

'Our Town' teaches PTHS players to appreciate brief moments, each other

Thornton Wilder's ode to small-town life resonates with cast



From left, Mrs. Gibbs (Julia Neville) gets her children, George (Jackson Miller) and Rebecca (Taylor Sue Germeau) ready for school in the Port Townsend High School production of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town."

LEADER PHOTO BY KIRK BOXLEITNER



Posted Wednesday, November 13, 2019 3:00 am

Kirk Boxleitner
kboxleitner@ptleader.com

It's Thursday afternoon, the dress rehearsal before their first show in front of an audience on Friday, and the cast and crew of Port Townsend High School's production of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" has become a community in miniature, much like the residents of the play's fictional town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire.

As the actors are reminded to check each other's costumes, and one cast member is singled out for her birthday, all before the actors apply each other's makeup and run through their scenes, the traditional theatrical spirit of camaraderie runs strong among the cast.

But to hear the student performers tell it, that's not the only lesson they've learned from the Pulitzer Prize-winning ode to small-town life.

"Our Town" is something of a familiar standard for high school stages, and director Kelly Doran attributes the ubiquity of the 1938 play to the universality of its themes.

"It's one of the most-performed plays of all time, because Thornton Wilder's words cut straight to the heart," Doran said. "His simple idea for staging, props and acting for this play highlight the message of not getting caught up in the unimportant details of life."

The PTHS cast has assiduously followed the play's directions, which call for it to be performed on an empty stage, with no scenery except tables, chairs and ladders.

"It reminds us that life will end, and our opportunities to love, to pay attention, to enjoy one another, and the beauty of the earth are fleeting," Doran said.

The student cast seems to have taken this message to heart, even as they've strived to make their production fresh, without merely going through the motions of what previous casts might have done.

Orion Pendley, who plays Doc Gibbs, sees the value of the play as "appreciating very normal things, like small things people do for one another," as well as "putting on stage the things that people notice, but don't talk about, that make an impact, and maybe more of an impact, than very large-scale things."

Aiden Hill, who plays both Wally Webb and Howie Newsome, gained a greater appreciation for the need to pay attention to one another.

"After running through this play a couple of times, I realized we really don't look at one another when we speak to each other," Hill said. "I've tried to do better on this, to realize that my actions have consequences, and that other people have feelings."

Finn Brooks, who plays Constable Warren, sees the value of the play as stemming from how its three acts establish the arc of its narrative message.

"The first act sets up the weight to Emily's monologue in the third act," Brooks said.

Julia Neville, who plays Mrs. Gibbs, agreed with Pascale Sanok, who plays Emily Webb, on the challenges and dramatic value of acting on a stage that's so stripped of furnishings.

"Miming is super difficult, but it's necessary for the simplified vision of the play to focus more on the relationships of the characters, and not things," Neville said.

"The heart of the play is about people and relationships," Sanok said. "It's why this play has no props or scenery, because if you boil it down to the important parts, we see none of those things matter."

Although this marks Sanok's seventh stage play, it's her first as an actor "not in a Shakespeare play."

Sanok deliberately avoided doing any research on "Our Town" beforehand, so that she wouldn't be comparing her performance to past standards.

"Rather than worrying about how people might believe it's supposed to be performed, I've just focused on playing my character to the best of my ability," Sanok said.

Trillium Burbank, who plays Mrs. Soames, had heard of the play, and freely acknowledged that it could be described as “not very remarkable people, living out their daily lives in the moment,” but scenes that seemed slow-paced to her during her first read-through “came alive and became breathtaking” once the cast began acting them out.

“It’s easy to make these characters your own,” Burbank said.

“It helps that our cast has a good mix of experienced hands and fresh faces,” Sanok said. “I think that’s what this play shows. What’s important are the people around you, and the things you do with them. That’s what you are going to remember. The most important things we do, as humans, are when we’re interacting with those around us, making connections and loving each other.”

“This play isn’t about anything that’s a huge event,” said Grace Wentzel, who plays Mrs. Webb, “it’s just about a life.”

Even Zoe Cook, as the stage manager, found that the “really impactful lines” she gets to deliver have “changed my way of thinking.”

As the play’s director, Doran brings the skills and experiences she gained from teaching theater at Peninsula College, Pierce College, the Tacoma School of the Arts and American International Education, as well as her current role as the technical director at Centrum.

Doran is joined by Linda Dowdell as the music director, Susan Latham as the costume director and Kendall Mahoney as the lighting designer, with Doran and Latham teaming up with Jim Guthrie to serve as the stage painters.

“Our Town” opened at the PTHS Auditorium Nov. 8-9, and returns for a second weekend of showings at 7 p.m. on Nov. 15 and 16.