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Preparing to Produce a Play in a High School Theatre Department

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Preparing to Produce a Play in a High School Theatre Department

(TITLE)

BY
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UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

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THESIS ADVISOR

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Date

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10 June 2019

Date

✓ DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Preparing to Produce a Play in a High School Theatre Department

Theatre Arts Departmental Honors Thesis

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When looking to produce a play in a high school theatre department, there are many different aspects to look at throughout the initial preparation process. In this thesis project, I will be exploring the different components involved in preparing to produce a successful production by ensuring that you as the director are as prepared as possible. The play that will be the central focus of this discussion will be *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. This play was wildly successful when it first premiered in 1938 and went on to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Drama after a successful run on Broadway.

Our Town is considered a metatheatrical play using a variety of metatheatrical devices such as setting the play in the actual theatre where it is being performed and the main character being the Stage Manager of the theatre who directly addresses the audience and brings in guest lecturers as well as fields questions from the audience. He is also seen playing some of the roles throughout the production. The play is performed without a set on a mostly bare stage. The actors also mime most of their actions without the use of props. The play itself tells the story of the fictional American small town, Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, between 1901 and 1913 through the everyday lives of its citizens as well as the Stage Manager's many interjections.

When looking to produce this play, or any play for that matter, the first thing you as the director needs to do is read the play. This allows you to understand the play and know what is happening throughout the show. After the play is read, it is time to create a proposal. The proposal is a way of showing the administration what the play is about and what benefits the students and community will receive from the process and performance of the show. In my proposal for *Our Town*, I discussed the various benefits both students and community members would receive as a result of performing this show in the reference titled "Fall Production Proposal 2019".

To help with the proposal it may be a good idea to create a general summary of each act of the play. This way you can quickly refer to your notes on the play to understand what is required for each act. In this thesis project, I have created a document titled “*Our Town* Act Breakdown” where I discuss the general summary of each of the three acts in the play.

Another component that would be very beneficial is creating a detailed analysis of the main characters. This is because it is important to have a good working knowledge of the main characters present in each scene and what each character requires of the actor. In this project, I created the reference “Main Character Breakdown: *Our Town*” as a way to help me understand each main character and how they fit into the story. This can be very useful to you as the director when it comes to casting. Having a good working knowledge of each character’s personality allows you to choose students who will best fit in these roles.

The next step in helping to understand the play is the answer a few basic questions about what the play is about. Using all of the previous information you gathered as well as your knowledge from reading the play, you can answer a few questions such as listing the major themes and the playwright’s intentions in writing the play. These questions will allow you to develop a deeper understanding of the major points in the play and help you interpret how to best direct the show. In this project, I answered these questions and many more in the reference titled “What is this Play About? (*Our Town*)”. Here I analyzed various aspects of the play, such as the title and character names, to develop a deeper understanding of what the play was intended to convey. I can then take these notes and utilize them when deciding in which direction I wish to take the play in and how to direct the actors.

After a general summary is completed and the basic questions are answered, the next step in understanding the play is to break the show down into French Scenes. French Scenes are a

way to break down a script into motivational units. This classic technique is used as a way to show the entrance or exit of major characters which can be used to signal a change in motivation. When producing a show such as *Our Town*, breaking it into the French Scenes allows the director to see what characters are going to be required for rehearsing specific sections of the play. This not only allows you to understand the script better but gives you an easier way of creating a rehearsal schedule. In this thesis project, I created a reference titled “Modified French Scenes for the Play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder” where I go into detail analyzing where each French Scene would be and what characters are present.

In the proposal I also made sure to include the set, prop, lighting, and costume requirements. This is all important information to present with a proposal because a lot of these components will need to be purchased or rented from various places. One thing that may also be beneficial in creating a proposal is to create a projected budget sheet, so the administration understands how the money will be handled and where it will go. In this project I created a mock budget sheet as well as included resources for purchasing materials titled “*Our Town* Budget Sheet”. Creating a list of costume ideas, if you are the only person in charge of the production, will also help you get an idea of prices as well as show the administration what the show will look like. I created a list of my main character’s costumes and my research titled “*Our Town* Costume References” to help me.

Once the show is approved by the administration you are ready to begin the rest of the process to produce the play. As the director, you will be in charge of casting, creating rehearsal schedules, creating the set, ensuring sound and lighting is working and appropriate for the production, and advertisements. I created a mock poster for the “High School” production of *Our Town* labeled as “Mock Poster”. However, thanks to the steps we took in ensuring you

understood the play, the rest of the producing and directing process should be significantly easier. In my analysis of *Our Town*, I have created all of the documents mentioned above and included them with this paper. These samples can be referred to when discussed in the corresponding sections.

Reference 1:

Fall Production Proposal 2019

1. Title and Author

- *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder

1. Educational Benefits

- Acting challenges:
 - Opportunity for students to learn a variety of acting techniques such as pantomime
 - Act 3 possesses a variety of challenges for “the dead” – required to deliver lines without emotion and never look at any other character but cannot have a “stiffness” to them
 - High schoolers playing high schoolers – this will push students to get into the mindset of people who are their own age but were born in a completely different time period. It gives them an insight into the lives of people living then.
 - Working on communicating an emotional growth in characters through the play – seen specifically with Emily and George
- Collaboration and team work – students will rely on each other during the show as many characters have extensive dialogue
- The ability to cast a variety of students depending on student interest– 24 characters with the ability to decrease or slightly increase size as needed
- Collaboration with the choir program/any students interested in singing
- Strong themes of companionship and the importance of friendship presented throughout the play
- Opportunity to bring in an outside actor for the role of Stage Manager – students will get firsthand experience working with a more experienced actor or member of the community or another teacher/faculty member

2. Community Benefits

- Strong themes of community, home, life, and small-town America – this is something that would be able to reach everyone regardless of their interest in theatre
 - Members of the audience can relate to these themes coming from a small-town with a supportive and close community – it can remind

them to slow down and enjoy the little things in life. Don't let it pass you by too fast because you can't go back once it is gone.

- Opportunity to bring in an outside actor for the role of Stage Manager – this would allow the community to be more involved in the production
 - Opportunity for the community to support and give back to the theatre program in the form of donations and intermission concessions
3. Set Requirements
 - Minimal set/prop requirement
 - No backdrop required – takes place mainly on an “empty stage”
 - Most props are pantomimed
 4. Costume Requirements
 - Period costumes (early 1900s) – allow students to learn about the time period
 5. Lighting Requirements
 - Traditional stage lighting required
 - No extra effects in lighting required but many opportunities to do so

Reference 2:

Our Town Act Breakdown

Act 1:

The Stage Manager introduces the audience to the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, and the people living there. The play begins in the year 1901 as each character goes about their day. Eventually, the Stage Manager stops the play to allow Professor Willard to speak to the audience directly about the history of the town. Later, Joe Crowell delivers the paper to Doc Gibbs as Howie Newsome delivers the milk and the Webb and Gibbs' households send their children (Emily and George, respectively) off to school.

Act 2:

Three years have passed, and George and Emily prepare to wed. The day is stressful for everyone involved. Howie Newsome delivers milk in the pouring rain while Si Crowell, younger brother of Joe, laments how George's baseball talents will be squandered. George pays an awkward visit to his soon-to-be in-laws. Here, the Stage Manager interrupts the scene and takes the audience back a year, to the end of Emily and George's junior year of high school. In this flashback, Emily confronts George about his pride, and over an ice cream soda, they discuss the future and their love for each other. George resolves not to go to college, as he had planned, but to work and eventually take over his uncle's farm. In the present, George and Emily say that they are not ready to marry—George to his mother, Emily to her father—but they both calm down and happily go through with the wedding. Most of the town is there to witness the wedding.

Act 3:

Nine years have passed. The Stage Manager opens the act with a lengthy monologue emphasizing eternity, bringing the audience's attention to the cemetery outside of town and the characters who have died since the wedding, including Mrs. Gibbs (pneumonia, while traveling), Wally Webb (burst appendix, while camping), Mrs. Soames, and Simon Stimson (suicide by hanging). Town undertaker Joe Stoddard is introduced with a young man named Sam Craig who

has returned to Grover's Corners for his cousin's funeral. That cousin is Emily, who died giving birth to her and George's second child. Once the funeral ends, Emily emerges to join the dead; Mrs. Gibbs urges her to forget her life, warning her that being able to see but not interact with her family, all the while knowing what will happen in the future, will cause her too much pain, but she refuses. Ignoring the warnings of Mr. Stinson, Mrs. Soames, and Mrs. Gibbs, Emily returns to Earth to relive one day, her 12th birthday. Emily watches with joy at being able to see her parents and some of the people of her childhood for the first time in years. However, her joy quickly turns to pain as she realizes how little people appreciate the simple joys of life. The memory proves too painful for her, and she realizes that every moment of life should be treasured. When she asks the Stage Manager if anyone truly understands the value of life while they live it, he responds, "No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some." Emily returns to her grave next to Mrs. Gibbs and watches impassively as George kneels weeping over her. The Stage Manager concludes the play and wishes the audience a good night.

Reference 3:

Main Character Breakdown: *Our Town*

Stage Manager:

- The host of the play and omniscient narrator
- The Stage Manager controls the action of the play, cueing the other characters actions, interrupting their scenes with his own interjections, and informing the audience of events and objects that we cannot see
- Occasionally assumes other roles, such as a minister – Interacts with both the world of the audience and the world of the play
- Almost reflective in thought at times – fondness for this story and its characters

Emily:

- Daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Webb
- Marries George in act 2 – their love is the focus of the “narrative” present in the play
- Dies in childbirth at beginning of act 3 – joins the dead souls
- Has major growth in act 3 – signifies the importance of living life and enjoying each moment

George:

- Son of Dr. Gibbs and Mrs. Gibbs
- Marries Emily in act 2 – their love is the focus of the “narrative” present in the play
- Innocent, “all-American” boy who chose love over his plans for the future

Mr. Webb:

- Emily’s father and the publisher and editor of the Grover’s Corners Sentinel
- Reports to the audience in Act I in interactive question-and-answer session – draws the audience physically into the action of the play.

Mrs. Webb:

- Emily’s mother and Mr. Webb’s wife
- At first a no-nonsense woman who does not cry on the morning of her daughter’s marriage – shows her innocent and caring nature, worrying during the wedding that she has not taught her daughter enough about marriage

Dr. Gibbs:

- George’s father and the town doctor
- Mild mannered and routine oriented man

Mrs. Gibbs:

George's mother and Dr. Gibbs' wife

One of the dead in act 3 – reveals personal growth of how important it is to enjoy life while you can

Dreams of one day visiting Paris – signifies the importance of seizing opportunity before its too late

Reference 4:

What is This Play About? (*Our Town*)

1. What does the title tell me about the play?

“Our Town” – this tells me that the location of play is supposed to represent any “all-American” small town. This story is supposed to resonate with the audience and provide them with a look into possibly their own town and the lives they live.

2. What does the date of the first performance tell me about the play?

The play was first performed on May 12, 1939. 1939 was the start of World War II – this play could be promoting the idea of community during the beginning of this huge war. It can also be seen as promoting the idea to live life to its fullest because you never know what tomorrow holds during these times.

3. What can I learn from the names of the characters?

Stage Manager: In theatre a stage manager is the one who basically runs the show behind the scenes – in this play he is like the omniscient “god-like” being who runs the play and the lives of these characters.

Emily: In Latin means “eager” – Emily is eager to return to her life after she dies but is greatly unaware of what consequences this holds

4. What is the major character’s functions?

a) Who is/are the central characters of the play?

The Stage Manager and Emily (Act 3)

5. What do the speeches in my play tell me about the meaning?

The main speeches presented throughout the play are those presented by the Stage Manager. His speeches tell us the key exposition and facts about the play as well as drive the action along. Looking at the themes he discussed, it is clear the Stage Manager wants us to see that life is fleeting and should be enjoyed and not taken for granted.

6. What was the playwright’s intent?

I believe the intent was to both inform and entertain. The playwright stresses the plot by providing the Stage Manager to tell the story but also stresses the characters by including the interactions with Emily, especially in Act 3.

7. What is the moment of disturbance?

The Stage Manager narrating the play – this is not a moment specifically but his narration and interventions throughout the play drive the action for the characters

8. What is the line or action that can be cited as the crisis or turning point?

The beginning of Act 3 – this is when Emily has just died and when the key themes are most present.

9. What is the line or action that can be cited as the climax?

Emily decides to relive a day despite many of the dead telling her not to

10. How effectively has the playwright handled exposition?

The Stage Manager is crucial for setting up exposition and narrating the play as a whole.

11. How well has the playwright handled dénouement?

The Stage Manager is crucial for handling dénouement and concluding the play. He is the one who informs the audience how the story ends.

12. Major themes?

The major themes are: community, friendship, don't take life for granted/live each day like it counts, and love.

Reference 5:

Modified French Scenes for the Play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder

Act 1 (1901)

1. Stage Manager

From – Stage Manager: This play is called “Our Town”

To – Stage Manager: And there comes Joe

2. Dr. Gibbs, Joe Crowell Jr., Stage Manager

From – Joe: Morning Doc Gibbs

To – Stage Manager: All that education for nothing

3. Howie Newsome, Stage Manager, Dr. Gibbs, Mrs. Gibbs

From – Howie: Giddap’ Bessie!

To – Howie: Come on Bessie

4. Mrs. Gibbs, Dr. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, Rebecca, Wally, Emily, George, Stage Manager

From – Mrs. Gibbs: George! Rebecca!

To – All: Goodbye!

5. Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb

From – Mrs. Gibbs: Here chick chick!

To – Mrs. Gibbs:English and don’t even want to

6. Stage Manager, Professor Willard

From – Stage Manager: Thank you ladies!

To – Thank you again.

7. Stage Manager, Mrs. Webb, Mr. Webb, Woman in the Balcony, Belligerent Man, Lady in Box

From – Stage Manager: Oh Mr. Webb?

To – Mr. Webb: Such a great lady before

8. George, Stage Manager (as Mrs. Forest), Emily

From – George: Excuse me Mrs. Forest

To – George: So long Emily

9. Emily, Mrs. Webb

From – Emily: So long George

To – Emily: You're no help at all

10. Stage Manager

From – Stage Manager: Thank you.

To – Stage Manager: ...tired Clock.

11. Simon Stimpson, Choir, George, Emily

From – Simon: Now look here

To – Emily: Good night George

12. George, Dr. Gibbs

From – Dr. Gibbs: Oh George

To – George: Yes Pa

13. Mrs. Soames, Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Gibbs

From – Mrs. Soames: Good night Martha

To – Mrs. Soames: ...men folk carry on

14. Mrs. Gibbs, Dr. Gibbs

From – Mrs. Gibbs: Well, we had a real good time

To – Dr. Gibbs: ...and everybody knows it

15. George, Rebecca, Stage Manager, Mr. Webb, Constable Warren, Emily

From – George: Get out Rebecca!

To – Stage Manager: ...those that smoke

Act 2 (1904)

1. Stage Manager

From – Stage Manager: Three years have gone by

To – Stage Manager: It's what they call a vicious circle

2. Stage Manager, Howie Newsome, Si Crowell, Constable Warren

From – Stage Manager: Here comes Howie Newsome

To – Howie Newsome: ...clear up for good

3. Howie Newsome, Mrs. Gibbs

From – Mrs. Gibbs: Good morning Howie

To – Howie Newsome: Come on Bessie

4. Dr. Gibbs, Mrs. Gibbs

From – Dr. Gibbs: Well Ma, the day has come

To – Mrs. Gibbs: Come and get your breakfast!

5. George, Mrs. Gibbs, Dr. Gibbs, Mr. Webb, Mrs. Webb

From – George: Good morning everybody

To – Mr. Webb: ...now remember that

6. Stage Manager

From – Stage Manager: Thank you very much

To – Stage Manager: ...coming down Main Street

7. Emily, George, Stage Manager (as Mr. Morgan), Emily's friends (pantomimed but can be real in needed)

From – Emily: I can't Louise

To – George: I'm ready

8. Stage Manager (also as minister), Mrs. Webb, Baseball Players (as many as needed but minimum 3), Mrs. Gibbs, George, Emily, Mr. Webb, Mrs. Soames,

Choir, Present but not speaking: Rebecca, Dr. Gibbs, Wally, Misc. Towns People as needed

From – Stage Manager: Well-

To – Stage Manager: Ten-minute intermission

Act 3 (1913)

(There are 10-12 characters in the “graveyard” on stage for the entirety of the act including: Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, and Wally. They only speak when specifically mentioned in the scene.)

1. Stage Manager

From – Stage Manager: This time nine years has gone by friends

To – Stage Manager: ...that left town to go west

2. Sam Craig, Joe Stoddard

From – Sam Craig: Good afternoon Joe Stoddard

To – Joe Stoddard: I see they're comin'

3. Mrs. Soames, Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, Woman from Among the Dead, Man from Among the Dead, Emily, Mr. Carter, Present but not speaking: Funeral party including Dr. Gibbs, George, the Webbs, ect.)

From – Mrs. Soames: Who is it Julia?

To – The Dead: ...three-day blow

4. Emily, Stage Manager, Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Soames

From – Emily: But mother Gibbs

To – Emily: But he's dead; he died!

5. Howie Newsome, Constable Warren, Emily, Joe Crowell, Mrs. Webb, Mr. Webb

From – Howie Newsome: Woah Bessie!

To – Mr. Webb: Where is my birthday girl?

6. Emily, Stage Manager, Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimpson, Man Among the Dead (x2), Woman Among the Dead

From – Emily: I can't. I can't go on.

To – Stage Manager: Good night.

Reference 6:

Our Town Budget Sheet (Pulled from Microsoft Excel)

Projected Income:

		(\$10 a
Ticket Sales	1200	ticket)
Concessions	200	
Sponsorships	1000	
Donations	200	
Fundraisers	400	
Total Projected Income	3000	

Projected Expenses:

Royalties	520	(Includes 4 performaces)
Scripts	248	
Set	200	
Props	50	
Costumes and Accessories	910	
Stage Makeup	300	
Miscellaneous Expenses	150	
Total Projected Expenses	2378	

References:

Script
and
Royalties <https://www.samuelfrench.com/p/646/our-town>

Costumes <https://tdf.org/nyc/57/Pricing-Info>

Stage
Makeup <https://www.stagemakeuponline.com/02-KMP/Mehron-Mini-Pro-Student-Makeup-Kit.html?ref=%2Fsearch%3Fdepartment%3DSchool+and+Education+Supplies>

Reference 7:

Our Town Costume References

Stage Manager:



Monochromatic vest and pants with white undershirt. Tie will act as a pop of color (red or blue). Possible jacket.



Alternate tie possibility

Emily:



Very bright color such as yellow or orange with simple styled hair (Act 1)



Wedding dress (Act 2)



"Dead" Emily Act 3

George:



Sweater vest with tie.
Complementing color to
Emily



Wedding suit (Act 2)

Townspople:



Variety of colors for women's dresses



Men in suits and vests. Working men (like Howie) can be in more casual clothing

The Dead:



Characters who have died (Act 3) are in either all white or all gray. A mix of both colors in the "cemetery"

Reference 8:

Mock Poster

"High School" Drama Department

Presents

Our Town

Written by Thornton Wilder

Directed by Cullen Scurlock

November 27th, 7:30 pm

November 28th, 7:30 pm

November 29th, 7:30 pm

November 30th, 2:00 pm

**Tickets
\$10 at
the door!**

