

When We Were Young and Beautiful!

by Tom Dugdale



Photo 11: (L to R, back to front) Jack Mikesell, Patrick Riley, Taylor Shurte, Joshua Brody, Zoë Chao, Thomas Miller, Claire Kaplan, Jenni Putney, Matthew MacNelly, Carissa Cash. Act One: The company sing “Oh, Bloom.”

Privately, I retitled my production of *Our Town*, “When We Were Young and Beautiful.” This wasn’t my line but a transposition of Emily’s in Act Three: “I can’t bear it. They’re so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old?” I cast young actors (all under 30) to straddle time. They looked like my parents in those embarrassing home videos we all hide. Young and beautiful indeed, my cast were both their own vivacious Present and ghosts of an unreclaimable Past.

Our Town asks for three different levels of looking. Act One is panoramic, like flying over the town, or standing above a miniature city in a natural history museum. Act Two pulls you down from the sky, ushering you indoors: the Webbs’ and Gibbs’ kitchens, the soda shop, the church. Act Three pulls you further still, into the ground. The play is a continuous seduction downward, an entreaty to look closer and closer, until you are caught and then compelled to imagine your own end. This was why I seated the audience and *The Dead* together in Act Three. In overromanticizing *Our Town*, we have forgotten the cruelty of its confrontation, the freedom it dangles early and then

gradually retracts. This confrontation was critical to Wilder, and site-specific performance offered new possibilities for exploring it.

Of Wilder’s many admonishments to the director, I found this one most provocative:

There remain two ways of producing the play. One, with a constant subtle acknowledgement of lights and sound effects; [or] a still bolder acknowledgement of artifice and make-belief: the rooster’s crow, the train and factory whistles and school bells frankly man-made.

For Act One and Act Two, I embraced Wilder’s second proposal, since I prefer cables undressed anyway. But then I broke the convention—and the convention of the entire Without Walls Festival—staging Act Three in a small blackbox theatre situated underground. While the line between audience and performance space is blurred in site-specific performance, going into a theatre re-establishes that line, and Act Three requires boundaries. Act Three is not about death or life, but the wall between the two—

how you're stuck on one side or the other. Any attempt to reach the other side is unsustainable fantasy, which is to say, theatre. Ending the production in a theatre was also (at least for me) a reflection on the entire festival: as we enjoy the freedom that comes from abandoning the traditional performance spaces, we cannot deny that theatres remain solemn temples whose walls are sometimes perfect.

Some say *Our Town* belongs to, and is driven by, the character of the Stage Manager. I believe a play that traverses so much life must belong to a larger group. I made many choices throughout the production to ensure collective responsibility. In the final moment there was not one voice but all voices, the ensemble summoned one more time, to underline what I see as Wilder's enduring message: We are not dead, we are here, we go on.

Rehearsing *Our Town* by Joshua Kahan Brody

Rehearsing *Our Town* was a daunting challenge. To begin with, we only had two weeks of rehearsal in the rehearsal room, followed by a scant few days of tech before opening. And yet despite that time pressure, the rehearsals were relaxed and playful. We began nearly every day with an intense and joyful physical warm-up, full of dancing and stomping and stretching. We all knew each other before beginning the process, which undoubtedly helped, but there was also great time and care taken by

Tom to allow for the creation of the ensemble. Moreover, Tom has a way of working on a scene that is efficient without seeming mechanical. He has an uncanny ability to articulate the situation of a scene clearly to the actors and then to allow them to play that situation precisely without squashing their input or creativity. Tom directs without ego and without wasted effort. No time is squandered talking around a moment. We are simply directed as to the situation and then we play it. Apparently, it allowed us to accomplish what normally might take four weeks in half that time.

Given the concept and the style of the production, a lot of its success probably relied on the energy and intimacy created by the ensemble. We christened the rehearsal room with sweat every day. You put the right group of people in a room with some guitars, a keyboard, and a microphone, and who knows what you can make.

The dramaturgy of *Our Town* is incredibly freeing for an actor. The style and the meta-theatrical devices lift the burden of realism or the creation of an arc. Because of the Stage Manager's intrusions into the smooth narrative and the artificial beginnings and ends of scenes and acts, an actor doesn't have to think through the play as a smooth arc. Sometimes when we work on a narrative play, the actor's temptation is to look at the whole play as a smooth arc for their character: what happens to me in a) which leads to b) which leads to c) etc. all seamlessly and smoothly, with delicately connected threads. *Our Town's* rough dramaturgy resists this kind of thinking and insists instead upon playing the moment in front of you, purely, simply. It allows for abrupt changes and shifts, musical explosions, and impromptu

Photo 12: (L to R) Jack Mikesell, Zoë Chao, Joshua Brody, Taylor Shurte, Patrick Riley. Act One: Breakfast in the Webbs' house.



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