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Gail Burns – “Gail Sez” – Blog Berkshire Theater Reviews

“Our Town” (Walking the dog Theater at PS/21) Posted by Gail M. Burns - July 2010

How perfect was the weather for my first visit to PS/21 to see *Our Town*? Pleasantly warm and breezy with moderately clear skies. As Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs stood and watched the evening star rise, that celestial object was actually climbing the sky in the west. As Emily Webb was complaining about the terrible moon, that three-quarter orb was appearing to the south, ringed in a summer haze. It was a truly magical marriage of nature and artifice.

From its name – PS/21 is short for Performance Spaces for the 21st Century – I had imagined something rather space-aged, but quickly realized that that was a very 20th century image of the new millennium. When I was growing up in the 1960’s we all thought the year 2000 would see us living in the clouds like the Jetsons. As I parted the irate flock of Canada Geese and unimpressed cows to wind my way up the dirt road that leads to the PS/21 tent – which is literally out standing in a field – I understood that the second decade of the 21st century is dawning on a solidly earth-bound return to the simplicity and home-grown entertainment that characterized Thornton Wilder’s Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, a century earlier.

There could not be a better match of performance space and material, nor can I imagine a more open and welcoming production than the one director David Anderson and Walking the dog Theater, of which Anderson is the Executive Artistic Director, have created. Anderson, who plays the narrator, is on stage almost constantly from a time before the show officially begins, making direct eye-contact with the audience more often than with the actors. There is a welcoming inclusion in his manner, and it is exactly what Wilder intended, but in too many productions of *Our Town* the impenetrable fourth wall comes between that intention and the reality. We are supposed to be aware that we are sitting in a theater watching actors present a play, but that knowledge is meant to bring us in closer relationship with them, not establish a barrier.

In the 73 years since [Thornton Wilder](#) wrote *Our Town* it has been widely produced and is extremely popular with community and educational theatre groups because it is a show about community with roles for a wide variety of ages and types of performers. A wise professional production will include area residents in the ensemble, if not in major roles, to help connect the community in which they are performing with their company. Walking the dog is a theatre in and of the Chatham area, with many of the actors actually living and working there as well as staging performances.

You can tell the pros from the amateurs, but Anderson has kept the whole production very low-key, and Walking the dog is all about ensemble performance, so the blend works very well. Because it is easy to get on to the stage from the audience, Anderson has actors come from and through the house.

In the leading roles of Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs and Mr. & Mrs. Webb – Mr. Webb being the Editor of the Grover’s Corners Sentinel, published twice a week – this production is fortunate to have [Robert Ian Mackenzie](#) (Dr. Gibbs), Benedicta Bertau (Mrs. Gibbs), Eddie Allen (Mr. Webb) and Nancy Rothman (Mrs. Webb). Bertau is the Producing Artistic Director of Walking the dog, and the other three highly accomplished performers members of Actors’ Equity, as is Bethany Caputo who plays Emily Webb.

Bertau, Mackenzie, Allen, and Rothman play *The Grown-Ups*. The slender plot line focuses on the courtship and marriage of Emily and George Gibbs (Andrew Rosenberg), and on Emily's subsequent death in childbirth. Act I is set in 1901, Act II in 1904, and Act III in 1913, although there are flashbacks in Act II and III to earlier times. Of course for *The Grown-Ups* in Wilder's original audience in 1937 these years would have been in living memory, but even now that they are a century distant, the impression is that daily life is more similar than different for residents of small New England towns today.

In other productions of *Our Town* that I have seen Emily Webb is usually portrayed as not just the smartest girl in town – Wilder tells us that she is several times – but also as the prettiest, even though when Emily asks her mother if she is pretty Mrs. Webb clearly tries to evade the question until, when pressed, she blurts out: “You’re pretty enough for all normal purposes.” But we have a grand American tradition of our heroines being physically beautiful, and so Emily is usually portrayed as a paragon in every way, the quintessential “girl next door” that Hugh Hefner glamorized in the pages of *Playboy*.

Caputo is certainly “pretty enough for all normal purposes” but she and Anderson have chosen not to use her beauty here. Her teen-aged Emily in Act I and II is geeky, gawky, and gangly. She speaks in a flat, overly self-conscious tone and has a bad habit of saying just the wrong thing at just the wrong time. To put it bluntly, the Emily Webb Caputo and Anderson have created is a fascinating creature – much more interesting than the Little Miss Perfects I am used to. In Act III, as a twenty-six year old mother and wife, she is much mellower and therefore prettier, but by then she would be beautiful to us anyway because we know and care about her.

Rosenberg's George is definitely the handsomest boy in town – the best baseball player and president of the senior class – but not so bright and not so ambitious as Emily. But he loves her and as the Stage Manager explains, George and Emily are “meant for each other.”

Some of this production's funniest moments come in Act II, entitled *Love and Marriage*, as Wilder ponders the “sacrament” of heterosexual union. Wilder, a gay man who never married or fathered children, was in his late 30's when he wrote *Our Town* so the line “Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married” is ironic with its unspoken coda, “Except me.” Many homosexuals did, and still do, enter into heterosexual marriages in order to conform with this acknowledged societal norm, but Wilder chose to stay on the outside looking in.

Constable Warren (Ralph Bedard) and milkman Howie Newsome ([Steve Dahlin](#)) anchor the daily morning life of Grover's Corners with their morning conversations, often including paperboy Joe Crowell (Jan Jurchak) or his brother Si (Griff Jurchak). Mrs. Soames (Morgana) and young Rebecca Gibbs (Luca Pearl Khosrova) keep up the town chatter, which is often about the troubled, alcoholic choir master of the Congregational Church, Simon Stimson (Parker Cross) and his antics in and out of the choir loft.

Cross makes a memorable, wordless, drunken cross of the stage under the watchful eyes of Bedard and Allen. All the people of Grover's Corners shake their heads at their town drunk and wonder “How'll that end?”

Jonathan Talbot has composed some wonderful incidental music for this production, which he, on violin and banjo, Bedard on trumpet, and Dae Jin Yuk on piano perform mostly live just off-stage. The Grover's Corners Choir provides simple harmonies on the hymns, notably *Blessed Be The Tie That Binds*. Katie

Jean Wall has kept the sets and costumes simple, as they should be, while the hilltop pasture land and orchard surrounding the PS/21 tent provide all the reality necessary.

I am sure many of you are wanting me to make a comparison between the Walking the dog production of *Our Town* and the [Williamstown Theatre Festival](#) production and I would remind you that I will not be reviewing the latter. The two productions overlap by just one weekend (July 29-August 1) and they are just far enough apart geographically that they won't encroach significantly on each other's ticket sales. But since that one weekend when both productions will be running simultaneously is coming up rapidly, I will offer the following advice in case you are trying to choose which to attend. On a purely economic level, the top ticket price at PS/21 is \$25 and there is not a bad seat in the house. The top ticket price in Williamstown is \$54 and some of the cheaper seats offer only a partial view of the stage. Weather is a factor at PS/21 and I would imagine a major thunderstorm might cancel or at least stop the show until it passed. And there are those trains. Both productions star experienced Equity actors and include community members in the cast. You will have fancier sets and lights in Williamstown, but since *Our Town* is supposed to be performed on a bare stage they are a moot point.