

Michael Miller - Berkshire Review for the Arts:

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*

Guest starring as Professor Willard for one night only: Frank Serpico

In the past week I have seen three plays, and each has been a play about community and/or family: Ödön von Horváth's *Judgment Day*, part of Bard's Summerfest, John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*, and the quintessential play of small town America, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Horváth presents a small town as well, an Austro-Hungarian community poisoned and corrupted by its own preferences, which are fickle, of course, because the preferences depend on rumour and whim. *Six Degrees of Separation* explores an even scarier community, the impersonal environment of Manhattan, where standing, one thinks, has to be maintained on a daily basis, if one doesn't want simply to disappear from the world. *Our Town*'s reputation as an American classic which resonates the true spirit of the simple life of rural New England has remained almost inviolable, although it is the work of a cosmopolitan homosexual who grew up in an intellectual mid-western family. His American simplicity came from his friend Gertrude Stein, not an intimate acquaintance with life in the Monadnock region. We accept it as a play that rings true, but, knowing that *Our Town* is anything but a series of impressions of the playwright's youth in southern New Hampshire, I still find that Wilder can still get his audiences to meet him on his own terms. He is looking at his characters and their environment from a certain metaphysical distance.

Walking the Dog Theatre, given their anthroposophical origins are well-prepared for this sort of long view of the play, but part of their mission is based on involving the local community, which enables most members of the audience to participate, at least by proxy, though someone they may know, who is appearing on stage. In this production New York Equity actors appear alongside local professionals and amateurs. In particular, a prominent local is invited to do a turn as Professor Willard. Frank Serpico appeared the night I saw it, and he dispatched his piece with some gusto.

The hit production at the Barrow Street Theater in Manhattan seems to have spawned a flood of interest in Wilder's old favorite, and, at least in the Berkshires we have two other productions at our feet: Walking the Dog's and another at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, to open on July 28th. Why not see them all, and immerse yourself in a play that bridged the gap between the avant-garde and homespun Americana for a generation or more? At PS 21, the wonderful, acoustically excellent movable tent, which has been installed in a field outside Chatham, NY, you will see some fine professionals, some gifted company actors trained in Michael Chekhov's technique, as well as some committed non-professionals — all gracefully blended and painstakingly rehearsed by David Anderson, who also appeared as the Stage Manager, who provides an overarching narrative and commentary on the story. An especially gratifying quality was the level of interaction among the performers, not only in individual scenes, when they were working closely together, but in ensemble action, when actors executed nicely tuned movements on opposite sides of the stage.

It seemed that actors were cast with their vocal qualities in mind among all the rest: most displayed extremely clear diction and very attractive voices in PS21's kindly acoustics. By contrast, I have to say that the ensemble's command of New England, specifically New Hampshire accents, was weak. I'll single this out as one criticism of the performance, in order to underline how weak our grasp of our rapidly fading American regional accents and dialect has become. I've lived around Boston long enough to experience the demise of the once distinctive local dialects, but when I was in college, I had the pleasure of knowing two friends who lived in suburbs ten miles away from each other and had known each other since early childhood, and their families had known each other since Revolutionary days, who had to repeat bits of ordinary conversation, because they couldn't understand their accents: "Eh, what was that you said, sir?" In any case, most of the WTD actors made a brave attempt at some sort of New English accent for a few lines and then lapsed into their own voices. Robert Ian Mackenzie, a distinguished Scottish actor based in New York, eventually sounded British. David Anderson sounded like a Southerner. Benedicta Bertau, a gifted multi-lingual Chekhov actor, whose native language is German, was as good as anybody. I mention the phonetical shortcomings of this production, because they are only typical of our ignorance of local accents. Who really knows what a New Hampshireman of 1900 sounded like, except a few academic specialists? I went to high school in New Hampshire. I wish I could remember the athletic coaches' accents. There has to be some reason for doing sports at school.

The scene between Dr. Gibbs and his son George lingers in my mind as especially well done and moving. George is the son of a physician, not very bright at school, who is lapsing back into the family past to take over his uncle's farm. Unfortunately he is lazy, even more of a handicap for a farmer than a physician, and his father sees fit to wake him up on this, not in general but in a particular context: the boy's failure to help his mother in chores, and — on a moral level — his indifference to his mother's contribution to their family life through her constant labor. Robert Ian Mackenzie built the scene up with a master's hand, firmly holding the doctor's ultimate passion, and progressing gradually to a fine blend of kindness and sarcasm that cut the boy to the quick. (I can remember a similarly gentle cauterisation of flagging purpose by the great Latin master, Robert MacFarlane Galt, fondly and respectfully remembered by his pupils.) It had its effect in Wilder's play, just as it had in my experience, but Dr. Gibbs had it easy. George listened. In *Six Degrees*, poor Ouisa and Flann only get the worst response when they attempt to ask a favor of their offspring.

Americans were so much better and so much more American before the War, the first one, I mean. At least Wilder has been able to convince people of that for some time, I've heard...