OUR TOWN
By Thornton Wilder

CREATIVE LEARNING RESOURCE

8 FEB TO 23 FEB
COURTYARD, STATE THEATRE CENTRE OF WA
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This Creative Learning Resource was written by Libby Klysz.

There are close links to Year 11 & 12 General and ATAR Drama, English, and Years 8-10 Drama syllabi.

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COVER: IAN MICHAEL. IMAGE BY RICHARD JEFFERSON
INTRODUCTION
MESSAGE FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

There is nothing more thrilling than the alchemy of theatre. Sitting in your seat and being invited into entire worlds created for you by brilliant artists. Thinking about who we are and the choices we make through the lens of a character realised by the extraordinary talent of an actor. The theatre invites our empathy and strengthens our compassion. The impossible becomes possible. And theatre can be ridiculously fun, the kind of fun that's infectious.

In curating the upcoming season, we began with the question – what should we be talking about right now, as citizens of Perth, as citizens of the world, as humans? Black Swan creates theatre that promises to be adventurous, ambitious, and highly entertaining, as well as asking those big questions.

As the next generation of artists, policy makers, theatre goers and engaged citizens, I invite students to join in the fun, and become part of the conversation.”

CLARE WATSON

OUR TOWN CREDITS

Director: Clare Watson
Set & Costume Designer: Tyler Hill
Lighting Designer: Chloe Ogilvie
Sound Designer/Composer: Russell Goldsmith
Assistant Director: Katt Osborne
Jonathan Paxman: Rhythmos Choir
Cast: Abbie-lee Lewis, Ian Michael, Shari Sebbens; supported by upto 95 members of the Perth community.
ABOUT BLACK SWAN

ARE WE PART OF THE HEART OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA? AND TO WHOM DO WE BELONG?

Our theatre has brought about countless moments of human connection – laughter, tears, and everything in between. After 27 years as our State’s premier theatre company, we can’t help but wonder if these moments have amounted to a greater sense of belonging. Have we, in part, helped you find Where the Heart Is?

In a season where we are asking you to explore Where the Heart Is, it would be remiss of us not to ask ourselves the same question – to reflect upon the role we play in fostering creativity and bringing people together.

Our ambition, as Western Australia’s state theatre company, lies on a scale far bigger than just the stage. We have a responsibility to our State that is like no other, to lead and advocate for our culture – to grow and to share our Western Australian identity.

In a place as vast as WA, we have the entirety of our State’s story to tell, and we know the absolute importance of sharing it with both our own community and the world. We must hear and share all voices – together they make our image of Western Australian-ness whole. We seek to build a dynamic voice that matters, from a place of isolation.

Black Swan is a theatre company of national significance, creating exceptional theatre that nurtures Western Australian audiences and artists, and promotes our artists within the state, nationally and internationally.

Founded in 1991, Black Swan has earned both critical and popular acclaim for its world premiere productions and highly distinctive reinterpretations of international theatre classics – all of which are infused with the unique culture of Western Australia.

EDUCATION PROGRAM AND RESOURCES

Black Swan is committed to supporting educators in developing a lifelong love of theatre and inspiring audiences of the future. We are accessible to all school communities with selected performances at the State Theatre Centre, student and teacher workshops, quality teaching resources and in-school experiences that align with the curriculum. Heavily subsidised student priced tickets and school subscription packages are offered in addition to work experience, internships and student ambassador programs.

Our Town and Education Program supported by

PRINCIPAL PARTNER

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR PARTNER

FOUNDATION PARTNERS

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Crown Resorts Foundation

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White Swans
SYNOPSIS & BACKGROUND

NO CURTAIN, NO SCENERY. THE AUDIENCE, ARRIVING, SEES AN EMPTY STAGE IN HALF-LIGHT.

Act I covers “Daily Life,” “No curtain. No scenery.” A minimalist theatrical style. Our Town opens with the Stage Manager’s introduction to Grover’s Corners, breaking the fourth wall by directly addressing the audience.

Once the actors have been set in motion by the Stage Manager in Act I, the world of Grover’s Corners unfolds. The audience is introduced to the Gibbs and Webb families who symbolize “ordinary people who make the human race seem worth preserving and represent the universality of human existence.” We witness the families’ inter-relationships, specifically between George Gibbs and Emily Webb as they talk through their bedroom windows.

Act II, “Love and Marriage,” takes place three years later on George and Emily’s wedding day. After listening to Dr and Mrs Gibbs talk about their own wedding day, the Stage Manager transports the audience back to the days of George and Emily’s high school courtship. In this scene, Emily expresses her disdain for George’s conceited behaviour. To make amends, George buys Emily an ice cream soda. George decides not to go to agriculture school, so he can remain in Grover’s Corners, close to Emily.

Then, the audience again finds itself at George and Emily’s wedding. The Stage Manager focuses the audience’s attention on the tearful and anxious families before George and Emily blissfully run up the aisle, ending Act II.

In Act III, “The Cycle of Life,” Nine more years have gone by and Emily has died in childbirth. As the funeral procession crosses the stage, Emily, dressed in white, emerges from behind the mourners’ umbrellas and sits next to the deceased Mrs Gibbs in the graveyard. Emily begins to question what it means to live and die, and, although warned against it, chooses to relive her twelfth birthday. Deeply saddened by everything she failed to notice while alive, Emily asks the Stage Manager to take her back to her grave but hesitates a moment to say goodbye to the world. As Emily accepts her death, George falls at her feet in grief. While watching George, Emily asks Mrs Gibbs, “They don’t understand, do they?” to which Mrs Gibbs responds, “No, dear. They don’t understand.” As Emily settles in with the dead of Grover’s Corners, the Stage Manager bids the audience a good night.
CHARACTER LIST

Stage Manager  the narrator; much like the chorus of Greek theatre
Emily Webb  young lover
George Webb  young lover
Dr. Frank Gibbs  George’s father, town doctor
Mrs. Julia Gibbs  George’s mother
Rebecca Gibbs  George’s younger sister
Mrs. Myrtle Webb  Emily’s mother
Mr. Charles Webb  Emily’s father, editor and publisher of The Grover’s Corners Sentinel
Wally Webb  Emily’s younger brother
Simon Stimson  the church choir director
Mrs. Louella Soames  gossipy town resident
Joe Crowell  a newspaper boy
Si Crowell  Joe’s younger brother, also a newspaper boy
Howie Newsome  the local milkman
Professor Willard  professor from the State University
Constable Warren  the local policeman
Sam Craig  Emily’s cousin, businessman
Joe Stoddard  the town undertaker

THEMES

Family and relationships
In Act III, Emily wonders: “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” The Stage Manager responds, “no,” but then concedes that “the saints and poets, maybe— they do some.”

💡 What does Emily realize in Act III?

The nature of Time
Written in 1938, the play itself travels back and forth through time— beginning in 1901, moves forward to 1904 for Act II, and moves forward another nine years to 1914 for Act III. During Act III there is a flashback to a scene that takes place in 1899. Black Swan has elected to set the play in both early 1900s and today.

💡 What comment is this making?

Cyclical nature of human existence

💡 Our Town can be viewed as a life cycle. What evidence is there of this?

MORE INFO?

WATCH videos here for the Stage Manager’s three monologues that open each act.
https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/mast16ot-ela-waywewere-1/masterpiece-our-town-1-the-way-we-were/

EASY TO READ overview of the play and characters.

WATCH seven minute video on the legacy of the play, featuring artists involved in its history.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=qhnHgz-nw2Y
LISTEN to Thornton Wilder read the Stage Manager’s role on radio here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hySLb1ivXpA

A version of *Our Town* directed by and starring David Cromer was produced on Broadway nine years ago to huge critical acclaim, CHECK OUT DETAILS HERE:

/player Icon Six minute CBS TV story and interview with Cromer
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JneZjv6Jy0I

/book Page  Icon New York Times feature article on the production;
https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/magazine/14cromer-t.html?pagewanted=1

/book Page  Icon and the New York Times’ review…

…compare this review to the New York Times’ original review from 1938…

🌞 There is at least one production of *Our Town* being performed every day; there have been over 4000 in the last decade alone. Why do you think this is?

In 2017 the cast of *Avengers: Infinity War* held a staged reading to raise money for victims of Hurricane Maria.

More info on that here:
"Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind – not in things, not in 'scenery'."

Thornton Wilder (1897–1975) was a pivotal figure in the literary history of the twentieth-century. He is the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction and drama. He received the Pulitzer for his novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) and the plays Our Town (1938) and The Skin of Our Teeth (1942). His other major dramas include The Matchmaker (adapted as the musical Hello, Dolly!) and The Alcestiad.

Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897. He spent part of his boyhood in China and was educated principally in California, graduating from Berkeley High School in 1915. After attending Oberlin College for two years, he transferred to Yale, where he received his BA in 1920. His post-graduate studies included a year spent studying archaeology and Italian at the American Academy in Rome (1920-21) and graduate work in French at Princeton (Master’s degree, 1926).

In addition to his talents as a playwright and novelist, Wilder was an accomplished essayist, translator, research scholar, teacher, lecturer, librettist and screenwriter. In 1942, he teamed up with Alfred Hitchcock on the classic psycho-thriller Shadow of a Doubt.

Wilder enjoyed acting and played major roles in several of his plays in summer theatre productions. He also possessed a lifelong love of music and wrote librettos for two operas, one based on The Long Christmas Dinner (composer Paul Hindemith) and the other based on The Alcestiad (composer Louis Talma).

One of Wilder’s deepest passions was teaching. He began this career in 1921 as an instructor in French at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. During the 1930’s he taught courses in Classics in Translation and Composition at the University of Chicago. In 1950–51, he served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard.

During WWII, Wilder served in the Army Air Force Intelligence. He was awarded the Legion of Merit Bronze Star, the Legion d’honneur and the Order of the British Empire.

In 1930, with the royalties received from The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Wilder built a home for himself and his family in Hamden, Connecticut. Although often away from home, restlessly seeking quiet places in which to write, he always returned to “The House The Bridge Built.” He died here on December 7, 1975.
ACTIVITIES: PRESHOW

Listen out for these lines during the show. Can you link the character names to the lines?

HINT: Not all of these characters are featured here…

“Gee, I wish a person could get married without all that marching up and down.”

“Only it seems to me that once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don’t talk in English and don’t even want to.”

“Oh, Ma! By ten o’clock I got to know all about Canada.”

“Mama, do you know what I love most in the world, do you? Money.”

“Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it – every, every minute?”

“Yes. Now you know. Now you know: that’s what it was to be alive.”

“Everybody’s resting in Grover’s Corners. Tomorrow’s going to be another day. You get a good rest too. Good night,”

“I was the scardest young fella in the state of New Hampshire. I thought I’d made a mistake for sure.”

“Come on, Bessie!”

“A man looks pretty small at a wedding. George. All those good women standing shoulder to shoulder, making sure that the knot’s tied in a mighty public way.”

“Chew that bacon good an’ slow. It’ll help keep you warm on a cold day.”

“Perfectly lovely wedding! Loveliest wedding I ever saw. Oh, I do love a good wedding, don’t you?”

A. The Stage Manager
B. Mr. Webb
C. Mrs. Webb
D. Emily Webb
E. Wally Webb
F. Doc Gibbs
G. Mrs. Gibbs
H. George Gibbs
I. Rebecca Gibbs
J. Simon Stimson
K. Howie Newsome
L. Professor Willard
M. Mrs. Soames
N. Constable Warren
ARE WE PART OF THE HEART OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA?
AND TO WHOM DO WE BELONG?

Thorton Wilder wrote a preface to *Our Town* which ran in *The New York Times* on February 13, 1938, but was not published with the play until 1979. In this preface, he explains many of his thoughts about and inspirations for *Our Town*.

Does this remind of you any sections of the play? What would an archaeologist make of Perth in a thousand years? What would remain, and what stories would it tell?

The Stage Manager talks about a time capsule for Grover's Corners at the end of Act One. What would you put in this time capsule to represent Perth? Or your school? Or your own life? Is social media taking the place of customs such as this? Will it be accurate?

“"For a while in Rome I lived among archaeologists, and ever since I find myself occasionally looking at the things about me as an archaeologist will look at them a thousand years hence. Rockefeller Center will be reconstructed in imagination from the ruins of its foundations. How high was it? A thesis will be written on the bronze plates found in New York's detritus heaps – “Tradesmen's Entrance,” “Night Bell.”

In Rome I was led through a study of the plumbing on the Palatine Hill. A friend of mine could ascribe a date, “within ten years,” to every fragment of cement made in the Roman Republic and early Empire.

An archaeologist's eyes combine the view of the telescope with the view of the microscope. He reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.

It was something of this method that I brought to a New Hampshire village. I spent parts of six summers tutoring at Lake Sunapee and six at the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough. I took long walks through scores of upland villages.

And the archaeologist's and the social historian's points of view began to mingle with another unremitting preoccupation which is the central theme of the play: What is the relation between the countless “unimportant” details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?

What is trivial and what is significant about any one person's making a breakfast, engaging in a domestic quarrel, in a “love scene,” in dying?

Create a short scene in which your capsule is found by humans a thousand years from now.

How would you describe Perth in the style of the Stage Manager's monologue at the start of *Our Town*?

Devise a short 60 second monologue, and get some classmates to form a series of five tableaux to perform alongside it. Use one Wilder's lines as a starting off point, if you like:

“Well, I'd better show you how our town lies.” Or “So--another day's begun.”

Give an actual scientific and anthropological description of your town, following the example of Professor Willard in Act One.

Give a political and social description of your town, as Mr. Webb does in Act One.
“I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.”

Thornton Wilder

Our Town by Thornton Wilder is one of my all-time favourite plays because of Wilder’s generosity and care towards his characters, the coexistence of the minutiae and the epic, and its humour and heartbreak. I’ve always thought of it as a Breughel painting brought to life on stage. It is no surprise that this is one of the most performed plays in the English language – in fact, it’s allegedly performed everyday somewhere in the world.

It was first presented in 1938 – winning Wilder the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. The action of Our Town takes place in the years 1901 to 1913 in a small American fictional town called Grover’s Corners. In this production we are not using accents or period costume. We are citizens of contemporary Perth, just like you, the audience. As storytellers we embrace the real ‘here and now’ to share with you a fictional story of ‘there and then’.

Our core cast – Abbie-lee Lewis, Ian Michael and Shari Sebbens – are joined on stage throughout the season by 90 community members making up the citizens of Grover’s Corners, the families, the milkman, the paperboy and the choir. Tonight, you will meet 36 of them populating Our Town. These performers are teachers, priests, doctors, funeral directors, students and UberEats drivers. They are the people who make up the community of Perth and we thank every single community member who has joined us on this adventure. Some of them have acted before and for some, this is their first time on stage. We agree with Oskar Eustis, the director of the Public Theatre in New York that “Artistry is not something that is the possession of a few. Artistry is inherent in being a human being, some of us just get to spend a lot more of our lives practicing it”. It is through the performances of our community ensemble that we celebrate the warp and weft that knit together our human existence. Our Town is a play about belonging and so it is fitting that our host for the evening, the character called the Stage Manager, is a Noongar man and carries a culture of storytelling that has belonged here for multi-millenia.

You, the audience have an important role too. Wilder’s script begins with the words - Act 1: No curtain. No scenery. So, you are invited to complete this town, to bring to it your imagination, your own memories of growing up, of falling in love and of pondering the eternal. The word ‘audience’ comes from the Latin word meaning ‘hearing’ – contemporary audiences are adept at this as listeners of podcasts, so put on your headphones and settle in to a very unique episode of This American Life. Thank you for joining us tonight in Our Town.
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

WATCH this TED talk by Oskar Eustis explaining how community is integral to theatre; and essential to democracy. It’s a good one:

https://www.ted.com/talks/oskar_eustis_why_theater_is_essential_to_democracy?language=en

Community Engagement is an essential part of producing theatre.
Can you think of three good reasons why this might be?

How can you get your school community more engaged with your Drama performances?
What would get more students selecting Drama as a subject, and do you start when they are at high school, or earlier?
How do you get more students, teachers and families to see your performances?

Some great READS here:
https://www.arts council.org.uk/blog/nine-things-i-learned-about-community-engagement

and


or have a WATCH of this approach taken by a company in Queensland:

“And the thesis of it is that artistry is not something that is the possession of a few. Artistry is inherent in being a human being. Some of us just get to spend a lot more of our lives practicing it.”

Oskar Eustis

Cast, crew, creatives and Perth
Community members in rehearsal.
**Our Town** was one of the only plays of its time to incorporate some element as storytelling that modern audiences may find familiar, such as

- Ordinary days, ordinary people.

Rather than epic stories of romance, politics or adventure, Wilder chose to show day-to-day life in a small town. We now call this “kitchen sink drama”.

- Minimal set
- Breaking the fourth wall (when a character acknowledges the audience)
- Mime

Brainstorm a list of basic physical activities from daily life (brushing teeth, drinking water, etc). Work to create a mime sequence for these, breaking these simple tasks down into tiny steps so you can get them fluid. Check out Meyerhold’s Biomechanics for more info.

Create and perform a brief “kitchen sink” drama by devising a short dialogue about a real life conflict that could exist in a household setting (parent and child argue over curfew, siblings fighting over bathroom use, a couple who disagree over decorating choices). Use mime and minimal staging, like one chair, for performance.

What challenges are involved with this kind of performance, and why would a director choose to use these techniques?

- How was performing it different to living it? What is really happening in each scene- what subtext is implied? What deeper truths are revealed about characters and relationships in this slice of life onstage? Look at Stanislavski’s methods and Mamet’s practical aesthetics for more info.

- Write out a scene from your own daily life (anything that involves more than one person, and there doesn’t have to be a conflict) where one character breaks the fourth wall. Audience interaction could include narration, details about character histories, inner thoughts, wishes or hopes…

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Remember that original preface Wilder wrote? Here’s another bit:

I wished to record a village’s life on the stage, with realism and with generality. The stage has a deceptive advantage over the novel—in that lighted room at the end of the darkened auditorium things seem to be half caught up into generality already. The stage cries aloud its mission to represent the Act in Eternity. So powerful is the focus that it brings to bear on any presented occasion that every lapse of the author from his collaborative intensity is doubly conspicuous: the truth tumbles down into a heap of abject truths and the result is doubly trivial.

So I tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery. The spectator through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his own head… The theatre longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves. All the lies it tells—the lie that that young lady is Caesar’s wife; the lie that people can go through life talking in blank verse; the lie that that man just killed that man; all those lies enhance the one truth that is there, the truth that dictated the story, the myth. The theatre asks for as many conventions as possible. A convention is an agreed-upon falsehood, an accepted untruth. When the theatre pretends to give the real thing in canvas and wood and metal it loses something of the realer thing, which is its true business.
Try your hand at writing a “Three Minute Play for Three Persons.” Then cast your play so that it can be read aloud in class. Choose your own subject matter, or, if you prefer, use some of the following prompts suggested by Act Two of Our Town:

A mother and father are discussing their son’s or daughter’s wedding with one other character.

A young groom is discussing his wedding with two other characters.

To the unhappiness of one character, two other characters fall in love.

One character is trying to keep a secret from two other characters.

“They brought up two children apiece, washed, cleaned the house,--and never a nervous breakdown.”

“Ma, I don’t want to grow old. Why’s everybody pushing me so?”

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When Thornton Wilder was in high school, he began writing what he called Three Minute Plays for Three Persons. Some of them are reprinted in A. Tappan Wilder, editor, The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder, Volume II (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998). “It’s a discouraging business to be an author at sixteen years of age,” Wilder wrote in a foreword to his book, The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays, published in 1928. He remembered that when he was in high school, he imagined publishing a book of his three-minute plays. He wrote out the table of contents for the book on the inside covers of his first year algebra text. All told, he wrote more than forty three-minute plays over the years. They each last three minutes, and involve three characters, and many of them tell complete, entertaining stories in that short space.

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Video interviews featuring artistic director Clare Watson, cast members Ian Michael, Abbie-lee Lewis and Shari Sebbens, Set and Costume Designer Tyler Hill, Stage Manager Natalie Moir, Assistant Stage Manager Anastasia Julien-Martial.

Video One: Favourite Parts

Video Two: Community

Video Three: Stage Management

Video Four: Indigenous Representation

Video Five: Set & Sound

Video Six: Relevancy

Video Seven: What is the show about?

Video Eight: Acting and Theatre

Video Nine: Costume

How do you design a show that famously calls for no design?

Here’s how the play starts:

ACT I

(no curtain)
(no scenery)
(The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light.)
(Presently the STAGE MANAGER, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and three chairs downstage left, and a table and three chairs downstage right.)
(He also places a low bench at the corner of what will be the Webb house, left.)
("Left" and "right" are from the point of view of the actor facing the audience. "Up" is toward the back wall.)
(As the house lights go down he has finished setting the stage and, leaning against the right proscenium pillar, watches the late arrivals in the audience.)
(When the auditorium is in complete darkness he speaks:)

Would you follow these stage directions?

What choices would you make if you were staging this play?

What if you were using a found space: a non-traditional theatre? What would you need to consider?

What costume considerations do you need to make?

Here are some of Black Swan designer Tyler Hill’s sketches for costume and set:
IMPORTANT INFORMATION

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

Black Swan’s *Our Town* is located in the courtyard of the State Theatre Centre of WA, and seating is general admission.

You will receive headphones when you arrive as part of the enhanced experience.

The State Theatre Centre of WA is located at 174 – 176 William St, Perth (cnr Roe St).

There are several City of Perth paid carparks nearby, or Perth Train Station is a three minute walk away.

There are pickup and drop off points on William St and Roe St.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

- Please make sure you mobile phone is switched off and stashed in your bag or pocket. Notifications and glowing screens are very distracting to both the audience and performers.

- Please don’t eat during the performance. It’s noisy and distracting for everyone.

- Please do clap and laugh and react like a human during the performance. Keep the chat until interval and after the show, though.

- Take heaps of selfies before and after the show. However, photos are not allowed to be taken during the show. Share your experience on social media! Post on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and tag: @BlackSwanSTC #blackswanstc #OurTown #wheretheheartis

- Please make sure you’re on time, with plenty of extra time to go to the toilet beforehand and to find a seat with your mates.