

# Shakespeare Theatre's 'Our Town' showcases depth of D.C. acting talent

Understudies step up as coronavirus and other health issues sideline several central cast members

Review by [Thomas Floyd](#)

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When director Alan Paul envisioned a post-lockdown production of “Our Town,” featuring a who’s who ensemble of D.C. theater standouts, even he couldn’t have imagined the depth of talent he would be showcasing at the Shakespeare Theatre’s Sidney Harman Hall.

That’s because coronavirus concerns, which already pushed back this staging of Thornton Wilder’s metatheatrical opus from a February launch to May, and other health issues sidelined several central cast members. But Paul’s deftly handled production forged ahead, formally opening last weekend with a half-dozen understudies onstage. Among those seamlessly swooping in to keep life churning along in the fictional hamlet of Grover’s Corners: Todd Scofield, Elliot Dash and Erin Weaver — decorated actors in their own right, whose stellar turns exemplified the breadth of D.C.’s performing prowess.

There’s an inherent timelessness to “Our Town” and its three-act meditation on the human experience in small-town America. Yet, for a play that revels in the rote — reflecting on how little we appreciate life’s simple joys — Paul was particularly prudent in his choice to revisit Grover’s Corners in the midst of the pandemic. His staging proves worthy of the shrewd endeavor, staying true to Wilder’s minimalist intentions while finding space for his own stylistic stamp.

Wilson Chin’s superb scenic design reimagines Sidney Harman Hall in the round, immersing the audience in the fourth-wall-breaking proceedings. That’s not the only trick up his sleeve: The 1938 play’s traditional ladders are swapped out for striking spiral staircases, breathtaking rafters hang just above the stage and the seemingly sparse set is filled with third-act surprises. Lighting designer Philip Rosenberg also offers stirring illuminations, and Michael John LaChiusa’s smartly subdued score punctuates Wilder’s profound prose.

But Paul's savviest move was to populate this small-town tale with venerated actors from a tightknit theater community. Coolly commanding, Holly Twyford pulls the strings as the all-knowing Stage Manager. She's the audience's guide through Wilder's poignant depiction of life and death in the early 20th century, dispensing wit and wisdom with an ease that makes Grover's Corners all the more inviting.

Jake Loewenthal, fresh off musical triumphs in Signature Theatre's "Rent" and "She Loves Me," imbues lovestruck baseball prodigy George Gibbs with boyish charm. As Emily Webb, the apple of George's eye, Chinna Palmer first exudes doe-eyed innocence, then taps into a primal side that channels her gut-wrenching work in another Pulitzer Prize winner: "Fairview," produced at Woolly Mammoth Theatre in 2019. Natascia Diaz also leaves an impression as George's mother, instilling the part with empathetic exasperation. (Diaz, who is leaving the production early to star in a revival of "Follies" at San Francisco Playhouse, will be replaced by Kate Eastwood Norris starting Sunday.) Felicia Curry, as reliable as ever, plays the Webb family's endearingly unassuming matriarch.

Then there were the understudies. Dash, filling in for Craig Wallace last weekend, brought gravitas and uncanny comic timing to Mr. Webb, Emily's father and the local newspaper editor. Weaver amused while stepping into Kimberly Schraf's shoes as Professor Willard, the scatterbrained town historian. Scofield, gamely spelling Eric Hissom, played George's father with a lovably wholesome streak.

Twyford's Stage Manager reflects on the bittersweet beauty of life in Grover's Corners and declares to an imagined audience a thousand years from now that "this is the way we were." She may as well be talking to future generations about the arts' fortitude amid the pandemic. Schedule juggling, coronavirus testing and actors coming and going — this is how theater endures nowadays. Let's take a moment to revel in it.

***Our Town***, by Thornton Wilder. Directed by Alan Paul. Scenic design, Wilson Chin; costumes, Sarafina Bush; lighting, Philip Rosenberg; sound, John Gromada; music, Michael John LaChiusa. With Hudson Koonce, Christopher Michael Richardson, Maisie Ann Posner, Josh Decker, Tommy Nelson, Lawrence Redmond, Sarah C. Marshall, Suzanne Richard, Quinn M. Johnson and Summer Wei. About 2½ hours. \$35-\$120. Through June 11 at Sidney Harman Hall, 610 F St. NW. [shakespearetheatre.org](http://shakespearetheatre.org).