

# OuR ToWN

# Afterword



## Overview

Thornton Wilder, Pulitzer Prize-winning, internationally acclaimed novelist, entered the decade of the 1930s determined to achieve still another great distinction: playwright in full Broadway standing. He appeared to have achieved this dream on Friday evening, February 4, 1938, at Henry Miller's Theatre on Forty-third Street, when Frank Craven, the admired character actor, played the part of the Stage Manager in the premiere of *Our Town*, directed and produced by the legendary Jed Harris. The play concluded with the language used in this production: "They're resting in Grover's Corners. Tomorrow's going to be another day. Good night to you, too. Good night. Get a good rest." After a short, stunned silence, broken by audible snuffles in the house, the audience offered an ovation.

The next day, the phone rang off the hook with good news at the author's home ninety miles away in Hamden, Connecticut. A particularly informative call came from

Wilder's greatest actor friend, Ruth Gordon, then starring as Nora in Wilder's translation of Ibsen's *Doll's House*, also playing on Broadway and also directed by Harris. (It is forgotten that Wilder had two shows running in New York City at the same time in 1938.) Wilder reported the highlights of Gordon's call (especially the detail about tears in the eyes of a Hollywood mogul) to Dwight Dana, his attorney, confidant, and keeper of Wilder's exchequer during the Great Depression. This letter is the earliest written record of the playwright's reaction to a theatrical opening that would have a defining influence on his reputation ever after. "Dear Dwight," he began:

Funny thing's happened.

Ruth phoned down. It's already broken a house record.

In spite of the mixed reviews when the box-office opened Saturday morning there were 26 people in line; the line continued all day, and the police had to close it for ten minutes so that the audience could get into the matinee; and that \$6,500 was taken in on that day—the two performances and the advanced sale.

Imagine that!

Friday night both Sam Goldwyn and Bea Lillie were seen to be weeping. Honest! . . .

Isn't it astonishing, and fun and exhausting?

*Our Town* did indeed receive mixed reviews. Negative comments focused on whether it was "dramatic" enough to be called a play or merely what Robert Benchley in *The New Yorker* saw as "so much ersatz." John Gassner in *One Act*

*Play Magazine* dismissed the play as “devoid of developed situations” and thus much less than “a major dramatic experience,” and George Jean Nathan later called it “a stunt.” *Time* thought that Wilder’s effective use of “Chinese methods gives ten times as much ‘theatre’ as conventional scenery could give,” but nevertheless found the third act full of disappointing “mysticism and high-flown speculation.” The *New Masses*, the left-wing journal, whose editor, Michael Gold, had famously trashed Wilder’s fiction earlier in the decade, tipped its hat slightly to the work while delivering a salvo: “It is an exasperating play, hideous in its basic idea and beautiful in its writing, acting and staging.” (“Hideous” was the playwright’s favorable treatment of middle-class, bourgeois values and lives.)

But where it really mattered, in such papers as the *Herald-Tribune*, the *World-Telegram*, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, and even in the tabloid *Sunday Mirror*, the play’s staging, acting, directing, and themes evoked powerful adjectives and praise. It was “beautiful,” “touching,” “one of the great plays of our day,” “magnificent.” Robert Colman in the *Mirror* pulled out all stops, proclaiming it “worthy of an honored place in any anthology of the American drama,” as soon it would be, starting in 1940. Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times*, the first among equals in influence, wrote a review of poetic intensity, hailing Wilder and Harris for a play that “transmuted the simple events of human life into universal reverie,” and that contained nothing less than “a fragment of the immortal truth.”

By February 14, box-office sales having held up well enough to justify moving the play to its permanent home, the Morosco Theater, Wilder felt comfortable enough to

write to his friend Lady Sibyl Colfax in London: “Lord! I can’t believe it myself. It’s the hit of the town. Almost everybody’s got some reservations against it (including myself) but everybody’s discussing it and going to see it.”

The drama that made even Sam Goldwyn cry appears as “M Marries N” in a list of ideas for plays penned July 2, 1935. This precise language—is it possibly the *oldest* in the play?—survives in the final version, at the the end of Act II, when the Stage Manager, as minister, says: “M. . . . marries N. . . . millions of them.” This “alphabet” marriage appears less than two weeks after Wilder encountered, at his brother’s wedding in New Jersey, the custom of the groom not seeing his bride on the wedding day until they meet at the church. This fact has always made *Our Town* an unusually personal (and tearful) experience for his family.

Thanks to records, we know that “M Marries N” evolved into “Our Village” in 1936, and into “Our Town” by 1937. Wilder was a writer who could not do serious writing in familiar settings. It is no surprise, therefore, that *Our Town*’s creative journey encompassed transatlantic streamers; writing tables in hotels and hideaways in such varied places as the Caribbean island of St. Lucia (October 1936) and the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire (June 1937); and such addresses in Switzerland in the fall of 1937 as Zurich, St. Moritz, Sils-Maria, Sils-Baselgia, Ascona, and Ruschlikon. Of these, the Veltin Studio at the MacDowell Colony and especially a room in the Hotel Belvoir in Ruschlikon (a small village outside Zurich—eight francs a day, including breakfast and lunch) were key locations where scenes and acts were written, discarded, and revised. And rain

or shine, there was one other central ingredient in a Wilder writing day—a long walk. Those taken in the Peterborough and Lake Sunapee areas of New Hampshire, starting in 1923, set the stage in his mind for *Our Town*. Shortly after the play opened, Wilder quantified his walks in an interview: “At a rough guess, one day’s walk is productive of one fifteen-minute scene. Everything I’ve ever done has come into being that way and I don’t think I could work out an entire play or novel at a desk now if I tried.”

The following excerpts from Wilder’s letters open helpful windows on the author’s progress during the key summer months of 1937. As they indicate, he was, in this period, working on several plays at once. (A reading below touches on the importance of Wilder’s one-act plays of 1931 as the tool chest he used to construct *Our Town*, among them *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha*.)

*June 24 from the MacDowell Colony to Alexander Woollcott.* My darts thrown at perfection are being feathered and pointed in many tranquil hours in these woods. Three of them are being assembled at once. None are ready to leave behind me when I sail. I always think of Our Village as yours. It is intended to give you pleasure. The Happy Journey [to Trenton and Camden] is no longer part of it. The last act in the cemetery will be prodigious. [*Our Town* is dedicated to Woollcott, the critic and broadcaster. He included *The Happy Journey* in the 1935 edition of his influential *Woollcott Reader*.]

*September 4 from Zurich to his family.* I’ve begun the Second Act of “Our Town.” It’ll be awful hard to com-

bine all the things, general and particular, that one would wish to say about love and marriage,—combine them in one long flowing musical curve. . . . And back into the First Act go some preparatory speeches: Amy “Mama, am I . . . am I nice lookin’?” Mother “Oh, go-on-with-you. All my children got good features. I’d be ashamed if they hadn’t.” [Amy was an earlier name for Emily.]

*September 6 to Sibyl Colfax from Zurich.* A scene that must not be morbid though it plunges deep in the unconfessed structure of the mind. The bride seems never to have seen the groom before, is terrified, fears him, appeals to the audience for help, draws her father over to the proscenium pillar, and asks him to run away with her to the South Sea, to anywhere. He too is haunted; over her head tells the audience that no girl should be married, that there is no anxious state in the world crueller than that of a young wife . . . then passes his hand over his forehead and trembling, reassures his daughter and leads her back to the clergyman.

*September 22 to family from Sils-Baselgia.* Wonderful place.

The great ghost of Nietzsche. . . . Last night my play got such an influx of new ideas that now it’s the most beautiful play you can imagine.

*September 25 to Sibyl Colfax from Zurich.* It’s raining and the pantomime of the funeral goes on over in a far corner of the stage and there are ten umbrellas up.

Every act has hymn-singing in it—the choir practice, the wedding, the funeral. And when the city-dwelling Americans get those homely ur-American hymns going through them,—Just as the negro spirituals bathed and supported “Green pastures.”

Yes, the last act has lots of cold iron and grasping-the-nettle in it, but Sils-Maria gave it an ultimate Affirming Ring.

*October 1 to Sibyl Colfax from Ruschlikon.* I’m behind schedule. I had hoped on October first to be able to jump to Play No #2.

But it doesn’t matter: “Our Town’s” First and Second Acts are all fair-copied and I think “set.” And that difficult cactus-spined third is moving into place every day.

Lord! What I got myself in for. A theologico-metaphysico-transcription from the Purgatorio with panels of American rural genre-stuff.

Isn’t it awful?

While they are waiting there to have the Earth slip from them, does Dante’s vesperal angel make its appearance?

Can we see by the turning of their heads, by a *recueillement* that Something has come?

First of all: do I believe it?

*October 28 to family from Ruschlikon.* Jed [Harris] telephoned from London for 20 minutes the other night. He wants to know if “Our Town” would be a good play for the Xmas season in New York. Would it?!! And guess

who might act the lanky tooth-picking stage-manager? Sinclair Lewis! He's been plaguing Jed to let him act for a long time; and there's a part for his famous New England parlor-trick monologues. Don't tell anybody anything about it. [Lewis played the Stage Manager later in summer stock.]

*November 24 to Amy Wertheimer from Paris.* I was summoned by Jed Harris to Paris and read him "Our Town"—a New Hampshire village explored by the techniques of Chinese Drama and of Pullman Car Hiawatha. He was very enthusiastic and hurried home to America to put it on for the Xmas season. . . . I follow soon for rehearsals.

Wilder did not, in fact, finish *Our Town* in Europe, and no walks are recorded in the last two places associated with the completion of the acting script. To assure that end *and* get publicity for it, Harris snatched Wilder off the dock when he arrived home on the *Queen Mary* and imprisoned him on Long Island. (To quote one headline: WILDER LOCKED UP TILL HE FINISHES THAT PLAY OF HIS.) The prison, a cottage on Long Island in the swanky Cold Spring Harbor area, came with amenities, including cook and butler and much chintz.

More spartan was the spot where Wilder finally completed the acting script on November 19, only a few days before rehearsals began: the Columbia University Club on Forty-third Street, three blocks from Broadway. Writing to Dwight Dana, he coupled this good news with a distressing report that he had not yet signed a play contract with Jed Harris, with whom he was "in such a mess of friendship-collaboration

sentiment . . . and with a sense of sense of guilt about the unfinished condition of the play that I can't pull myself together to insist." But what of *Our Town's* prospects? Wilder reported that Frank Craven (who had a contract) thought it "a possibility that the play will be a smashing success." This feeling built among the cast and the few people admitted to observe rehearsals (they predicted "big things"), although Wilder was almost immediately discouraged by some of Harris's stage directions, and worst of all, his "tasteless additions" to Wilder's script. These irritations soon grew into a violent quarrel that poisoned their relationship.

*Our Town's* route to Broadway wound through Princeton and Boston. The premiere was a single performance at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey, on January 22, 1938. The play drew a ferociously negative review in *Variety* ("it will probably go down as the season's most extravagant waste of fine talent"), but others saw it the way Wilder did when he wrote to Dana:

The performance at Princeton was an undoubted success. The large theatre was sold out with standees. Take was 1900 dollars; Audience swept by laughter often; astonishment; and lots of tears; long applause at the end by an audience that did not move from its seats.

Boston was in some ways a very different story. *Our Town* arrived there for a scheduled two-week run at the Wilbur Theater starting Tuesday, January 25. It is popularly believed that the Boston critics panned the play. In *Fanfare* (1957), the legendary stage publicist Richard Maney paints this standard story as only a New Yorker can: "[The play's]

reception was so chilly and attendance so wretched that the two-week engagement was pared to one. The American Athens wanted no truck with a play without scenery. To Beacon Hill Brahmins, such an omission was as confusing as tackling a grapefruit without a spoon.”

Business was terrible at the Wilbur in Boston in 1938, as it was in other theaters in that especially difficult Great Depression year. But the reviews were not all pans. Wilder described them as “cautious but not unfavorable.” Critics saw much to like in the play, but they were perplexed and mystified by its avant-garde features, as this lead from an Associated Press story suggests: SPEECH-MAKING BY ‘CORPSES’ UNUSUAL FEATURE. Mordaunt Hall of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, a prominent voice, found the play “curious,” but noted that it was “roundly applauded by last night’s gathering.” A *New York Times* piece painted a similar picture—a “puzzled” audience but one that nevertheless at the end “applauded unashamedly a touching, delicately written, warmly acted play that bears a distant resemblance in its technique to Chinese or Greek methods translated into New England terms.”

In Boston, *Our Town* drew perhaps the most extraordinary headline in its history. In what Wilder described as a “bomb dropped on the cast,” the day before the Boston opening Harris’s companion, the actress Rosamond Pinchot, committed suicide at her home outside New York. The tragedy was reported on page 1 in the *Boston Post* January 25:

LINK SUICIDE TO NEW SHOW HERE  
Rosamond Pinchot Said to Have Been Brooding  
Over Failure to Win Part in “Our Town”

Whatever the differences between the sizes of the houses, the Princeton and Boston productions shared one similarity—tears. Now disturbed about the audience’s reaction to the play, Wilder wrote to Sibyl Colfax:

Audiences heavily papered. Laughed and cried. The wife of the Governor of Mass took it on her self to telephone the box-office that the last act was too sad. She was right. Such sobbing and nose-blowing you never heard. Matinee audience, mostly women, emerged red-eyed, swollen faced, and mascara-stained. I never meant that; and direction is responsible for much of it; Jed is now wildly trying to sweeten and water-down the text.

Shaken by Pinchot’s death, the poor attendance, and critics who refused to leap with excitement, and losing significant money, Harris faced three options for a drama in which he had complete faith: close it (which he prepared to do); withdraw it for further work and try it out in another city (an idea apparently entertained, however briefly, with New Haven in mind); or arrange an earlier-than-planned New York opening. Harris chose the last, threw the cast into four days of rehearsals, and opened the play temporarily at Henry Miller’s Theatre on Friday, February 4. Said to have tipped the balance toward that option were the opinions of several influential figures who came from New York to see the play, among them the playwright Marc Connelly. He declared *Our Town* “magnificent,” and ready for Broadway. Wilder, now suffering physical symptoms of distress from the tension of it all, wrote Sibyl Colfax as rehearsals began in New York: “Marc [Connelly] and other have sent the rumors around

N.Y. that Friday night will be one exciting occasion. Jed is charging \$5.50 top, which is insane.”

As noted, the *Our Town* opening was an exciting occasion. The original Broadway production did not, however, break records. Brooks Atkinson would recall in 1973 that had it not received the Pulitzer Prize in May 1938, four months into the run, “it might have relapsed into the yawning obscurity of those innumerable Broadway plays that never really succeeded.” To keep the production going during the difficult hot summer months, Wilder accepted royalty cuts that reached 50 percent. Business improved somewhat when he played the part of the Stage Manager for two weeks in September. The job earned him respectable kudos in the press. He also enjoyed himself, although the experience left him “alternately exhausted and dizzy.”

On November 19, slightly more than ten months into the run, Harris closed *Our Town* in New York after 336 performances and took it out on what was projected to be a lengthy national tour. Three months and twelve cities later, on February 11, 1939, the tour ended abruptly in Chicago. Thomas Coley, an original cast member, recalled the reason in a memoir: “Jed noticed that Frank Craven was earning more each week than he, the producer-director. He came out to persuade Mr. Craven to reduce his percentage of the gross. They argued. Jed lost. In a rage, he closed the play, thus cutting off the nose to spite his face, and, incidentally, the noses of forty-seven actors plus the crew.”

Although *Our Town* had a less than record-breaking launch, its subsequent history, measured in amateur and stock productions, earned it the “smashing success” that

Craven had predicted on the eve of rehearsals. And it all happened quite quickly.

The play's amateur and stock rights, for example, became available for the first time on April 19, 1939. By December 31, 1940, the play (handled by Samuel French) had been performed on amateur stages in no fewer than 795 communities. The figure represented every state of the Union save one (Rhode Island), as well as the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and four Canadian provinces. This laid the foundation for the *Our Town* rule of thumb ever since: It is performed at least once each night somewhere in this country. Behind these figures lies a play that has marvelous parts for young people, is not expensive to mount, is glorious to teach, and treats life, death, and love in such an immediate fashion as to leave indelible and typically nostalgic impressions on generations of students.

*Our Town* was also a hit from the beginning with stock companies. Through May 1944 it had already been performed forty-three times, principally in the era's summer theaters in New England and the mid-Atlantic states. Five of these productions featured Wilder as the Stage Manager. Since World War II, the pattern has continued, now tied to the growth of American regional theaters in the postwar period. Between 1970 and 1999, for example, the play was performed ninety-one times in professional stock and regional theaters across the country, and it has already been performed another sixteen times so far in the new century. The Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, Wilder's home city, mounted the play's fiftieth-anniversary production, starring Hal Holbrook. Another landmark production occurred in 1976, at the Williamstown Summer Festival, when Geraldine Fitzgerald bowed as the first woman to play the Stage Manager.

Marc Connelly, one of the saviors of the play when it stumbled in Boston, played the Stage Manager when *Our Town* had its first major New York revival in 1944, a production Jed Harris directed. There have been four revivals since, the last two being Lincoln Center's Tony Award-winning production starring Spalding Gray in 1988 and the Westport Country Playhouse's successful production starring Paul Newman in 2002. These first-class and/or stock productions routinely provide the opportunity for audiences, critics, and artists to explore the play and its artistry in a fresh way. The findings can be revelatory—witness playwright Lanford Wilson writing about the fiftieth-anniversary production in 1987 in the *New York Times*: “And where the hell did [Wilder] get the reputation for being soft? Let's agree never to say that again. Let's not be blinded by the homey cute surface from the fact that ‘Our Town’ is a deadly cynical and acidly accurate play.” After September 11, theaters saw in it what Richard Hamburger at the Dallas Theater Center spoke of as a reassuring “sense of continuity and community.”

*Our Town* has also been an international success story, beginning with the first productions in 1938 in the Scandinavian countries. Isabel Wilder's letter to her brother Amos in the Readings that follow opens a small window onto a large story, itself a reminder that the play's themes, seemingly so American, have universal appeal. For example, since 1960, *Unsere kleine stadt* has been produced in at least twenty-two languages in twenty-seven countries, outside of Germany, and translated and almost certainly performed in more. (Precise figures can be hard to come by in this chapter of *Our Town*'s history.) Germany has always been a special case for this play as well as Wilder's other works. Between 1950 and

1970, *Our Town* was produced professionally eighty times in Germany; although it is done less often now, it continues to be performed and widely read in schools. It says much about the drama's planetary appeal and vision that the cover of the new German paperback edition depicts a major metropolis.

Despite many requests, Wilder did not permit *Our Town* to be fashioned into a live musical. But he was open to other options. Forgotten is the play's extensive radio history, launched in March 1938 with a segment of *The Kate Smith Hour* (then the nation's most popular radio show) and including a six-month Camel Caravan series during World War II, and Wilder's own appearance in a *Theatre Guild on the Air* broadcast in September 1946. With one notable exception the play's early record in television is also forgotten. The exception is the ninety-minute musical version in 1955 starring Frank Sinatra, remembered because of the continuing popularity of the award-winning Sammy Cahn–James Van Heusen song “Love and Marriage.” In 1977, Hal Holbrook played the lead role in an admired two-hour NBC broadcast, a tradition of televising the “straight play” that the productions with Spalding Gray and Paul Newman have built upon since.

Thanks to cable television, movie cassettes, and DVD, the *Our Town* movie released by Sol Lesser at a huge celebration in Boston in May 1940 continues to have a public presence. (This time, *Our Town* was a success in that city.) Wilder, who had credentials as a screenwriter, was not initially interested in any participation in the script. But to protect his increasingly valuable property, he became deeply involved in it, including the famous decision to let Emily live (she dies only in a dream). He expressed his view on the matter this way in

a letter to Lesser (thereby providing countless students with a term-paper subject):

I've always thought [Emily should live]. In a movie you see the people so close to that a different relation is established. In the theatre they are halfway abstractions in an allegory; in the movie they are very concrete. So in so far as the play is a Generalized Allegory she dies—we die—they die; in so far as it's a Concrete Happening it's not important that she die. Let her live—the idea will have been imparted anyway.

A month after the Broadway opening Wilder had fled to Arizona to complete *The Merchant of Yonkers*, a second play that had made the earlier trip to Switzerland. It is clear from letters that he was thinking hard about what he had learned about playwriting from his *Our Town* experience. He credited Jed Harris for much of its success, and would approach him two more times to direct new plays. (Harris passed.) But it is also clear that he never believed Harris fully grasped the deeper meaning of his play. In March 1938, from Arizona, he wrote his sister an opinion he appears never to have changed. The immediate context was that Eleanor Roosevelt had written a day earlier in her column "My Day" that the play had "depressed her beyond words."

I've now decided that on one plane *Our Town* is a very pessimistic piece. But on a higher plane it isn't. That's where Jed fell down. If you hang the planets and the years high up above the play, you can get the Reconciliation but if you don't it's crushing. Jed gypped me on

“the cosmic overtones” just where [Max] Reinhardt would be best.

Less than a year later, Reinhardt, the great German director whom Wilder had idealized since boyhood, took *Merchant* to Broadway—and failed dismally. After the war, the play was reborn as *The Matchmaker* and set a Wilder Broadway record of 486 performances, 110 more than *Our Town*. To quote Wilder (and many others): “Theater is a funny business.”

In the end, the “funny business” that Wilder sought to conquer after 1930 blessed him with great artistic and monetary success. Where *Our Town* is concerned, one can go further. Thornton Wilder had two sensational moments in his lifetime—one in fiction, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and one in drama, *Our Town*. Had he been a baseball player, they could be compared to hitting grand slams in the bottom of the ninth with his team three runs down.

Sensations cast long shadows. *Our Town*'s shadow is especially long and deep. It is the grand slam at the last out of the last game of the World Series. It says much about the author's drive and his sense of himself that the play's success did not cripple his art; Wilder was incapable of resting on laurels. He went on to write more plays and novels, including another Pulitzer Prize-winning drama and a novel that received the National Book Award, and busied himself to the day of his death with such a host of other literary deeds that he earned among the cognoscenti the reputation as a man of letters rather than only a novelist or a playwright.

But the *Our Town* shadow was long and deep—and remains so. When Wilder's turn came in 1997 to end up on a

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stamp, the artist did not hesitate to depict him against the backdrop of a New England landscape. The sun is setting and soon the village will be set against “the life of the stars.” That is where Thornton Wilder rests.

—Tappan Wilder  
Chevy Chase, Maryland

