinhardt in Vienna. Bert Glennon's work as a cinematographer was highly regarded in the film business and costumer Edward Lambert was a chief executive for Western Costume Company, the largest costume house in the world. Lesser even hired Edward P. Goodnow, production manager of the Broadway premiere of Our Town, to serve as Technical Advisor to the film. The creative talent and energies of these assembled artistic personalities made staff meetings sizzle. So many ideas and ideologies sky-rocketed around and across the planning table that Lesser, though ecstatic with what he had wrought, was frequently confused. This, perhaps, explains his constant return to Wilder for sage advice and counsel. One such letter written in report reflects Lesser's enthusiasm over the work being done on the film and his continuing efforts to win Wilder's praise and approval.

January 17, 1940

Dear Thornton:

...You are going to get a real thrill, Thornton, when you see on the screen the production of the graveyard sequence as designed by Mr. Menzies. There is great inspiration from the time the mourners under their umbrellas come into the graveyard. We never show the ground--every shot is just above the ground--never a coffin nor an open grave--it is all done by attitudes, poses and movements--and in long shots. The utter dejection of Dr. Gibbs--we have his clothes weighted down with weights so they sag--the composition of Dr. Gibbs at the tombstone is most artistic--and as Dr. Gibbs leaves the cemetery the cloud in the sky gradually lifts revealing stars against the horizon--and as the cemetery itself darkens, a reflection from a star strikes a corner of a tombstone which is still wet from the recent rain and the reflection (hilation) seems to give a star-like quality--and the scene gradually goes to complete darkness. We get a vast expanse of what seems to be sky and stars. When this dissolves to the dead people this same reflection of hilation appears to touch the brows of the dead. It is lovely--something quite bold! Well, if it comes out on the screen as we hope, we will get that feeling of joy.

Cordially, Sol Lesser[16]

Sam Wood had seen Harris' original Broadway production and was impressed with Martha Scott's work as Emily. He wanted her for the film and arranged for the screentests. The results were disastrous but Wood was not to be undone. He and cinematographer Glennon re-examined the tests more closely and in the process discovered that Scott's face and figure had been poorly photographed due to improper lighting. Another

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[16] Theatre Arts, p. 823.

screentest was scheduled. This time the results were favorable and Wood got his actress.

Wood was, indeed, a formidable force in the Hollywood film industry.[17] He once commented about his career in a New York Times interview that, "It was obvious to me that any picture was at the mercy of the director. So I decided to become a director."[18] He had worked with such Hollywood stars as Jackie Coogan, Gloria Swanson, Rudolf Valentino and the Marx Brothers. In fact, Wood attributed much of his success to "his insistence upon having first-rate actors and technicians to work for him".[19] He has been variously described as "shrewd", "versatile", and "the most thorough director in the business".[20] Time magazine eloquently remarked of his talents that "if a Hollywood executive were confronted with the dread fact of having to turn out at one try a Grade-A, sure-fire hit, he would almost inevitably turn to the tall, dignified, soft-spoken man [Sam Wood] who has been quietly making excellent pictures for the last twenty years."[21]

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[17] For nearly ten years Wood actively campaigned against the alleged infiltration of Communists into Hollywood films. To that end he served as founding president of The Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals.

[18] New York Times, January 4, 1942, p. IX 4.

[19] Ibid.

[20] New York Times, October 5, 1942, p. 14.

[21] Time, February 2, 1942, p. 54.

Whatever distinction Wood held in the film industry at the time of Our Town, he seemed more than adequate to Lesser. However, years later Harry Horner, who in effect, designed the film, recalled with some regret the experience of working with "Uncle Sam".[22] Horner had only recently come to the United States as chief assistant to the Austrian impresario Max Reinhardt and his American tour of Werfel and Weill's The Eternal Road. The new country with its remoteness from the impending doom of Nazi encroachment attracted the young architect-turned-theatre-artist. So he stayed and soon became a New York scenic designer where he worked for a time as apprentice to Norman Bel Geddes. Although Horner had designed a few Broadway productions on his own prior to 1940, Our Town was his first Hollywood film design assignment. However, he did the preliminary design sketches at his studio in New York. Lesser became so excited with the sketches of these early design concepts that he insisted artist and playwright should meet. He wrote another of his many letters to Wilder regarding Horner's work.

> ...I have a feeling that it might be helpful to you in visualizing the script to meet Harry Horner who could show you a number of sketches that he has prepared and which in a great number of cases have acted as a stimulant to our art designer here. I can't commence to tell you my enthusiasm for the

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[22] A nickname for Sam Wood coined by the child-star, Mickey Rooney.

> sketches that have so far been prepared. They are indeed artistic, and I think we will get a very unusual result.
>
> Most of the conversational scenes will be played in very close shots, eliminating scenic proportions, in order to capture the original purpose of the play--the non-use of scenery--but at the same time we will have a beautifully scenic production in the places where scenery will serve its purpose.[23]

Horner and Wilder did meet. What degree of warmth that meeting between the two engendered is not known. But their mutual adulation for the genius and rank of Reinhardt must have had some bearing on their common interest, aside from the filming of Our Town. In an interview published in the February, 1977, issue of the American Film journal, Horner recalled that meeting, his experience with Sam Wood, and his design work on Our Town. He remembered that "Thornton Wilder liked my sketches and the producer liked them--he probably liked them because Thornton Wilder liked them. My intention was to do the movie almost without scenery, primarily with props. That is where the disagreement started with the director. It ended in a compromise I hated."[24]

The compromise in concept he mentions is reflected in Lesser's somewhat airy statement quoted earlier in this chapter

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[23] Theatre Arts, p. 821.

[24] American Film, February, 1977. p. 34.

that close-up shots would be used to capture the original sceneryless purpose of the play but that scenic production would be used "in the places where scenery will serve its purpose".[25] Horner admitted his frustration with the fact that his "visual concept was not entirely used,"[26] which he naturally felt harmed the picture. If indeed Horner's design concept was to give greater focus to the props in the film, another of Lesser's exuberant letters to Wilder point to this issue of compromise.

> ...the picture itself will be treated in an unconventional manner with regard to camera set-ups, following our original idea of introducing properties intended to accentuate the moods and to visualize something deeper than just mere dialogue.
>
> For instance, the Simon Stimson episodes, with the scenes played in moonlight, the photography will accentuate the black and white shadows. The little white New England houses which look so lovely in other shots will look naked and almost ghostly in relation to Simon Stimson, to whom they did not offer nice lovely homes but a cold world which ruined him.
>
> As a further example: When we come to Mrs. Gibbs on the morning of the wedding, we will see her through the kitchen window grinding the coffee, but in the foreground the flower pots will be dripping in the rain to accentuate the general mood, so that Mrs. Gibbs is almost a secondary element in the scene.

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[25] Theatre Arts. op. cit., p. 822.

[26] American Film, op. cit., p. 36.

> And just another example: When Rebecca is crying in her room the morning of the wedding, we see her little pig bank tied by a ribbon to a corner of the bed, which will remind the audience of what Rebecca likes most in the world. I think this little effect will give as much to an audience as if we had a whole scene about her.[27]

For Horner the Our Town film experience was an unfortunate artistic compromise that disappointed him. He knew too well that the conceptual origins of Wilder's stagecraft lay in the innovative theatre practices of his Austrian mentor Reinhardt. Horner wanted to be loyal. He wanted the film to be bolder than it proposed to be. He wanted the film to be more like the stage version eliminating "all that crap that is called scenery".[28] But Wood was the director and however formidable and expert a force he was, his own approach to film realism was being stretched to the limit. Years later Horner reported in the interview, he discovered that Wood had not liked working on the picture.[29] An understanding of Wood's state of mind during the time when Our Town was being filmed might give further insights into his disenchantment with Lesser's project in general and the film industry in

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[27] Theatre Arts, op. cit., p. 821.

[28] American Film, op. cit., p. 35.

[29] Ibid., p. 36.

particular. Of course he knew he had been second choice as a director for the film. However, an account by his daughter suggests personal and professional anxieties and disappointments that affected her father deeply and permanently. She traces Wood's distraction "to his failure to win the Best Director Academy Award for Good-Bye, Mr. Chips...the defeat galled and disappointed him beyond measure".[30] The fateful defeat came as work on Our Town was just beginning. Jeane Wood also spoke of her father's "obsession" with Communism as having transformed a charming gentle man into a "snarling, unreasonable man".[31] Our Town was not a consoling experience for its film director.

Whether its director or designer enjoyed their experience with Lesser's film of Wilder's Our Town, the audience and critics did. The film received several Oscar nominations,[32] a poll by the New York Times included it as one of the year's

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[30]Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund. The Inquisition in Hollywood (Garden City, New York: The Anchor Press, 1980), p. 210.

[31]Ibid., p. 209.

[32]Our Town received six Oscar nominations: Best Picture, Best Actress, Interior Decoration, Sound, Music and Original Score.

top ten films,[33] and critics in general were supportive. Only the purists were distressed. When the film opened its gala world premiere showing on May 23, 1940, at Lowe's Theatre in Boston, the critical response there was characteristically cool. The Boston Globe's film critic, Elizabeth Copeland, wrote that "the simplicity of the camera which does not often lend itself to good photoplay becomes the most useful tool of all in the experienced hand of director Sam Wood, who knows how to keep things simple".[34] She also remarked on the script and its translation into the film mode as did the other critics. After viewing the New York showing on the Radio City Music Hall motion picture screen, Bowsley Crowthers of the New York Times reviewed the film and its translation with superlatives.

> We hesitate to employ superlatives, but of Our Town the least we can say is that it captures on film the simple beauties and truths of humble folks as very few pictures ever do; it is rich and enobling in its plain philosophy--and it gives one a passionate desire to enjoy the fullness of life even in these good old days of today....For this is not an ordinary picture, not a straight-away plotted

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[33]Other films were: The Grapes of Wrath, The Great Dictator, The Baker's Wife, Rebecca, The Long Voyage Home, Fantasia, The Mortal Storm and The Great McGinty.

[34]Boston Globe, May 24, 1940.

> story film. This is a story which utilizes the fullest perogatives of the camera to participate as a recognized witness to a simple dramatic account of people's lives, not just to spy on someone's fictitious emotions.[35]

Two days later Crowthers' superlatives for the film were again pronounced in a featured article for the screen section of the New York Times Sunday edition.

> For a few days of pleasant reflection upon the splendid picture, now at the Music Hall, leaves us with the stubborn suspicion that it must have been written originally for the screen. And if it wasn't, it should have been....Maybe Mr. Wilder had no thought at all of the screen when he was writing Our Town; maybe his use of flashbacks, lap dissolves, and cut-ins was merely fortuitous. But so completely workable is it as a "different" screenplay that we say--looking straight and hard at the boys in Hollywood who passed it up--that it should have been, and a long time ago.[36]

Film critic for the Hollywood edition of Variety curtly commented that the "picture rates high in all technical departments; photography by Bert Glennon being particularly noteworthy".[37] The New York Herald critic thought Glennon's frequent and effective use of close-up and two-shot camera techniques created an "enormously compelling drama and striking imagery".[38] The technique also seems to have anticipated the

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[35] New York Times, June 14, 1940, p. 25.

[36] Ibid., June 16, 1940, p. IX 3.

[37] Variety, May 10, 1940.

[38] New York Herald, June 14, 1940.

cinematic intensity of Jose Quintero's legitimate theatre off-Broadway revival nineteen years later. Other critics pointed to more outstanding elements in the film. Archer Winston of the New York Post reported that Aaron Copeland's musical score for the film "though quiet and unostentatious as befits a modest New England town, will repay your attention".[39] Douglas Campbell wrote about the success of a device used in the film that was originated by its production designer, William Cameron Menzies.

> Instead of employing the ancient method of a transparent figure moving about the room to denote a ghost in the sequence involving Emily's sixteenth birthday, Menzies originated a method by which the normal scene was photographed under natural conditions. The mature Emily then was shot against a black velvet backdrop and, in a white dress, she was flooded with an excess of light. This film has been superimposed on the other, a travelling matte blotting out the normal scene and allowing the light radiation to dominate the screen, thus giving the woman's figure an eerie appearance.[40]

For the purists Menzies' clever device created hardly more than an obtrusive distraction. In fact, for them the entire third act graveyard scene was a disappointment. Lee

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[39] New York Post, June 14, 1940.

[40] Mr. Churchill's article is among a file of uncatalogued newspaper clippings on Our Town located in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at New York Public Library's Performing Arts Research Center.

Mortimer felt that a serious crime had been committed by "providing a happy ending to Thornton Wilder's Our Town."[41] However, later in the review he expressed his respect for the beauty and simplicity of the film--in spite of his one disappointment. "The entire production is so well cast and so beautiful in every detail but the one, that...this commentator must note that his aforementioned harsh words are in sorrow because a great film was not made greater".[42]

Disappointed purists and frustrated filmmakers notwithstanding, the production was an immediate critical and commercial success. Wilder had indicated his approval early on in his correspondence with Lesser and the producer himself was ecstatic over the final outcome of his film. For it had been a bold and novel risk, even if certain artistic compromises were inevitable. The film had been daring in its presentation of a non-traditional plot line and its use of the narrative story-telling technique advanced in the French films of Sacha Guitry. Lesser's film had also dared to attempt bold ideas in the use of design concepts predating Orson Welles' cinematic masterpiece, Citizen Kane. Perhaps most importantly, the Our Town film attempted to expand the realistic eye of the camera as it became a sensitive, searching instrument capable of revealing not so much Nicholas Vardac's photographic realism of externals, but more fully the reality of Wilder's

psychological versimilitude. The filmed version of Our Town remained faithful to its original purpose of abstract stylization and the precepts of photographic realism at the same time. If Our Town had given new perspectives to the staid tradition of the legitimate theatre, so, too, had Mr. Wilder's script challenged the boundaries of the still-growing film mode of 1940.

CHAPTER IV

TELEVISION

This chapter will study Our Town as stated in the production mode of television. Two specific presentations have been selected for this examination:

1. Delbert Mann's musical adaptation broadcast live on NBC-TV in 1955.

2. George Schaefer's Bell System Special broadcast pre-recorded on NBC-TV in 1977.

These productions represent two unique staging approaches to Our Town; live television studio performance and edited video-taped presentation. The study also provides an implicit reflection of the advancement in television technology as well as a closer look at the work of two eminent American television directors.

Each particular production will be discussed in the light of those background circumstances leading up to its final realization in performance. Biographical sketches of the producer and director will be presented. The director's approach to staging Wilder's play within the given space of the television studio will also be considered. Finally, each

production will be studied for its own unique effectiveness through a comparative analysis of published critical reviews.

Musical Adaptation

Thornton Wilder allowed the 1955 television musical adaptation of Our Town with an attitude that suggests his confidence in the durability of his play regardless of the form or quality of the particular production. This attitude seems not unfounded when considering the stature Our Town attained in the few years since its Broadway premiere. The play ceased to be connected solely to its creator, now ranking as a national treasure belonging to its people. In the twenty years since the play's first performance, Our Town had been translated into an outstanding Hollywood film in 1940 and given its first limited-engagement legitimate theatre revival on the New York stage during 1944. Subsequently Wilder's "little masterpiece" became the most often produced play in this country. It has also become the most anthologized script in America next to the plays of William Shakespeare. Radio and television presentations were an inevitable matter of course.

Although Our Town had been produced on radio and on live television at least four times prior to 1955,[1] Delbert Mann's NBC-TV presentation was unique in two major respects:

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[1] See Appendix A of this study for other radio and television broadcasts of Our Town.

1) it was a musical comedy version starring the current young male singing idol, Frank Sinatra; and, 2) the production was telecast live and in "living color". Mann's production also represents a single presentation on one of the many early drama anthology series so popular during television's "Golden Age". In his book Television: The Creative Experience, A. William Bleum describes the golden era as having begun with "Kraft Television Theatre" on May 7, 1947; ending ten years later with the final production of "Playhouse 90". He goes on to comment that the television content of the age "was anthology drama--stories of human conflict and confrontation played with honesty and authority in living sight, sound and motion before audiences the size of which no actor, writer or director in all theatrical history would have dared to dream".[2] As Bleum continues, he also offers a vital distinction between the major modes of this study. Television, he says,

> ...is not quite cinema and not quite the living stage. It allows for intense visual concentration, and yet at its best it is verbal. In some ways T.V. is the penultimate technological extension of the naturalistic drama and its rejection of romantic superficiality in favor of the vital inner revelation of human character. The entire theatrical movement toward realism in acting and staging seems to culminate upon the small screen, where it can work out its own absolutes of form and style.

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[2] A. William Bleum and Roger Manvell, eds., Television: The Creative Experience (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1967) p. 16.

> Little matter that the cineaste deplores the shaky lines of light upon the tiny screen. No difference that the stage-bound theorist pompously declares the medium 'incapable of grandeur'. Television is the medium of the mass, and here alone can the man in the living room see the private tragedy delineated with a final degree of refinement. If twentieth century man has any tragic proportion, it is observed, the events and circumstances of his time have perfectly scaled it to fit the small screen.[3]

Bleum concludes his essay on television's L'Age D'Or with a final justification that since the new medium was visual, no one questioned the "logical turn to the stage and the movies for forms of fiction, fantasy and fun".[4]

The television drama anthology series which presented Mann's production of Our Town, "Producer's Showcase", first began broadcasting over NBC-TV affiliate stations on October 15, 1954, and aired every fourth Monday evening from 8:00 to 9:30 P.M. The producer of this monthly showcase, Fred Coe, began his work in television drama during 1947 by directing for the "Theatre Guild on the Air" series, also billed as the "U.S. Steel Hour". Among the various Broadway dramas he directed for this series is the first television

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

production of Our Town which John Gassner reviewed in his column for The Forum magazine.

> Unless I greatly miss my guess, The Theater Guild's telecast of Our Town over NBC on Sunday, June 6th, will go down in history as the date when televised drama was really born. It was the first time a play of quality was televised in the new medium with style and distinction. Congratulations are in order to the producer Lawrence Langner, to Frederick Coe who directed, and to the good cast headed by Raymond Massey in the celebrated Frank Craven role. More important, however, it is possible at last to appraise a televised production without condescension and to draw conclusion as to its worth as a dramatic form. This is because the Guild's Our Town, while suffering from the as yet unsolved technical problems, accomplished what every art does; it turned the limitations of the medium into an advantage, just as the good sculptor takes advantage of the intractability of his materials instead of being defeated by the conditions of his art.[5]

Mann's own career in television, inspired as it was by Coe, began to develop into one of distinction and national prominence in 1953 with his direction of the now classic "golden age" production Marty. Produced by Coe on the NBC-TV "Kraft Theatre" series, the live television treatment of Paddy Chayefsky's script so caught the attention and interest of Hollywood producers Harold Hecht and Burt Lancaster that they arranged to secure the motion picture rights. This done, they hired Mann to recreate Marty on film. Whether a matter of

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[5] John Gassner, The Forum, August, 1948, p. 91.

luck or timing, Mann's first experience as a Hollywood film director proved a resounding, if not surprising, success. At the 1955 Oscar ceremonies, Marty received eight Academy award nominations and won four: Best Picture, Writing, Actor and Direction.

Riding high with the enthusiasm, confidence and the reputation accorded one of filmdom's newest leading directors, Mann quickly became, as Vogue magazine reported, "burningly in demand".[6] However, maintaining his characteristically Southern sense of loyalty, he returned to work in television with his friend "Pappy" Coe. During the late summer of that same year it seemed that Coe had a new project that only Mann could handle; a production of Thornton Wilder's Our Town to be aired on the new NBC-TV "Producer's Showcase" in mid-September. The project itself presented a number of unique problems to solve; not the least of which involved adapting Wilder's idyllic poem to a ninety-minute musical comedy.

The major problem facing Mann was that the production would be a showcase in more than one way. The first item being showcased was the spectacle of color television offered only over NBC stations. In fact, the entire series aimed to encourage the sale of RCA color television sets. The second

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[6] Vogue. September 1, 1955, p. 55.

item being showcased in this particular production was the talents of the currently popular male singing idol, Frank Sinatra. He would play the role of the Stage Manager. The task of preparing a colorful production to sell television sets, while not without its own problems, became a minor challenge when compared to the anxieties of working with the star. In a personal interview Mann spoke with a mixture of fond memories and frustrated anguish about his experiences with the production.[7]

The show was staged in the new NBC-TV studio complex located in Burbank, California, and since the production held a position of top priority it received more than the usual few days set-up and rehearsal time. According to Mann, the three weeks' rehearsal time on the studio set did much for the show's ultimate success. Even though the Burbank complex was new and modern by contemporary standards, it was not large enough to facilitate the entire production in one single unit. The orchestra had to be placed in a separate studio with a television monitor focused on the actors to cue the conductor, Nelson Riddle. The sound was then piped back to the studio where the actors anticipated their musical accompaniment. Mann

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[7]Personal interview with Delbert Mann, September 20, 1981.

felt the effect rather telling with the "tentative" musical entrances. The music itself he now described as seeming "lethargic".

If the musical coordination of the production presented more than its share of problems, the design and execution of the scenery did not. Otis Riggs, the NBC-TV premiere designer since the very early days of the television drama and a classmate of Mann's, created stylized scrim sets combining realistic and non-realistic elements. The cartooned cut-out sets with transparent walls behind realistic properties and furniture served to suggest a scenic impression closer to the sort of compromise Harry Horner might have happily tolerated in the 1940 film version. Accordingly, Variety described the simplicity of Riggs' design in a manner that emphasized the recurring and predominant use of light in the productions of Our Town. "The settings with two 'open-faced' kitchens, the pencil-outlined church, drugstore, picket-fence, etc. had a becoming simplicity, with the third act graveyard scene mainly a product of lights and shadow".[8]

That scenic product of light and shadow, Mann recounts, came only after his determination to prove that the mood-creating

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[8]Variety. September 21, 1955.

silhouette effect he wanted could be accomplished over television. Al Scarlett, the man credited with the lighting of the show "just didn't understand what I wanted," Mann recalled. So he and Riggs stayed at the studio all night adjusting the instruments until they indeed accomplished the dramatic and specific effects of light and shadow; the bright oranges and blues so necessary to fulfill the original purpose of the showcase.

If the color and magic in a musical production of Thornton Wilder's American classic Our Town failed to sell television sets, RCA corporate executives felt confident that the charisma of Frank Sinatra would do the job. So convinced were they of this possibility that they invested $25,000 of the production's $400,000 budget for the singer's salary. However, no one knows which element actually sold the most televisions, if, in fact, either element sold any at all, but Mann knows that working with Sinatra was less than pleasant. The young singer built his public image on a breezy, casual style which he also carried over into his professional work habits. On several occasions Sinatra was late to rehearsal or altogether absent. One specific instance Mann recalled caused him no small amount of anguish. On the day before the show

Sinatra was not to be found for the dress rehearsal. To protect the production, another young singer, Johnny Desmond, then performing in Las Vegas, was hired and put on stand-by. However, Sinatra showed up in time to perform for the live broadcast. Mann remarked in Sinatra's defense that the entertainer knew his own style and talent well enough and was no doubt beginning to feel the loss of his casual spontaneity in the role. Coincidentally, the singer complained in a New York Times telephone interview published that day before the production about the amount of rehearsal time required for the show. "One day they're going to have to devise a method of cutting down on rehearsals".[9]

From the start much attention focused on shaping the show to the star's unique style, cutting much of the original script to accommodate songs, dances and Ford Thunderbird commercial intermissions. Sinatra's own choice for composer and librettist, Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn, were hired to write the music and songs for the production. David Shaw, one of Coe's studio writers, assumed the awesome task of adapting the script to the ninety-minute time frame as well as providing

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[9]New York Times, September 18, 1955. p. X 13.

the transition material into and out of the songs and dances. Unlike the 1940 screenplay, all television presentations of Our Town retain the original ending. Mann's production was no exception. However, because of time restrictions and the musical interpolation of seven songs and two dance numbers, Shaw cut much of the play's darker elements: Simon Stimson, the Stage Manager's longer speeches, and other interior monologues spoken during the course of the play.

Mann's own response to the production when viewed on a kinescope recording over twenty-five years later is interesting for the insights it provides into the director's analysis of his own work. He generally considered the presentation effective and affecting; nearly perfect with good "clean shots" and "no marks or boom shadows". However, he accepted the blame for the production's one major mistake. During Act III when Emily rushes out of her mother's kitchen in despairing recognition, Mann confessed he became so involved in the scene he forgot to cue the cameraman to dolly back and the actress playing the role almost ran into the camera.

Little evidence exists to indicate Wilder's response to the production. It is doubtful whether he even saw it at all. But in her biography Thornton Wilder: His World, Linda Simon

suggests the playwright's disappointment with "the musical television version in which Frank Sinatra sang the role of the Stage Manager. There was only one reason he allowed the musical to be done, Thornton admitted: 'it kept him in Martinis' for a year".[10] According to an article published in New Republic, Wilder's royalty fee for the one time only presentation was $5,000.[11]

Whatever private or professional motivations gave rise to the responses of director and playwright, the few published critical reviews available look on the production in terms generally favorable. The initial point of critical departure centered on the showcase idea and the fact that within the same month two of Wilder's classics had been aired on national television. Reviewers seemed to think that the earlier and disjointed production of The Skin of Our Teeth[12] might have detracted audiences from watching Our Town. Rod Nordell of the Boston Globe spoke to this point. "With the

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[10]Linda Simon. Thornton Wilder: His World. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1979) p. 234.

[11]New Republic. October 3, 1955. p. 23

[12]Aired on NBC-TV's "Color-Spread" series, Sunday, September 11 (7:30 to 9:30 P.M. EDT).

new television season underway, Thornton Wilder has been represented by two major productions. It would be sad if the conflicting opinions on The Skin of Our Teeth prevented anyone from tuning in on last week's Our Town."[13] Variety echoed the same enthusiastic support for Our Town in spite of a speculated fear that the first production, directed by Alan Schneider, may have turned audiences away from the musical showcase.

> The long-heralded musical version of Thornton Wilder's Our Town, which ushered in the new "Producer's Showcase" spec season on NBC-TV Monday night (19) proved a warm and finely wrought 'tv play with songs'. If as in the case of Skin of Our Teeth Wilder's simplicity and unorthodox expounding of his philosophy was not grooved to popular appeal, then once again the impatient viewing public was the loser.[14]

Viewing public or no, the critics applauded the artistic integrity of Mann's television production of Our Town. Wendell Brogan of the New Republic alluding to the mediocre level of television programming commented that the production "came close to and occasionally embraced distinction..."[15] Variety,

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[13] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

[14] Variety. September 21, 1955.

[15] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

too, remarked on the artistic achievement of the showcase.

> ...NBC can justly take pride in fashioning from Wilder's legit play a TV production that had many fine and rare moments. It emerged as a simple paen to the beauty of life, with a minimum of story or acting, yet in its very simplicity conveyed the quiet, peace and contentment of Wilder's original thesis and fundamental understanding of its essential theme. Our Town was upgraded television.[16]

As mentioned before, one of the major tasks confronting the production and given to David Shaw came in the assignment of adapting Wilder's script. His handling of the job did much to enhance the show's overall sense of artistic integrity. Variety called Shaw's adaptation "skillful" and Nordell of the Globe commented likewise writing that "In David Shaw's skillful adaptation, the love story between Emily and George survived at the expense of some details that might have lent more texture to the depiction of the town. Something had to be trimmed; what remained was memorable."[17]

Perhaps of equal importance to the critics when considering the memorable quality of the production was the music of Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn. The two men, who often worked together on joint musical projects, had become

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[16] Variety. September 21, 1955.

[17] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

close friends with Sinatra, writing and arranging much of his material. Hence, in hiring the star, his musicians were also hired. Critical response to their work on the show was mixed. Brogan of the New Republic reacted negatively to the intrusion of the musical score on Wilder's play.

> I hated the musical score. The superbly realized dramatic writing of Wilder was jarred by the...got-to-get-off-the-air-on-coming in of Frank Sinatra to sing. Never was a song-plug so out of place.[18]

Nordell of the Boston Globe on the other hand, felt more favorable about the effectiveness of the musical scoring. Speaking of the music following the wedding scene he wrote that it "came as a natural part of the festivities",[19] and that "other musical numbers were inserted with similar adroitness".[20] He also described one of his favorite numbers, "Love and Marriage" as having a "jaunty combination of rhythm, rhyme and melody".[21] The Globe critic went on to say that most all of the songs in the score "were fitting and unobtrusive and deftly arranged".[22] Variety supported Nordell's praise for

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[18] New Republic. October 3, 1955, p. 23.

[19] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

the musical scoring of the showcase, remarking that the challenge of expounding "Wilder's homilies with feeling and understanding"[23] then veering off "into light-hearted tempo... songs without disturbing the mood"[24] was well met.

> It was no easy task for composer Jimmy Van Heusen and lyricist Sammy Cahn to fashion a score that would at once capture the mood and tell the story of this pastoral drama, yet they met the assignment with perhaps the best success to date on TV. The music and the lyrics were so deftly integrated into the play's continuity that the viewer was never aware of a song's intrusion.
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> There are at least three potential hits in "Impatient Years", "Love and Marriage", and "Look to Your Heart" (already recorded by Sinatra for Capitol Records). A fourth, the thematic "Our Town" with its recurring note, has an undeniable haunting quality.[25]

As a musical, dance numbers also provided an essential element of spectacle to the production. Choreographer Valerie Bettis created two special dances for the show; a simple pantomimic ballet between Emily and George on a swing silhouetted upstage while Sinatra sang "Impatient Years" and then a full-scale production number following the wedding scene staged in a festive party mood of song and celebration called

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[23] Variety. September 21, 1955.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

"Wasn't It a Wonderful Wedding?" For the most part critical response to the choreography was minimal. Nordell only reported the fact that the show had dancing in it. Brogan remarked in a similar vein that "there was a bit of ballet added, requiring the services of a big time choreographer, Valerie Bettis".[26] Variety returned to its theme on the task of adapting Wilder's script by saying that "Valerie Bettis' choreography for the after-wedding scene was once more a challenge that was well met, for to introduce a dance number into Our Town was no mean accomplishment".[27]

Given the focus of the showcase--a musical production of one of America's most popular plays starring one of the country's most popular entertainers, critics also necessarily gave much attention to Sinatra's playing of the Stage Manager. While this study has intentionally avoided the discussion of acting as it relates to the various presentations, so much of the musical television showcase was designed around its star, that some brief comment on his contribution is essential to a fuller understanding of Mann's production. Sinatra's performance experience had not been limited to singing. He previously

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[26] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

[27] Variety. September 21, 1955.

performed roles in such straight dramatic films as "From Here to Eternity" and "Not As a Stranger". The Chicago Herald Tribune reported about Sinatra that "In the part of the Stage Manager, in the musical Our Town, he will have ample opportunity to display both facets of his talent as singer and actor".[28] Critical response to his display ranged from Brogan's "pretty plausible talent"[29] to Nordell's "he handled the singing without a crooner's overemphasis".[30] Nordell gave further response to Sinatra's acting ability by saying, "Sinatra made little attempt at a New England characterization in the role of the stage-manager-narrator. But apart from slighly mechanical reading of the lines, he had an appropriate unsentimental folksiness."[31] Variety credited much of the show's success to Sinatra's talent, charisma, and casual spontaneity.

> Sinatra was indeed a happy choice for the "stage manager" role of narrator--not only in the song department, where he carried off the major burden in fine style and voice, but by his charm and warmth succeeded in providing a lift that

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[28] Chicago Herald Tribune. September 17, 1955. p. 23.

[29] New Republic. October 3, 1955, p. 23.

[30] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

[31] Ibid.

> softened the tragic overtones of the play. This was unquestionably Sinatra's peak tv performance as he wandered through the sets in introducing the Grover's Corners' townspeople and bridging the story gaps with characteristic ease and assurance.
>
> It's to Sinatra's credit that he managed the transitions from songs to story dialogue with such dexterity and naturalness.[32]

Although positive as well as negative comments concerning the talent and style of Sinatra preoccupied much of the attention given the television showcase, critics also responded to other production elements. Inasmuch as Mann's reputation as one of Hollywood's leading directors was particularly press-worthy, some attention was therefore given his contributions to the production. The man whose award-winning work on the film Marty earlier that year had been lauded as "properly unostentatious"[33] and "accurate to a fault"[34] now received similar critical accolades for his television staging of Our Town. Nordell of the Boston Globe wrote perhaps the most insightful reaction to Mann's direction. Speaking about one of the production's most affecting moments,

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[32] Variety. September 21, 1955.

[33] Time. April 18, 1955, p. 106.

[34] Nation. April 30, 1955, p. 381.

Nordell commented that the soda fountain scene, played "with shining sincerity",[35]

> ...was the more touching for a lack of polish in keeping with the characters.
>
> This scene illustrated the shrewd television sense of the director, Delbert Mann. Like an artist in any medium, he knows how to make a virtue of limitations. Here the camera hardly moved. The two figures and their sodas occupied most of the small screen. They were seen clearly, and their emotions came through without trickery.[36]

Nordell's response here also suggests Mann's approach to the scene as contrasted to Sam Wood's 1940 black and white film version in which the camera work assumes a more complicated and mobile interpretation. But whereas only one critic directly mentioned Mann's work, other commentators were just as sensitive to "the idyllic purity of the second act soda fountain scene".[37] Brogan of the New Republic was also impressed by the scene and the director's decision to maintain its stark simplicity.

> Especially touching, I thought, was the scene at the soda fountain when the girl (Eva Marie Saint) and the boy (Paul Newman) realize their love, neither

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[35] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Variety. September 21, 1955.

> looking at the other, neither saying what he really is saying. How awful it would have been if music had "sneaked in behind" this scene. And this could happen on certain television programs even though long ago, in radio days, all directors were warned by Norman Corwin, "never louse up a love scene with fiddles".[38]

Given the fact that journalists are allowed only a certain amount of space, they gave little or none to commenting on production settings, lighting or costumes. Variety offered its cursory summation of the entire showcase staff's overall achievement by reporting that they had more than lived up to those expectations established by "advanced bally".[39] "On more than one count producer Fred Coe, director Delbert Mann, David Shaw in his skillful adaptation, and the many other key production and creative components fulfilled the promise."[40] Nordell merely remarked that the visual presentation of the showcase was more realistic than the stage play. "For example, instead of standing on ladders on a bare stage, Emily and George had bedroom windows to look out of. But the sets did

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[38] New Republic. October 3, 1955, p. 23.

[39] Variety. September 21, 1955.

[40] Ibid.

not prevent fluid movement."[41] Also commenting on the colors used in the production, he felt that they "had apparently been chosen for maximum clarify on black-and-white receivers".[42] No other evidence from published comments on the effectiveness of other production elements seem to exist.

However, a brief glance at the nominations made for outstanding achievements in television broadcasting for the 1955-6 season might offer a closer look at the success of this particular production and those individuals involved. Altogether nine Academy of Television Arts and Sciences nominations for outstanding achievement in the musical showcase were made. The series over which the production broadcast, "Producer's Showcase", was named Outstanding Dramatic Series of the Year. The Cahn-Van Heusen song from the show, "Love and Marriage", won the Musical Contribution award. Fred Coe was honored for his work on "Producer's Showcase" as the year's Outstanding Producer of a live series and Otis Riggs won the award for Art Direction in the same category. Eva Marie Saint, David Shaw, Nelson Riddle, and Delbert Mann were each recognized through academy nominations for their outstanding achievements

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[41] Boston Globe. September 27, 1955.

[42] Ibid.

in television. Frank Sinatra was also nominated as the male singer of the year, but the award went to Perry Como.

In the mid-fifties television predominated as one of this country's most popular modes of entertainment. Fred Coe, Delbert Mann, and their NBC-TV "Producer's Showcase" were pioneers during the time that later became known as the "Golden Age of Television". Their musical adaptation of Wilder's Our Town presented live and in living color serves as one isolated example of the "bold" and "novel" strides being made in the burgeoning new world of entertainment. The television showcase also serves as another example of unique approaches to the staging and endurance of Our Town. If Wilder's classic had indeed become America's most often produced play, it could now be experienced in the genre of the country's most popular theatrical form--musical comedy; as well as through the country's most popular mode of entertainment--television. Our Town would be produced on television again during 1959, restaged for television by Jose Quintero from his current off-Broadway revival discussed earlier in this study. The next television presentation, offered nearly twenty years later, brought its own unique and interesting approaches to producing Our Town and is considered more fully in the following section of this chapter.

Bell System Special

Thornton Wilder met director-producer George Schaefer for lunch at the Harvard Club in New York late in November, 1975, to discuss plans for a "new" television production of Our Town. The project had long preoccupied Schaefer's thoughts, but Wilder seemed hesitant and convinced that his play "could not be translated to the medium of television or motion pictures".[43] However, the playwright was impressed with the enthusiasm of the noted director and said he would think it over. Schaefer consequently left the meeting hopeful that his persuasive appeal would have a positive influence on Wilder's decision to approve the production. It was a hope well met. One week after the meeting, Wilder called to say, "I like the idea. Go ahead and do it."[44] That telephone conversation was the last time Schaefer ever spoke to the aging playwright; Wilder died the following week. The death news came as a great shock. Wilder's energy and obliging nature in life so struck Schaefer that he now grew even more committed to the project and its ultimate realization.

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[43] The New York Times. May 29, 1977. p. 27.

[44] Los Angeles Times. "TV Times," May 29, 1977, p. 4.

Subsequently, due to prior obligations, it took a year and a half for that commitment to reach its final fruition as it did on May 30, 1977, over NBC-TV affiliate stations. Schaefer's memorial production presented two particular unique approaches to the television staging of Wilder's Our Town that will be discussed in the following pages of this chapter.

1. The pre-recorded video-taped Bell System Special telecast represents the most complete version of Wilder's script ever produced on film or television.[45]

2. The production concept of Schaefer's staging give particular focus to the distinctive elements of the television mode.

In the interim since Mann's 1955 musical adaptation, Our Town appeared again on television in 1959 directed by Jose Quintero. As mentioned earlier in this study, the production simply transferred from its off-Broadway arena theatre to the television studio. However, Variety did review this television interpretation in favorable terms applauding the work of both dramatist and director. "...the mastery of Wilder in treating almost pure sentiment so tastefully in the first place, the mastery of Quintero in treating Wilder in like fashion, and

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[45] Los Angeles Times, op. cit.

the general acting performance made this a potent whole and--as the cliche goes--memorable tv."[46] Yet the Quintero television treatment remained essentially a restaging of his Circle-in-the-Square production with adjustments for the studio and the television cameras. Schaefer's Our Town therefore became the first presentation of Wilder's script in twenty-two years created specifically for the television production mode.

In those two decades since Mann's musical adaptation, giant strides in technology did much to create a more complex and flexible mode of popular entertainment. The development and refinement of outer space exploration did wonders for the technical advancement of television. In 1977 the camera eye had become more mobile with increased sensitivity to its environment through greater lens control. Color was now brighter and more consistent. Studios were larger and more complete. Also the use of video-tape, unlike motion picture film, easily produced the look of a "live" performance. Of course, the use of tape allowed for a more polished production. If a major mistake occurred, such as Mann's failure to cue the cameraman, the scene could be retaped, edited and broadcast in near perfect form.

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[46] Variety. November 11, 1959.

By the time of Schaefer's production, The Golden Age of the televised drama anthology series no longer dominated the air waves. Only one such program continued broadcasting with any sort of regularity--"The Hallmark Hall of Fame", which made its debut during the golden era in 1953. In fact, it was with the Hallmark series premiere season that Schaefer first began his work in television.[47] Prior to that, Schaefer's career in the entertainment world had been well established and dated back to 1932 when he directed his sixth grade class plays. While in high school and college he remained active in dramatics and debating. He also spent one year of post-graduate work at Yale University School of Drama. During the summers from 1937 to 1941 Schaefer "directed the Pastime Players, a semi-professional theatre group in Oak Park, Illinois".[48]

Fortuitously, Schaefer's 1942 enlistment with the United States Army proved to be a deciding step in the direction

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[47]A comprehensive treatment of Schaefer and his experience with the Hallmark series is offered in E. R. Diehl's unpublished dissertation, George Schaefer and the Hallmark Hall of Fame: A Study of the Producer of a Live Television Series. Ohio State University, 1964.

[48]Current Biography. "George Schaefer". (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1970) p. 372.

of his professional career. His assignment to a Special Services unit of the Central Pacific Base in Honolulu, Hawaii, brought him three years' experience under the direct command of the famous classic actor, Maurice Evans. A recent emigrant from England, Evans now served the United States Army as a major in charge of the Pacific base entertainment section. Together Evans and Schaefer "helped stage and rehearse over fifty plays, many of which were presented at outlying bases".[49] One of those plays of particular significance was a production of Hamlet, directed by Schaefer and starring Evans in the title role. The production was a "streamlined version of the tragedy especially designed for American servicemen unschooled in Shakespeare".[50] After their discharge in 1946 both men worked together again to bring their "G.I. Hamlet" to Broadway and a subsequent national tour. Reviewing the New York production, George Jean Nathan referred to Schaefer as the best director of the year and during the next three seasons Schaefer directed several Broadway productions--none of which achieved any particular distinction.

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

Then in 1949 Schaefer joined the staff of the New York City Center Company on the recommendation of Evans who had become the company's honorary artistic supervisor. During his four-year tenure at the City Center, Schaefer developed "what was essentially a stock company to a professional company able to present its productions in out-of-town tryouts and to attract top theatrical talent".[51] In 1953, again with Evans, Schaefer co-produced and directed John Patrick's award-winning play, The Teahouse of the August Moon, which ran for 1,027 performances.

That same year Schaefer also made his television debut as producer-director for the new NBC-TV "Hallmark Hall of Fame" series. Schaefer remained the major creative force behind the Hallmark series for the next fifteen years. During that time he directed a number of award-winning productions, many of which starred Evans in major roles. For his outstanding contributions to television broadcasting, Schaefer has received more awards of recognition than any other individual. In 1959 he added to his responsibilities as executive producer of the Hallmark series by forming his own company, Compass Productions. E. R. Diehl wrote in his unpublished dissertation, George

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[51] Ibid., p. 373.

Schaefer and the Hallmark Hall of Fame: A Study of the Producer of a Live Television Series that,

> ...Schaefer's role as producer-director is a major one...As an independent producer his influence has increased. As financial head of Compass Productions, engaged in motion pictures, theatrical, and television productions, he is in a strong bargaining position regarding the acceptability or unacceptability of playscripts....Schaefer's work as producer-director reinforces commonly held standards of artistic endeavors. He has the perceptive understanding of play values and the ability to communicate them to actors; and it is the well planned operation of his production company, and the coordination with the NBC production staff which makes this creativity possible.[52]

Diehl continues his evaluation of Schaefer's administrative abilities and personal commitment to quality and organization in a manner reminiscent of a style Mann found appealing in 1955 but one that Sinatra thought lugubrious.

> In this regard, it was noted that Hallmark utilizes a longer rehearsal period than comparable live anthology dramas of the fifties, enforces a rigid adherence to specific times on the schedule, and makes use of the unique abilities of production associates to ensure remarkably facile operation.[53]

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[52]E. R. Diehl. George Schaefer and the Hallmark Hall of Fame: A Study of the Producer of a Live Television Series. (unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, 1964).

[53]Ibid.

Otherwise, this unassuming man who stood five feet ten inches tall with gray eyes and thinning brown hair has been variously described as looking "like everybody's favorite uncle or the likeliest candidate to play Santa Claus in the PTA's Christmas pageant".[54] Her persuasive spirit also once caused a colleague to comment that Schaefer could "sell air-conditioning to an igloo-dwelling Eskimo".[55]

It was this unassuming yet persuasive personality which perhaps convinced the late playwright to accept Schaefer's approach to staging Our Town for television. But whatever reason motivated Wilder's obliging acquiescence to yet another television rendering of Our Town, Schaefer began to plan for its upcoming production. However, he had several other prior contractual obligations to finish before he could give himself completely to the new project. In an interview with Los Angeles Times reporter Cecil Smith, Schaefer spoke of his gratitude to the sponsors of the planned broadcast for being so patient. "The Bell people wanted Our Town for April, but, thank God, they were willing to wait for me".[56] It was not a long wait; for on May 29, 1977, The Bell Telephone System

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[54] Current Biography. op. cit., p. 374.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Los Angeles Times., op. cit.

presented its special production of Wilder's American classic to millions of television viewers over NBC-TV affiliate stations.[57]

Smith's pre-production interview also provides insights into Schaefer's fondness for the play as well as several descriptive accounts of his approach to the staging of the television production. The director affectionately admitted that, "I think it's the best American play ever written. But it's never been done well on television."[58] The more Schaefer studied the script, the more he became increasingly aware of the notion

> ...to produce the play as it if was written for television. Not to alter a word but to rethink it for television. Actually, no Stage Manager would ever come out and talk to the audience in a theatre--it never happens. But on television a commentator, an anchorperson...who talks one-to-one to the audience--that's standard tv language. To suddenly freeze frame on a face at Emily's wedding and to hear a voice expressing thoughts--that's standard tv. To have a commentator say: 'This is what happened 15 years before'--and to cut back there and play the scene, that's done all the time in television.[59]

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[57]The Bell System also rebroadcast the production the following year on Monday, June 5, 1978, in a special salute to the play's fortieth anniversary.

[58]Los Angeles Times, op. cit.

[59]Ibid.

Then, speaking of Wilder's script in terms suggesting Crowthers' evaluation of the 1940 motion picture, Schaefer continued by commenting that, "What Wilder created was a television play before we had television. All the things he broke ground with in the theatre are standards of television."[60]

Actually, there is some question regarding the source of the "anchorperson" idea used in the production. In a New York Times article Saul Jaffe,[61] who worked with Schaefer on the ill-fated television presentation of Wilder's novel Theophilus North, credited himself with convincing the playwright to allow the new production of Our Town that Schaefer proposed. Jaffe further reported that while considering the project

> one day it suddenly occurred to the playwright that he had actually written a script for television in 1938 before television existed....It was Wilder's suggestion that instead of using the Stage Manager as one of the characters in the play to use him as a tv host or anchorman, having a direct one-to-one

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[60] Ibid.

[61] In his capacity as president of his own company, Hartwest Productions, which the Bell System had commissioned to oversee the television presentation of Our Town, Jaffe also served as the production's executive producer.

relationship with the home audience.[62]

In his article Jaffe also commented on another idea offered by Wilder and used in the show.

> Wilder further implemented his concept for the television suggesting the use of an obviously bare television studio with only 'suggested' sets and a minimum of props. He felt that these devices, aided by the use of sophisticated lighting and the unique sound effect available in television, would accomplish the original aims he had for the play in the theatre, one of which was to enable each member of the audience to see Our Town as his or her own town.[63]

The question of who convinced or persuaded Wilder and who suggested what ideas now can be answered only by conjecture and perhaps seem irrelevant. Yet Wilder did allow the production. The anchorman and bare studio ideas were incorporated into the production. In effect, both Schaefer and Jaffe in their separate newspaper articles reflect a common visual approach taken in staging the production and it is interesting to consider the possibility of Wilder's input into the television creation of his masterpiece. Jaffe described the context of what he understood as Wilder's "anchorman" idea.

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[62] The New York Times, op. cit.

[63] Ibid.

> While sitting close to the camera (much as Chancellor and Brinkley do when they are covering a political convention) as Joe Crowell, Jr.--down on the 'floor'--is delivering the papers and talking to Dr. Gibbs, the Stage Manager swings around and says to the audience, 'Want to tell you about that boy, Joe Crowell there....' This is the Stage Manager as 'commentator'--much like a political analyst swinging around in his chair and 'commenting' to the home audience about some young senator on the convention floor.[64]

Schaefer's remarks, while not ignoring the focus of the Stage Manager/Anchorman, address a more technical concern for maintaining a definitive visual point of reference in the bare television studio in order to keep the home viewing audience from becoming lost; a concern similarly manifested in Schneider's letigimate production of Our Town discussed in Chapter II of this study. Schaefer expressed his feeling about the play's need for greater visual definition by saying, "When you do a play without sets or scenery, the audience tends to get lost. If you do it with realistic scenery as in the movie, the play gets lost."[65] Schaefer also spoke about the double task of keeping the audience visually oriented as well as eliciting their proper and imaginative response. "The major problem in directing Our Town," Schaefer wrote, "was to force the home audience, which is used to literal presentation, to expand its imagination. This imaginative

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Los Angeles Times. op. cit.

participation is essential if the third act is to work."[66] Schaefer commented further in the Smith interview regarding the issue of audience involvement, saying that to get the proper imaginative response going, "you have to break down barriers or you've failed".[67] He then continued by describing his approach to staging the production in ways that he felt would accomplish his goals of maintaining a visual point of reference while breaking down audience barriers to imaginative participation.

> I think it's essential people use their imaginations, fill in the pieces...I didn't want anything literal, no sets, no props, everything in pantomime. But with the camera, when you come in for a close shot and pull back again, the audience has problems locating themselves without walls. What I did was to hang a camera 40 feet up in the eaves of the studio and paint the floor for each act to identify houses, streets, the church, the cemetery. Whenever I felt people might get lost, I cut to that high camera to re-orient them.
>
> We open on that high shot, actors moving around. We cut to follow Holbrook as he walks between our stars to his Stage Manager's desk. On it there's a small model of the town. He turns it around and begins to tell you about Grover's Corners...[68]

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[66]Personal letter from Mr. Schaefer. June 10, 1981.

[67]Los Angeles Times. op. cit.

[68]Los Angeles Times. op. cit.

In his review of Schaefer's production, published a week later, Smith offers another detailed description of the opening scene:

> Thus, we see Holbrook in close-up on the morning of May 7, 19- ought -1, and over his shoulder in the far distance we see Ned Beatty as Doc Gibbs yawning his way along a painted street between the painted green circles of trees that line it. The Gibbs and Webb houses in outline have scrim roofs and through invisible walls we see Sada Thompson, as Mrs. Gibbs, fixing breakfast on an invisible stove...[69]

Given his earlier expressed commitment to the most complete production of Our Town ever staged, Schaefer met with some difficulty and compromise. "We have recorded every word of the play that Thornton Wilder wrote....Our version is even more complete than the original Jed Harris production on Broadway....I'm not sure we'll get all of it on the air, even though the Bell people have cut their commercials way down."[70] Schaefer's doubts were well founded as his persuasive appeal this time fell on deaf ears. NBC and the Bell System would not be moved and the production was therefore broadcast with a few minor but distinctive adjustments. The first such adjustment in the script came in dividing the presentation into four acts, not three as in the original, "to accommodate the carefully

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[69] Los Angeles Times. May 30, 1977.

[70] Los Angeles Times, op. cit.

placed commercials"[71] that the Bell people required as barely essential. Act one of Wilder's script was divided into two parts for the Schaefer production; the other act divisions remained unchanged. The second adjustment came in the addition of a scene included in Wilder's initial draft, but cut by Harris from the 1938 production and therefore absent in subsequent stagings. The added "ironing board" scene in Act two gives greater emphasis to the conversation between Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs as they contemplate the perils of parent-child relationships on the eve of their son's wedding. The third script adjustment came in the deletion of one scene from the televised production. The twelve-minute Professor Willard scene from Act one was cut to accommodate network playing time. Smith reported that Schaefer "hoped wistfully that NBC might regard the great play as they would a football game or a movie and let it run over time. No such luck. The play had to be cut to fit the space."[72] In spite of the few compromises Schaefer had to make in presenting Our Town, his production did achieve the distinction of being the most complete version ever created for television or film.

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[71] Los Angeles Times. op. cit.

[72] Ibid.

Schaefer's production ran two hours' playing time. All other television versions ran less than 75 minutes; the motion picture "ran about 90 minutes and left a great deal out".[73]

This most complete of Our Town television productions met with mixed critical reviews. The Hollywood Reporter critic appeared the most negative in response to the production by commenting that the theatrical devices of Wilder's play "worked beautifully within the confines of the live theatre. However, this very technique, when brought to the extremely naturalistic media of TV, gets to be a distraction."[74] The same reviewer also wrote of the Stage Manager's obtrusive explanation of the play's action and that even though "Producer-director George Schaefer brings a faithful rendition of the play, he does not conquer the electronic medium."[75] The reporter did, however, react favorably to William Brownwell's "superbly provided" sound effects and Roy Christopher's "artful production design", but wrote that "the absence of music" created a coldness. Kay Gardella of

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[73] Los Angeles Times, May 29, 1977.

[74] Hollywood Reporter, May 27, 1977.

[75] Ibid.

the New York Daily News also expressed the same response to Schaefer's distracting direction. She found the focus and detail of the production's pantomime particularly overstated. "...the pantomime...defeats its purpose. The idea is to isolate the characters and what they're saying without distraction. It has the opposite effect."[76] Morton Moss of the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner directed most of his attention to the "poignant poetry" of Wilder's drama. Yet, like commentators twenty years earlier, Moss decries the dismal state of television entertainment by raising Schaefer's production to levels of excellence above the norm. "Generally the word 'creative' is applied in television to innumerable works that don't even come close. The staple of the trade is engineered formula. Not so, however, with Our Town, Thornton Wilder's 1938 play and the imaginative staging it has been given on NBC."[77] Moss added that Schaefer's contribution to the production resulted in an "uncommonly good job of stamping a unity on the Wilder work"[78] and that the director had "deftly maneuvered" his "accomplished cast".

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[76] Daily News. May 30, 1977.

[77] Los Angeles Herald-Examiner. May 30, 1977.

[78] Ibid.

Perhaps the most laudatory of all critics, Cecil Smith of the Los Angeles Times, also wrote the pre-production interview with Schaefer cited earlier in this study. Smith spoke only with superlatives in his follow-up review of the Our Town television broadcast.

> The production is simply superb, as definitive a work of theatrical art as television's small screen has ever housed. Schaefer's notion of treating the play as a work of television, with Holbrook's Stage Manager with his decided New England twang a kind of television host and narrator, is an unqualified success.[79]

Smith makes special note of Schaefer's visual point of reference in commenting about his scenic device of the Grover's Corners outline painted on the floor of the bare television studio. "One never has the feeling that we're in any sort of realistic environment, there's never what Wilder called 'the childish attempt to be real'; we are always conscious that these are actors performing a play."[80] The reviewer also points to the director's use of pantomime as well as sound effects to heighten the play's demands on the viewer's imagination. In a final evaluation of Schaefer's television production, Smith describes what he feels is the essence of

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[79] Los Angeles Times, May 30, 1977.

[80] Ibid.

Our Town; that it "is essentially a mirror. And beautifully has Schaefer polished it."[81]

The reflection of success which shone in Schaefer's "definitive" television presentation of Wilder's Our Town can be given additional illumination. An examination of the recognition awarded outstanding achievements in television broadcasting during the 1977 season offers further insights into merits of Schaefer's production. The Bell System's special program was awarded seven nominations of excellence in its category of "Special--Drama or Comedy". The production itself was nominated as Program of the Year. Hal Holbrook and Sada Thompson[82] were each nominated for their performances and Schaefer for his direction. Roy Christopher received the nomination for his work as art director. Technical director O. Tamburri and his three cameramen, Jon Olson, Roy Holm and Reed Howard were collectively nominated for their respective achievements in Technical Direction and Electronic Camerawork. Another television technician, Ron Estes, earned a nomination for his work in Tape Sound Mixing. The one Emmy ultimately awarded the production went to William F. Brownell and John H. Kanthrowe, Jr. for their outstanding Sound Effects; chosen

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Miss Thompson played the role of Mrs. Gibbs.

from nominees in the broadly defined category "Individual Achievement in Any Area of Creative Technical Crafts".

Production concepts, critical response, and professional recognition notwithstanding, The Bell System Special stands as the most complete presentation of Wilder's Our Town ever created in the production mode of television. To date it remains the last interpretation presented in that medium.[83] The production reflects not only its unique "anchorman" and painted floor reference point approach, but also the advancements made in television technology during the nearly forty years since its first "live" sixty-minute telecast by The Theatre Guild on the Air. And as the sixth separate television presentation of Wilder's play broadcast through the popular entertainment mode of the masses, Our Town maintained its position of prominence as the American play most often produced as well as the play seen by the greatest number of people.

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[83]The production was broadcast again the following year on Monday, June 5, 1978, in a special tribute to the play's endurance: "The Bell System Salutes The 40th Anniversary of Thornton Wilder's Our Town".

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The following chapter concludes this study of Thornton Wilder's Our Town as staged for the various production modes of the legitimate theatre, film, and television with a presentation of the following three considerations:

1. Summary of the study
2. Conclusions reached by the study
3. Implications for further study suggested by this research.

Summary

The purpose of this study as indicated has been to present a descriptive examination of Thornton Wilder's Our Town as represented in selected productions from 1938 to 1981.

Justification for the study pointed to Our Town's status as the most often produced play in this country in spite of the critical disagreement concerning its genre, merit and scope. Chapter I presented a review of the literature pertaining to Wilder and Our Town. The paucity of such

existing literature led to the opening chapter's statement which suggested the essence, if not the purpose, of this study--the first scholarly effort to examine a specific American play as it had been represented in the various production modes of the legitimate theatre, film and television.

Chapter II focused on three legitimate theatre productions:

1. Jed Harris' 1938 Broadway premiere
2. Jose Quintero's 1959 off-Broadway revival
3. Alan Schneider's 1981 regional theatre thrust staging.

Chapter III studied the creation of the single United Artists motion picture release produced by Sol Lesser and directed by Sam Wood in 1940.

Chapter IV addressed the television production mode with an examination of two unique stagings especially created for that medium and which were selected from six separate and distinct productions:

1. Delbert Mann's 1955 musical adaptation
2. George Schaefer's 1977 Bell System special.

Conclusions

Thornton Wilder's Our Town has indeed become one of the most popular and therefore most frequently produced American plays. For that reason alone the import of this study seems to be that it provides the first compilation of information regarding the staging of Our Town as presented in a variety of production modes and performing spaces. Hence, the study may be used as a comprehensive resource by theatre historians who wish to supplement their research of the American genre or by directors and producers planning to stage Our Town and wish to consider the various approaches taken in presenting the play. The study therefore intends to serve as a sourcebook for those individuals interested in gaining further insights into the presentation of Our Town and its concommitant realization through each of the major current production modes of entertainment.

The three letigimate theatre productions considered were alike in that they each attempted to establish a personal actor-audience relationship. They differed primarily in their manner of establishing that relationship; a manner perhaps dictated by the times in which they were produced. Harris' Broadway production stated during what Harold Clurman called

the "austere"[1] thirties, attempted to create a more informal theatre experience in a time when the proscenium arch and the grand drape still controlled the detached, stilted, and formal atmosphere of the depression era. The premiere production naturally retained traces of the fourth wall sense of objectivity and restraint common to the theatre of the times. But the play also surprised and warmed its audiences with its novel attempt to be personal. Quintero's 1959 production, staged in the intimate space of an off-Broadway cabaret, expanded on that personal quality during the final year in a decade given to post-war sentiment and romance. Schneider's 1981 production presented in the festival-like atmosphere of the Guthrie Theatre's thrust stage projected a casual informality free from a restrained sense of austerity; a quality perhaps not uncharacteristic of its times. Scholars ten years hence will speak to this point more objectively. The three productions varied markedly in their unique visual presentation of the play. Harris created a rehearsal-like stage environment of stark simplicity and sharp definition of space by his exacting placement of set pieces and lighting was minimal. On the other hand, while the situation of a repertory season limited the use of creative

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[1]Harold Clurman, ed., Famous American Plays of the 1930's. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.) 1959. p. 14.

lighting in Schneider's Guthrie production, he did call for greater detail and historical authenticity in the execution of this set pieces.

The film departed from the legitimate theatre approach to presenting Our Town for a number of reasons. Not the least of which was the tenor of the times in a world on the brink of World War II. However, the most significant departure from the legitimate theatre production, aside from the changed ending, was the naturalistic environment so much a part of film aesthetics of photographic realism. Sam Wood's production however did attempt to retain the presentational theatrical nature of the original by calling attention to itself as a motion picture entertainment consciously aware of its self and its audience.

While a case might be offered suggesting a kinship of similarities between film and television, the differences are great enough to separate the two modes categorically. Film uses one camera employing many takes and edited later into the finished product. Television then used three or more cameras with the director editing his production simultaneously as he selected the pictures he felt best captured the intention of his interpretation and approach to the play. A further distinctive difference between the two modes is that film

production budgets and time allotments usually surpass any such considerations allowed television programming. Also film scripts are presented as one uninterrupted unit without time limits. Commercial television programs are controlled by rigid time restrictions and broken up to provide for the sponsor advertisements so essential to the economic survival of the medium.

Of the two television broadcasts presented in this study, Mann's 1955 musical seems the most unique, yet in spite of its nature, form, and content, easy comparison to Schaefer's 1977 Bell System special becomes allusive, if not obtuse. Mann's showcase was a ninety-minute adaptation of Our Town with songs and dances interpolated. What remained of Wilder's original script was merely its basic story line. Schaefer's production intended to be the most complete rendering of Wilder's play ever produced. Comparisons of these presentations must necessarily begin with a consideration of the differences and similarities in televising the two productions. Mann's musical was broadcast live. He used semi-realistic cut-out scrim settings with authentic looking set pieces. He attempted to enhance the romantic mood of his musical through a dramatic use of high contrast lighting. He also maintained a relatively

stationary and straight-on use of the camera often relying on close-up shots to establish a more intimate presentation of the play. Schaefer's Bell System broadcast was pre-recorded on video-tape. His production concept approached the assimilation of Our Town into a natural vehicle for the television mode with the Stage Manager becoming an "anchorman" character; one who as a matter of course converses directly and personally with the home-viewing audience. However, the idea of making the Stage Manager into something more than a narrator was used in the film version which suggested that he was the town druggist. In Mann's production, the story-telling minstrel image of the Stage Manager seemed to evoke a sense of the close and personal relationship between the popular entertainer and his audience. Technically, Schaefer created a painted outline of Grover's Corners on the bare studio floor as a visual reference point to complement his complex camera work of contrasting long shots and close-ups intended to emphasive what he felt was Wilder's theme on the vastness of the universe against the simplicity of the human experience. For all its uniqueness of camera positioning, Schaefer's production remains the most complete presentation of Our Town ever filmed or televised.

When examining these productions of Our Town from a larger perspective, certain general conclusions seem apparent:

1. In spite of Our Town's seeming but perhaps deceptive simplicity, directors have continued rather insistently to impose their own particular imprint on the play, which points to Wilder's belief in the nature of the theatre as an art of collaborators. The implication here seems to suggest two possibilities: 1) that the play's openness encourages directorial license; or, 2) that such openness has proffered Our Town with perhaps the additional reputation as the most misinterpreted American play.

2. Consequently, there seems to have developed three basic directorial approaches to staging Our Town:

   a. Austere and detached objectivity as in the Harris proscenium theatre production and the Schaefer television "anchorman" presentation;

   b. Romantic and sentimental reverie as in Wood's naturalistic film, Mann's musical adaptation, and Quintero's intimate off-Broadway revival;

   c. Casual caricature focusing on farce as in Schneider's regional thrust staging and

reported by Isabel Wilder as the approach increasingly taken over the years.[2]

3. The technical realization of creating the visual presentation of Our Town appears to run the gamut from the stark and barren theatricality of Harris' production to the naturalistic realism of Wood's film. Lighting is often considered the key technical element used to establish locale and mood as in both Harris' staging and Mann's musical. Set pieces are anywhere from rehearsal furniture selected at random as in Quintero's revival to the detailed antiques carefully chosen for their authenticity and visual appeal as in Wood's film, Mann's musical, Schneider's production, and Schaefer's television broadcast. The use and number of realistic or imaginary properties, sound effects, and the degree of technical attention given to both of these elements differs with each production. Only the costuming seems to have maintained any sense of consistency in all productions covered in this study through a stylistic approach to suggested historical realism.

4. The major distinction separating the three production modes seems to be in the degree of personal

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[2]Interview with Isabel Wilder. September 19, 1981.

relationship that can be created between actor and audience. The legitimate theatre, of course, accomplishes this best because of the immediate presence of living, breathing, touchable human beings. While Wood's film attempted to project a self-conscious awareness of its own mode, the motion picture screen with its larger than life two-dimensional reality succeeds least of all in creating an atmosphere in which actor and audience commune in the same physical and psychological space. Television manages by the very nature of its easy and personal access and its smaller screen to affect a more intimate relationship with its audience than does film. However, even though the latter two modes have attempted to be as intimate and personal as their respective mediums will allow, theatre still retains the energetic presence of living human beings sharing a common experience so vital to the presentation of Our Town.

5. A significant element which appears to influence and pervade each presentation is the specific modes' sense of space, or aesthetic distance, as the actor and audience are brought as close together as the medium and the times will allow.

6. The progression of time itself has affected the various stagings of Our Town through the ever-present and changing social values of restraint and response.

7. While published critical response has certainly reflected the spirit of the times, an overview of such professional criticism varies in its expectations and standards according to the production mode in question. Critical response to legitimate theatre presentations seems to be more comprehensive and inclusive of all production elements. Film criticism seems to consider fewer elements of the total production while focusing primarily on the performer and the impact of the work as a whole. Television criticism, though still undeveloped as a unique journalistic genre of its own, gives much attention to comparing the calibre of the program to the current standard of television entertainment fare.

Finally, in whatever mode the play has been produced and by whatever directing approach it has been staged, Thornton Wilder's Our Town remains an enduring and endearing masterpiece of American dramatic literature which audiences continue to support with common familiarity and fondness not unlike the patrons of the theatre in Ancient Greece. Wilder's play

maintains its vast and popular appeal because of its seeming simplicity, its familiarity in dramatic irony, the personal relationship it establishes with its audience, and because of its beneficent view of death; a view held by every major religion in the world. The universal appeal of the play has continued to attract producers, directors, actors and audience members beginning with its premiere production in 1938. For since that time, Thornton Wilder's classic paen to the simple truths of human endeavor, Our Town, has recreated for each successive generation not what happened or what they thought happened, but what they hoped happened.

With the intent and purpose of this study concluded, it seems appropriate to imply suggestions for further research in areas relative to the present subject.

Implications for Further Study

While this study proposes to be the first of its kind to examine the specific production history of the singular most often produced American play and since the general body of literature devoted to Wilder and his work is small when compared to the attention given other major American dramatists, the opportunities for further research in areas related to

Our Town seem open to a variety of scholarly endeavors. The following subjects are therefore offered here as implications for further study as suggested by the findings of this particular investigation:

1. Other productions: There is certainly a vast store of information to be gleaned and analyzed from the many productions of Our Town not covered by this study. The other professional legitimate theatre productions staged in this country listed in Appendix A of this dissertation suggest further study. Then there also exists an untold number of amateur or semi-professional theatre productions which by the bold or novel approach to the play seem worthy of academic investigation. During the civil rights era of the sixties, productions of Our Town attempted to relate to the social issues of the times. On both coasts of this country the play was produced for and with black inner-city patrons. During 1976 in Massachusetts a production was staged giving focus to the feminist movement by having the role of the Stage Manager played by actress Geraldine Fitzgerald--the first known woman to ever play the part. Wilder himself played the role on several occasions and an examination of his performances might shed additional light on the intent of the artist. In 1981 the Wooster Group, as

evolved from Richard Schechner's Performance Group, produced a media montage approach to dramatic presentation in which they directly incorporated their own bold and "exotic features of conceptual performance theatre"[3] with the theme and substance of Our Town. Also, productions of Our Town, presented in a variety of languages, have been staged in theatres around the world and a study of these presentations could offer international insights into a comprehensive understanding of the play. In 1945 Russian Soviets banned performances of Our Town in Berlin because of the play's alleged "defeatist" theme.[4] During that same year Raymond Massey toured a successful U.S.O. production of the play to GI's stationed at United States Army camps in Europe and the following year a professional company presented Our Town to a non-receptive London audience in war-torn England. Since then Wilder's play has been performed on nearly every continent of the globe to mixed critical response. The separate international productions of Our Town offer many research opportunities and, of course, Schneider's 1973 State tour of Russia mentioned earlier in this study is

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[3]William Coco. "Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)," Theatre Journal. May, 1982. p. 249.

[4]Uncatalogued newspaper clipping from the Our Town file at the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

worthy of further analysis. Those television presentations not covered by this dissertation but listed in its appendix, as well as the two major radio broadcasts of Our Town are yet unexplored. The radio productions were aired in 1948 and 1950, starring Dorothy McGuire and Elizabeth Taylor respectively in the pivotal role of Emily Webb.

2. Literary influences: Comments by politicians, critics and Wilder himself imply the possibility of Chekovian influences in the writing of Our Town. The two men share the distinction of being widely read in two different modes of literature. However, both writers also seem to be more consistently acclaimed for their prose fiction. Chekov's mastery of the short story form approaches unparalleled skill and control of character and situation as he captures like none of his contemporaries the vitality of the Russian spirit. Wilder, too, has been acknowledged for his economy of prose style and his story-telling skill. His early novellas, while not American in locale, reflect a poignancy of character and grand scheme situation reminiscent of the stories told by Chekov. Wilder's later novels evoke the essence of several short stories linked together by the common thread of a single character of situation--an idea Chekov considered but never

completed. Certainly the prose works of both men exceed their output of dramatic literature; each with only three major plays. As writers they are criticized, in comparison, for their shortcomings in drama. As dramatists their writing eludes directors for its ambiguous nature as farce or melodrama. Their plays are often considered skeletal, incomplete, other-worldly. Stylistically they are given to such descriptions because of the impressionistic intent and content of their themes--the illusions of happiness held by their despairing characters; a theme which is best presented in the misty outlines and muted colors suggested in the painting of a Manet or Monet. Also the work of contemporary dramatists such as Tom Stoppard and Ted Tally offers possibilities for further comparative study on the dramatic theme of man's illusion of hope and happiness. Stoppard's works of the sixties, as in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Enter A Free Man, deal thematically with the questions of free will versus predestination and whether life's meaning is to be answered in death rather than life, not unlike the themes and questions addressed by Wilder--particularly in Our Town. Ted Tally, a dramatist on the horizon of the eighties, might also provide provocative subject matter for further research

into comparative drama studies. From his "sombre tribute to moral courage"[5] in Terra Nova to his satirical invective against venality in Coming Attractions--both played with a most overt sense of theatricality, Tally seems to be exploring the bold terrain of diverse playwrighting styles fatefully travelled by Wilder.

3. Wilder's stagecraft and other technical considerations: The influences of European theatre practices, particularly those of Max Reinhardt, which Wilder observed firsthand during the twenties indicate the possibility of further research opportunities. Reinhardt's affection for intimate theatre spaces is evidenced in his first stage, The Kleines Theatre, and later in his Kammerspiele. Unfortunately, his work in these intimate theatres has too often been upstaged by the attention given his more grandiose productions staged at the Grosses Schauspielhaus. There seems to be a connection worth further consideration between Wilder's deployment of the proscenium arch and Olver Sayler's commentary, published in 1924, on Reinhardt's "Dramatic Value of Space".

> Looking at a framed stage is somewhat similar to looking through a telescope or microscope. On lifting your head, you are back in the world of reality. In the arena, the spectator himself undergoes a transformation; he becomes an actor.

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[5] Time. December 15, 1980, p. 86.

> The drama has broken through the wall that separated it from real, everyday life; it has stepped right into the center and radiates a magnetic power of attraction that draws everything toward it.[6]

It is perhaps this magnetic point that explains the mystique, magic, and holding power of Wilder's dramatic writings. It also gives further explanation to Wilder's satisfaction with Quintero's 1959 revival of Our Town. The issue here suggests a sort of Brechtian ideal of keeping the production from becoming bogged down in nineteenth century realism, but creating rather a sense of actuality to which each audience member/actor can bring his own personal resonances to the theatre experience. Academic examination into any of these areas would help to establish a more pervasive understanding of the genesis behind the stagecraft concepts Wilder introduced in his early sketchbook plays and so uniquely realized in Our Town.

Another area of technical consideration for further study is suggested by the coincidence of Reinhardt's student Harry Horner being commissioned to design the film production of Wilder's play. The implication here seems to offer the possibility of an investigation into the interspersement of New York to Hollywood designer-director relationships and the

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[6]Oliver M. Sayler. Max Reinhardt and His Theatre. (New York: Brentano's, 1924) p. 151.

varying demands made by each of the production modes on that working relationship.

4. Biographical Studies: While a few theatre personalities such as Wilder, Harris and Schaefer have received some academic attention, many of the individuals involved in a major way, not only with productions of Our Town but also with the theatre itself, have been overlooked in scholarship. Wilder and his work have been the subject of several critical and biographical commentaries. Aside from Harris' two auto-biographical recollections published in 1963 and 1981, his career has been reviewed in one Ph.D. dissertation written in 1979. George Schaefer received similar academic treatment in a 1964 dissertation. Quintero outlined his career in an autobiographical memoir published in 1974. However, there remains many interesting and intriguing personalities whose lives and careers did much to influence productions of Our Town as they also affected the growth and development of the entertainment world thus deserving of academic investigation. The following list suggests only a few possibilities for biographical studies:

a. Raymond Sovey, premiere production technical director

b. Helene Pons, premiere production costume designer

c. Edward Goodnow, premiere production stage manager

d. Jose Quintero, off-Broadway revival director

e. Theodore Mann, off-Broadway revival producer

f. Alan Schneider, regional theatre director

g. Sol Lesser, film producer

h. Sam Wood, film director

i. Frank Craven, stage and screen actor

j. Fred Coe, pioneer television producer

k. Delbert Mann, television and film director

l. Otis Riggs, television designer.

With the examination completed, the conclusions reached, and the implications suggested, any study in the subjective realm of the theatre is naturally limited by the time in which the investigation took place and the writer's powers of observation, synthesis and recapitulation. But in spite of its literary obtuseness, the affecting endurance of Thornton Wilder's Our Town seems destined to remain a vital and meaningful portrait of this country's myth-like heritage, making Wilder's "little masterpiece" as close to our national play, or "as close as any play has come thus far".[7] Future generations of Americans appear to be assured of frequent

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[7] Goldstone. op. cit., p. 138.

trips to Grover's Corners, through the several production modes presented in this study, for a simple look at what they hope might have happened and what their faith tells them will happen. From the boldness of reaching out beyond the proscenium arch in Harris' 1938 production to the novel media montage multiple reality of the Schechner inspired Wooster Group's 1981 treatment, Thornton Wilder's Our Town stands up against its many detractors as it continues to challenge producers, directors and audience members with its unique invitation to open and creative theatrical collaboration.

APPENDIX A

OUR TOWN CHRONOLOGY

Appendix A

Our Town Chronology

January 22, 1938	First out-of-town try-out presented at the McCarter Theatre on the Princeton University campus in Princeton, New Jersey; produced and directed by Jed Harris
January 25, 1938	Second out-of-town try-out presented at the Wilbur Theatre in Boston, Massachusetts
February 4, 1938	Broadway premiere opening at the Henry Miller Theatre then moving to the Morosco Theatre for the remainder of the run; starring Frank Craven and Martha Scott
May 23, 1940	United Artists film release produced by Sol Lesser; directed by Sam Wood; first shown at Lowe's Motion Picture Theatre in Boston, Massachusetts; starring Frank Craven, Martha Scott, William Holden, Thomas Mitchell
January 10, 1944	Limited-run engagement revival presented at New York's City Center; produced and directed by Jed Harris; starring Marc Connelly, Martha Scott, Montgomery Clift
September 29, 1946	CBS radio broadcast on "Theatre Guild on the Air" starring Thornton Wilder and Dorothy McGuire
June 6, 1948	First television broadcast on NBC-TV "Theatre Guild on the Air"; produced by Fred Coe; starring Raymond Massey, Jane Seymour, E. G. Marshall, Helen Carew

March 12, 1950	CBS radio broadcast on "Theatre Guild on the Air", starring Walter Huston and Elizabeth Taylor
April 17, 1950	NBC-TV presentation of "Robert Montgomery Presents"; starring Burgess Meredith and Jean Gillespie
December 1, 1950	ABC-TV presentation of "Pulitzer Prize Playhouse"; starring Edward Arnold and Elizabeth Patterson
September 19, 1955	NBC-TV presentation of "Producer's Showcase"; musical version; produced by Fred Coe; directed by Delbert Mann; starring Frank Sinatra, Eva Marie Saint, Paul Newman
March 21, 1959	Off-Broadway revival presented at the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre; directed by Jose Quintero; starring John Beal, Jane McArthur, Clinton Kimbrough
November 13, 1959	NBC-TV presentation of "David Susskind Presents" ("The Art Carney Show"); directed by Jose Quintero; starring Art Carney, Kathleen Widdoes, Clinton Kimbrough
November 27, 1969	Limited-run Broadway revival at the ANTA Theatre; produced by Martha Scott and Alfred De Liagre; directed by Donald Driver; starring Henry Fonda, Elizabeth Hartman, Harvey Evans, Ed Begley, Mildred Natwick, Margaret Hamilton, John Beal
December 15, 1972	Regional theatre presentation at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C.; also toured to Russia; directed by Alan Schneider; scenery by Ming Cho Lee; starring Robert Prosky, Dianne Wiest, Gary Bayer

June 10, 1975	Regional theatre presentation at the American Shakespeare Festival for its Bicentennial program at Stratford, Connecticut; directed by Michael Kahn; starring Fred Gwynne, Kate Mulgrew, Eileen Heckart, Geraldine Fitzgerald
May 30, 1977	NBC-TV presentation of "The Bell System Salutes"; directed by George Schaefer; starring Hal Holbrook, Glynnis O'Connor, Robby Benson, Ned Beatty, Barbara Bel Geddes, Ronny Cox, Sada Thompson, John Houseman
July 11, 1981	Regional theatre presentation at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota; directed by Alan Schneider; starring Ken Ruta, Keliher Walsh, Boyd Gaines

APPENDIX B

Production Staff

Appendix B

Production Staff

The Henry Miller Theatre
Jed Harris
presents

OUR TOWN

by
Thornton Wilder

Technical Direction
Raymond Sovey

Costumes by
Helene Pons

Cast

Stage Manager	Frank Craven
Dr. Gibbs	Jay Fassett
Joe Crowell	Raymond Roe
Howie Newsome	Tom Fadden
Mrs. Gibbs	Evelyn Varden
Mrs. Webb	Helen Carew
George Gibbs	John Craven
Rebecca Gibbs	Marilyn Erskine
Wally Webb	Charles Wiley, Jr.
Emily Webb	Martha Scott
Professor Willard	Arthur Allen
Mr. Webb	Thomas W. Ross
Woman in the Balcony	Carrie Weller
Man in the Auditorium	Walter O. Hill
Lady in the Box	Aline McDermott
Simon Stimson	Philip Coolidge
Mrs. Soames	Doro Merande
Constable Warren	E. Irving Locke
Si Crowell	Billy Redfield
Baseball Players	William Roehrick
	Thomas Coley
Sam Craig	Francis G. Cleveland
Joe Stoddard	William Wadsworth
Assistant Stage Managers	Thomas Morgan
	Alfred Ryder

People of the Town: Carrie Weller, Alice Donaldson, Walter O. Hill, Arthur Allen, Charles Melledy, Katherine Raht, Mary Elizabeth Forbes, Dorothy Nolan, Jean Platt, Barbara Brown, Alida Stanley, Barbara Burton, Lynn Swann, Dorothy Ryan, Shirley Osborn, Emily Boileau, Ann Weston, Leon Rose, John Irving Finn, Van Shem, Charles Walters, William Short, Frank Howell, Max Beck, James Malaidy, Bernice Silver, Charles Wildey, Sr., Willard Cary.

Premiere February 4, 1938; Closed Morosco Theatre November 19, 1938. 336 Performances

Circle-in-the-Square

Leigh Connell | Theodore Mann presents | Jose Quintero

Thornton Wilder's

OUR TOWN

Directed by
Jose Quintero

Lighting by
David Hays

Costumes by
Patricia Zipprodt

Cast

Stage Manager.....John Beal
Mrs. Gibbs.....Helen Harrelson
Mrs. Webb.....Marjorie Nelson
Joe Crowell.....Taugh O'Faillon
Doctor Gibbs.....Dana Elcar
Howie Newsome.....Richard Dysart
Wally Webb.....Michael Pollard
Emily Webb.....Jane McArthur
George Gibbs.....Clinton Kimbrough
Rebecca Gibbs.....Aina Niemela
Professor Willard.....Charles Althoff
Mr. Webb.....Daniel Keyes
First Woman in Audience.....Julia Follansbee
Artistic Lady in Audience.....Mary Louise Wilson
Indignant Man in Audience.....John Dodson
Mrs. Soames.....Martha Greenhouse
Simon Stimpson.....Harrison Dowd
Assistant Stage Managers.....George Segal
Harvey G. Knox
Constable Warren.....Robert Charles
Si Crowell.....Taugh O'Faillon
Baseba-l Players.....George Segal
Harvey G. Knox
First Dead Woman.....Julia Follansbee
Second Dead Woman.....Mary Louise Wilson
First Dead Man.....John Dodson
Second Dead Man.....George Segal
Farmer McCarthy.....Gerald Richards
Joe Stoddard.....Roland Wood
Sam Craig.....Michael Reilly

Townspeople: James Carruthers, Robert Charles, John Dodson, Harvey G. Know, Michael Reilly, Pat Reed Scott, Marcia Stillman, Mary Louise Wilson

Opened March 23, 1959; Closed February 21, 1961.

The Guthrie Theatre
presents

OUR TOWN

by
Thornton Wilder

Directed by
Alan Schneider

Scenic Designer	Lighting Designer	Costume Designer
Karl Eigsti	Richard Riddell	Marjorie Slaiman

Cast

Stage Manager	Ken Ruta
Assistant Stage Managers	Steven Fagerberg
	Paul Laakso
	Laurence Overmire
	Eliot Ross
Mrs. Gibbs	Peggy Schoditsch
Mrs. Webb	Catherine Burns
Dr. Gibbs	John Lewin
Joe Crowell	Adam Redfield
Howie Newsome	Richard Hilger
George Gibbs	Boyd Gaines
Wally Webb	Paul Reighard
Emily Webb	Keliher Walsh
Professor Willard	Roy Brocksmith
Mr. Webb	William Newman
Woman in the Balcony	Katherine Cortez
Man in the Auditorium	Peter Thoemke
Lady in the Box	Carol Rosenfeld
Simon Stimson	Peter McRobbie
Mrs. Soames	Mim Solberg
Constable Warren	Oliver Cliff
Si Crowell	Adam Redfield
Baseball Players	Paul Laakso
	Laurence Overmire
	Eliot Ross
Sam Craig	Robert Nadir
Joe Stoddard	John E. Straub
Dead Woman	Katherine Cortez
1st Dead Man	Peter Thoemke
2nd Dead Man	J. Patrick Martin

Townspeople: Becka Dalton, Steven Fagerberg, Bruce McLean, Nancy Moyer, Joyce Paul, Eliot Ross, Hayden Saunier, Warren Scheueman, Eileen Reagan

Opened July 11, 1981; Closed September 18, 1981.

Sol Lesser
presents

OUR TOWN

A United Artists release

Screenplay by
Thornton Wilder, Frank Craven, and Harry Chandlee

Directed by	Production Designed by	Costumes
Sam Wood	William Cameron Menzies	Edward Lambert

Associate Designer	Cinematographer	Music
Harry Horner	Bert Glennon, ASC	Aaron Copeland

Cast

The Narrator, Mr. Morgan.....Frank Craven
George Gibbs.....William Holden
Emily Webb.....Martha Scott
Mrs. Gibbs.....Fay Bainter
Mrs. Webb.....Beaulah Bondi
Dr. Gibbs.....Thomas Mitchell
Editor Webb.....Guy Kibbee
Howie Newsome.....Stuart Erwin
Mrs. Soames.....Doro Merande
Rebecca Biggs.....Ruth Toby
Wally Webb.....Douglas Gardiner
Professor Willard.....Arthur Willett
The Constable.....Spencer Charters
Joe Crowell.....Tim Davis
Si Crowell.....Dix Davis
Simon Stimson.....Phillip Wood
Dr. Ferguson.....Charles Trowbridge

Opened Loew's Theatre; Boston, March 23, 1940.

NBC-TV

Fred Coe	"Producer's Showcase" presents	Ford Motor Company and RCA

OUR TOWN

Directed by
Delbert Mann

Written for Television by
David Shaw

Set Designer	Lighting	Costumes
Otis Riggs	Al Scartlett	Bob Campbell

Composer	Lyricist	Conductor	Choreographer
James Van Heusen	Sammy Cahn	Nelson Riddle	Valerie Bettis

Cast

Stage Manager.....Frank Sinatra
Emily Webb.....Eva Marie Saint
George Gibbs.....Paul Newman
Mr. Webb.....Paul Hartman
Mrs. Webb.....Peg Hillias
Dr. Gibbs.....Ernest Truex
Mrs. Gibbs.....Sylvia Field
Wally Webb.....David Saber
Rebecca Gibbs.....Shelley Fabares
Mrs. Soames.....Carol Veazie
Joe Crowell.....Anthony Sedes
Mrs. Slocum.....Charlott Knight
Mr. McCarthy.....Harvey B. Dunn

Broadcast September 19, 1955.

NBC-TV

Saul Jaffee "Bell System Special" Bell Telephone Company presents

OUR TOWN

Directed by
George Schaefer

Technical Direction
O. Tamburri

Design	Costumes	Lighting	Sound
Roy Christopher	Noel Taylor	John Freschi	Bill Brownell

Cast

Stage Manager.....Hal Holbrook
Dr. Gibbs.....Ned Beatty
Mrs. Gibbs.....Barbara Bel Geddes
George Gibbs.....Robby Benson
Mr. Webb.....Ronny Cox
Emily Webb.....Glynnis O'Connor
Mrs. Gibbs.....Sada Thompson
Mrs. Soames.....Charlotte Rae
Howie Newsome.....William Lanteau
Simon Stimson.....David Cryer
Constable Warren.....Don Beddoe
Joe Stoddard.....Ford Rainey
Sam Craig.....Charles Cyphers
Rebecca Gibbs.....Elizabeth Cheshire
Joe Crowell, Jr.....Allen Price
Si Crowell.....Michael Sharrett
Wally Webb.....Scott Atlas

Broadcast May 30, 1977.

APPENDIX C

Biographical Sketches

Appendix C

Biographical Sketches

This biographical list of names, while not all-inclusive nor complete, attempts to sketch the lives of those individuals who made significant contributions to the major productions of Our Town explored in this study. The list is arranged in alphabetical order and does not include actors. Certain omissions appear; the result of a lack of information gleaned from the major biographical reference sources.

VALERIE BETTIS, choreographer 1955 television musical adaptation:

Born in Houston, Texas, Miss Bettis was educated at the University of Texas. She later studied ballet with Hanya Holm in New York City, subsequently making her stage debut there in 1937 with the Hanya Holm Dance Company. She toured with her own company and choreographed not only for the concert stage but also for film and television. Bettis choreographed the "Dance of the Seven Veils" for the film, Salome. She also worked as dancer and choreographer for her own CBS-TV series Valerie Bettis Dancers and a number of other television broadcasts. Miss Bettis has won several awards for her work in dance and choreography. She died of a heart attack in October, 1982, in New York City.

SAMMY CAHN, lyricist 1955 television musical adaptation:

Born June 18, 1913, in New York City, Mr. Cahn was educated at Seward High School. He began his musical theatre career as a violinist in a vaudeville orchestra. In 1940 he moved to Hollywood to write songs for films, subsequently winning the Oscar four times for his work. During 1947 Cahn created the lyrics for his first Broadway show, High Button Shoes. Mr. Cahn published his autobiography, I Should Care, in 1974.

FRED COE, producer 1955 television musical adaptation:

Born December 23, 1914, in Alligator, Mississippi, Mr. Coe was educated at Peabody College and Yale University School of Drama. His early experience in the theatre began at 12 years of age when he wrote the class play. Six years later he directed for the Nashville, Tennessee Community Theatre. Shortly thereafter he became director of the Town Theatre, Columbia, South Carolina. Coe joined the staff of NBC-TV in 1945 as production manager where he was soon promoted to producer. In this position he produced over 500 television productions in such series as the Philco Television Playhouse, The Goodyear Playhouse, Producer's Showcase, and Mister Peepers. He remained with NBC until 1957 when he moved to CBS as executive producer. During this time he also continued to

work in the legitimate theatre. In 1953 he co-produced his first Broadway play, The Trip to Bountiful, subsequently producing a series of New York successes: Two for the Seesaw, The Miracle Worker, Teahouse of the August Moon, and All the Way Home--and A Thousand Clowns, which he also directed. He often worked in film as producer and director. For his work at all levels, Mr. Coe received many awards. He died April 29, 1979, in Los Angeles, California.

AARON COPELAND, composer 1940 film:

Born November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn, New York, Mr. Copeland studied with private tutors in the United States and Europe. He holds honorary degrees from several universities. Copeland has served as chairman of the Harvard University and Berkshire Music Center, guest conducted a number of symphonies, and written several books on musicology. In addition to his other musical credits, he has scored many motion pictures: The City, Of Mice and Men, Our Town, and The Heiress, for which he received the 1949 Oscar.

KARL EIGSTI, scene designer 1981 Guthrie Theatre production:

Born September 19, 1938, in Goshen, Indiana, Mr. Eigsti was educated at Indiana, American, and Bristol Universities.

Since 1969 he has served as scenic designer to well over 200 Broadway, off-Broadway and regional theatre productions, many of which have been for the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. He has also worked as art director to television films. Eigsti is currently visiting associate professor of drama at the State University of New York at Purchase.

BERT GLENNON, conematographer 1940 film:

Born May 19, 1895, in Anaconda, Montana, Mr. Glennon was educated at Stanford University. While still a student at Stanford he worked as an assistant cameraman for Keystone and was eventually promoted to director of photography in 1920. For a time (1928-1932) he worked without much success as a director. Glennon worked with many of the giants of the film industry: DeMille, Von Sternberg, Lubitsch, and Ford. Glennon filmed the original versions of The Ten Commandments, All Quiet on the Western Front, and Stagecoach. He also worked in television filming such series broadcasts as 77 Sunset Strip and Hawaiian Eye. Mr. Glennon died June 30, 1967, in Sherman Oaks, California.

JED HARRIS, producer and director 1937 Broadway premiere:

Born Jacob Horowitz February 25, 1900, in Vienna, Austria, emigrated soon thereafter with his parents to Newark,

New Jersey. After graduating from high school in 1916, he attended Yale University for three years dropping out before the end of his junior year. He travelled around the country taking on a variety of jobs. After working for a time as a theatrical press agent he decided he could produce and direct better than any of the people for whom he had been working. He produced his first show, Weak Sisters, in 1925 and within the next three years he followed with four of his greatest successes: Broadway, Coquette, The Royal Family and The Front Page. Other shows to his credit, besides Our Town, are the Broadway premieres of The Heiress and The Crucible. He also worked in films. Harris' career covered thirty-two years of thirty productions. He wrote two books of memoirs: Watchman, What of the Night and Dance on the High Wire. Mr. Harris died in New York City on November 15, 1979.

DAVID HAYS, lighting designer, 1959 Circle-in-the-Square revival:

Born June 2, 1930, in New York City, Mr. Hays was educated at Harvard, Yale, and Boston Universities. He served his design apprenticeship at the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts from 1949 to 1952. Then in 1952 he received a Fulbright Scholarship to study at London's Old Vic. His design

work has since taken Mr. Hays across this country and often to Japan. He has taught stage design at New York, Columbia, and Boston Universities, and Connecticut College. Hays also serves as the founder and General Director of the O'Neill Theatre Center's National Theatre of the Deaf.

HARRY HORNER, Associate Designer 1940 film:

Born July 24, 1910, in Halic, Czechoslovakia, Mr. Horner studied at the University of Vienna. While at the University studying architecture he met Max Reinhardt and became an actor for the great Austrian stage director. In 1935 when Reinhardt brought his pageant The Eternal Road to the United States, Horner came along as his assistant and remained in this country to become a New York scenic designer. In 1940 he took on his first film design assignment as assistant to William Cameron Menzies. The film was Our Town. He continued in film design working on such productions as The Little Foxes, The Heiress and The Hustler; winning Oscars for his art direction of the last two mentioned.

SOL LESSER, Producer 1940 film:

Born February 17, 1890, in Spokane, Washington, Mr. Lesser began his career in films as a young boy selling ice cream cones at his father's nicklelodean in San Francisco.

At seventeen he became a film distributor and in 1916 bought a partnership in a cinema chain. During the next ten years Lesser not only managed a chain of movie houses but he also began to produce films. Among his successes were Oliver Twist which introduced Jackie Coogan as a child-star and broke box office records. Lesser's 1943 film Stage Door Canteen was so profitable that he was able to donate $1.5 million of the proceeds to the American Theatre Wing. Most of his films were serials, low-budget westerns, and Tarzan pictures. Between 1938 and 1959 he produced nineteen Tarzan films starring Johnny Weissmuller. In 1951 Lesser was awarded an Oscar for his documentary Kon-Tiki and in 1960 he received the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award for his long term support of theatrical and film industry causes. He was innovative in introducing the out-of-town "sneak preview" to get audience reaction to film before it was given general distribution. Lesser also introduced the idea of clearly designated film ratings as early as 1951. In his later years he taught cinematography at the University of Southern California and at the age of 86 he earned a master's degree in film education from that same university. Mr. Lesser died in Hollywood, California on September 20, 1981.

DELBERT MANN, director 1955 television musical adaptation:

Born January 30, 1920, in Lawrence, Kansas, Mr. Mann was educated at Vanderbilt and Yale Universities. In 1949 he joined NBC-TV becoming a director on the Philco Playhouse and other broadcast series. Mann has since continued to direct productions for television. In 1980 he directed the made-for television version of All Quiet on the Western Front. He has also directed a number of films including Chayefsky's Marty which won Mann an Oscar for his direction. Other notable films directed by Mann are Bachelor Party, Separate Tables, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs. His most recent work is his direction of the Walt Disney production of Night Crossing released in 1982.

THEODORE MANN, co-producer 1959 Circle-in-the-Square revival:

Born Theodore Goldman May 13, 1924, in Brooklyn, New York, Mr. Mann was educated at Columbia, New York University, and Brooklyn Law School. His first theatrical experience was during the summer of 1950 when he produced Alice in Wonderland for the Maverick Players, of which Jose Quintero was also a member, at the Woodstock Summer Theatre in upper New York. In the fall of that year he moved with the small group of

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dedicated theatre people to Greenwich Village calling themselves the Loft Players. Mann was instrumental in locating a permanent home for the group which finally became known as The Circle in the Square Theatre. He has since functioned as its producer and artistic director and often assuming the direction of individual shows as well.

WILLIAM CAMERON MENZIES, production designer 1940 film:

Born July 29, 1896, in New Haven, Connecticut, Mr. Menzies was educated at Yale, the Students' League in New York, and studied for a while in Scotland. Menzies began his career in art as an illustrator of children's books. His first design experience in film was with the Famous Players Studio in New York. He then moved to Hollywood and soon began to work for Mary Pickford, Samuel Goldwyn, and David O. Selznick. In 1939 Selznick assigned Menzies the title and responsibility of Production Designer for the now classic film, Gone With the Wind. It was the first time anyone was to have such artistic control over the entire film. Menzies won the first Academy Award Oscar for his art direction of The Dove and The Tempest in 1927. In 1939 he received a special Oscar for his achievement in the use of color for the enhancement of dramatic

mood in Gone With the Wind. Other film credits to Menzies' name include: The Thief of Bagdad, The Taming of the Shrew, and For Whom the Bell Tolls. Mr. Menzies died March 6, 1957, in Hollywood, California.

HELENE PONS, costume designer for the 1940 film:

Born Helene Weinnscheff in Tiflis, Russia, Mrs. Pons designed costumes for over a hundred shows both in the legitimate theatre and films. She also served as President of the Helene Pons Studio in New York City which executed her own designs as well as those of other leading costume designers. Her first Broadway commission was in 1927 for The Ivory Door presented at the Charles Hopkins Theatre. She first worked with Raymond Sovey in 1930 on The Second Little Show at the Royale Theatre. As a costume designer Mrs. Pons was also a member of United Scenic Artists.

JOSE QUINTERO, director 1959 Circle-in-the-Square revival:

Born October 24, 1924, in Panama City, Panama, Mr. Quintero was educated at Los Angeles City College, the University of Southern California and the Goodman Theatre School in Chicago. Then in 1950 Mr. Quintero directed plays with a small group of friends who together created the Maverick

Players at the Woodstock, New York, Summer Theatre. After the summer the group moved to Greenwich Village under the name of The Loft Players; subsequently becoming known as the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre. Quintero's first play at the Circle was a revival of Dark of the Moon. However, it was his revival of Summer and Smoke that brought critical acclaim to both him and his theatre group. In 1956 he directed The Iceman Cometh. This successful production and several others by O'Neill created for Quintero the reputation of the leading interpreter of America's leading playwright. In 1960 Quintero left the Circle to assume other directing assignments in film, television and on Broadway. In 1974 he received the Antoinette Perry Award for his direction of O'Neill's Moon for the Misbegotten.

RICHARD RIDDELL, lighting designer 1981 Guthrie production:

Mr. Riddell has served as lighting designer on many of Alan Schneider's productions: Waiting for Godot, The All American Quiz Show Scandal, and A Wilder Evening. In fact, Riddell currently works as a teacher and head of the design program at the University of California at San Diego, where Schneider also works. Mr. Riddell has designed lighting for

the Neterlands Opera in Amsterdam, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and he designed the setting of Krapp's Last Tape performed at the Akademie der Kuenste in West Berlin.

NELSON RIDDLE, conductor the 1955 television musical adaptation:

Born June 1, 1921, in Oradell, New Jersey, Mr. Riddle studied piano and trombone. Early in his professional career he played with such band leaders as Tommy Dorsey and Charlie Spivak. Later he formed his own bank. In 1947 he became the musical arranger and conductor for NBC radio with an easy transition into television work for the same company. During the fifties and sixties he wrote and conducted much of the music for the NBC network series programming. Mr. Riddle also worked as arranger and conductor for many Hollywood films: Pal Joey, Camelot and How to Succeed Without Really Trying.

GEORGE SCHAEFER, producer and director 1977 Bell System TV Special:

Born December 16, 1920, in Wallingford, Connecticut, Mr. Schaefer was educated at Lafayette College and Yale University. He directed his first play at 17 in 1937 for an Oak Park, Illinois community theatre group. While assigned to the Army Special Services in Hawaii, he directed over fifty

productions. He served as executive producer and artistic director of New York's City Center from 1946 to 1952. He co-produced the award-winning Broadway production of Teahouse of the August Moon. He has produced and directed a number of touring productions both in this country and England. Starting in 1954 Schaefer began to direct and produce for television. He has won eight Emmys, several directing awards and has served as President of the Director's Guild of America.

ALAN SCHNEIDER, director 1981 Guthrie Theatre production:

Born Abram Leopoldovich Schneider December 12, 1917, in Kharkov, Russia, he emigrated to the United States with his parents in 1923. He was educated at the Maryland Institute of Arts, John Hopkins University, the University of Wisconsin, and Cornell. Schneider taught on the speech and drama faculty at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. from 1941 to 1952. While there he also served the U. S. war effort and occasionally worked in the New York theatre. On July 11, 1944, he made his acting debut in Storm Operation at the Belasco Theatre. In 1948 he studied with Lee Strasberg and directed his first Broadway show, A Long Way From Home. The next year he received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to study theatre in Europe. He began his long affiliation with Washington, D.C.'s

Arena Stage in 1951 assuming a variety of directorial responsibilities until 1963. During the interim he also remained an active Broadway and regional theatre director. In 1956 he directed the American premieres of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Endgame. His personal association with Beckett, initiated by Thornton Wilder, brought about his working relationship with Edward Albee in 1960. Schneider directed the first production of Albee's The American Dream. Two years later both men won accolades at the Antoinette Perry Awards celebration for their joint efforts on Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Schneider's Broadway reputation brought him an appointment as Director of the Theatre Center at the Juilliard School from 1976-9. He is currently Professor of Drama at the University of California at San Diego and continues to direct for various regional theatre companies.

MARJORIE SLAIMAN, costume designer 1981 Guthrie Theatre production:

Educated at New York's School of Industrial Art, Ms. Slaiman has been resident costume designer at the Arena Stage, Washington, D.C. since 1974. She has also designed productions for Broadway and other regional theatres. Her costumes have toured Russia and China.

RAYMOND SOVEY, technical director 1938 Broadway premiere:

Born 1897 in Torrington, Connecticut, Mr. Sovey studied at Columbia University. He taught art at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore. After serving as an Army machine gunman in World War I, he entered the field of scenic design with pageants presented by the Methodist Episcopal Board of Foreign Missions. One of his most elaborate productions for them entitled The Wayfarer, was staged at Madison Square Garden. His first experience on the Broadway stage was as an actor in the 1919 production of The Burgomaster of Stilemonde at the Bilmont Theatre. His first costume design assignment for Broadway was in 1920 for George Washington. In 1935 he was hailed by the critics for his design of the Black Mesa Bar-B-Que setting of Robert Sherwood's The Petrified Forest. From then he took a variety of design projects in scenery, costumes, and lighting, working with such theatre artists as Robert Edmond Jones and Jo Meilziner. However, Mr. Sovey is best known for his work on Our Town. He died June 25, 1966, leaving no immediate relatives.

NOEL TAYLOR, costumer designer 1977 Bell System television special:

Born January 17, 1917, in Youngstown, Ohio, Mr. Taylor was educated in Paris, France. He began his costume design

efforts during 1947 and has since worked on Broadway, London and in film and television. He has designed costumes for such Broadway shows as Auntie Mame and Teahouse of the August Moon and for the film Rhinocerous.

JAMES VAN HEUSEN, composer 1955 television musical adaptation:

Born Edward Chester Babcock January 26, 1913, in Syracuse, New York, Mr. Van Heusen was educated at Cazenovia Seminary and Syracuse University. His first professional musical composition "Harlem Hospitality" was performed in the Cotton Club Revue presented in Harlem, New York City, in 1933. He first began writing scores for films in 1940 with Love Thy Neighbor. Our Town marked his first experience in television. Mr. Van Heusen has won a number of awards for his musical scoring; his first of four Oscars came for "Swinging on a Star". He also won television's Emmy award for his song, "Love and Marriage" from the Our Town score.

THORNTON WILDER, playwright of Our Town:

Born April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wisconsin, Mr. Wilder was educated at Oberlin College, Yale and Princeton Universities. As a young child Wilder moved with his parents to mainland China and then to Berkeley, California, where he graduated from high school in 1915. He served with both the U. S. Army

Coast Artillery and the USAAF Intelligence Corps. After a year's study at the American University in Rome, he became an instructor and house master at Lawrenceville Academy in New Jersey. His earliest published writing is a collection of brief dramatic sketches entitled "The Angel Who Troubled the Waters". His first work to achieve serious attention was his novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey which was awarded the 1928 Pulitzer Price. With his new success, Wilder resigned his post at Lawrenceville to devote more time to his career as a writer. One of his fortunate professional writing assignments came from Edith Isaacs, editor of Theatre Arts magazine, who asked him to do a series reflecting his impressions of productions he would be seeing while travelling throughout Europe. The series was called "Playgoing Nights". Its significance to Wilder's future is that it helped introduce him to many of the important New York theatre people. Wilder continued supplementing his writing career with occasional university guest lectureships and intermittent stage appearances in his plays. He has become this country's most celebrated writer, having received three Pulitzer Prizes, the Gold Medal for Fiction, the Peace Prize of the German Publishers and Book Dealers, and many other awards. Mr. Wilder died on December 12, 1975, in Hamden, Connecticut.

SAMUEL WOOD, director 1940 film:

Born July 10, 1884, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mr. Wood travelled to Nevada in 1900 lured by the excitement of the gold rush. Four years later he moved further west to Los Angeles where he became a successful real estate broker. He invested a great deal of his profits in the burgeoning motion picture business. His money and dapper appearance soon got him bit parts in the films of the Famous Players Studio where until 1916 he played "heavy" roles. For two years he served as Cecil B. De Mille's assistant and in 1916 he began to direct full time. He worked for Paramount Studios, MGM and then in 1939 he went free lance. Some of his film successes, other than Our Town, were Good-bye, Mr. Chips, Kitty Foyle, and For Whom the Bell Tolls. David O. Selznick asked him to fill in as director of Gone With the Wind during the illness of the film's regular director, Victor Fleming. Mr. Wood died September 22, 1949, in Hollywood, California.

PATRICIA ZIPPRODT, costume designer 1959 Circle-in-the-Square production:

Born February 25, 1925, in Evanston, Illinois, Ms. Zipprodt was educated at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, and the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Her first designs for New York were the costumes for The Potting Shed,

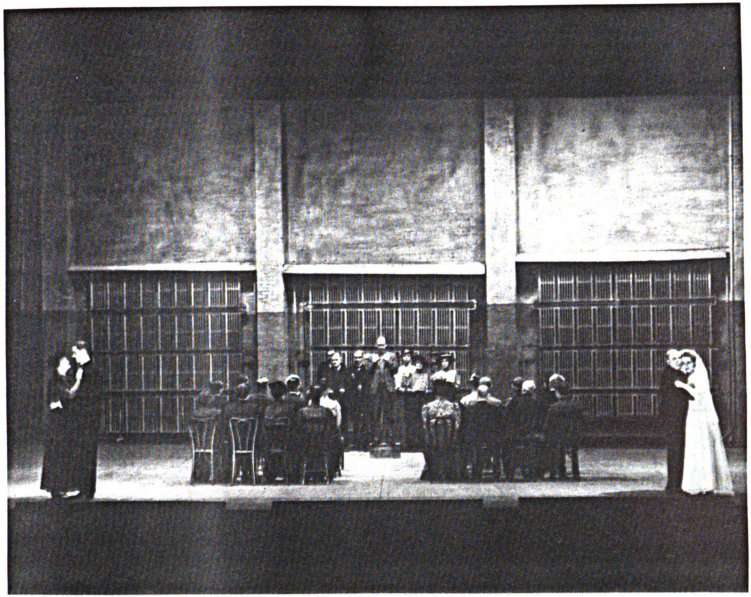
at the Bijou, February 29, 1957. She has worked both on and off Broadway and in regional theatres as well. Her designs have been executed for the legitimate theatre, ballet, opera and film. Ms. Zipprodt won the Antoinette Perry Award twice; for Fiddler on the Roof in 1965 and Cabaret in 1967.

APPENDIX D

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS

The classic drugstore scene from Act II with Frank Craven as the Stage Manager, Martha Scott as Emily Webb, and John Craven (Frank Craven's son) as George Gibbs; photographs of the 1938 Broadway premiere by Vandamm.

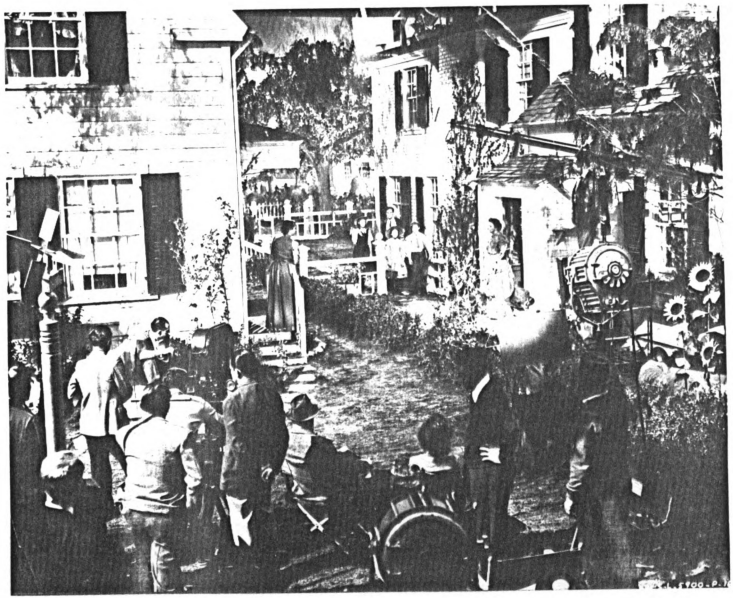
The wedding scene from Act II with Evelyn Varden as Mrs. Gibbs, John Craven as George Gibbs, Frank Craven as the Stage Manager/ Minister, Thomas W. Ross as Mr. Webb, and Martha Scott as Emily Webb; from the 1938 Broadway premiere.



The graveyard scene from Act III with Frank Craven as the Stage Manager, Philip Coolidge as Simon Stimson, Evelyn Varden as Mrs. Gibbs, Martha Scott as Emily Webb, John Craven as George Gibbs; the little boy upstage is Charles Wiley, Jr. as Wally Webb; from the 1938 production.

Thornton Wilder as the Stage Manager in his two-week 1938 Broadway performance during Frank Craven's absence.

Studio setting for 1940 United Artists film with technicians in the foreground; Fay Bainter, left on steps, as Mrs. Gibbs, Martha Scott as Emily Webb, William Holden as George Gibbs, Ruth Toby as Rebecca Gibbs, Douglas Gardiner as Wally Webb, and Beulah Bondi at right as Mrs. Webb.



The homework scene from Act I with William Holden as George Gibbs and Martha Scott as Emily Webb; from 1940 film.

The wedding scene from Act II with Edward Arnold as the Stage Manager, Charles Dingle as George Gibbs, and Elizabeth Patterson as Emily Webb; from the 1950 ABC-TV "Pulitzer Prize Playhouse" series broadcast.

The graveyard scene from Act III with Elizabeth Patterson as Emily Webb; actor playing Dr. Gibbs as well as other actors is not known; from 1959 ABC-TV broadcast.

Studio rehearsal with Eva Marie Saint and Paul Newman on steps; man at right is director Delbert Mann; man at left is not known; from 1955 NBC-TV musical version for "Producer's Showcase".

The breakfast scene from Act I with Shelley Fabares as Rebecca Gibbs and Paul Newman as George Gibbs; from the 1955 NBC-TV technical production.

The scolding scene from Act II with Eva Marie Saint as Emily Webb and Paul Newman as George Gibbs; from 1955 NBC-TV broadcast.

This publicity photography taken on the stage of the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre for its 1959 production suggests the intimate playing space; John Beal played the Stage Manager.

Henry Fonda as the Stage Manager in the limited-run 1969 Broadway revival.

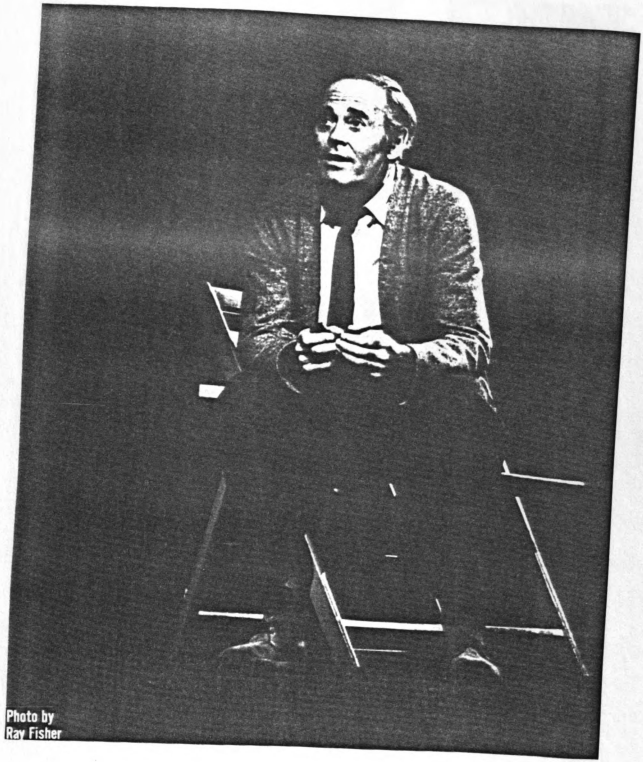


Photo by
Ray Fisher

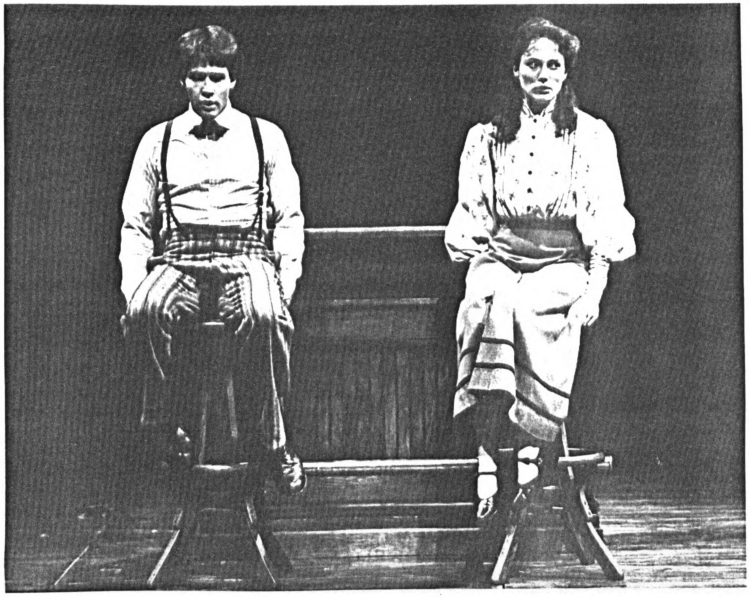
The drugstore scene from Act II with Gary Bayer as George Gibbs, Robert Prosky as the Stage Manager, and Dianne West as Emily Webb; from the 1973 Washington, D. C. Arena Stage production.

The wedding scene from Act II of the 1973 Arena Stage production which also toured to Russia.

Publicity photograph showing the wedding scene from Act II with Glynnis O'Connor as Emily Webb, Hal Holbrook as the Stage Manager/ Minister, and Robby Benson as George Gibbs; for the 1977 NBC-TV "Bell Telephone Salutes" broadcast.

Hal Holbrook as the Stage Manager during the graveyard scene; from the 1977 NBC-TV broadcast.

The drugstore scene with Boyd Gaines as George Gibbs and Keliher Walsh as Emily Webb; from the 1981 Minneapolis Guthrie Theatre production.



The wedding scene from the 1981 Guthrie Theatre production.

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