

## Note

1. A proper citation for this is not available, but it is one of those stories in which the myth upstages the confirmable facts. Reputedly published in the *New Yorker*, it is referenced obliquely in countless other articles, including by Joy Horowitz in *The L.A. Review of Books* (2014).

## Work Cited

Horowitz, Joy. "Too Jewish?: The Making of The Fiddler on The Roof." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 30 Oct. 2014. Web. 1 Aug. 2023. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/jewish-making-fiddler-roof/>.

## OUR TOWN

*Directed by Jesse Jou*

*Pendragon Theatre*

*Saranac Lake, New York*

*15 August–26 August 2023*

*Reviewed by Shawna Mefferd Kelty*

As the days of summer grow shorter, residents, tourists, and travelers in the north country of New York are already nostalgic for the summer that has not ended yet. The sense of nostalgia, that aching to return to what has passed or has been lost, permeates these days in the Adirondacks and Pendragon Theatre's 2023 production of *Our Town*.

There is a shared history between the theater and the village of Saranac Lake; Pendragon Theatre has been producing year-round professional theater for over forty years in the village. The intimate theater of approximately 85 seats is housed in a rustic, renovated barn that rests on a plot formerly part of a historic family estate and evokes a sense of nostalgia for days gone by. The Pendragon production creates a shared history between *Our Town* and *this* particular small town nestled in the Adirondacks and invites the audience to take on the role of community members of both the play and the community gathered at the theater. The audience was made up of local residents, summer vacationers,

transplants, and travelers from all over the world, yet all were made to feel at home, as if we were all residents of that universal place that is *Our Town*. Some of the liveliness before the show can be attributed to the unique staging of the production. The audience already knew from the theater's promotions that Acts 1 and 2 would take place inside the theater and Act 3 would be staged in the Pine Ridge Cemetery directly behind the theater "to experience the final scene," as the director's program note asserts. The unique staging also explained the 6 p.m. curtain time: the performance would need to conclude before sunset.

As I took my seat in the theater, both the program and the music set a tone of reverence. The slim playbill resembled a funerary "celebration of life" program, a subtle foreshadowing of Act 3. Andy Evan Cohen's sound design led the audience into the play with sweeping instrumentals and the sounds of birds singing. In the theater we can imagine it to be whatever time or season we are told; we understand that it is only a simulation of life, functioning on suggestion and metonymy. The physical world of Grover's Corners is evidence of this substitution and allusion—ladders for second-floor bedroom windows, suspended arches for doorways, and tables and chairs stand in for entire homes. Natalie Eslami's architectural set design for the small stage perfectly complemented Wilder's simple metatheatrical world. Her use of metonymy went farther than the required practical necessities, utilizing picture frames to allude to portraits of family members or family memories preserved and framed on the walls of every home in town. The stained glass image of the town under the starry night sky (Fig. 1) not only presented a fuller picture, but also suggested that the image itself hung in a holy space (perhaps a church? or a theater?). I was also struck by the idea that the entire life of a town could be contained in one image (and one play). A series of muslin markers, echoing shapes of buildings from the stained glass, peppered the upstage wall and illuminated during the evening scenes to suggest the rest of the town, while also foreshadowing the cemetery to come in Act 3.

We were introduced to Grover's Corners, its layout and its residents guided by the Stage Manager, performed warmly and flawlessly by Tyler Nye. He was a charming and kind soul, exuding a sense of ageless wisdom: part stage manager, part minister, part dear family friend (Fig. 2). We trusted him implicitly as our guide, but also, like any good stage manager, he was conscious of the time. When Nye interrupted the story, we were reminded gently by him and the other actors that these characters were reenacting moments from their lives for us, building a story of a life, of a town, to help us understand Wilder's message: "Life is fleeting. Take time to really see and be present for one another."



FIG. 1 The wedding scene in Act 2. Photo Credit: Burdette Parks, courtesy of Pendragon Theatre.



FIG. 2 Tyler Nye as the Stage Manager. Photo Credit: Burdette Parks, courtesy of Pendragon Theatre.

Some may view *Our Town* as a sentimental exercise, merely longing for a time when life was easier; however, Jesse Jou's direction framed the entire

production around nostalgia, that painful yearning to return home, an aching for the moments we can never return to, but can only revisit or recall out of time. Wilder's play romanticizes nostalgia and Jou asked us to question what we were seeing. In observing the characters as they replay portions of our lives, we witnessed that they, just like us, were more present for their memories than they were for the moment they shared with another person.

The strong ensemble performances consistently juxtaposed the appearance of everyday joy with this aching for what is not there. Rachel Botchan's Mrs. Gibbs seemed to take utter delight in the everydayness of her chickens, but then revealed a deeper, richer, and even more effervescent interior life as she confided in Mrs. Webb (Keelie Sheridan) about her legacy and her longing to visit Paris, dreaming of a life that did not yet and would not ever exist. We were reminded during Dr. Gibbs's (SJ Hannah) recollection of his youthful fear of running out of things to say to his wife that when we recall a memory, we are reliving that past moment, remembering it (putting it back in the body) and as a result we are not present for the people with whom we are sharing it. We savor the experience of the recollection instead of the experience of sharing it and connecting to dear ones in the present moment. Nearly every character was portrayed with an abundance of joy and, at times, a youthful exuberance regardless of the character's age. Professor Willard (Carl Jaynes) took immense pleasure in regaling the audience with his knowledge, exuberantly exclaiming "anthropological data!" much to the delight of the audience. Every performance of the ensemble fit beautifully in this almost lilting world. Every character seemed to fit neatly into the town, except of course for Simon Stimson, whose cynicism and sadness were palpable in Anthony Lopez's performance.

The evening I attended, Lopez portrayed the additional role of Howie Newsome. His characterization, pantomime, and coordinated timing with the sound cues of the horse and clinking of milk bottles were impeccable. Had we not been informed of the change in performer for Newsome, the audience would have been none the wiser. Kudos as well must also go out to the production stage manager (Courtney Knysch) for her spot-on timing, without which the illusion would have been broken. Sound design offered us a refined version of the sounds of everyday life and the ambient sounds that make up a world. These cues reminded the audience of a tangible world, but within the walls of the theater they were merely alluded to, inviting the audience to imagine what Howie's horse looks like, how heavy the milk bottles were, or how hard early morning newspapers struck the front porches of the neighborhood.

The recreated present moments the characters offer the audience are also full of other things that we do not wish to re-experience—all of the distractions,

doubts, judgments, and anxieties we carry with us as humans—were made all the more poignant by Jou’s juxtaposition between what happened versus what was remembered. For example, Mrs. Webb misses or avoids Howie Newsome’s polite hint that his wife may not be able to attend the wedding because they must work, that they do not have the same privileges as the families they deliver milk to. As the audience we hear his words and through Jou’s staging, we see that Newsome says he will try to make it, but he doesn’t stop working or moving, demonstrating to us that his labor has no respite. Mrs. Webb, too, is moving through the labor of her day, not able to take time to hear what he is repeatedly saying to her.

Acts 1 and 2 were staged in the theater, utilizing all the design and technical elements available in such a space. Act 3 then moved to the Pine Ridge Cemetery located directly behind the theater. The audience was guided by the ushers through a garden with trees draped with faerie lights in an archway into the cemetery. There was no mistaking that the performance was now located in a very real, very locally historic cemetery. There were some folding chairs set up near Emily’s “grave,” but most audience members stood, much like they might do at an actual funeral. The south end of the lower area of the cemetery where Act 3 was staged was intended for newer graves, fitting for Emily’s funeral. The upper area of the cemetery directly behind the actors held the more historic graves of the former residents of the community. The other deceased characters were seated in chairs interspersed across the playing area. The muslin markers from the upstage wall of the theater were brought outside to serve as headstones for the deceased characters, tying the stage picture of Acts 1 and 2 into the immersive design of Act 3. The bucolic ridge rising to the west of the audience was peppered with graves leading the eye up to the sunset and clouds, completing the circle between the metonymic headstone designs in the theater and the actual headstones in the cemetery.

Once we stepped into the cemetery, we were no longer in a space of simulation or suggestion. We were asked to move from passive audience members bearing witness in a simulated theater space to active participants immersed in all the layers of meaning of a very real location, the story that was being performed, and also our own experiences of funerals, loss, and grief. All of those threads were woven into the performance in the cemetery. Understanding that we were entering hallowed ground and were advised to stay on the path to avoid stepping on graves, the audience took on the role of funeral attendees, performing the expected solemnity when we gather to grieve in this space. Some audience members took on their new role with ease and others worked through their discomfort with humor. While there were some seats, most of the

audience stood through the final act of the play, somewhere between standing room only and paying our respects. The cast made their way into the cemetery along a footpath and entered behind the audience much like pall bearers and grieving family and friends might do.

While we as the audience experienced the beauty of the hillside and the sunset, surrounded by actual headstones with local family names, we were brought face to face with the exact schism between nostalgia and the present moment. Much like the theater, our memory filters out the minutiae and what does not fit into the story we wish to tell about our lives. In the theater, we witness the simulation of life from a point of comfort: the recorded sounds of birds, lighting that allows actors to be clearly seen, a cushioned seat, and a clear view of the stage. No longer in the theater but standing in a cemetery with gnats buzzing, a chill in the late summer air, and the light fading towards sunset, we were confronted with a flurry of concerns and distractions that removed us from the present moment.

While watching Emily learn that existence was not what she believed it to be, I became very cognizant of the myriad of distractions pulling at my attention and was struck by the thought that remembering is more appealing than the reality of the moment for both the inhabitants of Grover's Corners and the audience in Saranac Lake. Acts 1 and 2 repeatedly tapped into our collective sense of memory; sounds of birds and the clip clop of Bessie's hooves evoked memories of "birds" and "horse"—their essence, but not their reality. The play is a condensation of life; the Stage Manager moves us through the significant moments in the lives of two families and in particular that of Emily. Act 3 is not a condensation; it asks audience members to sit or stand in discomfort with the present moment, between nostalgia and letting go. The experience in Pine Ridge Cemetery was something larger than simply watching the final act of *Our Town*, larger than an "immersive" experience of watching a play in a cemetery. We were asked to confront the discomfort of mortality and to reflect on the times in our own lives when we were too consumed with the worries of the day to be present, truly present with and for others.

*Our Town* premiered eighty-five years ago with no notion of how the world would change or how technology would so deeply impact and alter our sense of connection. We are more connected and yet more disconnected than ever. There have been eighty-five years of theater artists and audiences discovering and rediscovering this quintessential American play about the human experience. There have been eighty-five years of American society fervently striving towards happiness and, all the while, Wilder's words have gently asked us to see that happiness exists only in the present moment of our everyday lives.

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