

21st-Century Grover's Corners, With the Audience as Neighbors

By **CHARLES ISHERWOOD** FEB. 26, 2009

① Watch your toes at the wonderfully intimate production of "Our Town" that opened at the Barrow Street Theater on Thursday night. Here come Howie Newsome and his horse, Bessie, delivering the morning milk, and you may be sitting right in the middle of Main Street.

② Most regular theatergoers have probably paid at least one visit to Grover's Corners, the fictional village in New Hampshire where Thornton Wilder's classic play takes place. But you've probably never been as friendly with its citizens as you are likely to become at this modest but highly rewarding production, directed by David Cromer.

③ We temporary inhabitants number just 150 at each performance. Many could reach out and start trimming peas with Myrtle Webb, or ruffle the hair of that baseball-mad paperboy, Joe Crowell. Even if you're in the back row you can probably read the headlines in Doc Gibbs's morning paper. When the play moves to the heights of the town cemetery in the third act, a little chill may crawl up your spine. The place looks uncomfortably populated. You might even feel an inclination to check your own pulse.



"Our Town," with James McMenamin and Jennifer Grace, is being given an intimate revival at Barrow Street Theater in the West Village. Credit James Estrin/The New York Times

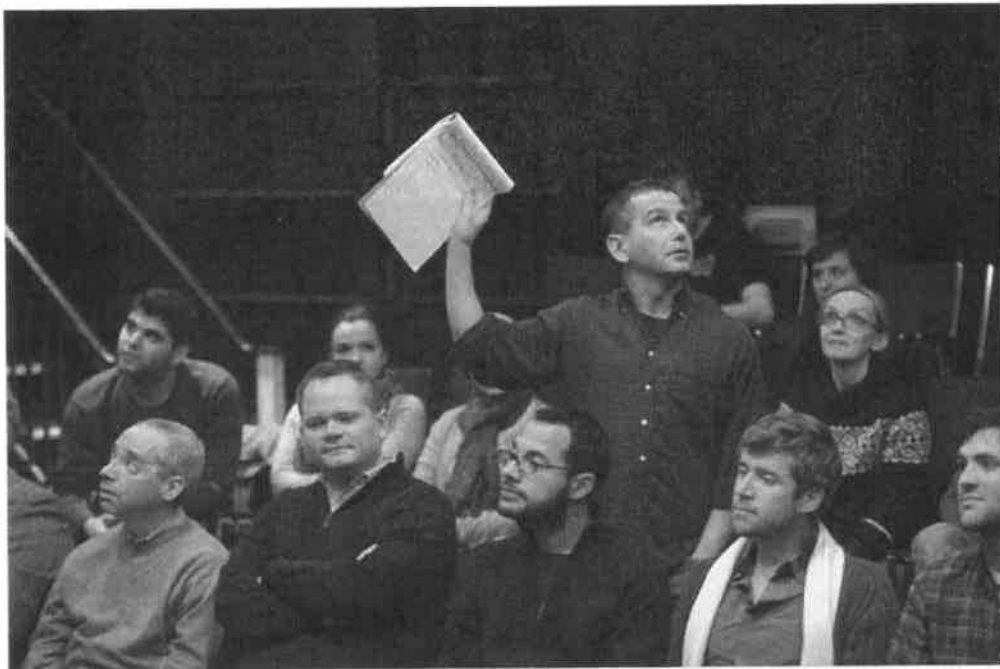
④ A sturdy staple of the American theater — professional, amateur and educational — since its Broadway debut in 1938, "Our Town" has become so familiar that its homespun surfaces can sometimes obscure its mournful philosophical depths. In Mr. Cromer's staging the artifice of theater that Wilder sought to strip away — by heightening it, paradoxically — is even further

dissolved by the immersion of the actors in the audience, or the audience in the playing space, depending on how you look at it. (Those allergic to audience participation should know that the production doesn't hold any real terrors; you will not be asked to join in choir practice.)

⑤ The folksy warmth in which the play is often saturated is scrubbed off too. The actors wear contemporary clothes that look as if they'd been pulled out of their own closets, or maybe just off the floor. They are you-and-me types, the better to blend in with, well; you and me.

⑥ About half the cast comes from the original Chicago production, also directed by Mr. Cromer, for the troupe the Hypocrites. They eschew regional accents, and while most of the performances are fine, and some are quite good, they are not blazingly brilliant. (Among my favorites were Ken Marks as a wry Mr. Webb, and James McMenamain as a touchingly open-hearted George Gibbs.)

⑦ Mr. Cromer, who plays the central role of the Stage Manager, doesn't seem to have an avuncular bone in his body. Setting the scene as the play opens, he checks the hour on his cellphone, checks his notes on a yellow pad and briskly marches us through the geography of the town and introduces its principal players in an almost brusque, offhand manner. He has the impersonal, businesslike tone of an office manager showing the new employees where the water cooler and the bathrooms are.



David Cromer, standing, plays the Stage Manager in "Our Town," which he also directed. Credit James Estrin/The New York Times

⑧ You may feel a little deflated at first. Where's the heady perfume of nostalgia? The lyric feeling for small-town life? The affectionate tone that suggests that all these quaint old rituals — the milk delivery, the courtship at the corner drugstore — are freighted with a poignancy and significance born of extinction?

9) Nowhere to be seen, and good riddance. "Our Town" is not a play about the evaporated glory of simpler yesteryears. On the contrary, it whispers to us the urgent necessity of living in the here and now — which is all anybody in Grover's Corners ever had, all anybody anywhere really has.

10) The house lights never go down in the theater, although as bright day turns to dusk and evening, the lamps that hang above both audience and actors dim accordingly. The production keeps us continually in the present moment, not obscured by the dark anonymity of spectatorship but visible to one another and to the actors. It expresses with a fine clarity the idea that theater is not, ideally, an escape from life but a means of entering into it more fully.

11) In this environment small details can stand out with a sharpness that imbues them with a piercing significance: the way George's hair holds the shape of his cap even after he has taken it off, or the empty, endless silence that gapes when the cordial Mr. Webb tries to coax the church organist with the drinking problem to head on home.



A scene from "Our Town," at the Barrow Street Theater. Credit James Estrin/The New York Times

12) The musical direction, by Jonathan Mastro, who plays that organist, Simon Stimson, is expert; the singing has a soft, rapturous pull in the small confines of the theater. When a woman in the audience had a coughing fit, I almost wanted to call in exasperation for Doc Gibbs to toss her a lozenge.

13) The impact of the play's moving third act is heightened by a surprise Mr. Cromer springs when Emily Webb (Jennifer Grace), the clever girl of Act I and nervous bride of Act II, joins her mother-in-law in the cemetery but is given a chance to relive a single day in her life. It's a beautiful feat of stagecraft that departs from tradition but transmits the essence of Wilder's philosophy with an overwhelming sensory immediacy.

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That is the sole extraordinary touch in a production that is in most ways ordinary, and I think purposely and profitably so. Wilder sought to make sacraments of simple things. In "Our Town" he cautioned us to recognize that life is both precious and ordinary, and that these two fundamental truths are intimately connected.

OUR TOWN

By Thornton Wilder; directed by David Cromer; sets by Michele Spadaro; costumes by Alison Siple; lighting by Heather Gilbert; original music and music direction by Jonathan Mastro; associate producer, Patrick Daly; production manager, B. D. White; production stage manager, Richard A. Hodge; assistant stage manager, Kate McDoniel; assistant director, Michael Page; general manager, Two Step Productions. Presented by Scott Morfee, Jean Doumanian, Tom Wirtshafter, Ted Snowdon, Eagle Productions LLC, Dena Hammerstein/Pam Pariseau, the Weinstein Company and Burnt Umber Productions. At the Barrow Street Theater, 27 Barrow Street, West Village, (212) 868-4444. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: Jeremy Beiler (Sam Craig), Robert Beitzel (Howie Newsome), Kati Brazda (Mrs. Webb), David Cromer (Stage Manager), George Demas (Constable Warren), Donna Jay Fulks (Mrs. Soames), Jennifer Grace (Emily Webb), Wilbur Edwin Henry (Professor Willard), Adam Hinkle (Joe Crowell Jr.), Ronete Levenson (Rebecca Gibbs), Ken Marks (Mr. Webb), Jonathan Mastro (Simon Stimson), James McMenamin (George Gibbs), Seamus Mulcahy (Wally Webb), Lori Myers (Mrs. Gibbs), Jay Russell (Joe Stoddard), Jeff Still (Dr. Gibbs) and Jason Yachanin (Si Crowell).

Our Town

- NYT Critics' Pick

Barrow Street Theatre

27 Barrow St.
W. Village
212-633-9632
[website](#)

Category Off Broadway, Drama, Play

Cast Robert Beitzel as Howie Newsome, Elizabeth Audley as Mrs. Soames, Kati Brazda as Mrs. Webb, Will Brill as Joe Crowell Jr., Nathan Dame as Sam Craig, Mark Hattan as Constable Warren, Jennifer Grace as Emily, Daniel Marcus as Professor Willard, Jake Horowitz as Wally Webb, Michael McKean as the 'Stage Manager' (8/3-8/22), David Cromer as "Stage Manager" (8/24-9/12) except Scott Parkinson on matinees 8/28-29, 9/4-5)

Preview February 17, 2009

Opened February 26, 2009