Preparation for *Our Town*

The Playwright: Thornton Wilder

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was born in Wisconsin but spent his childhood traveling both nationally and internationally with his family; they even lived for a time in China due to his father’s job. Wilder began his higher education at Oberlin College but transferred to and graduated from Yale University. He obtained a master’s degree from Princeton University. After graduating, Wilder spent time in Rome, working on archeological excavations before returning to the United States to teach French. Wilder gained prestige for both his novels and his plays, winning a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1928, and twice winning the Pulitzer Prize for drama for *Our Town* in 1938 and for *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942. His writings, particularly *Our Town*, were popular during his lifetime and have remained so after his death—according to the Wilder Family Estate, a production of *Our Town* is being performed at least once a day somewhere in the United States or abroad.

**Original Preface to *Our Town***  Thornton Wilder wrote a preface to *Our Town* which ran in *The New York Times* on February 13, 1938, but was not published with the play until 1979. In this preface, he explains many of his thoughts about and inspirations for *Our Town*:

“For a while in Rome I lived among archaeologists, and ever since I find myself occasionally looking at the things about me as an archaeologist will look at them a thousand years hence. Rockefeller Center will be reconstructed in imagination from the ruins of its foundations. How high was it? A thesis will be written on the bronze plates found in New York's detritus heaps – “Tradesmen's Entrance,” “Night Bell.”
In Rome I was led through a study of the plumbing on the Palatine Hill. A friend of mine could ascribe a date, “within ten years,” to every fragment of cement made in the Roman Republic and early Empire.

An archaeologist's eyes combine the view of the telescope with the view of the microscope. He reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.

It was something of this method that I brought to a New Hampshire village. I spent parts of six summers tutoring at Lake Sunapee and six at the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough. I took long walks through scores of upland villages.

And the archeologist’s and the social historian’s points of view began to mingle with another unremitting preoccupation which is the central theme of the play: What is the relation between the countless “unimportant” details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?

What is trivial and what is significant about any one person's making a breakfast, engaging in a domestic quarrel, in a “love scene,” in dying? To record one’s feelings about this question is necessarily to exhibit the realistic detail of life, and one is at once up against the problem of realism in literature....

I wished to record a village’s life on the stage, with realism and with generality. The stage has a deceptive advantage over the novel—in that lighted room at the end of the darkened auditorium things seem to be half caught up into generality already. The stage cries aloud its mission to represent the Act in Eternity. So powerful is the focus that it brings to bear on any presented occasion that every lapse of the author from his collaborative intensity is doubly conspicuous: the truth tumbles down into a heap of abject truths and the result is doubly trivial.
So I tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery. The spectator through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his own head.

In its healthiest ages the theater has always exhibited the least scenery. Aristophanes's *The Clouds*—423 B.C. Two houses are represented on the stage, inside of one of them we see two beds. Strepsiades is talking in his sleep about his racehorses. A few minutes later he crosses the stage to Socrates's house, the Idea Factory, the “Thinkery.” In the Spanish theater Lope de Vega put a rug in the middle of the scene; it was a raft in mid-ocean bearing a castaway. The Elizabethans, the Chinese used similar devices.

The theater longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves. All the lies it tells—the lie that that young lady is Caesar’s wife; the lie that people can go through life talking in blank verse; the lie that that man just killed that man; all those lies enhance the one truth that is there, the truth that dictated the story, the myth. The theater asks for as many conventions as possible. A convention is an agreed-upon falsehood, an accepted untruth. When the theater pretends to give the real thing in canvas and wood and metal it loses something of the realer thing, which is its true business. Ibsen and Chekhov carried realism as far as it could go, and it took all their genius to do it. Now the camera is carrying it on and is in great “theoretical peril” of falling short of literature. (In a world of actual peril that “theoretical peril” looks very farfetched, but ex-college professors must be indulged.)

But the writing of the play was not accompanied by any such conscious argumentation as this. It sprang from a deep admiration for those little white towns in the hills and from a deep devotion to the theater. These are but the belated gropings to reconstruct what may have taken place when the play first presented itself—the life of a village against the life of the stars.
In an earlier draft of the play there were some other lines that led up to those which now serve as its motto. The Stage Manager has been talking about the material that is being placed in the cornerstone of the new bank at Grover's Corners, material that has been chemically treated so that it will last a thousand or two thousand years. He suggests that this play has been placed there so that future ages will know more about the life of the average person; more than just the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh Flight—see what I mean?

Well, people a thousand years from now, in the provinces North of New York at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, people et [sic] three times a day—soon after dawn, at noon, and at sunset.

Every seventh day, by law and by religion, there was a day of rest and all work came to a stop.

The religion at that time was Christianity; but I guess you have other records about Christianity.

The domestic set-up was marriage, a binding relation between a male and one female that lasted for life.

. . . Anything else? Oh, yes, when people died they were buried in the ground just as they were.

Well, people a thousand years from now, this is the way we were—in our growing-up, in our marrying, in our doctoring, in our living, and in our dying.

Now let's get back to our day in Grover’s Corners....”

**Questions:**

What does Wilder mean when he refers to “all the lies [theatre] tells?”
How is film in “theoretical peril” of carrying on realism? How is theatre’s form of realistic storytelling more “real” than what is captured on camera?

How do the lines that were taken out of the Stage Manager’s monologue relate specifically to the time and culture in which they were written? How do they relate to the culture of today? Why do you think those lines were removed from the play?

David Cromer and His Vision of Our Town  The Huntington Theatre Company’s Artistic Director, Peter DuBois, has described director David Cromer’s production as “the seminal production of Our Town of our generation. David’s production has been acclaimed by critics, by audiences. It really is one of the more moving experiences with a classic American work that people are going to have. It’s really this generation’s Our Town.”

But what makes David Cromer’s vision so unique and this production so special? Read the following collection of quotations from fellow directors, actors, writers, journalists, and critics. What insights do their observations provide into Cromer’s artistic vision and his novel take on Our Town?

• “But to hear Cromer tell it, he’s not so much a director as an art restorer, stripping away the varnish applied by generations of well-meaning regional stages and high-school drama clubs to reveal Thornton’s original vision. Although the spare, meta-theatrical Our Town was radical for 1938, it has since acquired a patina of homespun, old-fashioned sentimentality. Cromer scraped all that off. Initially, he took on the part of the Stage Manager—an all-knowing narrator—and played him not as a simple yarn-spinning New Englander but as a brusque director with a clipboard. As himself, basically.” –Margaret Gray, Los Angeles Times
• “People sometimes interpret the play as saying, ‘You have to live life every moment,’ ” says Cromer. “I don’t know that I agree with that. It says that every moment is pretty stunning if you look at it, but you can’t live like that. You’d just be staring at the orchids every second, like ‘Can you believe it?’ You’d wander into traffic, you’d never go to work. You have to miss some of it, and regret that you missed some of it, and that’s part of it, too.” –Los Angeles Times

• “The folksy warmth in which the play is often saturated is scrubbed off too. The actors wear contemporary clothes that look as if they’d been pulled out of their own closets, or maybe just off the floor. They are you-and-me types, the better to blend in with, well, you and me.” –Charles Isherwood, The New York Times

• “David Cromer is a theater director and actor who is reinvigorating classic American plays and illuminating their relationship to the present. His incisive interpretations of the twentieth-century repertoire honor the original intention of each work while providing audiences with more psychologically complex performances than previous renderings. Eschewing nostalgia and period kitsch, Cromer reveals the dark truth and unexpected humor in William Inge’s Picnic, while his meticulous attention to the expressive power of simple objects transforms a musical adaptation of Elmer Rice’s The Adding Machine into a compelling portrait of a desperate office worker that reflects our time. Every element of his production of Thornton Wilder’s Our Town—from set design, to costumes, to music, to the choice of actors—converges into a cohesive whole that evokes an immediate and powerful experience for viewers. Performing the role of the Stage Manager himself, Cromer adopts modern dress and a conversational tone and is simultaneously the omniscient, efficient director and a character in the play. The minimalist aesthetic of the production and his portrayal of the Stage Manager avoid the sentimentality characteristic of other versions of Our Town and, at
the same time, increase the emotional force of the play’s exhortation to live in the present moment. From venues in Chicago to the theaters of New York, Cromer is re-staging earlier plays with a spirit and urgency that resonates with contemporary audiences.” –MacArthur Foundation biography

• “Performed in modern dress, not quite in the round but in the midst of its audience and with the lights on for the first two acts, Cromer’s *Our Town* managed to erase the divide between players and spectators to deliver the maximum gut punch the theater can offer.” –Alex Witchel, *New York Times Magazine*

• “‘Everything David says to the actors and designers grows out of the play, not the theatrical idea of it or the nostalgic idea of it,’ [Austin] Pendleton told me. ‘When I saw *Brighton Beach Memoirs* [which Cromer directed], I thought, I didn’t know the play was this good. And he didn’t seem to do anything except pay attention to it.’” –Alex Witchel quoting Austin Pendleton, *New York Times Magazine*