

## **Theatre Review: “Our Town” By Kevin M. O’Toole**

Over the years, Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town,” first performed in 1938, has become a staple of high school drama groups and community theatre. It requires very little in the way of a set and, on the surface, appears easy to stage. Seemingly a portrait of the mundane doings of the inhabitants of a small New England town around the beginning of the twentieth century, Wilder’s masterpiece has proven timeless and timely. On opening night, Weston’s spare production of “Our Town,” performed straightforwardly, revealed the play’s depth, insight and power to move.

Prior to the show, Director Steve Stettler emphasized that every production of the play speaks to that moment and place, and has very little to do with the fictional town of Grovers Corners, New Hampshire. Following Wilder’s lead, the set consisted of a bare stage, with the exception of two tall stepladders and two sets of tables and chairs. Actors, dressed casually for the most part, sat at the rear of the stage and created many of the sound effects as they wait to be summoned by the Stage Manager. As with Shakespeare, Stettler wished to emphasize that the play is the thing.

Christopher Lloyd, whose late brother, Sam, played the same part back in 1973 when Weston last mounted “Our Town,” assumed the role of the Stage Manager. He addressed the audience directly and also took the roles of different locals. Lloyd loomed onstage as the audience shuffled in and, when the house lights dimmed, eased into this guided tour into the human condition. The soft-spoken cadence of Lloyd’s voice took a little getting used to but the sincerity of the delivery gave his words added weight.

Much of “Our Town” revolves around two families that live next door to one another: the Gibbs and the Webbs. As Dr. Gibbs, Raphael Peacock conveyed the weariness of a small town doctor, husband. As a father, he dispenses wisdom to his son George quietly and effectively with a simple word or two. Similarly, Brandy Zarle illustrated how Mrs. Gibbs accepted her role as homemaker without fuss but still longed for an opportunity, just once, to visit a place “where they don’t speak English, or even want to.”

As Mr. Webb, the editor of the local newspaper and father of the bride, Emily, Tim Rush squirmed hilariously when pinned down to comment on cultural matters or to chat with the prospective groom on the morning of the nuptials. As Mrs. Webb, Christine Toy Johnson, just by keeping her house in some semblance of order and chatting with Mrs. Gibbs, celebrated the ordinary.

Vichet Chum gave an “ah shucks” interpretation of George Gibbs that recalled a universal truth: young men can be clueless. His characterization, however, allowed for growth as in Emily, George came to know what he wanted from life and with whom he wanted to share it. As Emily Webb, Julie Benko met the challenge of portraying Emily Webb, who loved George despite the “faults in his character,” and later, viewed daily life on earth through the lens of someone who could no longer muddle through like the rest of us. Her performance was as delightful as it was

heart-wrenching.

It is fitting that Weston Playhouse Theatre Company opened its final season under the auspices of Producing Directors Steve Stettler, Tim Fort and Malcolm Ewen by assembling a cast peopled with different generations of actors or relations of actors who have graced its stage over the years. This production included cameos by longtime Weston stalwarts Barbara Lloyd, Dorothy Stanley and Munson Hicks that added color. Also featured were a chipper Jim Raposa as milkman Howie Newsome and a sullen Michael Hicks as Simon Stimson, the drunken church organist who is the subject of much talk and meets a bad end.

If you have not seen “Our Town” in a while, treat yourself. If you have never seen “Our Town,” do not let this opportunity slip away. The message of “Our Town” is plain enough: appreciate that life is precious and every moment, no matter how painful, golden.

Performances of “Our Town” continue at the Weston Playhouse through July 7. For ticket information, call the WPTC box office at (802) 824-5288 or visit its website at [www.westonplayhouse.org](http://www.westonplayhouse.org).