



This Curriculum Guide was written by Bethy Atkins, and provided by the Huntington Theatre Company's Department of Education & Community Programs

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COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Student Matinee performances and pre-show workshops provide unique opportunities for experiential learning and support various combinations of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts. They may also support standards in other subject areas such as Social Studies and History, depending on the individual play's subject matter.

Activities are also included in this Curriculum Guide and in our pre-show workshops that support several of the Massachusetts state standards in Theatre. Other arts areas may also be addressed depending on the individual play's subject matter.

Common Core Standards in English Language Arts

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details 3

- **Grade 7:** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.
- **Grade 8:** Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.
- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the themes.
- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop related elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Reading Literature: Craft and Structure 5

- **Grade 7:** Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.
- **Grade 8:** Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.
- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks), create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Reading Literature: Craft and Structure 6

- **Grade 7:** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.
- **Grade 8:** Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.
- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.
- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze a case in which grasping point of view required distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7

- **Grade 7:** Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).
- **Grade 8:** Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.
- **Grades 9-12:** Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g. recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist).

Massachusetts Standards in Theatre

Acting

- **1.7:** Create and sustain a believable character throughout a scripted or improvised scene **(By the end of Grade 8)**.
- **1.12:** Describe and analyze, in written and oral form, characters' wants, needs, objectives, and personality characteristics **(By the end of Grade 8)**.
- **1.13:** In rehearsal and performance situations, perform as a productive and responsible member of an acting ensemble (i.e., demonstrate personal responsibility and commitment to a collaborative process) **(Grade 8)**.
- **1.14:** Create complex and believable characters through the integration of physical, vocal, and emotional choices **(Grades 9-12)**.
- **1.15:** Demonstrate an understanding of a dramatic work by developing a character analysis **(Grades 9-12)**.

- **1.17:** Demonstrate increased ability to work effectively alone and collaboratively with a partner or in an ensemble **(Grades 9-12)**.

Reading and Writing Scripts

- **2.7:** Read plays and stories from a variety of cultures and historical periods and identify the characters, setting, plot, theme, and conflict **(By the end of Grade 8)**.
- **2.8:** Improvise characters, dialogue, and actions that focus on the development and resolution of dramatic conflicts **(By the end of Grade 8)**.
- **2.11:** Read plays from a variety of genres and styles; compare and contrast the structure of plays to the structures of other forms of literature **(Grades 9-12)**.

Technical Theatre

- **4.6:** Draw renderings, floor plans, and/or build models of sets for a dramatic work and explain choices in using visual elements (line, shape/form, texture, color, space) and visual principals (unity, variety, harmony, balance, rhythm) **(By the end of Grade 8)**.
- **4.13:** Conduct research to inform the design of sets, costumes, sound, and lighting for a dramatic production **(Grades 9-12)**.

Connections

- **Strand 6: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts:** Students will describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings **(Grades PreK-12)**.
- **Strand 10: Interdisciplinary Connections:** Students will apply their knowledge of the arts to the study of English language arts, foreign languages, health, history and social science, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering **(Grades PreK-12)**

Objectives

Students will:

- Learn proper audience etiquette before attending the performance
- Learn about the life of the playwright, Thornton Wilder, and how his life experience contributed to his writing
- Learn about the director of *Our Town* at the Huntington, David Cromer, and why his vision for the play is unique
- Explore *Our Town*'s themes and motifs, which include:
 - The significance of family and relationships
 - The nature of time
 - The cyclical nature of human experience
 (Any of the questions in this section could be used as discussion question, or as open response/essay questions)

Audience Etiquette

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to the Huntington.

- How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?
- Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience will affect the actors' performance. No two audiences are exactly the same and no two performances are exactly the same—this is part of what makes theatre so special! Students' behavior should reflect the level of performance they wish to see.
- Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. It is absolutely all right to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be? Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!
- Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off (or better yet, left at home or at school!). Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food and gum should not be brought into the theatre.
- Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun.
- Please note that the Roberts Studio Theatre, where *Our Town* is performed, is a particularly intimate space. Anything that happens in the audience will be seen and heard by the actors.

Background

Our Town, by Thornton Wilder, is an American classic, expressing with warmth, humor, honesty, and even some sadness, the eternal truths of human existence. It is a heartening, compassionate glimpse of that time before the Great Wars—before much of our innocence was lost forever.

From the time of its first performances in 1938, *Our Town* has continued to be regarded as one of the best representations of life in America and of the richness of our theatre world. For decades it has remained a landmark of theatrical craftsmanship and a loving picture of American life.

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Our Town* depicts pathos set against a background of centuries of time, social history, and religious ideas. As the Stage Manager (who functions as a Greek chorus in the drama) says: “This is the way we were in our growing-up and in our marrying and in our doctoring and in our living and in our dying.”

Our Town is set in 1901 in Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, where the Gibbsses and the Webbs are neighbors. During their childhood George Gibbs and Emily Webb are playmates and their lives are inextricably woven together as neighbors’ lives are likely to be. But as they grow older they evolve into a state of romantic (and embarrassing) interest in one another. George proposes marriage to Emily in the drug store over an ice cream soda, and they are married with all the good folks of Grover’s Corners in attendance. But George’s and Emily’s happiness is short-lived. Emily dies in childbirth while delivering her second baby and is buried in the town’s cemetery on a rainy, dreary day. There she is reunited with those friends and neighbors who have died before her, and they help her acclimate to her new existence. In one of the most vital scenes in modern theatre, the peace and quiet of death, which can never be understood by the living, is portrayed.

Our Town is not just about Emily and George and, indeed, is not just about a small town in northern New England a hundred years ago. *Our Town* is a play about what we (and Thornton Wilder) thought America and Americans were. The characters in *Our Town* tell us what they knew of life, its pain and hope, its simplicity and truth. Thornton Wilder’s play is often viewed as saying that life is meaningful only when lived with full awareness of the value of the present moment. For over 70 years of audiences, *Our Town* has demonstrated the peril of not doing exactly that.

Shortly before Wilder’s death in 1975, Alan Schneider wrote in *The New York Times*:

Wilder’s plays are now more than ever in rhythm with our changing habit of theatergoing... He relates the moment to eternity, seeks the infinite in the immediate, finds the universe in each grain of wheat. His plays have not so much been ‘revived’ over and over again, as they have almost continuously stayed alive among us.

(“Thornton Wilder and the Importance Of Being Optimistic; The Optimism of Thornton Wilder” by Alan Schneider, *The New York Times*, July 6, 1975)

Questions:

- What other plays have won the Pulitzer Prize? What are the criteria for consideration for the award? When was the first Pulitzer Prize awarded?

Research Thornton Wilder’s other works. How are they similar to and different from *Our Town*? In what other literary forms did Wilder write, besides plays?

Preparation for *Our Town*

The Playwright: Thornton Wilder

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was born in Wisconsin but spent his childhood traveling both nationally and internationally with his family; they even lived for a time in China due to his father's job. Wilder began his higher education at Oberlin College but transferred to and graduated from Yale University. He obtained a master's degree from Princeton University. After graduating, Wilder spent time in Rome, working on archeological excavations before returning to the United States to teach French. Wilder gained prestige for both his novels and his plays, winning a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1928, and twice winning the Pulitzer Prize for drama for *Our Town* in 1938 and for *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942. His writings, particularly *Our Town*, were popular during his lifetime and have remained so after his death—according to the Wilder Family Estate, a production of *Our Town* is being performed at least once a day somewhere in the United States or abroad.

Original Preface to *Our Town*

Thornton Wilder wrote a preface to *Our Town* which ran in *The New York Times* on February 13, 1938, but was not published with the play until 1979. In this preface, he explains many of his thoughts about and inspirations for *Our Town*:

“For a while in Rome I lived among archaeologists, and ever since I find myself occasionally looking at the things about me as an archaeologist will look at them a thousand years hence. Rockefeller Center will be reconstructed in imagination from the ruins of its foundations. How high was it? A thesis will be written on the bronze plates found in New York's detritus heaps – “Tradesmen's Entrance,” “Night Bell.”

In Rome I was led through a study of the plumbing on the Palatine Hill. A friend of mine could ascribe a date, “within ten years,” to every fragment of cement made in the Roman Republic and early Empire.

An archaeologist's eyes combine the view of the telescope with the view of the microscope. He reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.

It was something of this method that I brought to a New Hampshire village. I spent parts of six summers tutoring at Lake Sunapee and six at the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough. I took long walks through scores of upland villages.

And the archeologist's and the social historian's points of view began to mingle with another unremitting preoccupation which is the central theme of the play: What is the relation between the countless “unimportant” details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?

What is trivial and what is significant about any one person's making a breakfast, engaging in a domestic quarrel, in a "love scene," in dying? To record one's feelings about this question is necessarily to exhibit the realistic detail of life, and one is at once up against the problem of realism in literature....

I wished to record a village's life on the stage, with realism and with generality. The stage has a deceptive advantage over the novel—in that lighted room at the end of the darkened auditorium things seem to be half caught up into generality already. The stage cries aloud its mission to represent the Act in Eternity. So powerful is the focus that it brings to bear on any presented occasion that every lapse of the author from his collaborative intensity is doubly conspicuous: the truth tumbles down into a heap of abject truths and the result is doubly trivial.

So I tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery. The spectator through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his own head.

In its healthiest ages the theater has always exhibited the least scenery. Aristophanes's *The Clouds*—423 B.C. Two houses are represented on the stage, inside of one of them we see two beds. Strepsiades is talking in his sleep about his racehorses. A few minutes later he crosses the stage to Socrates's house, the Idea Factory, the "Thinkery." In the Spanish theater Lope de Vega put a rug in the middle of the scene; it was a raft in mid-ocean bearing a castaway. The Elizabethans, the Chinese used similar devices.

The theater longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves. All the lies it tells—the lie that that young lady is Caesar's wife; the lie that people can go through life talking in blank verse; the lie that that man just killed that man; all those lies enhance the one truth that is there, the truth that dictated the story, the myth. The theater asks for as many conventions as possible. A convention is an agreed-upon falsehood, an accepted untruth. When the theater pretends to give the real thing in canvas and wood and metal it loses something of the realer thing, which is its true business. Ibsen and Chekhov carried realism as far as it could go, and it took all their genius to do it. Now the camera is carrying it on and is in great "theoretical peril" of falling short of literature. (In a world of actual peril that "theoretical peril" looks very farfetched, but ex-college professors must be indulged.)

But the writing of the play was not accompanied by any such conscious argumentation as this. It sprang from a deep admiration for those little white towns in the hills and from a deep devotion to the theater. These are but the belated gropings to reconstruct what may have taken place when the play first presented itself—the life of a village against the life of the stars.

In an earlier draft of the play there were some other lines that led up to those which now serve as its motto. The Stage Manager has been talking about the material that is being placed in the cornerstone of the new bank at Grover's Corners, material that has been chemically treated so that it will last a thousand or two thousand years. He suggests that this play has been placed there so that future ages will know more about the life of the average person; more than just the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh Flight—see what I mean?

Well, people a thousand years from now, in the provinces North of New York at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, people et [*sic*] three times a day—soon after dawn, at noon, and at sunset.

Every seventh day, by law and by religion, there was a day of rest and all work came to a stop.

The religion at that time was Christianity; but I guess you have other records about Christianity.

The domestic set-up was marriage, a binding relation between a male and one female that lasted for life.

. . . Anything else? Oh, yes, when people died they were buried in the ground just as they were.

Well, people a thousand years from now, this is the way we were—in our growing-up, in our marrying, in our doctoring, in our living, and in our dying.

Now let's get back to our day in Grover's Corners....”

Questions:

- What does Wilder mean when he refers to “all the lies [theatre] tells?”
- How is film in “theoretical peril” of carrying on realism? How is theatre's form of realistic storytelling more “real” than what is captured on camera?
- How do the lines that were taken out of the Stage Manager's monologue relate specifically to the time and culture in which they were written? How do they relate to the culture of today? Why do you think those lines were removed from the play?

David Cromer and His Vision of *Our Town*

The Huntington Theatre Company's Artistic Director, Peter DuBois, has described director David Cromer's production as “the seminal production of *Our Town* of our generation. David's production has been acclaimed by critics, by audiences. It really is one of the more moving experiences with a classic American work that people are going to have. It's really this generation's *Our Town*.”

But what makes David Cromer's vision so unique and this production so special? Read the following collection of quotations from fellow directors, actors, writers, journalists, and critics. What insights do their observations provide into Cromer's artistic vision and his novel take on *Our Town*?

- “But to hear Cromer tell it, he’s not so much a director as an art restorer, stripping away the varnish applied by generations of well-meaning regional stages and high-school drama clubs to reveal Thornton’s original vision. Although the spare, meta-theatrical *Our Town* was radical for 1938, it has since acquired a patina of homespun, old-fashioned sentimentality. Cromer scraped all that off. Initially, he took on the part of the Stage Manager—an all-knowing narrator—and played him not as a simple yarn-spinning New Englander but as a brusque director with a clipboard. As himself, basically.” –Margaret Gray, *Los Angeles Times*
- “People sometimes interpret the play as saying, ‘You have to live life every moment,’ ” says Cromer. “I don’t know that I agree with that. It says that every moment is pretty stunning if you look at it, but you can’t live like that. You’d just be staring at the orchids every second, like ‘Can you believe it?’ You’d wander into traffic, you’d never go to work. You have to miss some of it, and regret that you missed some of it, and that’s part of it, too.” –*Los Angeles Times*
- “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.” –Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*
- “David Cromer is a theater director and actor who is reinvigorating classic American plays and illuminating their relationship to the present. His incisive interpretations of the twentieth-century repertoire honor the original intention of each work while providing audiences with more psychologically complex performances than previous renderings. Eschewing nostalgia and period kitsch, Cromer reveals the dark truth and unexpected humor in William Inge’s *Picnic*, while his meticulous attention to the expressive power of simple objects transforms a musical adaptation of Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* into a compelling portrait of a desperate office worker that reflects our time. Every element of his production of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*—from set design, to costumes, to music, to the choice of actors—converges into a cohesive whole that evokes an immediate and powerful experience for viewers. Performing the role of the Stage Manager himself, Cromer adopts modern dress and a conversational tone and is simultaneously the omniscient, efficient director and a character in the play. The minimalist aesthetic of the production and his portrayal of the Stage Manager avoid the sentimentality characteristic of other versions of *Our Town* and, at the same time, increase the emotional force of the play’s exhortation to live in the present moment. From venues in Chicago to the

theaters of New York, Cromer is re-staging earlier plays with a spirit and urgency that resonates with contemporary audiences.” –MacArthur Foundation biography

- “Performed in modern dress, not quite in the round but in the midst of its audience and with the lights on for the first two acts, Cromer’s *Our Town* managed to erase the divide between players and spectators to deliver the maximum gut punch the theater can offer.” –Alex Witchel, *New York Times Magazine*
- ““Everything David says to the actors and designers grows out of the play, not the theatrical idea of it or the nostalgic idea of it,’ [Austin] Pendleton told me. ‘When I saw *Brighton Beach Memoirs* [which Cromer directed], I thought, I didn’t know the play was this good. And he didn’t seem to do anything except pay attention to it.” –Alex Witchel quoting Austin Pendleton, *New York Times Magazine*

Questions:

- Based on the quotes above, what do critics and fellow theatre artists think of David Cromer’s approach to directing classic plays? What predictions can you make about what David Cromer’s production of *Our Town* will be like?
- Research jobs in professional theatre. What kinds of responsibilities does a stage manager have? Compare these with the Stage Manager’s role in *Our Town*. Why did Wilder name this character the Stage Manager? In some performances of *Our Town* in Chicago and New York, Cromer actually played the Stage Manager himself. What do you think was the logic behind having the production’s actual director appear on stage in this role?

Themes for Discussion and Writing

The significance of family and relationships

In his 2009 review of David Cromer's production, *New York Times* theatre critic Charles Isherwood wrote, "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."

Throughout *Our Town*, and particularly in the third act, Wilder makes poignant statements about the beauty of life, how people do not recognize that beauty, and do not cherish the smaller moments of their lives, until it is too late.

Questions

- In Act I, siblings George and Rebecca Gibbs have the following conversation:

REBECCA: I never told you about the letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

GEORGE: What's funny about that?

REBECCA: But listen, it's not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that's what it said on the envelope.

GEORGE: What do you know!

REBECCA: And the postman brought it just the same.

Why is Rebecca amazed by this address? What is the context for her telling this to George? Which do you think is more likely: That Rebecca thinks the address is funny or that she is contemplating something about her life, her place in the universe, and the vastness of nature and existence? Why? What was playwright Thornton Wilder trying to communicate with this piece of dialogue?

- In Act III, Emily wonders: "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?" The Stage Manager initially responds, "no," but after a moment of consideration, concedes that "the saints and poets, maybe—they do some." What does Emily realize in Act III? Why does the Stage Manager say that the saints and poets maybe understand what Emily is talking about, but other people do not? What do saints or poets realize about life and beauty that other people may not, and why? Explain a time when you feel you've truly been struck by beauty or goodness in your life—what would it be like to go around always feeling like that? Would you enjoy it? Why or why not?

The nature of time

Time plays a significant role in both the original script of *Our Town* and in the Huntington's production. The play itself travels back and forth through time—Act I begins in the year 1901, moves forward three years to 1904 for Act II, and moves

forward another nine years to 1914 for Act III. During Act III there is a flashback to a scene that takes place in 1899. During the production, all of this moving about through the early twentieth century occurs over the course of two hours, and in the Huntington Theatre Company's production, the actors are dressed in modern clothes even though the play is set in the early twentieth century, further complicating the manner in which *Our Town* represents time and its passage.

Questions:

- The production of *Our Town* at the Huntington Theatre Company features actors dressed in modern clothing and uses minimal to no set or props to tell the audience when the action is taking place. Do you think this will change how you understand the play? Why or why not? What affect do production elements such as costumes, scenery, and props have on audience members, especially in terms of their understanding time and place in the world of the play?
- Thornton Wilder states in his original preface to *Our Town* that he “tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery.” In David Cromer's production, how does the removal of scenery change how the story of *Our Town* is told? Is it successful or unsuccessful in “restor[ing] significance to the small details of life”? Why or why not? How do those “small details” affect the feelings you have while viewing the play?
- What is nostalgia? Is this production of *Our Town* nostalgic? If yes, why? If not, should it be? How do feelings of nostalgia affect audience's experience of watching a play?

The cyclical nature of human experience

Our Town tells more than the story of one moment in just one person's life, it explores various moments in the lives of a number of people in Grover's Corners. In fact, *Our Town* can be viewed as a life cycle—it begins with the birth of twins, delivered by Doc Gibbs (first mentioned at the very beginning of Act I), moves forward to show the Gibbs and Webb children going to school, getting older, falling in love and getting married (throughout Acts I and II), and then ends on the day of Emily's funeral (Act III). Even that death, however, shows that a new cycle is beginning—we learn that Emily passed away in childbirth, in the act of beginning the cycle over again.

Questions

- How does the fact that this production of *Our Town* is not visibly set in the turn of the twentieth century (1899-1913) affect your viewing experience? Does it change your understanding of time in the play? Do you think the meaning of the play would change if the actors wore period costumes? Why or why not? What aspects of life do you think would be the same whether you were alive in 1400, 1900, 2010, or 3000? What aspects of life would be different in those time periods? What parts of *Our Town* seem to relate to your life today, and what parts do not?

Mastery Assessment

ACT I

1. According to the Stage Manager, what is the first act of the play about?
2. Why is Dr. Gibbs out early?
3. What are the names of Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs's children?
4. What are the names of Mr. and Mrs. Webb's children?
5. Why is Mrs. Gibbs concerned about her son?
6. To where does Mrs. Gibbs dream of traveling?
7. What does Dr. Gibbs know a lot about?
8. Who does the Stage Manager bring out to answer questions about Grover's Corners?
9. What can George see from his window at night?
10. What does George say he wants to be when he grows up?
11. What does Emily want to know from her mother?
12. Why does the Stage Manager want to put a copy of this play in the cornerstone of the new bank?
13. What is the gossip about the church organist, Simon Stimson?
14. How does Dr. Gibbs feel about the fact that some people in town lock their doors every night?

ACT II

1. How much time has passed since the end of Act I?
2. What does the Stage Manager say the second act will be about?
3. Who is the best baseball pitcher Grover's Corners ever had?
4. Who is George Gibbs going to marry?
5. Why don't Mr. and Mrs. Webb think George should see Emily?
6. According to Emily, how did George change while they were in high school?
7. What did George consider doing after high school? Why did he change his mind?
8. Who arrives to make fun of George at his wedding?
9. Why is George upset before the wedding?
10. Why is Emily upset before the wedding?

ACT III

1. How much time has passed since the end of Act II?
2. In what ways has Grover's Corners changed?
3. Which characters have died and are already buried in the cemetery?
4. Who is Sam Craig? Why is he in Grover's Corners?
5. How did Simon Stimson die?
6. How did Emily die?
7. What does Emily want to do?
8. Why does seeing her parents again make Emily so upset?
9. What do the dead understand that the living do not?

Further Exploration

- **Theatre Criticism**

- Original *New York Times* review of *Our Town*, February 5th, 1938: <http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/theater/OurTown.pdf>
- 2009 *New York Times* review of *Our Town*, with audio links: David Cromer talking about his vision for *Our Town* and performing an excerpt of the play (as the Stage Manager): http://theater.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/theater/reviews/27town.html?_r=0

Activity: Compare and contrast the reviews from 1938 and 2009, both in terms of writing style and content. After attending the production at the Huntington Theatre Company, assign students to write their own review and then compare theirs to the two from *The New York Times*. Are there any overlapping themes or similar ideas?

- **Process and Interpretation**

- Video interview of David Cromer after he was named one of the recipients of the MacArthur Fellowship “Genius” Grant in 2010: <http://www.macfound.org/fellows/29/>
- 2010 *New York Times Magazine* profile on David Cromer (6 pages): <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/magazine/14cromer-t.html?pagewanted=1>
- Various audio recordings of Thornton Wilder reading from his plays and lecturing, including reading from *Our Town*: <http://www.thorntonwilder.com/about/biography.html>

Activity: Ask students to listen to the audio of David Cromer reading from Act I of *Our Town* (audio link on the 2009 *New York Times* review) and then ask them to listen to Thornton Wilder reading from Act I. Ask them which interpretation they prefer, and why? Both Thornton Wilder and David Cromer played the Stage Manager. Ask students to discuss the different jobs that exist in the theatre—playwright, director, actor, technician, designer—and talk about when it makes sense for some of these roles to overlap. Brainstorm the challenges of writing a play and then becoming one of the actors, as well as serving in the roles of both director and actor in a single production.

Suggested Activities

Movement-Based Performance: Pantomime

Pantomime is a process of telling a story with all movement—without sounds or physical props (“panto” means “all” and “mime” means “movement”). When using pantomime as a performance technique, the actors use their movement to communicate what activities they are doing and what imaginary props they are using. In many moments in *Our Town*, characters pantomime activities from their daily lives,

such as when paperboy Joe Crowell, Jr. throws imaginary newspapers onto doorsteps and when dairyman Howie Newsome delivers imaginary bottles of milk to his customers. Brainstorm a list of basic physical actions from daily life (such as brushing teeth, pouring and drinking a glass of water, etc.) then pantomime these activities as a group. While they move, students should pay specific attention to:

- What physical steps are involved in the action. For example, if they are pouring a glass of water, they should include the steps of getting the glass out of the cabinet, turning on the faucet, holding the glass under the faucet while it fills, and turning off the faucet, all before drinking.
- The shape, size, and location of any invisible objects. For example, if they have pantomimed holding a coffee cup and then they go to pick up a newspaper, they must remember that the coffee cup is in their hand when they reach to get the paper or must place the cup down somewhere first, then pick it up again by the handle without spilling the “coffee.”
- How they feel about the activity and what facial expressions and body language can be used to communicate their emotions.

After each student has pantomimed some basic activities, ask students to perform a more complex series of movements such as the ones Mrs. Gibbs or Mrs. Webb might do to prepare their families for the day. For example, preparing breakfast could include making toast, pouring juice into a glass, placing dishes on the table, etc.

Apply these pantomime skills to performing a scene (could be from a play or book from class or short scenes written in small groups—it doesn’t have to be long!) without any props, pantomiming all of the action, then reflect on the following:

- Were any actions more difficult to pantomime than others?
- What are the unique acting challenges inherent in pantomime versus using props onstage? Why might a playwright choose to include this kind of action into his or her play? What does it change about the world of the play?

Acting: Kitchen Sink Drama

A kitchen sink drama is a short performance that explores the drama of every day life. In this exercise, students will take a relatable set of characters and a conflict and put the moment under a microscope. Begin by choosing two characters and a real-life conflict that could exist between them in a household setting. For example:

- A parent and child in conflict over the child’s refusal to eat his or her vegetables
- Siblings fighting about who gets to use the bathroom mirror
- A couple who disagree over interior decorating choices

As a class, brainstorm ideas for a short dialogue between the two characters. The dialogue should have a beginning, middle, and end, and clearly articulate the conflict, but be short enough to memorize quickly (no more than 5 or so lines per character). Divide the class in half, assigning the first group to one character and the second group to the other. Orchestrate the memorization of the dialogue by having the groups read it aloud together several times. Then pair up students from each group so that each pair has one of each character.

Have students create a brief “kitchen sink drama” by using the dialogue to create a performance that brings the conflict to life. Confine the performance to a 4’ x 4’ space that represents a home setting (such as the area around a kitchen sink, the hallway in front of the bathroom, etc.) and restrict props to a single chair. Pantomime all other props.

After each pair performs, reflect on the following: How was performing the chosen situation similar to and different from really living it? What is really happening in the scene? In each pair, what subtext was implied by the characters’ movements and actions? What deeper truths about the characters and their relationships are communicated within this “slice of life” interaction?

This exercise can also be done with each pair focusing on a different character/conflict combination.

Creative Writing Exercise: Time Capsule

“So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century.—This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.” **(Act I, page 33)**

“An archaeologist’s eyes combine the view of the telescope with the view of the microscope. He reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.” **(Thornton Wilder’s original preface to *Our Town*)**

Ask students to bring in an item (alternatively, make a list of items) that they would put into a time capsule—things that they feel best exemplify this moment of their lives in 2012 (or 2013, if you are seeing the play in January!). Students should then write a story from the perspective of the person who finds the item(s) one thousand years from now—what assumptions would you make about the people who put these items in a time capsule? What do you think are the functions of these items? Are the items mainly sentimental or practical? Describe the future society and explain how these items may fit into it, if they do at all. Do you think the items are odd, or does your society still have things similar to the items found in the time capsule?

Essay alternative: Have students write a five-paragraph essay about the items they have chosen and the significance that the item or items have in their lives. Why do they think these items should be preserved for future generations? What do they think someone one thousand years from now would think of the items in the time capsule? What do they hope someone in the future would understand about them or their culture from the time capsule items?

Dramatic Writing: Stage Managing Your Life

The Stage Manager serves as a narrator in *Our Town*. He provides information about the characters and setting, sets the mood of the play, and in a way, gives the play its moral compass. Examine the Stage Manager’s speeches, such as those at the beginning

of each act, then ask students to write out a simple scene from their daily lives (washing dishes with a parent, getting ready to go to school with their siblings, helping a neighbor rake leaves, shoveling snow, doing other chores around the house—anything that involves more than one person) in the manner of the Stage Manager. Students should include:

- Precise details of who the people in the scene are
- The date, time, and location in which the scene takes place
- Some of the history of scene's setting
- Some of the inner thoughts, wishes, hopes, and dreams of the characters involved in the scene

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