

Ritualized inertia in small town America

Thorton Wilder's mini-classic *Our Town* reviewed by Kwame Dawes

Director: Robbie O'Neill . Design: Danny Silk . Producer: Marcel Brideau . Supervising Professor: Kathleen Scherf.

A

study of why the Thornton Wilder

play *Our Town* has been so widely produced in North America should reveal a great deal about the peculiar North American fixation with the staid and conservative world that has come to be known as "small town America." The answers may help us appreciate the mythic fascination with this frontier-like world of middle America.

Set in New Hampshire, the home, interestingly of the virtually extinct Shakers sect (whose close-knit community reminds this writer of "Our Town"), *Our Town* is a very uncomplicated play about what Wilder assumes to have been life in a small American town at the turn of the century. In three acts we are taken through the three stages of life as perceived by conservative America - birth, marriage and death. The characters are cartoon-like and painfully dull and inconsequential. They do very little that surprises the village or the viewer for that matter. Nothing exceptionally interesting happens in the town; life simply goes on in that inexorable fashion that is trustworthy, predictable, and essentially dull.

"Our Town" is a segregated community that never deals with (or is apparently never forced to deal with) its attitudes to race. The Polish people - foreigners who are reported to be taking over the community - are heard of in the first act and never heard of again. The villagers are far more concerned with gossiping about the clergy man who has a problem with the bottle and the... well there is little else of a scandalous nature in the little quaint town.

Rituals of family life: several hundred thousand meals cooked by a wife all her life, marriage at an early age, death at child birth and the attendant funeral, courtship and rugged but long-lasting marriages, are all granted ample attention in the piece. Wilder is unrelenting in his portrayal of the boredom and repetition of the life of the village.

To the credit of the cast and crew of this production, the same pattern of repeated images was maintained throughout the piece. Robbie O'Neill direction entailed the establishment of a series of ritualistic patterns of behaviour which were repeated with careful detail throughout the production. The effect was deadening and without the intelligent and witty playing of a few of the actors in the

company, this sense of inertia would have completely overwhelmed the production. However, O'Neill's direction was extremely tidy and at moments reflected a tremendous amount of hard work.

There were funny moments in the production. The old professor's speech about the history of the town, while lacking in weight and volume, was handled with a clever piece of caricature and satire by the actor Willie Hodgson. Paula Dawson who played one of the mothers in the piece has an extremely expressive

face and her delivery and timing were at times quite impressive. Her ability to gain weight through the creation of a portly gait

which was appropriate for the part. Especially competent was Frank Findlay who played the role of narrator (stagemanager). Granted a more central role than other productions of the play have given to this character, the young actor handle the rapport with the audience and the multiplicity of character roles played with skill. He shifted from preacher, to old lady, to soda fountain owner with agility and control.

The final scene in the graveyard was very evocative in conveying a sense of eeriness and death. The smoke effect, while being visually appealing almost introduced a touch of burlesque when the audience members began coughing uncon-

in the expressions; the startling contrast between the living and the dead; and the powerful moment in which the dead attempted to distance themselves from the grieving living.

Sadly, the tone that was appropriate for the final scene was often apparent in some of the earlier scenes. One had the feeling that the actors had not had a chance to relax and enjoy the play. Their seriousness even during moments that demanded a certain playfulness and exuberance, drained the play of much of its limited vibrancy. Arguably, the rigidity of the blocking, along with the flatness of characterization were merely an inevitable consequence of doing a script that at no point attempts to draw the audience into the unpredictability of human existence. *Our Town* is a boring town and one couldn't help feeling a certain sense of relief that this is merely the romanticized or satirized (?) interpretation of small town life.

However, one must not blame the cast and crew of the production for what is essentially a script problem. Despite its limitations, the play has a fairly large cast and the sparse style demands studied and carefully rehearsed techniques of mime, movement and some singing. These are important tools to be learnt by budding actors. As this is the work of a credit course in drama at UNB (English 2140), there is no question that the decision to stage this play was a good one.

If it is of any consolation, I overheard an audience member grant far greater praise to the show than my review has done. The chap, when asked about the show during the second intermission said: "Well, normally I am completely bored out of my skull after an hour of theatre, and yet I am still watching this piece and wide awake. Heck, I even laughed...must be alright." Yes, it was alright.

"Well, normally I am completely bored out of my skull after an hour of theatre, and yet I am still watching this piece and wide awake. Heck, I even laughed...must be alright."



Rich textures and ritualized performance in Thornton Wilde's *Our Town* staged by English 2140 at Memorial Hall.

and to assume the controlled and stable manners of a forty-something year old mother was commendable. In this regard, she outshone some of her fellow actors in the production. The young female protagonist of the piece, played by Heidi Killoran while being somewhat slow on her cues and managed to achieve a quality of innocence

trollably as the smoke filled their lungs. But the direction here was imaginative - the still and whitened faces of the dead; the monotone emotionless

MENS LEVI'S RED TAB JEANS

Assorted Styles

\$39.98

Our Everyday Low Price...Every day!

CAPITAL

MEN'S & BOY'S WEAR

362 Queen Street

455-7062

A&A

Fredericton Mall & Kings Place
Locations Only

In Stock

Northern Pikes "Snow In June"

\$8.99 \$17.99

A & A, Fredericton Mall & Kings Place Locations Only.

Black Crows "Shake Your Money Maker"

8.99 17.99

A & A, Fredericton Mall & Kings Place Locations Only.

Tragically Hip "Road Apples"

8.99 16.99

A & A, Fredericton Mall & Kings Place Locations Only.

Enigma "MCMXC a.D."

9.99 17.99

A & A, Fredericton Mall & Kings Place Locations Only.

Great White "Hooked"

9.99 16.99

A & A, Fredericton Mall & Kings Place Locations Only.

Student Bonus Coupon

20% OFF any reg. priced C.D.

Offer Expires April 6/91. While Quantities Last.
A & A, Fredericton Mall & Kings Place Locations Only.