

1 week ago

Our Town Shines In The Center Of The Universe



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It was a sort of busman's holiday for me. I had heard about the Whistle Stop Theatre Company for the past several years, but sense their work was primarily children and family oriented and didn't fall under the guidelines of coverage by the RTCC, I hadn't journeyed to Ashland to check out their work. However, when I learned they were presenting Thornton Wilder's classic *Our Town* with a largely professional cast, I was curious enough to make the trip north and once I experienced the show, I was delighted to have made it.

Once upon a time, *Our Town* was frequently produced, but lately it has been replaced by a number of other titles. Maybe its small town charm has become too folksy, but its universality still holds up all these years later. It's a world in which young boys and girls still fall in love and get married, it's a world in which dreams don't have to be big to be important and it's a world where love, joy, and pain often go hand in hand.

This production of *Our Town* is a real family affair for the Keeton family. Artistic Director Louise Keeton, who plays Emily with beautiful wide eyed naivete scores with her down to earth honesty. Her father Craig Keeton is the Stage Manager who narrates the show and assumes a couple of roles with a down home charm. Her real life mother Barbara Keeton plays her stage mother Mrs. Webb with a solid reality.

Emily's boyfriend, George is played by Axle Burtness and the two show their growth from about age 16 to mid 20's. Burtness has a strong presence throughout the show as he grows from shy kid just interested in baseball and farming to adult husband touched by tragedy.

Dean Knight as Simon Stimson steals just about every scene he is in, whether playing the troubled choir leader as tipsy, drunk, or playing the organ for Emily and George's wedding. Knight, like Burtness and Louise Keeton, has a solid reputation for his work and he certainly lives up to it here.

A nice surprise is Annie Zannetti as Mrs. Gibbs, George's mother. Zannetti chooses her roles carefully and while I've seen her play some hysterical roles in the past, it was good to see her play a sweet dramatic role.

Director Matt Bloch has assembled a great cast who has come together quickly. I've been told that the group only had twelve rehearsals prior to opening making this production that much more impressive in my book. Bloch is noted more for his acting than his directing, but this could open up more opportunities for him. He even throws in an homage to his working space of a movie theatre for one important scene. Very astute.

Working in a movie theatre presents certain issues, but not as many as one might imagine. If you go, and I hope that you will, make sure you sit in the center or on audience right in order to take advantage of some of the blocking.


I hope this is the start of more adult theatre being produced by the Whistle Stop Theatre Company, as they have done a great job bringing *Our Town* to life. It is well worth the journey to Ashland to see their work.

For more information, please [check out their website \[https://whistlestoptheatre.weebly.com/ \]](https://whistlestoptheatre.weebly.com/) and visit this interview I conducted with Louise Keeton here: <https://vpm.org/articles/26839/whistle-stop-theatre-companys-production-of-our-town-a-family-affair> [\[https://vpm.org/articles/26839/whistle-stop-theatre-companys-production-of-our-town-a-family-affair\]](https://vpm.org/articles/26839/whistle-stop-theatre-companys-production-of-our-town-a-family-affair)


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