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# Grover's Corners Gets Sexy

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## The Appealing Dissonance of David Cromer's *Our Town*

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**D**AVID CROMER'S production of *Our Town* has been an astounding commercial hit, selling out in every city it plays. This contemporary reimagining of Thornton Wilder's classic began in Chicago with *The Hypocrites* in 2008 before moving off Broadway to the Barrow Street Theatre, where it ran for over 600 performances. Since then, Cromer has been invited to stage the production at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica and at Boston's Huntington Theatre Company. Designed for intimate spaces and played in a three-quarters round, Cromer's production is able to adhere to Wilder's famous stage directions, which call for very spare setting and props, while interpolating intriguing conceptual choices that dramatically shift the tenor of the show. Chris Jones, in his review of the original *Hypocrites* production, raved that Cromer "removes every last shred of sentimentality from the piece, replacing it with a blend of cynicism and simple human truth. But—and here's the rub—he does so without removing the vitality and sincerity. Like many great revivals . . . it's neither archly conceptual nor a subversion of a great American play, but an explication for the modern age."<sup>1</sup>

This article explores the multiple threads that weave through this intriguing production. My observations and analysis are based on reviews of the various manifestations, and also from two performances I witnessed at the Huntington Theatre Company in January 2013.<sup>2</sup> First, I consider a brief production history of *Our Town* and show how its reputation as a life-affirming portrait of American life and its usual tone of sentimental yearning for the past have formed over time and were not apparent at the show's Broadway premiere. Second, I place Cromer's production within this history, outlining what makes the show so distinc-

tive. Of Cromer's conceptual choices, the most noteworthy is a reversal, what I refer to as the magic trick, which he introduces during the third act. Critics have described this choice as "jaw dropping,"<sup>3</sup> "profound and stunning,"<sup>4</sup> and "audacious and brilliant."<sup>5</sup> The simple but innovative directorial choice changes everything about the show for a few moments, bringing new life to the play's emotionally rich ending. The magic trick along with Cromer's other directional choices help rediscover the thematic possibilities found in *Our Town* and highlight aspects of the play that are often glossed over. As a result, the show experiences a renewal, ripe with rejuvenation that transcends traditional notions of nostalgia and restores relevancy and commercial viability to the well-known classic.

As Thornton Wilder wrote *Our Town*, he famously attempted to mirror the theatre as it was performed by the Greeks and by Shakespeare, letting the conventions of the stage carry the meanings of his play rather than resort to realism. Concerning the thematic importance, he states that the play "is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village; or as a speculation about the conditions of life after death. It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life."<sup>6</sup> Brooks Atkinson, in a glowing review of the 1938 Broadway premiere, focuses on these same themes: "Day by day we are buoyed up by the normal bustle of our families, neighbors and friends. But the long point of view is a lonely one and the little living that people do on this spinning planet is tragically unimportant. It has been repeated so many times in so many places without plan or deliberation, and there are centuries of it ahead. Some of the simplest episodes in *Our Town* are therefore touching beyond all reason." It is noteworthy that Atkinson says nothing in his review about American values or the idyllic beauty of small-town life, but focuses on how the play brings forth meaning through the simple and mundane. He points out that Wilder is able to reveal insights about the universe through the niche of Grover's Corners. He also states that the actors "preserve the dignity of the human beings they represent and communicate kindness without sentimentality."<sup>7</sup> Understanding Wilder's intentions for the play and seeing that the critical reception mirrors these intentions indicate that there is a stark difference in the how the play was originally presented and how it exists within our current cultural imagination that so often shelves the play as an old-fashioned piece of Americana.

Part of the prevalent perception of *Our Town* comes from the play's immense popularity. Since its premiere there have been many famous revivals, including four on Broadway, starring Stage Mangers as diverse as Henry Fonda, Spalding Gray, and Paul Newman. There have been two different television specials, starring Art Carney and Hal Holbrook, a

musical version, also made for television, starring Frank Sinatra, a radio production featuring Orson Welles, and a Hollywood movie starring William Holden. Along with these are the innumerable regional, community, and high school productions that have coated the play with the sort of contempt bred through familiarity. Cromer, aware of this challenge, observes, “The first line in Thornton Wilder’s script calls for no scenery and no curtain, the original intent was to strip away artifice. But over the years, *Our Town* acquired its own artifice simply from the fact of being so produced.”<sup>8</sup>

Along with audience fatigue for the play, another issue that Cromer faced is the tone the play can easily take. He states, “With *Our Town* I realized productions have a tendency to be folksy, to seem very, very precious, about a foreign environment with lots of gingham dresses.”<sup>9</sup> Thornton Wilder, also aware of this issue of tone, told the cast of the 1959 Williamstown Theatre revival, “Keep it dry. . . . You’re not playing the ‘cello. The danger here is playing it dolefully, turning the play into a welter of sentimentality.”<sup>10</sup> Tappen Wilder, the author’s nephew and the head of the Wilder estate, gives this insight into how the tone changed from the original production to how the play is now mostly understood: “The cost of the forties and fifties and sixties was a dumbing down, if you will, a sentimentalization of *Our Town*.” He also points out that “the play was considered a safe celebration of American values, and as such it was appropriated by conservatives during the years when anything ‘un-American’ was dangerously taboo.”<sup>11</sup> Cromer’s production attempts to position the play away from these familiar notions and reintroduce audiences to a version of the play that more closely mirrors the Broadway premiere with regard to tone and message.

While Cromer’s production seeks to turn down the sentiment of the play, it should be noted that he certainly is not the first to recognize the thematic layers within the work that are sometimes glossed over. Nancy Bunge, in a thoughtful analysis of the misconceptions of *Our Town*, points out that what many critics see as a “golden community” in Grover’s Corners actually “consists of people terrified of change who not only stifle themselves, but give no signs of confidence or hope in others.”<sup>12</sup> Edward Albee is reported to have stated, “*Our Town* is one of the toughest, saddest plays ever written. Why is it always produced as hearts and flowers?”<sup>13</sup> Cromer’s aspirations for the play mirror these statements. After viewing the famous 1989 Lincoln Center production, Cromer explained that he first appreciated what he thought of as the play’s “astringent” qualities: “It explained how the play had, at times, this almost clinical detachment to suffering, to sentiment, to sweetness, to love. . . . The play seems quite cruel . . . because it suggests that the sentimental ver-

sion of the things we sometimes tell ourselves—that love will conquer all . . . or that God is watching from above . . . are not necessarily true in the way you think they are.”<sup>14</sup>

In order to bring out a darker side of *Our Town*, Cromer employed a few simple conceptual tactics. Critics have noted that these tactics might have the audience asking, as Charles Isherwood pointed out in his review of the New York production, “Where’s the heady perfume of nostalgia? The lyric feeling for small-town life?” Isherwood answers, “Nowhere to be seen, and good riddance.”<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Gantz makes a similar observation of the Boston production: “Cromer’s goal is to dispel the nostalgia that has settled”<sup>16</sup> on many different productions of the play. While it is clear that these critics are distinguishing Cromer’s production from others of *Our Town*, their comments are somewhat misleading in stating that Cromer’s piece functions without nostalgia. While the play successfully avoids what Christopher Wallenburg calls the “amber glow of folksy, homespun sentimentality and reflexive nostalgia”<sup>17</sup> that are often associated with the play, the production and, I would argue, the play itself create an emotional sensation that is a blend of joy shaded by a deep sense of pain and loss, which, for lack of a better word, seems a lot like nostalgia.<sup>18</sup> This is not a nostalgia that seeks to contain the past in the present, but rather a raw emotion that is experienced on a personal level by the audience. So Cromer’s production eschews nostalgia, yet, paradoxically, nostalgic sensations strongly radiate throughout.

Charles P. Pierce faced a similar nostalgic conundrum. In an article for *Grantland* he writes about revisiting Marquette University years after he graduated and about the intense feelings and emotions he experienced. He writes that the sensation he felt is like nostalgia, but: “There has to be a better word for the way a longtime feeling of community rises unbidden when the right song pops up on a jukebox, or how I can still tell to this day the difference between the way yeast smells and the way hops smell, or the way the chill wind comes off the big lake.” After struggling for the length of the article to come up with a better word, he finally settles on the term “belonging” and reasons, “That’s a better word than nostalgic.”<sup>19</sup> While Pierce’s discovery overlooks several important aspects of nostalgia, his distinction of “belonging” is helpful in understanding how Cromer’s *Our Town* functions. Instead of the radiating nostalgia for America’s lost past, the production brings a deep sense of belonging and community within the audience, essentially making *Our Town* ours. Cromer’s production brings a sense of belonging and community through acting technique and simple and intriguing costume and lighting design, but he then blows up all expectations and conventions with the magic trick that takes place at the end of the play.

The first way that Cromer made his production relate to his audience is through the use of a very understated and emotionally detached acting style that is devoid of any regional accents. The character of the Stage Manager shows this shift most clearly. So often a well-seasoned and wise older actor portrays the role with a large amount of country charm or whimsy. Paul Newman is the quintessential example of this type of Stage Manager, and his performance, forever captured on video and available through PBS, shows that a traditional portrayal of the character can be very effective. The Cromer Stage Manager, on the other hand, whether played by the director himself or by a well-known performer such as Helen Hunt, has been described by Charles Isherwood as not having “an avuncular bone in his body. . . . He has the impersonal, businesslike tone of an office manager showing the new employees where the water cooler and the bathrooms are.”<sup>20</sup>

Joel Colonder, who replaced Cromer for the two performances that I saw, mirrored the matter-of-fact portrayal. When Colonder first entered the performance space, he held his cell phone in the air with one hand and brought it down to his eyes, referring to it each time he stated the time in Grover’s Corners throughout the evening. He also carried a yellow legal pad that he referred to while making the various introductions and setting the scene of the town and the two households. He kept a very brisk pace and had an understated vocal approach. In spite of this, the character maintained a charming demeanor, showing that Wilder’s lines can be underplayed and still retain their generosity.

During the more philosophical moments, when the Stage Manager expresses insights on humanity, rather than being passionate like Newman or chilly like Spalding Gray, Colonder was more thoughtful, but still very subtle. At the beginning of act 3 he pulled out a stool and sat on the steps next to one side of the audience while he quietly recited the lines: “Now there are some things we all know, but we don’t take ’em out and look at ’em very often. We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings.”<sup>21</sup> The lines were stated with a rather off-hand delivery that suggested the character was still working through the complex ideas himself, saying them quietly enough that I felt the need to lean closer to make sure I could hear him. This fact that the Stage Manager quietly contemplates while sitting among the audience suggests that he is just like us, trying to figure out what the play—and life, for that matter—is all about.

This businesslike and somewhat brusque Stage Manager set the tone for muted performances by the other actors. Scenes that often can be

played, as Wilder warned, “dolefully” were quite “dry,” including the famous soda fountain scene between George and Emily. In the Huntington production actors Derrick Trumbly and Therese Plaehn—both appeared to be in their late twenties—played the two characters. The scene is crucial to the play as George states his appreciation to Emily for being such a good friend and for being honest with him about his faults. He then reconsiders his plans to attend farm college the next year, preferring to stay in Grover's Corners as he cares for Emily and wants to remain close to her. She reveals she feels the same way for him and she always has. Rather than relishing the confession of first love, the scene carried a hint of sadness. Both characters seem happy to reveal their inner feelings for each other, but there was also a sense of remorse for the lost experiences and growth that George would have if he were to go to college. Having this complicated emotional reaction, rather than ruining the romantic affect, added a rich emotional dissonance and a multiplicity of ideas to the scene, showing both the romance of the moment, but also the future consequences that the decision would bring. The scene was made more poignant through the multiplicity, which was made possible by the older age of the actors who brought out the emotional complexity.

Another way that Cromer related the play to the audience is through costuming the actors in contemporary clothing. Rather than putting boys in knickers and suspenders and girls in gingham dresses, which suggests a production longing for yesteryear, the costumes, as Isherwood points out, “look as if they'd been pulled out of [the actor's] own closets.”<sup>22</sup> Allison Siple's designs, while seemingly simple, beautifully represented the emotionally conflicted nature of many characters in the play. These conflicts were realized in two ways: first, through the use of layering, such as having long-sleeved undershirts emerging from short-sleeved tops or wearing zippered sweatshirts and hoodies; and second, by adopting a monochromatic color scheme. These two simple design choices clearly demonstrate the emotionally guarded nature of everyone in Grover's Corners. George, Emily, Mrs. Gibbs, and Mrs. Webb all wear layers with subdued colors throughout the show that indicate an emotional hesitancy highlighted by the safe and guarded choices these characters make throughout the play. Dr. Gibbs and Mr. Webb wear long sleeved, patterned button-ups that denote their characters as emotionally conflicted. This is shown most forcefully when Dr. Gibbs, played by Craig Mathers, chastises George in act 1. Rather than laying a gentle guilt trip, Mathers becomes enraged, shouting the lines, “And you eat her meals, and put on the clothes she keeps nice for you, and you run off and play baseball—like she's some hired girl we keep around the house but that we don't like very much,”<sup>23</sup> at which point, seeing that George is crying,

he immediately catches himself, seems to feel embarrassed, and promptly raises George's allowance. The long-sleeved, patterned shirt represents the testy and somewhat volatile nature of Dr. Gibbs by keeping his heart region covered with a complicated pattern.

There are various moments in the play during which Emily experiences emotional ruptures, and these were supported by changes in her wardrobe. During her tearful confrontation of George in act 2, Emily, who has worn a jacket throughout the play, now ties it around her waist, making her heart region much more exposed. This is repeated during her short breakdown at the wedding scene in the end of act 2 where she wears a sleeveless gown. Both instances leave her more exposed physically, which nicely mirrors her vulnerable emotional state. It was the seemingly simple but nuanced nature of Siple's costumes that made the characters very relatable without sacrificing artistic merit. The Stage Manager states that the play is taking place during the years originally placed in the script, from 1901 to 1913, but the contemporary and thoughtful costuming choices place the emphasis on the ideas in the play rather than the time period in which it is set.

The last way in which Cromer's production created a sense of belonging within the audience was made possible by the lighting designed by Heather Gilbert. It might have seemed to a casual observer that the house lights remained on for the majority of the play, but the reality of the show's lighting was that members of the audience became an active participant in the play—not that they would be called up onstage, but that the intricate lighting design included the spectators as if they were performers. For example, the lights did not change at all when Colonder, as the Stage Manger, walked onstage to begin the play. The jarring effect of being able to see everyone around you eventually went away, replaced by a feeling of comfort. I felt as though I knew the people sitting around me by the end of the first act.

The simple nature of the lighting design should not be mistaken for not having any lighting design. The lights faded at the end of act 1 as night fell on Grover's Corners, but a sneaky special light, specifically fashioned to be unnoticed, was used on George and Emily for their wedding to provide the couple with an extra glow. The overcast, rainy day of act 3 was dark and shadowy, so much so that I found it difficult to see Colonder as he performed the Stage Manager's act 3 opening monologue, creating an ambiance that perfectly set the tone for the final act. In addition, as noted above, the very fact that members of the audience were included and not separate from the lighting design made them feel as though they belonged with the characters, that they were a part of what the characters

were doing. There were no physical or design elements that separated us from them.

The last conceptual choice, and easily the most memorable, upended every other conceptual aspect of the production that I have mentioned so far, yet the moment fortified the emotional complexity of the show. The magic trick in act 3 was what sets Cromer's *Our Town* apart from the other famous iterations of the play and likely astonished unsuspecting audience members. In the Huntington production the upstage wall, the only one that didn't have anyone sitting alongside of it, was covered with a thick, black, curtain. It could easily have been assumed that this curtain merely masked an ugly wall in the theatre. In act 3, after Emily has died, she requests to return and relive her twelfth birthday. At this request, the Stage Manager walks to the black curtain, which up to this point in the show has been completely ignored, and opens it to reveal a highly representational and functional box set of a nineteenth-century kitchen, bathed in the glow of sunrise. The scene is said by the Stage Manager to be taking place in 1899, and all the characters in the flashback wear period costumes and speak with thick New England accents. The smell of bacon that Mrs. Webb is cooking wafts through the audience, capping the sense of enchantment that the set evokes. Like a skilled magician, Cromer directed the audience's attention away from the area where the ultimate surprise would take place until the final moment when the set is revealed, and this illusion would appear and disappear in a matter of a few moments.

Emily, still in her modern attire and with her unaffected accent, first observes and then enters the unveiled space. While the kitchen was meticulously detailed, it was very hard to see, as the only lighting was a gas lamp fastened to the wall and the effect of sunrise that beamed through the windows. This lighting made the characters appear mainly in silhouette, while outside the windows frozen tree branches could be seen as the morning light struck them, cold and beautiful.<sup>24</sup> As the scene plays out and Emily becomes more and more disenchanted and frustrated with living in the past, rather than having a huge outburst of emotion she stays calm and cries quietly, "I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another,"<sup>25</sup> in a subtle and subdued manner. Almost as quickly as the new setting appears, it is gone, as Emily, after taking one last look, closes the curtain and returns to her place in the cemetery.

This scene highlights the dissonance that the Cromer production brings out in *Our Town* and poses as many questions about the play as it answers. The first time I observed the production I knew about the hidden set and was still overwhelmed by its presentation, not really noticing



any details because of the powerful emotional affect. Upon my second viewing I forced myself to pay closer attention, and I saw the great pains that had been taken with regard to props and set dressing to make that setting as historically accurate as possible, from the texture of wallpaper to the working condition of all the appliances. In a very clear way, having Emily's flashback cross into the realm of the highly representational echoes Wilder's notion of the small things in life being of the utmost importance. Emily's twelfth birthday is so beautiful, and the fact that no one pays any attention to it makes it unbearable for her to remain. This production is the first of note to take Emily's flashback out of the realm of the imaginary and place it, literally, before our eyes. In order for the magic trick to work it has to be stunning, and Cromer along with his designers do not fail to deliver.

The overall effect of this noteworthy reversal does more than just reify Wilder's original thematic intent; it also calls into question the nature of reality. Is the magic trick supposed to represent what is real, or is the rest of the show, with its imagined settings and props, placing us in reality? These distinctions are important since the way the audience views the hidden set shapes their perception of the overall message of the show. Does it glorify the wonderful past or does it highlight the problematic nature of memory and not living in the present? An appealing aspect of Cromer's production is that it effectively presents all of these ideas and gives them equal weight. The magic trick is beautiful, but strange in that it is very hard to see and is in distinct opposition to every other aspect of the production. The dichotomy found within the scene wonderfully mirrors themes within the play that are so often overlooked, that life is both precious and straining, that sadness accompanies death, but also that death offers relief from this world. Cromer's production successfully shows ambivalence in a play that from the surface can seem simply optimistic, but the magic trick also brings a tremendous outburst of spectacle to the extremely muted production.

Beyond the surprise set, one of the most impressive feats of Cromer's *Our Town* was that it made Thornton Wilder's play a sexy draw to theatre-goers. On one level it shows that audiences love to see a thoughtfully conceptualized restaging of a classic, a fact that often compels theatre companies around the country to feature such shows on their seasons each year. But on another level the popularity of the show points out that audiences will support and attend a production that does not have a happy ending, is challenging, and might even "hurt [their] feelings,"<sup>26</sup> as the Stage Manager warns in act 3. Perhaps the many optimistic aspects of *Our Town* make the astringent qualities palatable. Or perhaps Cromer's

magic trick is so amazing that audiences no longer care about the show's themes, being so overwhelmed by spectacle. Whatever the reason, the production certainly shows the artistic viability, and financial marketability, of a well-known classic play when the artifice surrounding it is stripped away and a director is able to effectively explicate the play for a modern audience.

## Notes

1. Chris Jones, "David Cromer's Utterly Astounding *Our Town* Hits Home, but Hard," *Chicago Tribune: The Theatre Loop* (blog), May 2, 2008, [http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/the\\_theater\\_loop/2008/05/david-cromers-a.html](http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/the_theater_loop/2008/05/david-cromers-a.html).
2. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, Huntington Theatre Company, Boston, Massachusetts, January 19 and 20, 2013.
3. Chris Jones, "David Cromer's."
4. Hedy Weiss, "Inspired Production keeps *Our Town* Clever, Modern," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 29, 2008, <http://www.chopintheatre.com/event.php?id=180>.
5. Brian Nemtusak, "*Our Town* Review," review of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, *TimeOut Chicago*, May 1, 2008, <http://www.chopintheatre.com/event.php?id=180>.
6. Thornton Wilder, "Preface," *Three Plays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), xxx.
7. Brooks Atkinson, "How They Used to Live," *New York Times*, February 13, 1938.
8. Sid Smith, "Actor-director Cromer Fulfilling Early Promise," *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 2010, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-05-18/news/0805160517\\_1\\_steppenwolf-cider-house-rules-big-apple](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-05-18/news/0805160517_1_steppenwolf-cider-house-rules-big-apple).
9. Christopher Wallenburg, "Blowing the Dust off *Our Town*," *Boston Globe*, December 6, 2012, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2012/12/06/david-cromer-brings-stripped-down-our-town-huntington-theatre/SLNDnmSnHDIWBqIVXfVW5M/story.html>.
10. Ira Henry Freeman, "Wilder Brings *Our Town* to Williamstown," *New York Times*, August 23, 1959, Proquest Historical Newspapers (1851-2009), XI.
11. Mara Tapp, "Talk of *Our Town*," *Chicago Magazine*, February 2009, <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/February-2009/Talk-of-Our-Town/index.php?cparticle=2&siarticle=1#artanc>.
12. Nancy Bunge, "The Social Realism of *Our Town*," in *Thornton Wilder: New Essays*, ed. Martin Blank et al. (West Cornwall, Conn.: Locust Hill Press, 1999), 360.
13. Jeremy McCarter, "The Genius of Grover's Corners," *New York Times Book Review*, April 1, 2007.
14. Wallenburg, "Blowing the Dust off *Our Town*."

15. Charles Isherwood, "21st Century Grover's Corners, with the Audience as Neighbors," *New York Times*, February 26, 2009, [http://theater.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/theater/reviews/27town.html?\\_r=0](http://theater.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/theater/reviews/27town.html?_r=0).

16. Jeffrey Gantz, "David Cromer Brings Unique Approach to *Our Town*," *Boston Globe*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2012/12/13/david-cromer-brings-unique-approach-our-town-performance-boston-center-for-arts/SUPnDPxeVz1zqFICG8HgVN/story.html>.

17. Christopher Wallenburg, "Blowing the Dust off *Our Town*."

18. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books 2001), 49–50. Boym distinguishes between what she calls "restorative nostalgia," or an emotion that connects the urge to restore the past to the present, and "reflective nostalgia" that is more about "mediation of history and the passage of time." She continues: "It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection." Cromer's *Our Town* shifts the nostalgia of the play out of the restorative and into the reflective.

19. Charles P. Pierce, "The NCAA and Nostalgia," *Grantland*, December 4, 2011, [http://www.grantland.com/story/\\_/id/7318012/the-ncaa-nostalgia](http://www.grantland.com/story/_/id/7318012/the-ncaa-nostalgia).

20. Isherwood, "21st Century Grover's Corners."

21. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, in *Three Plays*, 89–90.

22. Isherwood, "21st Century Grover's Corners."

23. Wilder, *Our Town*, in *Three Plays*, 39.

24. The image called to my mind the line from Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner* where various characters exclaim that outside of the house "every least twig is wrapped around with ice." Thornton Wilder, "The Long Christmas Dinner," in *Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays & Writings on Theatre* (New York: Library of America, 2007), 62.

25. Wilder, *Our Town*, in *Three Plays*, 110.

26. *Ibid.*, 90.

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