

Cast of the Shakespeare Theatre's 'Our Town' is an all-local affair

Thornton Wilder's classic play about small-town America features an ensemble of D.C.-area actors

By [Thomas Floyd](#)

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Warm spring air flows through the open windows of the Shakespeare Theatre's Eastern Market rehearsal space on an April afternoon. An unwieldy stack of chairs, a bicycle and a coffin occupy one corner of the room. Next to director Alan Paul sits a set diorama, with costume sketches pinned to a nearby corkboard. And propped against a whiteboard is a well-worn copy of the play at hand: Thornton Wilder's classic "Our Town."

Although it's a picturesque spring day outside, the cast is rehearsing a scene in which Natascia Diaz's Mrs. Gibbs worries her soon-to-be-wed son is going to catch a cold. During one pause in the proceedings, amid talk of blocking and dramaturgy, Paul offers the actress a suggestion.

"Don't kill me, but I think there's great comedy and pathos in saying, 'You'll catch your death of cold' a bit bigger," he says.

"Oh, you don't have to tell me twice," Diaz responds, tapping her feet with anticipation. "I'll let a little more out."

There's an easy rapport among Paul and his cast as they meticulously probe Wilder's meta-theatrical text about life and death in a tightknit New Hampshire town. The understanding is unsurprising: In a Shakespeare Theatre first, Paul has recruited an ensemble entirely composed of D.C.-area actors — many of whom he has worked with or regularly seen onstage for years. Last week, the production kicked off a month-long run at Sidney Harman Hall, which has been reconfigured for an in-the-round staging.

"Things are messy in rehearsal when you're trying to figure it out," says Paul, the Shakespeare Theatre's associate artistic director. "But when you know how good the other people are — because we all know each other, because you've seen them — you don't have to push the process beyond what it should be, which is to peak at the right time."

Coming out of live theater's pandemic-induced pause, Paul and Artistic Director Simon Godwin found themselves cycling through ideas for classic plays that could speak to today's difficult times. After considering the likes of "The Grapes of Wrath" and "The Matchmaker," the duo landed on "Our Town," Wilder's 1938 exploration of the mundane and the melancholy of small-town America. The local casting conceit followed sooner after.

"There was nowhere to go for actors" during the lockdown, Paul says. "There was no money, there was no outlet for anything creative, and I just thought, 'Well, we should do this play and make it about this group of people.' I was moved by what we went through as a community, and I thought it would be such a shame to come back and not celebrate them."

The pandemic, however, had another wrench to throw in their plans: The production was originally set to open in February before concerns about the omicron variant prompted a postponement, shortly before rehearsals were scheduled to begin.

For many, the shift created scheduling conflicts. But Paul and others credited D.C. theater veteran Holly Twyford — who plays the fourth-wall-breaking role of the onstage Stage Manager in "Our Town" — with working the phones and calling in favors to help keep the cast intact.

"Alan had a vision of what the community of 'Our Town' should look like, and how it should look like it's really *our* town," Twyford says. "It had to be these particular people, and that was important. Maybe I have the biggest mouth, but we certainly all did it together. It was sort of going to be all or nothing."

The connections among the cast are plentiful. Two of the veteran actors, Craig Wallace and Kimberly Schraf, are a couple. Schraf also is performing alongside Sarah C. Marshall, her first teacher back in the 1980s at D.C.'s Studio Acting Conservatory. There, Schraf's scene partner was Lawrence Redmond — another "Our Town" cast member. Wallace, meanwhile, is joined in the company by Chinna Palmer and Llogan Paige, both of whom he taught at Howard University.

Never mind all the other D.C.-area productions that have starred multiple actors from this "Our Town" cast — cultivating an inherent comfort in the rehearsal hall.

"It's about being able to take a really big risk and to know you can face-plant and it's okay," Schraf says. "That's a really hard place to get to. If you're with a bunch of strangers or a brand-new director, I think a lot of actors want to hew to the safe, middle road. It's freedom of experimentation because there's trust."

While the cast is entirely local, some faces will be less familiar than others. For actors with thinner résumés in the region — such as Palmer and Jake Loewenthal, who play the love-struck young couple Emily and George — the production plays more like a D.C. theater christening than a reunion.

"Being an artist is hard, and surviving the pandemic and continuing to get work after that, it's been a struggle," Palmer says. "It is incredibly validating to be in a show like this, with so many wonderful veteran D.C. actors."

"Everyone is pretty new to me," adds Loewenthal, a Connecticut native who moved to the area this past summer. "So to get to be in an ensemble of these sort of all-stars is a real honor."

Even once the actors' availability was sorted out, assembling the cast for rehearsal was no small feat. Felicia Curry, who plays Emily's mother, was regularly out of town while performing the solo show "Queens Girl in the World" in New York. Twyford was in and out of rehearsal because she was directing "The Upstairs Department" at Arlington's Signature Theatre. Redmond and Loewenthal pulled double duty as well, spending their afternoons in rehearsal and their evenings starring in Signature's musical comedy "She Loves Me."

“In a normal process, you have that time to establish chemistry and familiarity,” says Christopher Michael Richardson, who plays the town milkman. “But this show and this company, because everybody is so centered in D.C., that began years ago. For a show that’s about community and relationships and family and all of those things, to be able to bring that layer in is something special.”

If you go

Our Town

Shakespeare Theatre Company, Sidney Harman Hall, 610 F St. NW. 202-547-1122. shakespearetheatre.org.

Dates: Through June 11.

Prices: \$49-\$120.