

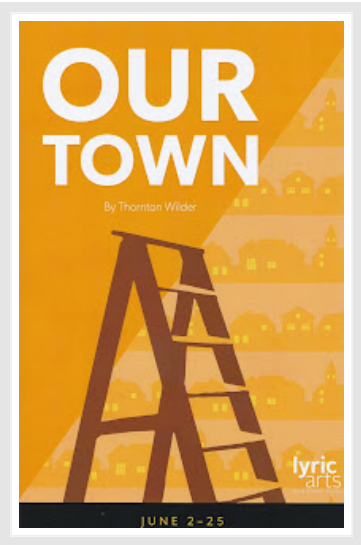


theatrical musings in Minnesota and beyond

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Saturday, June 3, 2023

## "Our Town" at Lyric Arts



Thornton Wilder's 1938 play *Our Town* is a classic of the American theater for a reason. It's a slice of life kind of play (or rather, three slices of life), in which not a lot happens, but everything happens. *Our Town* tells the story of an average American town in the early 20th Century, filled with average people. While the gender roles feel dated (the men go out to their jobs while the women stay home and take care of the home and family, and everyone is married), the themes still resonate. In fact I find the older I get, the more bittersweet the play becomes. The idea that it's the ordinary days that are the very stuff of life, and we rarely realize their value while we're in them, only becomes more relevant the more those ordinary days stack up behind you. Lyric Arts' new production uses the traditional bare bones style, and adds movement and music to help

color the world of Grover's Corners. With beautifully sparse design and a talented cast, they've created something heart-breakingly lovely. You can visit Grover's Corners on Main Street in Anoka weekends through the end of June.

The play is written in an unusual style, in which a character known as "Stage Manager" serves as narrator, and fully acknowledges that this is a play, introducing scenes and cutting them off when time is short. He speaks directly to the audience as he tells us the story of this extraordinarily ordinary town. We meet many people in the town, from the milkman to the constable to



"Stage Manager" Jake Sung-Guk Sullivan watches a scene (with Jennifer Inderlee and Kendall Kent, photo by Molly Weibel)

the town drunk, but the focus is on the Gibbs and Webb families. George Gibbs and Emily Webb are teenagers and best friends in the first act, and the second act features their wedding at a young age. The third act takes place in the cemetery, with the deceased observing and commenting on the living. The recently departed wants to relive one mundane day in their life, against the advice of the other residents of the cemetery. They soon find out that it's too painful to watch the careless way people go about the day, not realizing how precious each moment is, and beg to be returned to their grave.\* #bringtissues

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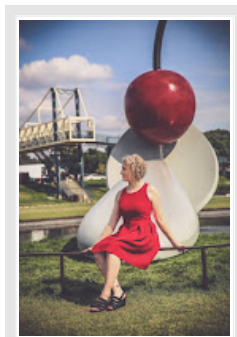


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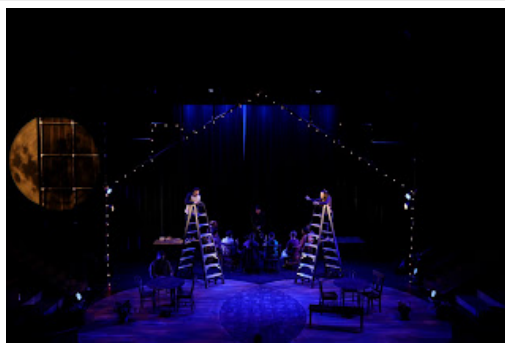
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George and Emily at the soda shop  
(Noah Hynick and Kendall Kent, photo by Molly Weibel)

Leading this large and talented ensemble cast is Jake Sung-Guk Sullivan, who lately has been directing shows at Lyric. Returning to the stage here, he's a warm and charming narrator, guiding us through the story, speaking directly to the audience in a conversational and conspiratorial way, as if he's as fascinated by these town residents as we are. He occasionally gets flustered or surprised or annoyed by his subjects as he hurries the story along. As our young lovers, Noah Hynick is adorably awkward as the teenage George, believably transforming into the grieving man of Act III. And understudy Kendall Kent gives a remarkable performance as Emily after only a week of rehearsal. It's a pivotal role, particularly in the third act, and Kendall pulls it off flawlessly, making us feel all the feels. Other highlights in the cast include Jennifer Inderlee and Eric J. Knutson as George's parents, Katie Wodele and Don Maloney as Emily's parents, and Michael Quadrozzi getting some of the biggest laughs of the show as the town historian who's more than willing to tell us all the details. But this is a true ensemble piece and there's not a weak link in the cast.

Scott Ford directs the piece with playfulness and physicality, humor nicely balanced with pathos. Characters mime actions with invisible props, and make sound effects from the sidelines, where the entire cast is almost always sitting, observing, even laughing at the action. It really does have a meta theater feel in the most endearing way. The bare frame of a house serves



Grover's Corners (photo by Molly Weibel)

as the proscenium under which the story is told, with the circle of chairs that open the show moved around to create different spaces. Music fills the moments between scenes, with original music composed by Ben Emory Larson and played by Steven Ramirez on guitar, Rae Wasson on cello, and Jenny Liang on the erhu, a gorgeously haunting two-stringed instrument known as the Chinese violin, joined occasionally by Jake on accordion. There are also a few dream ballet type sequences that illustrate Emily and George's relationship (choreographed by Lauri Kraft and beautifully danced by Rae Wasson and Andrew Newman). Characters are dressed in simple modern clothing that could work in any time (scenic design by Greg Vanselow, costume design by Alyssa Olsen).

As I left the theater last night, I looked up to see a full moon in the sky, which figures prominently in the play, several characters spending time basking in the moonlight. It's sort of a symbol for the simple joys in life, and the beauty that surrounds us that we're often too busy to notice. This is the kind of play that makes you slow down and notice those things. It weaves a magical spell as you're transported to this long ago and far away place, that reminds you of things very real and present and all too precious.

\*Plot summary borrowed from what I've written about previous productions I've seen.

Labels: [Andrew Newman](#), [Ben Larson](#), [Don Maloney](#), [Eric Knutson](#), [Jake Sung-Guk Sullivan](#), [Jennifer Inderlee](#), [Katie Wodele](#), [Kendall Kent](#), [Lyric Arts](#), [Michael Quadrozzi](#), [Noah Hynick](#), [Our Town](#), [Rae Wasson](#), [Scott Ford](#)



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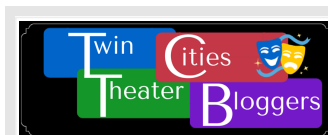
#### Contact Me

Have you seen a great show recently that you think I should see? I'd love to hear about it, email me at [cherryandspoon@gmail.com](mailto:cherryandspoon@gmail.com).

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- [Speechless](#) (Moving Company at Jungle, Uptown Mpls)
- [Ain't Too Proud](#) (touring at the Ordway, downtown St. Paul)
- [RENT](#) (Artistry, Bloomington)
- [White Christmas](#) (Chanhassen Dinner Theatres)
- [Holmes/Poirot](#) (Park Square, downtown St. Paul)

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