

## RVArt Review

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# OUR TOWN



**“Does Anyone Ever Realize Life While They Live It?”**

*A Theater Review by Julinda D. Lewis*

**At:** The Ashland Theatre, 205 England Street, Ashland, VA 23005

**Performances:** November 3, 12 & 13, 2021

**Ticket Prices:** November 3: Pay What You Can. November 12 & 13: \$10 donation.

**Info:** [whistlestoptheatre@gmail.com](mailto:whistlestoptheatre@gmail.com)

Nothing out of the ordinary happens in Thornton Wilder’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, **OUR TOWN**, and that is precisely the point. But first, a confession: like many of

you, I have heard of **OUR TOWN**, but this is the first time I have ever actually seen it.

Presented in three acts, “Daily Life,” “Love and Marriage,” and “Death and Eternity,” the play – a metadrama, if you will, that is narrated by the Stage Manager (Craig Keeton) – follows the simple, everyday lives of two families who live in the fictional New Hampshire town of Grover’s Corners from 1901 to 1914. Children grow up. People fall in love and get married. Others die. And therein lies the thick of the plot.

Using minimal props (four ordinary wooden chairs, two wooden ladders, and a couple of those all-purpose black cubes that most theater companies seem to have in stock) Wilder takes us on a languidly breath-taking journey that reveals the complexities and the beauty of life. Of every life. Of your life and mine. Do we take the time to look at one another? Do we really listen to one another? Are we really present in our own lives? Mrs. Webb (Barbara Keeton) insists that, as important as reading is, Wally (William Young) put his book down at the breakfast table. (I don’t need to tell you to translate that to today’s smartphone, but I just did.) Rebecca Gibbs (Ziona Tucker) sneaks into her brother’s room because his window has a better view of the full moon, and another character – I don’t remember which – takes time to enjoy the moon as well as the scent of Mrs. Gibbs’ heliotrope. (For those of us who had no clue, that’s a fragrant, often purple-colored flower often used to make perfume. And yes, to make another obvious statement, that’s example of taking time to stop and smell the, well, flowers...)

Emily’s mama assures her that she is, in fact, pretty. “You’re pretty enough for all normal purposes.” And when Emily (Louise Keeton) can’t find a blue hair ribbon her mother left out for her, Mrs. Webb says, “if it were a snake it would have bitten you,” the exact words my own grandmother wielded on my youthful overlooking of the obvious. Simon Stimson, the organist and choir director for one of the town’s churches (there are multiple denominations, with the Congregationalists and Methodists near the center of town, the Baptists down by the river and the Catholics on the other side of the tracks), has a drinking problem. People gossip about him, but they also look out for him, and we never learn the cause of his unnamed

troubles. The point is, **OUR TOWN** really is about the best of each and every one of us.

The play starts on May 7, 1901. Dr. Gibbs (John Gordon) is the overworked town doctor, there is a stable for the horses, and it is deemed downright weird for anyone to lock their doors at night. George Gibbs (Axle Burtness) and Emily Webb (Louise Keeton) meet in high school. Act 2 takes place three years later. It's July 7, 1904, when students have graduated and turn their attention to marriage. George and Emily get married right after intermission.

**SPOILER ALERT:** Don't read the next paragraph if you don't know what happens in the third act.

The third act takes place nine years later. It's 1913. Horses are becoming a rare sight on the main streets and people have started locking their doors. Emily has died giving birth to her second child and the rest of the play takes place in the town cemetery after a philosophical monologue by the Stage Manager and a simple yet touching procession in which Emily is surrounded by her remaining family. (I won't give away everything; even I have my limitations!)

Some comic relief is provided by Dean Knight as Simon Stimson, the drunken choir director. Knight appears up in the balcony, usually with a bottle, or some sort of drinking prop in his hand. Props are rare commodities in **OUR TOWN**. Most actions are mimed by the ensemble, some with more clarity than others. A wonderfully awkward moment occurs when George visits his future father-in-law (Roger Reynolds on November 2, Frank Creasey on November 12 and 13) on the morning of the wedding. And the soft-spoken Emily gives George a piece of her mind, striding from the stage to the back of the audience, forcing us to turn and crane our necks like voyeurs watching a couple's very public argument.

Some cast members have been given multiple roles. Most notably, Ziona Tucker gave little sister Rebecca Gibbs just the right amount of sassiness, balanced friendliness and servitude as newspaper boy, Howie Newsome appeared constrained as mortician Joe Stoddard with a long church jacket that appeared to have been misbuttoned. (Was that intentional, or no?). William Young also breezed through

multiple roles as little brother Wally Webb, Si Crowell (who appears only as a visitor for his cousin's death), and Sam Craig.

Director Matt Bloch maintains a languid pace that doesn't feel weighted down and keeps the audience from becoming complacent by blatantly ignoring the parameters of the proscenium stage. Once we, the audience, become familiar with the characters and their rhythm, the pacing and flow seem quite natural – so natural that I couldn't be sure if a few slight stumbles were first-night flubs or normal speech patterns. I also thought I detected some New England accents, but I didn't see any credit for a dialect coach, so maybe I was just lulled by the atmosphere.

This production – my introductory production – of **OUR TOWN** is like theatrical baklava: rich and multi-layered, sweet with seductive savory bits mixed in, resulting in a satisfying treat. Two more performances remain as of this writing.

## **OUR TOWN**

by Thornton Wilder

### **Cast**

Craig Keeton as the Stage Manager

Axle Burtness as George Gibbs

Dean Knight as Simon Stimson

Louise Keeton as Emily Webb

Roger Reynolds as Mr. Webb on Nov 3

Frank Creasy as Mr. Webb on Nov 12 & 13

John Gordon as Dr. Gibbs

Barbara Keeton as Mrs. Webb

William Young as Wally Webb, Si Crowell & Sam Craig

Annie Zannetti as Mrs. Gibbs

Ziona Tucker as Rebecca Gibbs, Howie Newsome & Joe Stoddard

### **Creative Team**

Directed by Matt Bloch  
Music direction by Michelle Bayliss  
Stage management by Kieran Rundle

**FYI Notes**

1.) *Guests are required to present proof of vaccination at the door and remain masked unless consuming concessions. Children under the age of 12 may attend without proof of vaccination.*

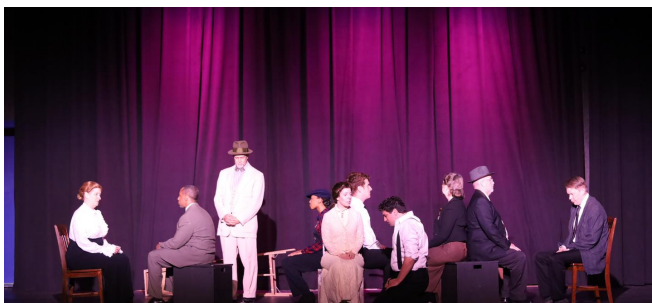
*Guests may choose their own seats upon arrival and are encouraged to consider social distancing.*

2.) *There are no physical tickets or seating assignments. Ticket confirmation emails will be sent the day before the show you purchased tickets for. If you purchase tickets the day of the show, you will not receive a confirmation email from the Whistle Stop. Please bring a copy of your PayPal confirmation in its place.*

Julinda D. Lewis is a dancer, teacher, and writer who was born in Brooklyn, NY and now lives in Eastern Henrico County.

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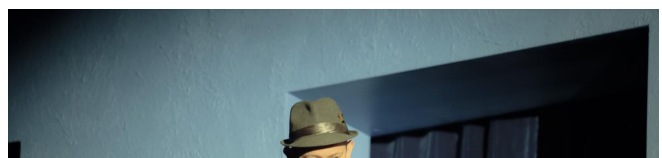
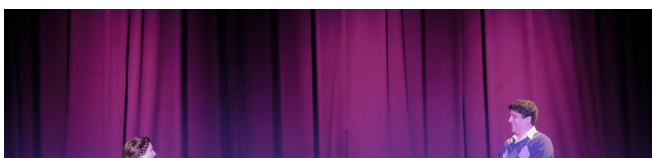
*Photo Credits: Kieran Rundle*



*The Cast of OUR TOWN*



*Annie Zannetti & Barbara Keeton*





*Louise Keeton &  
Axle Burtness*



*Dean Knight*



*The Cast of OUR TOWN*



*Ziona Tucker &  
Axle Burtness*



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**Author: jdldances**

Julinda D. Lewis is a dancer, teacher, and writer, born and raised in Brooklyn, NY and transplanted to Richmond, VA. A retiree from both the New York City and Richmond City Public School systems, she is currently an Adjunct Instructor for the Department of Dance and Choreography at Virginia Commonwealth University, and holds the degrees of BS and MA in Dance and Dance Education (New York University), MEd in Early Childhood

Education (Brooklyn College, CUNY), and is currently working on her dissertation in Educational Leadership (Regent University). Julinda is the Richmond Site Leader for TEN/The Eagles Network and the East Region Coordinator for the International Dance Commission and has worked in dance ministry all over the US and abroad (Bahamas, Barbados, Haiti, Jamaica, Kenya, Puerto Rico). She is licensed in dance ministry by the Eagles International Training Institute (2012), and was ordained in dance ministry through Calvary Bible Institute and Seminary, Martinez, GA (2009). [View all posts by jdldances](#)

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