INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the educator resource guide for Triad Stage’s production of OUR TOWN. We are excited to share one of the greatest American plays with audiences during our student matinee performances.

Our goals for this guide include:

- Offering resources for further study about the play and playwright.
- Providing practical instructional activities that you can use in your classroom that make connections between the production and curricular standards in areas including English/Language Arts, and Drama/Theater.
- Offering opportunities for students to make personal connections between the production and their own experiences, as well as sparking dialogue about the play’s central themes and big ideas.

In the guide, you will find dramaturgical information about the show and Triad Stage’s production of the play, as well as a number of links to additional resources and information. There is also a section of classroom activities that are aligned with secondary English/Language Arts and theater standards, are designed to meet curricular goals, and seek to support students’ exploration of the play’s themes. This guide is designed specifically for students in 7th grade and up, but you can adjust the activities and information for younger students as well.

If you have any questions about the guide or how to use it, please don’t hesitate to reach out to Learning Director Lauren Smith at lauren@triadstage.org.
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: THORNTON WILDER

“We’re all People, before we’re anything else. People, even before we’re artists. The role of being a Person is sufficient to have lived and died for.”

Born April 17, 1897 to a newspaper owner and an accomplished poet, Thornton Niven Wilder was the second child of Amos and Isabella Wilder. When Thornton was nine, his father was appointed the American Consul General and moved the family to Hong Kong. Amos was a strict puritanical man, who supported prohibition and sought to raise his children under the guidance of Christian values. Because his salary was small, the family spent considerable time apart, unable to afford to live and stay together. They began to write letters to one another to stay connected. It is likely that this commitment to writing letters is what led Thornton and his three siblings to all pursue careers in writing.

When the United States entered WWI, Thornton volunteered for the Army’s Coast Artillery Corps at Fort Adams, Rhode Island and earned the rank of Corporal. After completing his enlistment, he earned a BA at Yale, his father’s alma mater. He then went on to earn an MA in French Literature from Princeton in 1926. The same year, the author debuted his first novel The Cabala, which was followed by his first Pulitzer-winning publication The Bridge of San Luis Rey in 1927. The success of this novel made his work not only a critical success, but a commercial one. He replaced his father as the Wilder family breadwinner, building a house in Hamden, CT, where his siblings often lived and where his sister Isabel remained for the rest of her life.

Wilder’s continued success made him some notable friends including Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Alfred Hitchcock; these acquaintances became his collaborators for his film Shadow of a Doubt. This screenplay was followed closely by his play The Skin of Our Teeth, which earned him another Pulitzer Prize. Following these artistic endeavors, Wilder enlisted as a U.S. Air Force intelligence officer during WWII, and remained in the service until 1945.

Wilder never married. After concluding his military service, he spent the rest of his life writing and teaching at several universities. His 1955 play The Matchmaker became the inspiration for the famous American musical Hello Dolly. The man who had spent a considerable amount of his career, committed to exploring what it meant to live a life, to exist on this planet - to be, to want, to die - passed away from a heart attack in 1975. He was 78 years old and left behind an incredible legacy of the human condition.
RESOURCES:

FOR FURTHER STUDY ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Thornton Wilder Biography (from the Thornton Wilder Official Family Website).
   A concise biography of the playwright.

Thornton Wilder Chronology (from the Thornton Wilder Official Family Website).
   A life timeline of the playwright.

Gottlieb, Robert. “Man of Letters.” (from The New Yorker)
   A detailed profile of Thornton Wilder, including both personal details and information about his written works.

FOR FURTHER STUDY ABOUT THE PLAY

   Tells the story of how OUR TOWN came to life the first time.

“Our Town.” From the Thornton Wilder Family Official Website.
   Offers and overview of the play and its history.

“Our Town.” The Thornton Wilder Society.
   Contains a synopsis and brief critical analysis of the play, including some production history.

   This article draws parallels between the television show “The Leftovers” and OUR TOWN, as well describing a personal experience the author had with the show.
WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT TO SEE AND HEAR:

COSTUMES: OUR TOWN is set in the early 1900s in New England, and the costumes are a central visual focus. Costume designers undertake considerable research to create costumes that are accurate both to the geographic area where plays take place, as well as the time period. Here, you can see several research images that Costume Designer Lauren Pennebaker used as inspiration for the clothing you will see onstage.

SCENERY: OUR TOWN was a revolutionary piece in American theatre history for a number of reasons. One unique element of the play is its lack of dependence on a set or scenic elements. Rather than a complex backdrop, most productions of OUR TOWN (as specified in the script) feature a blank stage and very simple objects such as chairs, benches, and ladders, which the actors transform into necessary props and scenery. Much of the action in the show takes place through pantomime, such as Mrs. Webb miming chopping vegetables for supper rather than having a bowl of real carrots and a knife in front of her. This leaves much of the imaginative work to the audience to fill in the details as they watch the performance.

LIGHTING: Since the scenery for this production is very simple, lighting plays a key role in helping us understand the world of OUR TOWN. Lighting Designer Rob Perry used the images you see here as inspiration for the lighting in each of the three acts of the play. While the lighting you see during the production may not be as saturated as these inspirational images, it will elude a similar feeling, which is also described in the image captions.

SOUND: The sound design constitutes a unique element of the Triad Stage production of OUR TOWN. Most theatre productions use recorded sound, such as music or sound effects (i.e. doorbells, telephones, etc.) that plays through speakers at pre-determined times during the performance. For this production, however, director Carl Forsman wanted to use “foley” sound, or sound effects produced by common objects. Any sounds you hear during the performance are produced live in the theatre, likely by an actor or member of the crew. One example of foley early in the performance is the sound of milk bottles that Howie Newsome delivers.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: VISUAL MAPPING

**Content Area:** English/Language Arts  
**Approximate Time:** 30-60 minutes  
**Standards:**
- CCSS ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.  
- CCSS ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

The goal of this activity is to give students a way to visually explore the meaning of the script through dialogue. There are many ways you can approach this activity with OUR TOWN; a few options are below.

**Directions:**
Cut pieces of recycled paper into strips (about four per piece of 8 ½ x 11 paper) and give several strips to each student. Give students a prompt to respond to that relates to the play, and ask them to generate several answers to that prompt, writing one per slip of paper (generally, this works best if students write a word or short phrase, rather than a long quotation or sentence).

Some prompts you might use (or feel free to write your own!):
- What themes stood out to you in OUR TOWN?  
- What words or moments do you remember the most clearly from the performance?  
- If you had to describe the play in one word, what would you say?

Once students have written their responses, have them lay them out either on a large flat surface like a table or on the floor. Ask students then to “map” their responses, physically moving the pieces of paper around to make create a visual representation of their reactions to the prompts. This is a collaborative activity, and students may find multiple ways to group responses that make sense.

Some possible side-coaching questions as students are working:
- What similarities do you notice between the answers? How might you categorize them?  
- I notice that you have a group of similar responses over here; what might you title this group?  
- How might one group of responses connect to another group?

If you have a larger class, it may be advantageous to have two groups mapping at the same time, and then have students view each other’s maps and note what they see in how their peers mapped their ideas. Some reflection questions to ask might be:
- What do you notice about the way this group mapped the responses?  
- What new insights into OUR TOWN does this map offer?

Alternatively, if you wish to read any of the articles listed in the resources pages or others that you find as part of your classwork, students can process those articles through participating in Visual Mapping. If you go this route, here are some questions you might use:
- Write a word or short phrase that stuck out to you from the reading.  
- Choose one quotation from the reading that illuminated something about Wilder or OUR TOWN.  
- Write one question you have about the reading or its contents.

For additional ideas, visit [http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/visual-mapping](http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/visual-mapping).
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: SOUNDSCAPE & FOLEY SOUND

Content Area: English/Language Arts and Drama
Approximate Time: 20-30 minutes
Standards:
  • B.AE.1 Understand how to design technical theatre components, such as costumes, sets, props, makeup, lighting, and sound.
  • B.AE.1.2 Explain how the major technical elements, such as sound, lights, set, and costumes, are used to enhance formal or informal productions.

After introducing students to the idea of foley (or asking them to name examples they remember from the performance, if doing this activity after they have seen the production) ask students to look around the classroom for objects they could use to make sound effects (some options are clothing items with zippers, keys, tearing or crumpling paper, metal water bottles, etc.). They can also make sounds using their bodies or voices. Offer students the opportunity to practice making various sounds, then have them put all of those sounds together.

As the teacher, you can “conduct” this soundscape by using hand signals (i.e. raising your hand means to increase the volume, lowering your hand means to decrease the volume, pointing to certain students or groups adds their sounds into the mix, putting a hand up means that an individual or group should stop their sound). After trying it out a few times, ask students what they heard, and what locations or stories they might associate with the soundscape they just heard.

Once they have experience creating a soundscape, choose a short piece of text, which could be from OUR TOWN or a different source, and ask the students to make a list as a group of sounds they might hear in the environment described within the text. Give students an opportunity to choose a sound they are interested in and find and object to make the sound, or a way to make it with their body or voice.

Conduct this soundscape so students can hear it all together. If desired, you might ask for a volunteer to narrate the piece of text while the soundscape is taking place.

For more information and ideas, visit http://dbp.thetrethedance.utexas.edu/content/soundscapes.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: COMMUNITY MAPPING

Content Area: English/Language Arts and Drama
Approximate Time: 45-60 minutes, with possible extension to homework
Lesson Cycle: Near the beginning of reading OUR TOWN, or after seeing the performance

Standards:
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A: Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
- 21st C. Geography: 12.G.1.2 Compare various types of visual representations, such as traditional and mental maps, charts, graphs and remote imaging.

Materials:
- Copies of the Act 1, Scene 1 of OUR TOWN (read through “...hurling imaginary newspapers through doorways.”)

Directions:
Have students read or review the opening scene and words of the play. You might have a short discussion about the text and the way it is structured; the following questions could serve as a guide.
- What moments or phrases about this piece of text stand out to you? What makes those pieces memorable?
- What do you notice about the structure of this text? How is it similar to or different from other plays (or novels) that you’ve read before?
- What information does the playwright give us in this opening (i.e. setting, characters)?

In pairs or small groups, have students draw their own version of the map that the stage manager is describing. There isn’t one right or wrong answer, and each map will likely look different. Ask students to include as many details as possible, and to find ways to represent the people the stage manager mentions as well.

Have each pair or group share their map with another pair or group, and ask them to observe how their maps are similar and different. You might also ask them to go back to the text and find the lines that correlate with the artistic choices they made in putting their map together.

Extension (could be done in class or for homework):
Have students create their own map of their city or town AND a written description to accompany it, in the style of the stage manager from OUR TOWN. You might give them guidelines, such as needing to include at least 5 separate landmarks, or descriptions of at least two important people. You might also suggest that they choose diplomatically who to include in their description and how to characterize them (i.e. agreeing not to name any personal information about students in that particular class). You might also ask them to reveal the same types of information (i.e. year, setting, etc.) that the stage manager’s monologue reveals, or you could leave it more open to their interpretation. Encourage students to highlight the important details of their community.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: MURAL WALL

Content Area: English/Language Arts
Approximate Time: 30-40 Minutes
Lesson Cycle: After viewing the performance

Standards:
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1: Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

Materials:
- Large pieces of butcher paper or poster board
- Markers or colored pencils

Directions:
Place four large pieces of butcher paper around the room, and ask students to divide up into four groups and go to one piece of paper (alternatively, it may work best to have students work in table groups and bring the paper to them). They will respond to a series of prompts through drawing and writing on the large pieces of paper. After giving a few minutes to respond to each prompt, have one student “fly” the paper to the next group clockwise. For the second prompt, the next group will add on to the drawings and writings of the group before them. With four rounds of this process, each group should end with the piece of paper they started with.

As students are responding, encourage them to think about the ways they are aesthetically representing their ideas, even if they are writing in words (you might mention spray paint art or hand lettering as an example). You might also ask them to think of murals and characteristics of murals before beginning.

You can choose the type of prompts you’d prefer that they respond to. Here are a few examples you might use:
- Round 1: Write or draw one quote or moment that you remember from the performance.
- Round 2: Draw one thing you imagined based on the description in the dialogue (since OUR TOWN focuses less on scenery, what was coming up in your mind as you watched the play?).
- Round 3: Take one element, either a word or a drawing, that someone else has created and add details to it or expand it.
- Round 4: Ask students to fill in the extra space with color, words, or pictures, things they think are missing from the paper’s current iteration.

After the rounds have finished, take the four pieces of paper and place them on the ground or on a large table and have students walk around and look at each piece of the mural. Ask students the following reflection questions to spark a discussion about the play:
- What images or words do you see repeated? Which are most prominent?
- Based on the images we see here, what are the big ideas that our group remembered or connected to from the performance?
- Looking at our mural, what major theme or idea from the play would you say is best-represented here?

For more information and ideas, visit http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/graffiti-wall.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: STORY OF MY NAME

**Content Area:** English/Language Arts  
**Approximate Time:** 25-30 Minutes  
**Lesson Cycle:** Before viewing performance  
**Standards:**  
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**Directions:**  
Have students partner up and ask them to tell their partner the “story of their name.” This could be a first name, middle name, last name, or nickname. If desired, you can also give students the opportunity to make up the story. It might be advantageous to tell a story about your own name as an example; the story should be no longer than a minute or two long.

Ask students to listen carefully to their partner’s story, as they will need to remember enough details to share it with someone else later. They can take notes if helpful.

Have each pair find another pair (to create groups of four students). One by one, have each student tell the story of their partner’s name; make sure they know they can ask questions or clarifications during their re-telling if they need to.  
[NOTE: Depending on the size of your class, you might also have students tell their partner’s story to the entire class.]

After the students have finished sharing each other’s stories, ask the group the following reflection questions:
- How did it feel to share your story with your partner? How did it feel to listen to their story?
- How did you feel while you were re-telling your partner’s story? How did it feel to listen to someone else tell the story of your name?
- What themes did you notice about our stories? Where did our names tend to come from?

For more information and ideas, visit [http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/story-my-name](http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/story-my-name).
References

The Drama-Based Instruction Network. http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/

Photo sources are listed in captions.

For additional information about Triad Stage’s production of Our Town please visit our Dramaturgical Website.


Triad Stage Staff

Artistic
Preston Lane, Founding Artistic Director
Sarah Hankins, Associate Artistic Director
Lauren Smith, Learning Director
Kamilah Bush, Artistic Apprentice

Administration
Richard Whittington, Founding Managing Director
Jason Bogden, General Manager
Ramon Perez, Company Manager
Bobby Pittman, Facilities/Rentals Coordinator
Justin Nichols, Development Manager
Tiffany Albright, Marketing Manager
Stacy Calfo, Graphic Designer
Kathryn Knoerl, Administrative Apprentice

Audience Services
Sherry Barr, Director of Audience Services
Olivia Langford, Box Office Manager
Martha Latta, Mary Reading,
   Box Office Managers on Duty
Josh Kellum, Box Office & Lobby Bar Associate
Hailee Mason, Box Office Associate

Production
Lara Maerz, Production Manager
Tannis Boyajian, Technical Director
Donald Quilinquin, Master Carpenter
Eric Hart, Props Master
Jennifer Speciale Stanley, Costume Shop Manager
Erin Barnett, Assistant Costume Shop Manager
Troy Morelli, Master Electrician
Derek Graham, Sound Supervisor
Jessica Holcombe, Scenic Charge
Alex Boyt, Stage Management Apprentice
Eva Trunzo, Carpentry Apprentice
Shay Hopkins-Paine, Props Apprentice
Sara Beth Watkins, Costume Apprentice
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ON HOUSING POLICY AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

The Racist Housing Policy that Made Your Neighborhood
https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/05/the-racist-housing-policy-that-made-your-neighborhood/371439/

The Forgotten History of How the US Government Segregated America
https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america

Interacting Redlining Maps Zoom in on America’s History of Discrimination


LORRAINE HANSBERRY
