

## Critique of *Our Town* in Performance

Due **Tuesday September 25th**, a **3-page** critique of Two River Theater Company's production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. (You may write more than 3 pages if you need to; write a **minimum** of 3 **full** pages.) The performance we are attending is Sunday September 16th at 3 p.m. If we arrive early enough, we'll attend a pre-performance talk with some of the actors. You might want to quote some of their comments in your paper, so plan to take notes.

A first draft of the paper is due during our regular class meeting, **Friday September 21st**; bring three copies to class for workshopping: two for groupmates and one for instructor. At the top of the first page of the **instructor's copy**, write a focused question on what you would like me to give you feedback. (It has to be something possible to do in 4-5 minutes, e.g., "How are my introduction and thesis?" or "Did I avoid the plot summary trap?" or "Am I using semicolons correctly?")

On **September 25th**, along with the 1) **final** draft of your paper, turn in 2) the workshop draft with my comments in response to your question, 3) the two copies of the workshop draft with your classmates' comments, and 4) the *Dead Man Walking* essay with my comments in green ink. All of these materials must be held together in some way. (I prefer—but do not require—that all of this be self-contained in a manila envelope or file folder or (ideally) a two-pocket folder.)

This critique assignment is not the same as a review of a play on Broadway that comes out in *The New York Times* and other papers the day after a play has opened. In that situation, the theatre critic may be experiencing the story for the first time (if he or she is reviewing a new play); if that is the case, much of the review is concerned with summarizing the story. Whether a new or classic play, the theatre reviewer writes, purportedly, to help readers decide if they want to see the production or not.

Your task is to evaluate the production based upon how well you think the acting, directing, set design, etc. served to bring *Our Town* to life, to serve Wilder's intention, to dramatize what the play is about (or just is), as you interpret it. You support your evaluation by quoting dialogue and/or stage directions from the text, analyzing/interpreting them, then describing how the speeches were said, or how the actions were performed, or how design elements worked, comparing page and stage. In other words, one way to think of this assignment is as a compare/contrast essay, C/Cing text and production. Since you've seen one production (albeit on video) that was close to the original and to Wilder's stage directions, you may also make brief references to that (the 1988 Lincoln Center production).

Take notes during intermissions if possible, but for sure ASAP after seeing the production. Think about the list of categories on page two of this document and jot down everything you can remember thinking or feeling while watching the performance. After noting down these first impressions, not too long after seeing the production, page back through the play to stimulate your memory of other details about the production: how this speech was said, how this movement was made, what sound or lighting was used at this moment.

These are the major aspects of the production to consider: set, props, lighting, sound, costumes, makeup, acting, and directing. You are not required to comment on all of these production values in your critique, just the ones that are relevant to your evaluation of the production. In fact, it would be impossible to discuss all the aspects of the production in only three pages, except very superficially, so don't try! Instead, focus on the 2 or 3 aspects that best support your thesis, and that you actually have something substantive to say about them. All your comments with regard to how the production served or did not serve the play must be supported by specific examples from the production.

### **Set, Props:**

When it's a realistic living room, there often isn't much to talk about, but you can look at the color of the walls, pictures, any peculiarities about furniture, etc. There might be a visual motif of color or geometric shapes. If a sky appears in background on a cyclorama, is it dark and foreboding or light and promising? When the play is in a nonrealistic dramatic style (e.g., *Everyman*, *Top Girls*), then the set designer can do more creative things with scenery. A pragmatic concern about the set is if the actors are able to move in it easily and appropriately. Same basic considerations with props.

### **Lighting:**

Again, in a realistic play or production, this may be "invisible," but can be used to create impressions of moonlight, starlight, house light. (e.g., regarding the original production of *Our Town* someone said the lighting was like another character in the play.) If it is a nonrealistic play or production, light can be expressionistic, alienating.

### **Sound:**

Pretty much the same as lighting: may be "invisible," but can use music to underscore the emotional effect of a scene (as in movies) or can create impressions of activities offstage in the house or city (as in *Our Town*).

### **Costumes:**

If the play is not set in the present, then a decision has to be made as to how historically authentic the costumes should be. Sometimes costume designers will do a great deal of research to recreate the fashion of a particular period and society; sometimes he or she will merely employ conventional ideas about clothes in the period. (e.g., men wore tights during the Renaissance; women wore long dresses and strange-looking head coverings.) The color of the costume can be important, as can the formality or casualness of the attire. The costume must seem appropriate to the character: would he or she dress in such an outfit? The costume must also allow the actor to move freely (unless restriction is called for in the play), not interfering with the actor's performance.

### **Makeup:**

This is usually a matter of believability when actors are playing characters older than they are. Does the wig look too obviously like a wig? If the theater is small and the audience is close so that they will be able to see more details of the face, are the wrinkles and lines realistic? Of course, makeup also applies to beards, scars, deformities, and blood.

### **Acting:**

This is probably the aspect of a production you will want to focus on the most (at least for realistic plays). How do the actors play their roles? Overall, do the actors make the characters come to life, fulfill their function in the play? In specific scenes, do they show, for example, anger where you think the character is angry, and do they express the anger to the level called for in the scene? One thing to look for in reading a play as dramatic literature or in acting or seeing a play in production is how a character's personality is shown to us rather than told to us, as in a novel. The character usually has highly characteristic utterances or actions that reveal his or her personality. Similarly, actors will often find a characteristic mannerism or stage business to suggest something about the character.

### **Directing:**

The director is responsible for the blocking (how actors are arranged on stage, how they move), pacing (how fast or slow the production moves, rate at which actors say their lines, if they run over each other's lines), and the overall conception of the play as a theatrical production. (He or she will decide what the play is about or what interpretation he or she wants to give it in performance, and will explain to the set designer, lighting, sound, and costume designers what effects she or he wants from each of those aspects of the production.) The director gets the general blame or praise for the production, though actors playing major roles are often singled out as well.