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# Our Town: good cast but set is debilitating

By Michael Christ

I managed to catch the preview performance of the Theatre Department's production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* before it began its run which ends this Saturday. A critic is not usually welcomed at a preview because the director is busy tidying-up loose ends he wants nobody to know about. If a critic insists on attending he must ignore the few mismanaged lighting cues and address himself to the heart of the matter.

At the heart of the Wilder's play is the story of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire: a story of any small, unambitious town and the lives and the loves of the people who populate it. Wilder's observances betray a homespun philosophy - in the school of Emerson, Whitman, and other American writers - a Taoist view of life acquired honestly from the author's youthful travels in China. In a flowing, meditative manner, birth, childhood, marriage, and death follow in succession, as the seasons of life unfold in Grover's Corners.

*Our Town* offers non-denominational spirituality to us all, it is a play of warmth and dignity. I feel that this has been responsible for instilling the third year performance class with a sense of purpose not usually apparent in a student production.

Ordinarily, I find work by young actors embarrassingly narcissistic. There is so much energy devoted to the furtherance of the individual's ego that, very often, the playwright is ill-served. Young actors are mildly annoying in Shakespearean and other bombastic modes of drama and positively irritating in comedy where perhaps they feel they must compete with the playwright, who like themselves, is in the process of showing himself to be very clever indeed.

There is no doubt that serious drama possessing humanity and spirituality - and freed from the taint of outmoded doctrines - evokes the best from young actors. In my years at York, no cast has ever shown as

much depth in talent. No cast has been as proficient in voice in the third year. No cast has been as polished in the essentials of building the character.

John Gray's accomplishment with his actors does not save the play from criticism. For a play which is a meditation on the fleeting, transient nature of life, the pace is ponderous and self-important. For a play which is a comment on the universal, the inclusion of a very parochial depreciating joke about Canada was a bad idea on many levels. I, for one, am very tired of people attaching the equivalent of maple leafs on every foreign play performed in Canada. We don't paint maple leafs on Picasso's and we don't interrupt a Mozart symphony with a few strains of *O Canada*.

Thornton Wilder's stage directions made it fairly clear that his play is to be performed on a bare stage. A bare stage set only with the scenery of one's imagination says an inexhaustible number of things as a view of life. The 'unset' in this production, though scant, manages to say, 'life is like a clay pit' - this represents a significant departure from the author's intent.

Someone in the theatre department is teaching, 'The stage design must be a neutral frame for the actors.' The student designers have taken this idea to the extreme by using every neutral colour in the artist's palette to create a depressing and emotionally debilitating experience for the audience.

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