

dance parties in the same space as very deeply felt emotional drama.

We spent an awful lot of time laughing and doing quite silly things in the rehearsal room. Tom insisted on us being generous and available to our audience. This, I think, helped keep us from being too self-absorbed or too excited by our own jokes. We are the best of friends and just having the opportunity to be with one another for a few weeks is enough to make us excited. It's all well and good to have a great time in that room, but ultimately we're there to share it with the audience. And we hope that the joy and tight-knit quality that the ensemble embodied infected the audience at our backyard barbeque.

A Seat at the Table: Inviting the Audience to Join *Our Town* by Shelley Orr

Creating community has been the purpose and the promise of theatre since its earliest recorded days, but rarely in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has a sense of community been more than a fleeting, illusory effect, often as calculated as the light levels, which dissipates when the house lights come up and patrons fight to get out of the parking lot. However, in this *Our Town*, in the words of the show's director, "Community is at the center," and creating that community seems to have driven all the artistic decisions. Allow me to pause a moment here to say that I recognize that my title is a cliché. I chose it for three reasons. The sentiment of this (yes, hackneyed) phrase points directly toward this production of *Our Town*'s interest in inviting the audience into the show in a sincere and serious way. It also reflects the real-world setting of the actors having a cookout (complete with bratwurst on the grill), seated at a long table on a San Diego evening—an occasion that is layered on top of the Grover's Corners setting of the play. And third, in my view the production effectively reinvigorates and makes relevant a play that has rightfully earned a prominent place in the canon of American dramatic literature but, seventy-five years after its premiere, could easily be seen as overdone and sapped of potency; in short: the play itself is a cliché.

Taking on one of the most widely read and produced plays of the past century is no small feat; staging it in a way that has something compelling to say to an audience of 2013 is yet another audacious undertaking. To do both these with a light and inviting touch was quite a revelation. As I have noted, central to this production was the building of a community. Of course, the text of the play does this by, in effect, building the community of Grover's Corners,

New Hampshire, before the audience members' very eyes. However, this production takes the idea of community several steps further first by creating a community among the company members producing the show and then by inviting the audience to join their community through the performance. As director Tom Dugdale noted during our conversation: "The event of theatre is wonderful. The play is really a pretext to get people together." This *Our Town* company uses four main techniques to create community and invite the audience to join: prominent use of humor and original music, three site-specific settings for the production, casting the audience as members of the community, and including real details from the actors' lives.

These four elements combine to create a production that helps the audience connect in an unconventional yet enthralling way to this show.

A Community of Artists: "Creating a family"

Dugdale directed *Our Town* and also served as a line producer for the Without Walls Festival. *Our Town* was produced by La Jolla Playhouse in association with THE TRIP, a new company founded by Dugdale and Joshua Kahan Brody. Currently based in San Diego, THE TRIP was founded in 2012 and has produced three shows thus far. Dugdale's method of directing seems at once disciplined and yet open to the vicissitudes of the personalities in the rehearsal room. Dugdale noted, "Whenever I direct, I tend to turn the company into a family, even if the characters in the play are not a family." He confessed that he finds music a helpful vehicle for his ends, and that he always has his casts learn a song and sing together at the first rehearsal to help foster connection among company members. *Our Town* was no exception. Original music was composed and performed with great gusto during the show. Two songs, "Oh Bloom (It's the Life)," which features prominently in Act One and "Time for a Wedding Today" which is performed in Act Two help convey a passage of time and provide the company with an opportunity to connect with the audience in a direct way. The traditional hymn "It is Well With My Soul" helps to bring the play full circle as it is performed in both Act One (at choir practice) and Act Three (for Emily's graveside service).

In the case of *Our Town*, the company already had a shared past that came into play in the production. All members of the cast and major members of the creative team attended the same university. All of the company graduated from either the graduate or undergraduate program at the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, San Diego. The fact that the company has a past history of working together created a palpable dynamic during the performance. Perhaps even



Photo 13: (L to R) Carissa Cash, Zoë Chao, Patrick Riley; Act Two: George and Emily's wedding.

more significant to this production of *Our Town* than that common past experience is the fact that after scattering across the country post-graduation, this company is having a reunion on the very campus where most of them met. The feeling of connections being rekindled and a sense of drawing on a fond past experience during the performance was an undercurrent that helped to make this production compelling.

One might rightly say that these logistical details of how the company came together should be beside the point of the performance, but in fact these details were part of the fabric of this show. Further, seven of the ten actors in the show (those from out of town) lived together during rehearsals and performances in a large house in Carlsbad, north of San Diego—the very house featured in a video shown in Act Two as the wedding preparations for Emily and George kick into high gear. Dugdale said, “we knew this section of the play was about people getting ready for a wedding, so it felt right to film the actors getting ready” in their temporary, shared home. Most of the video has a decidedly humorous, contemporary feeling to it, using an extended, intentionally contrived all-in-one shot, and even having actor Matthew MacNelly appear on the toilet (which conveniently served as a reference back to his repeated scatological jokes from earlier in the production). In this and other ways, the real world community formed by these actors underpinned *Our Town*.

A disarmingly casual approach to the play was evident from the opening moments. The preshow featured a cookout in full swing: people playing catch with a football, lining up to fill plates with food grilled right there, and gathering at a long table as the sun set over the ocean nearby. The actors offered audience members soda or iced tea from coolers as the latter settled into a mismatched variety of outdoor chairs in three semi-circular rows. The actors settled in at

the long table facing the audience together as the play began. And the play began in roughly traditional fashion, with the Stage Manager greeting the audience, listing the names of the actors (who waved when mentioned), and laying out (invisibly) the main features of Grover's Corners for us. However, throughout Act I, there was an ironic delivery used that gave off the quality of the company sharing an inside joke. The play's lines were spoken according to the script, but the meaning of those words were at times shifted to better fit the moment happening between the actors than evoking a character's experience. This opening act signaled to the audience that the actors were not going to “disappear” into their characters, rather that the actors would play their parts but also be themselves: actors staging these scenes with their fellow actors.

At a handful of moments, the relationship among the actors seemed to take precedence over the relationships between the characters. Some examples: the Milkman and Mrs. Gibbs laughing over the purported problem with the milk separator that caused the milk delivery to be late became a moment much more about Thomas Miller and Jenni Putney laughing over the ridiculousness of their characters' conversation. Shortly thereafter when Doc Gibbs returns from his overnight house call, the actor Matthew MacNelly makes fun of his next patient by making a fart noise, in true junior-high style. This is hardly the demeanor that Doc Gibbs, one of the pillars of Grover's Corners, would adopt in a more conventional production. Mrs. Gibbs has a line that begins with the exclamation “Holy Moses!” when speaking to her children, but this line becomes Jenni Putney nearly catcalling the shirtless Jack Mikesell (Mr. Webb) as he mimes mowing his lawn. The irreverent approach to the play is both surprising and endearing as the actors' personalities shine through. While some in the audience could conceivably have been offended by the irony, I think

that this delivery served as a way for the actors to connect in a genuine fashion to *Our Town*, and consequently to allow the audience to connect in a more personal, individual way to the show.

From a conventional perspective, this cast of twenty-somethings is not ideally suited to the play: most of the time, the actors are either too old or too young to play the parts in a realistic way. The five men and five women in the company resulted in some minor characters' gender changing from male to female to better fit the actors. The paper boys become paper girls in Act One and Emily's cousin Sam who attends the graveside service is a young woman (rather than a young man) in Act Three. These casting decisions and acting choices are signals to the audience that this production is eschewing a realistic portrayal in favor of developing a real connection to the community of actors involved in putting on this play. By the end of the show, these same approaches have primed the audience to develop or renew real connections to the various communities with which they identify.

Joshua Kahan Brody, the producer of the show and a member of the company of actors, noted that "the production may not be a faithful interpretation of the text, but it is faithful to the company." He spoke about how Dugdale's approach to directing during the rehearsal process included reminding the actors to make themselves available to the audience, rather than sealing themselves off in their representational world. One important choice was made with respect to the lines of the Stage Manager. Rather than casting one actor in that iconic role, the lines were divided among every member of the company, thereby affording every cast member the opportunity to address the audience directly. The choice not to keep to the period of the play in the costumes and in the use of video seems inspired by a desire to keep this story close to the actors and the audience. In other words, the production choices anchor this *Our Town* in *our* time rather than tie it to an inaccessible past, which would distance the audience from the story. The costumes were appropriate in other ways: Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Web had aprons, George wore a letter jacket in the flashback to high school, Emily wore a white dress for her wedding, and the company wore black for Act Three, but the style of the clothing was not from the early 1900s.

Fourth-wall realism was not on display, though it was clear that these actors have the chops to do that style of acting. The force of the more serious, dramatic moments in the play, especially in Act Three, was enabled and supported by a connection to the emotions of the actors. Zoë Chao, who played Emily, seemed to be channeling her inner adolescent in both Acts One and Two, and her heightened, humorous petulance only made the pathos of Emily's realizations in Act Three all the more powerful. In many ways, this technique worked on the level of the production as a whole as well. The moments of irreverence in the early part of the play served to disarm and open the audience up to experience Act

Three in a way that might not have been possible in a more conventional production. We may feel that we have become immune through exposure to the sentiment in *Our Town*, but the approach taken by this company helps revive the play's emotional power and make it genuine.

The actors' connection to the play was underscored by moments when the actors' lives were directly referenced. During Act Two, there was a wedding video being made with George's sister Rebecca often holding the camera. In this compilation video, a format is used that will be familiar to anyone who has attended a wedding in recent years. The video is on a loop; the bride and groom are shown in home video as children, as adolescents, and as the happy couple of the hour. Keeping to the tradition, audience members—here, cast as the wedding guests—are also featured in the wedding video, which was quick-edited from live footage of that very performance to feature three or four people sitting in that audience as they watched the performance. The video is shown at the end of Act Two, complete with musical underscoring.

The wedding video featured home video of the two actors playing Emily and George as children. So, this footage was not created for the show, but rather the actors' actual home videos were used. The audio of a home video of Zoë Chao as a child was also used in Act Three when Emily visits a day from her past. The audio track that plays features Zoë as a child of four or five as she imitates a popular motorized doll called Baby Alive for her parents. Zoë listens to the track and tries to lip synch to her own words from years ago. Clearly this is a very funny, happy home video, but as we listen to it with Zoë, it becomes clear that she is touched by the fact that she can't return to this moment. The lessons of Emily Gibbs are learned through this snippet of Zoë Chao's past. Instead of supplanting the actors' identities with the identities of their characters, this production brings the identities of the actors into conversation with the characters and with the audience.

The Theatrical Space: Site-Specific and Traveling, Too!

The production used three different locations, one for each act of the play. Act One takes place in an open outdoor area under eucalyptus trees near the looming grey wall of the Mandell Weiss Forum Theatre. At the end of Act One, the actors removed the long table down center and asked the audience members to move their chairs forward about fifteen feet. The audience was then closer to the outdoor wall of the Forum Theatre and near a small platform about a foot high and fifteen feet wide. Part of the table was placed on the platform serving as the soda shop where George and Emily reenact the moment when they became engaged. The use of video was a prominent feature of Act Two. With the audience closer to the outdoor wall of the Forum, video images were enhanced by proximity to the forty-foot-high wall that served as the projection surface for both pre-recorded and live video. For Act Three, the audience members were

escorted by the actors on a short walk to a small theatre inside UCSD's Galbraith Hall with 100 fixed seats and audience on three sides of the playing area. The larger transition from the outdoor space to the indoor one also served as an intermission.

At first, I questioned the move indoors for Act Three. In that act, the Stage Manager specifically notes that we are on a windy hillside where the citizens of Grover's Corners are laid to rest. I thought it an odd choice to come indoors for the one act that specifically sets the action in an outdoor space. Then, as the performance resumed, I recognized the wisdom of this choice. After casting the audience as visitors to Grover's Corners in the first act, and as wedding guests in the second act, in the third we are the dead. This last act of innovative casting is accomplished cleverly and simply by positioning the three dead characters of Mother Gibbs, Simon Stimson, and Mrs. Soames in seats among the audience. The theatre has three sections of fixed seating, and each of these three characters was seated in one of the sections. Their presence was not easily detected at first by audience members because the actors sat themselves along with the audience when the house opened after intermission. The house lights also faded on a very slow cue of perhaps ten minutes or more, so it was only fully evident after the third act was well under way that the audience section was the graveyard. The central playing area was used by the living characters coming to lay Emily to

rest and by the living characters when Emily visits her past. However, most of the lines of the act are spoken from where the audience is sitting. The stage becomes an illusory space, a theatre of the past and of memory. The audience gets to take on the novel perspective of seeing life from beyond the grave. When Mother Gibbs counsels Emily, "Rest, Dear," the audience members can feel that she is speaking to them as well. We are simultaneously wrenched by the idea of Emily's being taken from her family and calmed by the very long perspective of the dead. At the end of the performance, the actors (still in their mourning clothes) dance with abandon. They shake off death and return to themselves. The audience is returned to themselves at the end of the performance as well, but not unaffected by the experience.

Dugdale hoped that "the audience becomes implicated in the play." By engaging us directly and speaking to us in our present moment, Dugdale's *Our Town* succeeds in forging a new kind of contract with the audience. Instead of a world of illusion hermetically sealed behind the proscenium arch, we are offered a genuine experience that we can join in with the actors. Rather than the actors being subsumed by their characters and the audience "getting lost" in the story, in this production we can find something that speaks to us in a shared experience. In 2012, Brody and Dugdale co-founded THE TRIP, and *Our Town* is their third production. I look forward to where this company takes us next.



Photo 14: The production's final image: "There are the stars — doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky."

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