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Our Town Set Design

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Communication Arts.

By
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Under the mentorship of Kelly Berry, MFA and Sarah McCarroll, MFA, PhD

ABSTRACT
An important piece of any theatrical production is the scenic design. My thesis project follows my process through the research and design process used to create my own set design for Our Town by Thornton Wilder. I look at the text of the script as well as the background of Thornton Wilder’s ideas for the play. I explore other productions’ choices and what worked or did not work for them. By using my own analysis of the script and research on design elements, I produce an original set design for Our Town including a ground plan and renderings of the set. This project was due to be realized as part of the 2020-21 production season of Georgia Southern Theatre, but due to COVID-19 the production was postponed.

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As always, I want to express my gratitude towards my friends and family for constantly pushing me to do my best and supporting me. Especially my mom and dad, Jill and Jon Rennie, for the unwavering support in everything I strive to achieve.
Theatre is important because it makes people think about the world around them. Shows cause an audience to make connections between the world of the show and the contemporary world. This is extremely important because it offers a way to bring new ideas to the people around you and to help share experiences that not everyone has personally. Theatre is a way to open people’s eyes to the world around them and the places farther away. It puts people in front of a new perspective for a couple hours, and a good performance makes people question how they interact with the world or how the world works hours after they have left their seats. The power to influence people and show new perspectives is incredible, and it is a helpful tool in teaching society about ourselves and our world.

Many people have seen a play or musical where even after stepping out of the theatre, the message of the show is still on our minds. For a show that really resonates with us, we can catch ourselves thinking about its message days or weeks after watching the performance. Even watching the same play produced by a different theatre or group can spark new interest in our minds because when new people are involved in a show, they bring different approaches and ideas to the table. By working together, a team of designers can create a cohesive production where each person has the opportunity to help bring a world to life through their own fields.

Designers get an opportunity to help bring the world of a show to life and the specific choices they make help influence how the audience reacts to and interprets a show. Design choices can make the difference between a show that sticks in an audience’s mind for years or just mere minutes after they leave the theatre. As a designer it is important to understand not only what the show is about, but why it was important
when it was first created and now. Much like other literature, the historical context of a time can influence what the script's message is and how the playwright intended it to be produced. It is important to understand where a show originated from and what meaning it can have in today’s world. This gives a designer a chance to see what parts of a show can be highlighted or important scenically. For my thesis, I take the role of a set designer and look at the American classic *Our Town* to design a set with significant research and thought that communicates the world of the play while supporting the action onstage.

Every design process starts with the script. By examining the text of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, I can see what the show needs from its set and begin to form ideas for my design. The first section of my thesis will cover what ideas and information I get from the script that help drive my design. I discuss my own ideas regarding the most important theme in the play as well as what pieces of the play I feel need to be highlighted. Using the text, I will discuss what aesthetics or visual ideas the script brings to me. This will be the beginning ideas of my set design.

After examining the script, I explain how various *Our Town* productions have tackled the show as well as how they were received. This is important because although there have been countless productions of *Our Town*, the show still manages to capture audiences’ attention and interest. I will look at what productions have done that were effective at creating a unique show. I will also examine a production that was met with poor reviews and analyze what caused the show to fall short. Looking at other productions is helpful because it shows me some of the pitfalls to avoid and what approaches to the show are more effective than others.
Next, I will discuss my set design process. I share my concept statement for my design as well as what images and ideas brought me inspiration. I explain how my many research images translate into my final design and what elements I keep or discard from these ideas. This discussion includes reasoning behind why specific choices were made and how I think those choices will benefit my design in creating a set for the show that matches the world of *Our Town* thematically while supporting the practical needs of the production.

While I created ideas for the set, I developed documentation for my set design as well. Documentation is important because it helps the production team know what to expect from the set before it is built as well to give the scenic shop instructions on what to build. These documents are included and I will explain what each one is and why it is an important element of a scenic design. A ground plan will be included as that is the paperwork that a scene shop would use to get the dimensions and information for building the physical set. A ground plan is a birds-eye view of the set that shows the topography of the set. Because this show was not actually produced, I am including three dimensional renderings of the set. Images of the model I built will also be included in this section of my thesis. The model is used to get a physical idea of the set, but is built at a much smaller scale. A production team can see what the entire theatre space will look like with the set inside it, and this can help the director spot any changes that need to be made before all the effort of building the set is made.

In the course of this thesis, I discuss the research that I did on *Our Town* as a whole. I discuss what I pull from my research to create my own scenic design for the show. Finally, I present my own ground plans and renderings of the set to show how it
would look if it were built for a full production. I explain where my research led me and how it is visible in the final design product. This process brought me to an original artistic product which is ultimately a set design that fulfills the practical needs of an *Our Town* production which pulls from the themes inside the script.

**Production History**

*Our Town* by Thornton Wilder is a classic American play that at first glance may seem sentimental, but at its core is an incredible look into how we as humans live our lives. One theatre critic wrote that *Our Town* is the “most misunderstood and misinterpreted of American plays” because many people interpret the play as sentimental (Gussow 1987). The play, however, is not sentimental or nostalgic, it is a show about a truth that we spend most of our lives unaware of. *Our Town* is about the fact that life is short and every moment is important, but we probably will not understand that until it is far too late.

*Our Town* is split into three acts. The stage manager of the play, a character who both narrates and becomes part of the action, refers to the first two acts as being called “Daily Life” and “Love and Marriage”, and implies that the last act is titled Death (Wilder, 2003). The first act follows two families who are neighbors and their respective elder children, Emily and George. The act is about the average, everyday lives of the families. The mothers make breakfast which the children eat before heading off to school, and the mothers attend choir practice in the evening. The second act is about the marriage between Emily and George three years later. It includes a flashback of them visiting a soda fountain which is where their romantic relationship begins, but the predominant focus of this act is the relationship the two share. The last act occurs at and after Emily’s
funeral, who has died in childbirth. The act features characters who have died throughout the time of the play and includes a flashback to Emily’s twelfth birthday. She decides to relive the day before she realizes how much her life should have meant to her while she was alive. *Our Town* ends with Emily realizing that every moment of life is precious and no human ever understands and appreciates it as much as they should to which the other dead townsfolk have been trying to tell her all along. The play is simple, but emphasizes that we as humans, undervalue and do not appreciate all the moments that life gives us.

The most important theme in *Our Town* is the idea that time is fleeting. The show runs about two hours while managing to show multiple events from Emily’s life and her thoughts after death. Much as the show is a small amount of time to watch when compared to our lives, we live for a miniscule amount of time when compared to eternity. At the end of act three, we see Emily come to the realization that nobody appreciates their life and lives to the fullest while they have the opportunity.

Act three brings the viewpoint of the dead as Emily looks back at the life she has to leave behind. The ghosts of characters we have seen throughout the play, speak towards the finiteness of human life and how people do not realize what they have while they are alive. Emily first comes to this conclusion after going back to her twelfth birthday. She asks to leave her flashback and proceeds to ask the Stage Manager if “human beings ever realize life while they live it” to which the Stage manager replies that they do not (Wilder 1957). This conversation is continued by the other dead characters. Simon Stimson talks about how people “waste time as though you had a million years” in “ignorance and blindness” (Wilder, 1957). The dead even mention that the living should not be at the graveyard because they should be doing other things with their time. This
conversation happens just a few pages away from the end of the script. It is Wilder clearly stating what he wants his audience to take away from his play.

Wilder wants people to see that their life is finite and to really understand the weight that carries. From the moment you are born, you are dying. He highlights this by having the Stage Manager introduce characters in the first act accompanied by information about their death. Within seconds of Doc Gibbs and Mrs. Gibbs walking onstage the stage manager mentions how “Doc Gibbs died in 1930” and “Mrs. Gibbs died first” (Wilder 1957). This trend continues throughout the show as we are introduced to new characters. Wilder is extremely clear about the fact that everyone is destined to die and brings that to our attention repeatedly before we ever see the characters in the graveyard.

Another important piece to illustrate this theme is that we see the characters in both life and in death. The first two acts of the show, we see the characters going about their day. In act one we see the characters do their everyday business. The characters do tasks that may seem miniscule at first, but by the end of the show, we see why Wilder chose to highlight the moments that do not seem like exciting plot points. He is emphasising that even the small moments in our life hold importance and should be cherished.

In today’s technology driven society, I think this theme is even more important. It is easy to waste days away on social media or watching content online. People spend a lot of time trying to create an artificial life online or compare themselves to the personas other people are presenting online. Our Town highlights that each of our lives are incredibly special, and we should live them up to the fullest while we have the chance.
Wilder wrote about how we as humans will never fully understand how special our lives are until they are gone, but *Our Town* is a reality check that life is not infinite and cherishing as much of it as we can is probably the best we can do.

Since Wilder writes about the inevitability of life’s end, I think it is important to use my own scenic design to help propel this theme. I will use my understanding of the script and the message it carries to influence my scenic design. Before I began sketching out set ideas, however, I looked at some other productions of *Our Town* to see what ideas did and did not work for other productions of the show. Although another show’s ideas might not have the same outcome when translated to a new production, it is important to understand what ideas might not come across how you expect onstage.

**Original Production**

Thornton Wilder’s first thoughts of *Our Town* came when he was studying archaeology in Rome. In 1920, he went to a archeological dig and later in a letter to his parents wrote that, “we were clutching at the past to recover the loves and pieties and habits of the Aurelius family, while the same elements were passing above us” (Kliment, n.d.). He saw that there was little difference in human lives and universal truths between himself and the people that had died thousands of years ago. This moment gave him the idea of placing the past and present beside each other which eventually was part of the initial concept that became *Our Town*.

Wilder’s work on *Our Town* grew slowly. He dabbled with ideas such as breaking the fourth wall (where the actor directly speaks to the audience), non-linear time, and unusual stage techniques in other shows he wrote, which were not common elements of theatre at the time. However, these elements became crucial in the script and design of
"Our Town." The script features notes from the author that call for a set made up predominantly of tables and chairs. These pieces are not extremely descriptive of time and place, but help create a space for the script’s action to occur. Props are minimal and actors mime most of their actions. This is a stark contrast to the extreme realism that was prevalent during the creation of "Our Town" and for decades earlier where productions created hyper realistic sets and props for shows. The actual visual onstage is minimal and bare, but is interesting because the play does not try to hide from the fact that the show is happening in a theatre. The script calls for stagehands and the stage manager moving pieces onstage. We see the back wall of the theatre and there is not an attempt to hide this or create a sense of realism. The play makes use of the stage manager character who talks to the audience and guides them through the show. This is not the most unusual convention today, but it was not as common when Wilder first wrote the show. He also used a non-linear timeline. The play has flashbacks to previous moments in the characters’ lives. All of these methods used in presenting the show were not very common practices in the 1930s and definitely gave audiences something to talk about.

Before "Our Town" was performed on Broadway, the show had performances in multiple cities. "Our Town"’s first few performances were met with mixed reviews. One stage publicist wanted nothing to do with a play that had no scenery, calling it “as confusing as tackling a grapefruit without a spoon” (Wilder, Margulies, and Wilder 2003). He was not the only person who wanted a bigger set for the show. It was a fairly new concept to present a show with little scenery. Pairing that with the other unusual elements for the time such as a non-chronological timeline and actors breaking the fourth wall makes it easy to see why people would be skeptical of this new play.
However, many people did enjoy *Our Town*. Its first performance sold out with an audience that did not leave their seats during the show and applauded loudly at its end (Wilder, Margulies, and Wilder 2003). Audiences definitely enjoyed watching Wilder’s new play despite its quirks. While critics did not have an over the moon response to the play, there were still interesting concepts and points made in the show.

Many people were skeptical of the new play, and although not all reviews were bad, the show was not receiving the attendance it needed. As *Our Town* began losing money, director and producer Jed Harris decided to push the show to Broadway early in an attempt to recoup money lost (Wilder, Marguliees, and Wilder 2003). On February 4, 1938, *Our Town* opened on Broadway and ticket sales proved that Harris’s decision was not in vain. Reviews remained mixed, but critics started to write more positive reviews. Prominent theatre critic Brooks Atkinson gave a glowing review of *Our Town* in *The New York Times*. He called the play “one of the finest achievements of the current stage” and went on to explain how the stripped down play worked in Wilder’s favor (Atkinson 1938). Atkinson argues that by creating a play that only has the essentials, the ordinary actions of the play are given more significance. Essentially the play shows the simplicity of life and tragedy as a universal truth.

In an attempt to give people some answers for *Our Town*, Wilder wrote “A Preface for *Our Town*” which was published in The New York Times after the show moved to Broadway’s Morosco Theatre. Wilder’s preface included some background on the show as well as his own reasonings for some of the conventions in his play. For starters, Wilder explains he wanted to show life inside a small town that was real but could apply to everyone. The use of minimal scenery is credited to his desire to “restore
significance to the small details of life” which he believed would give each audience member an opportunity to “restage it inside his own head” (Wilder 1938). Ultimately, this is one of the reasons Our Town still holds a spot in many theatres’ seasons year after year. Our Town’s call for a minimal set made up predominantly of chairs and tables allows theatres with a smaller budget to tackle the show easily, but it also gives each member of the audience a better opportunity to engage with the show. Much like in a novel where the reader gets to make decisions on how they envision the world in their head, this show allows for each audience member to become “a participant in a theatrical experience” instead of just a viewer (Hewitt 1959). Our Town avoids a lavish set and a multitude of props which gives the individual a chance to input his or her own ideas onto the world of the play and replace pantomimed props with objects they are familiar with. This gives each person a better connection to the show and makes the show’s message more meaningful to the individual.

Our Town’s original production was met with mixed reviews, but remained interesting and engaging for its audience both when it was first produced and now. Wilder’s notion that theatre is meant to “represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves” (Wilder 1938) is one that he leans on throughout the play. He does not use a full, realistic set with props and set dressing to surround and help emphasize setting. Instead, he allows the audience to imagine their own world and create their own connections to the play that would not be possible without a bare-bones set. Wilder’s show stayed on Broadway for less than a year, but it managed to become the talk of the town and a play that gets produced over and over in American theatres.
Westport Country Playhouse Production

While many productions of *Our Town* do well, Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut had a 2002 production that surprisingly received unfavorable reviews. With Paul Newman playing the stage manager and many other popular actors in the cast, one might expect a stellar show. However, many critics felt that this production underperformed and fell flat. It is debatable what the culprit for this is, but I think a main contributor was the choice to do too much which made the show lose some of its beautiful simplicity and have some conceptual contradictions.

Read reviews about this production both at the Westport Country Playhouse and after its transfer to Broadway and one will find critics claiming that many tickets were sold to audience members who just wanted to see Newman onstage. He had not been on a Broadway stage in almost 40 years and was an iconic actor. Tickets on Broadway were ninety-one percent sold out days before the run even started (Simonson and Jones 2002). Having popular actors in a cast can be a great way to pull more people into the audience who might not have been interested in a show, but this seems to backfire when much of the acting failed to communicate the ordinary lives of characters in Wilder’s play. For theatre critics, many of the actors had their compelling and believable moments. However, overall the characters were less authentic humans and more theatrical copies of people who could have existed (Isherwood 2002). This is one example of how the production failed to pick one direction and lean into it. Throughout the show, the characters did not seem particularly real, but they also were not entirely fake. They had their moments of feeling like they fit into the story well but did not maintain their place in the world of *Our Town* consistently.
One of the most iconic parts of *Our Town* is its directions to keep a minimal set with few props. The production seemed to be half in and half out of this idea. This production used minimal props with many of the actions pantomimed as called for in the script. However, the set did not follow with the same simple and bare-boned concept. Set designer Tony Walton created a set that “suggests a Disneyland version of an empty stage” (Brantley 2002). This effect was created because the set was overdressed. Not only were the simplistic chairs and table set a little too flashy, but Walton incorporated multiple backdrops. The main backdrop was used to cover the actual theatre wall with a painted image of a theatre’s back wall filled with heating radiators. He seemed to choose to keep the simple, bare theatre wall as a choice while changing it into a new wall that maybe seemed more visually appealing. However, this choice contradicts the script. Instead of letting the theatre wall fade into the background of the world, he highlights it by giving the wall its own set piece that ultimately looks cluttered and unauthentic. For act three, a new backdrop is lowered onstage. This one depicts gravestone silhouettes and a night sky filled with stars. The rest of the set nods towards the minimal look that *Our Town* asks for, but this backdrop pulls away from that concept. Overall, the set provides a mix of the simple set that Wilder asks for while distancing itself from that with over designed set pieces.

This production highlighted the fact that when choosing to create a show, one must pick a concept and lean into it. Without unified and consistent decisions, a show can feel more like multiple shows pieced together. The Westport Country Playhouse’s production of *Our Town* was not a failure, it made great ticket sales and had its moments. However, the failure to keep a consistent concept throughout it made the show feel less
authentic and impactful to its audience. Choosing to stray from Wilder’s exact directions in the script can be successful, but without a clear idea as to why specific choices are made, a production can look messy and ununified.

Chopin Theatre Production

A production that found a way to stray from Wilder’s exact wishes and still keep audiences engaged and interested was the 2008 Chopin Theatre production of *Our Town*. Directed by David Cromer, this production was so popular, it eventually was given an extra run before eventually being transferred to an off-Broadway theatre. The reason for the show’s popularity starts with Cromer’s approach. He saw Wilder’s play as one which “is supposed to be without artifice” and thus “you have to strip away artifice everywhere you can” (Simonson 2009). This mixed with his view on the script helped lead him to a moment in the third act which sealed the deal on an amazing production.

Cromer looked not only at the text of the script but the original performance. Cromer’s belief is that Wilder wanted to “invert things that people were expecting when they came into the theatre, to disorient you” (Wallenberg 2012). In Wilder’s time that meant to have a bare stage, have the actors break the fourth wall, and have a timeline that is not linear. When *Our Town* first was performed, these were unconventional and jarring for audiences. Today, however, these tactics are familiar and used frequently in plays and other media. Cromer and his design team looked for ways to remove pieces of the show that distance the audience from it (Wallenberg 2012). Keeping the house lights up for most of the play kept the audience and the actors in the same world. The audience’s seats were also placed close to the actors and the set. With the set almost on top of the audience, the audience was pushed into the world even more. Many productions of *Our*
Town choose to use period costumes. To keep the audience more connected to the show, Cromer’s production gave the characters contemporary costumes. Choosing to use contemporary costumes makes the audience see themselves and their everyday surroundings in the characters. Cromer also decided to act the role of stage manager himself. Taking up the role made sense to him because he was already directing the actors where to go and what to do. Playing stage manager would help with “stripping away some of the pretension of the character” while allowing the character to have “a deeper level of honesty” (Laster 2008). Since the stage manager helps set the stage and guide the audience, Cromer found it fitting to play the role himself to create a character that was more authentic. This way he could introduce the audience to the play himself and knock down a little more of the barrier that separates the audience from the play. All of these choices help keep the audience as close to the play as possible. It makes the play’s meaning more impactful and personal.

Scenically, his approach meant that he did not want the world of the play to be an artificial depiction of life. Keeping true to Wilder’s wishes, Cromer’s choices included a minimalistic set. His scenic designer Michele Spadaro created a set made up predominantly of chairs and a couple tables. Even the iconic ladders were replaced with simple chair-on-table setups (as seen in figure 1). This bare-boned set is called for in the script and many productions of Our Town stick to those instructions. Cromer’s production breaks away from this in his third act which becomes a crucial part in making his production so successful.

In the third act, Emily goes back to her twelfth birthday. Instead of keeping the same simple set for Emily’s flashback, Cromer goes the exact opposite direction. Cromer
and Spadaro create a hyper realistic design for Emily’s home that features a working stovetop. Emily’s mother is even cooking bacon on the stove, so the audience can hear the sizzling and smell the bacon as she cooks breakfast. Cromer’s reasoning for a drastic change in scenery is because Wilder changes the rules of the world in the play itself (Simonson 2009). During the start of the show, Wilder has characters break the fourth wall, but this does not persist throughout the entire show. There also is no flashback until the middle of act two. Cromer saw that the last act is different from the first two. He asked himself if the scene is asking for a different treatment than the rest of the play, and “how does that scene want to be elevated and supported” since the world’s rules change for that scene (Simonson 2009). Because the third act is drastically different from the rest of the play, Cromer decided to change the set for the flashback.

Introducing a realistic set for Emily’s flashback creates a drastic difference between the sets that came before and the set for the flashback. It frames that scene differently from the rest because the visual world of that scene is extremely different from the rest of the play. This is important because this scene is where the audience sees that the time they have here on Earth is fleeting and once they experience a moment, they will never get to have it again. It is a scene that shows how important it is to cherish your life while you’re still living.

Ultimately, this decision paid off. Audiences members were definitely not expecting such a shift in set design which probably made the effect work even better. A Chicago theatre critic called this effect “shattering” and claimed that the scene made him remember parts of a similar day in his life that he had not thought about in years (Polkow 2008). This shows that the effect really helped pull audience members in and make them
see themselves in the play. This effect is what Cromer was hoping for because he wanted to take out whatever pieces of the performance that made audience members distance themselves from it. The performance does not need to tell its viewers what the point of the show is because each person gets to see themselves in the show and experience the lessons firsthand.

The 2008 Chopin Theatre production of *Our Town* was a hit. It was so popular that the show got a second run. Eventually the show got transferred to off-Broadway at the Barrow Street Theatre. The off-Broadway production ran for over 500 performances which makes it the longest running production of *Our Town* (Gray 2012). There were definitely a lot of choices that helped make this performance especially interesting and important, but the choice to give the flashback in the third act a scenically different design helped push the show to becoming a unique and successful production. The choice was made supported by evidence in the text, and overall became one of the most memorable parts of the production. The production team elevated *Our Town* and set it apart from the productions many people see at local or high school theatres.

**Design Process**

The beginning of my design process was to read the script and analyze some of the themes to create my own set design concept statement. *Our Town* ’s first act focuses on routine life and the habits and moments that we experience daily. The second act focuses on marriage and love, but has a significant scene where we get to see how the two main characters start to form a deeper relationship. The last act is about death and highlights the idea that we don’t appreciate all the moments we have in life. The play might seem at the surface like there isn’t much action, but in reality, it is filled with the
moments most of us experience throughout our lives and that we just don’t realize hold value and meaning. This led me to my design concept statement: *Our Town* is life stripped down to its framework to highlight the importance of every moment without getting too distracted in the complexities of the world around you. This statement helped guide my design.

I wanted to create a predominantly wooden set that symbolized the homes of the two families without being a realistic set. Because I was thinking about having both a wooden set as well as wooden furniture, I realized I would need to consider different stains of wood to keep it interesting and not create a set that felt flat because it was all the same color and texture. One of my jumping off points in terms of different stains and shades of wood was an image of wood planks (see fig. 2) because it has a great juxtaposition of saturated and unsaturated wood tones. The image creates the illusion of depth and makes the wood look more dynamic and interesting.

I also began looking at different structural designs for the ladder structure. Instead of a simple ladder, my director wanted a structure with a platform at the top, so actors could stand or sit at the top and have some room to act. This led me to library ladders (see fig. 3 and fig. 4) because they offer handrails next to the steps and have space for a small platform at the top. One of the library ladders I found had a small platform with railings on it which I liked (see fig 3). However, I found a library ladder that is much taller which is a better reference to the height I want the ladder structure to be at (see fig. 4). I also looked at bridges in the late 1800s because the second story of the two homes bridges Emily and George together and gives them opportunities to connect with each other. I wanted to use the structural elements from these bridges to support the ladders. I found
that many of the bridges featured wooden cross braces as well as braces parallel with the floor (see fig. 5 and fig. 6). I decided I wanted to create a blend of the library ladder with the bridge structures.

During my first meeting with the director of the show, she asked for platforms that moved to help create a dynamic set and gave space for action to occur on different levels. I decided to create a platform for each of the two homes that separated the houses from the street without making set pieces that were too specific to a house’s outline. After looking at some buildings from the late 1800s, I found an image of a building (see fig. 7) which had an interesting top to the building’s facade. I used this shape as the inspiration for my platforms because it can also be placed together to create a bigger platform that is still interesting for act two. However, I changed the dimensions of the shape, so it would be more useful onstage. I made the small rectangular section on the end of each triangle bigger. This allowed for more action to occur on those pieces which made the area of the platform more usable. Because I made the rectangular section of the platform larger, I also elongated the legs of the triangle. I wanted to keep an angle that was similar to the photograph, but I needed more space on the platform so a table with four chairs could fit on it as well as extra space for action to occur.

Outside the two houses are trellises which the Stage Manager references. I wanted to give the two families different trellises while still keeping the trellises simplistic to match the rest of the set. When looking at trellises I decided on an arched trellis for the Gibbs family (see fig. 8). A trellis similar to this could easily have wheels added to the bottom so it is easy to move at the end of act one. For the Webb family’s trellis I looked
at triangular trellises (see fig. 9). This trellis gives off more of a vegetable garden feeling which makes sense because the script references Mrs. Webb’s stringing beans next to it.

Most of the remaining set pieces were various furniture pieces which needed to be accurate to the time period. I began by researching kitchen tables for the two houses onstage. Because the tables are in kitchens and not in dining tables, I focused on kitchen tables rather than dining tables. I looked at tables that could fit the script and came across a lot of rectangular tables (see fig. 10). These would allow for multiple characters to sit around the table while still leaving one side open so the audience could see the actors’ faces. There were also many seats needed for acts two and three. I planned on the seats not all matching each other, but still keeping all the seats wooden. I came across many reference images for these chairs. For kitchen chairs in the two homes, I looked at chairs with curved backs (see Fig 11). Adding some curves to the furniture where possible will make the set more interesting than using only right angles. However, the soda fountain scene calls for a board to be placed over chairs to create a countertop. This means that I need some chairs with flat backs, otherwise the board would not balance on top easily. A chair with back posts that extend past the top rail of the chair would allow for a board to easily be placed across the back of two chairs while minimizing the chance it could slip off (see fig 12). Other than this, the rest of the chairs used in the play do not require any special requirements and can be chairs that fit the time period and look cohesive with the rest of the set.

I also began looking at soda fountains from the early 1900s. During act two, there is a flashback to the first time Emily and George get to express their feelings for each other. It is a sweet moment where we get to see the start of their eventual love. Although
this flashback is short, it is important in showing the events that lead to their marriage which is the main action of act two. After looking at soda fountains from the time period, I found figure 4. I was drawn to this image because the stools are wooden and can stand on their own. This was different from some of the other images I found (see figure 13) in which the stools would need to be bolted to a platform of some sort. I also liked the image because it included wooden stools which would aesthetically match the rest of the set. Not only is the matching aesthetic better for this scene, but it also means the stools could be used in other scenes as well. Since act two and three require many seats for actors to sit on, sticking to scenery that aesthetically matches will allow me to use pieces in multiple parts of the show. Stools similar to these would allow for a level higher than the chairs with a board across them which is called for by the script to be used as the soda fountain counter. This means the actors could sit on the stools and easily be seen over the counter without having their actions hidden behind another set piece. For other scenes, such as the graveyard scene in act 3, the stools could be used in the back row of the graves so the actors can still be seen behind the rows of other graves. This added level of seating would help create more interesting scenes because it allows for people to be at different heights.

Most of the set pieces remaining were seating elements which needed to fit the time period of the show. The show requires seating for seventeen people split between benches, chairs, and stools. I already had two stools needed for the soda fountain scene. The show also calls for one bench outside the Webb’s house as well as three chairs for each of the kitchen tables. This leaves seven more seats that are necessary for the show.
I decided to make seating for two more with a bench, so there would be two benches in the show. I chose to do this because having two benches would create a better look for the wedding scene. One of the benches is used outside of the Webb’s house in the garden. I looked at benches that would fit the time period and found some simple wooden benches (see fig. 14). This bench would fit the scenes it is in as well as look like it belongs with the rest of the set because the bench is not ornate and will blend well into multiple scenes. I decided the rest of the seats would be wooden chairs that looked cohesive with the rest of the set pieces.

I used what the show needed and my research and inspiration to come up with the final set design. I decided to keep the set onstage for the entire show and not create masking to hide pieces when they were not being used. I decided this because the script highlights that the show is not real life. The Stage Manager works as a narrator throughout the show and breaks the fourth wall to explain to the audience what they are looking at and what life is like in Grover’s Corners. These ideas lead me to what eventually became my final design.

The Final Design

One of the most important parts of scenic design is the paperwork necessary for the set. Documents serve two main purposes: give the design team an idea on what the set will look like and help the scene shop know what to build. I began my paperwork process with rough sketches of what each act would look like scenically, which evolved into a ground plan. Later, I created renderings as well as a scale model which help give the director and other designers an idea of what to expect from the set.
After researching different aspects of the set, I sketched out a set for each of the acts (see Fig. 15, Fig. 16, Fig. 17, and Fig. 18). After discussing some initial changes that needed to be made with my director, I began creating a ground plan of the set on Vectorworks at ¼ inch scale. A ground plan is a drawing of the set to scale from a top down view. It is useful because it allows the director and designers to have a first look at the set inside the space. My ground plan is in ¼ inch scale which means that every fourth inch represents a foot in the theatre. This gives the director and other designers a clear image of how the set will sit inside the space as well as the exact dimensions of scenic elements.

I created a ground plan for each of the three acts as well as an extra ground plan for the set when the ladders are in place during act one (see Fig. 19, Fig. 20, Fig. 21, and Fig. 22). In the ground plan I placed all the furniture and set pieces onstage where they would go during the performances. I kept everything labeled so it would be easy to understand what all the items in the documents are. The four ground plans are fairly similar since I keep all the scenery onstage throughout the entire show, however having multiple documents makes it easy to see where pieces are moved throughout the show.

Set pieces are not only drawn on the ground plan, but their height is given. For platforms, stairs, and the ladder units, a measurement that relates to their height off the ground is given. This is so it is clear how tall pieces are which is helpful for a director when blocking a show. For my set, I have platforms that sit sixteen inches off the floor with steps leading onto them in two different places. However, if the heights were not given, it might not be clear that the platform is at a height that is not the easiest to step onto from the ground, and the stairs are the best way on and off the platform.
The ground plans also include the audience’s seating. This design is intended for a black box space. Blackboxes are theatres with flat floors with little to no permanent seating. Because the theatre this design is intended for has no permanent seating on the ground, I made sure to include it on all of my ground plans. This would help give a count of how many seats would be in the theatre for this production which is important when looking at how many tickets can be sold and the rights you get for a specific production.

Act one of Our Town has two ground plans because large ladder units are moved onstage for part of the act. The ground plans both feature the same setup for the houses with the ladder units being the only change. Both houses are represented by six sided polygonal platforms that follow the shape I found in research earlier. The platforms both have a kitchen table with three chairs for the families. The trellises and bench are on the downstage side of the set, closest to the audience. These pieces are off of the platforms because they are outside of the two homes. When the ladders are moved onstage, they come up flush to the platforms. The steps of the ladder start higher up than a normal ladder because the actor is coming from a platform that is already raised sixteen inches above the floor. Set pieces that are not being used are on the upstage side of the set, farthest from the audience.

For act two, the two platforms have been rotated to create a church altar for the wedding. Chairs and benches are used for many characters to sit when attending the wedding. By placing some of the chairs on the platform, I am giving more levels for the actors to stand and sit on. It will make it easier for the audience to see more of the actors and make the stage picture more interesting. The stairs to get on and off the platforms have been moved as well to create one large step in the center while keeping the two
steps on the far sides of the platform. The stairs have been moved so the platforms will sit flush against each other and the actors can get on and off the platform from the center of the newly formed platform.

For act three, the two main platforms are moved again. Emily’s home is back onstage with her kitchen table and chairs, so she can go back to experience her twelfth birthday. Seats have been set out and arranged so the characters who are dead can sit in the rows that are their graves. There is also a chair center stage to represent Emily’s grave. There is space upstage left for the people mourning Emily’s death to stand.

To get a better idea of how a set will look, a model is created. My model is in ¼ inch scale and is used to help see a small version of the set in the space. A model is a great tool for seeing a physical version of the set without all the time, effort, and cost involved with a fully built set. This allows for any issues to be seen and fixed before the set is built. Because the set is small and to scale, moving around furniture or set pieces is easy and changes can be made on the model quickly to see how different scenes would look if pieces were adjusted. Since a model allows any major concerns to be addressed, any issues that arise from actually building the set are minimized.

I created a model with all of the set pieces and furniture that is in the design (see Fig. 23, Fig. 24, Fig. 25, and Fig. 26). I then took photos of each of the different acts to correspond with the ground plans. The model set up for act one has two different versions. One version has the ladder units pushed back (See Fig 23). The other setup for act one has the ladders out and next to the platforms (See Fig 24). For act two, I set the model up for the wedding. The chairs and platforms are moved to create the altar and church seating (See Fig 25). Act three’s graveyard has the platforms moved again, and
Emily’s house furniture back on a platform (See Fig 26). The model features a human figure as well, so we can see a person to scale in the space among the set.

Because this show was not produced, my next step was to render the design in 3-D. By using these renderings, I was able to see the design with people on it as well as see the set from different angles. This gave me the opportunity to fully see how the set would look if it had been built and produced.

Much like with my color model, I created images of the main scenic layouts. I continued in Vectorworks from my ground plans and worked on creating my set in 3-D. Similar to my color model, my act one has two renderings. The first rendering is with the stairs still upstage with most of the other furniture (See Fig 27). The second rendering for act one has the stairs pulled up to the platforms (See Fig 28). Act two’s wedding setup is also rendered (See Fig 29). The last act’s graveyard and house set up have been rendered as well (See Fig 30). Each rendering of the stage is easy to edit if furniture is moved or changed throughout the design process.

These renderings would not only be helpful in giving people on the team an idea of what the set will look like, but it could even be helpful for other designers. A lighting designer could use this 3-D model and the ground plan to help place lights. The model would allow them to render their lights on the stage so they could see exactly how the lighting would look with the set in place.

Conclusion

Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* is a play with an important message about cherishing our lives while we are still living even though it is inevitable that we will not
fully understand the beauty of life until it is too late. When it was first produced, *Our Town* challenged the current theatrical standards and pushed the envelope on what a good play was. Today, *Our Town* is one of the most frequently produced shows and continues to be a staple show in American theatre.

I examined *Our Town’s* history from what brought Wilder to write the play to recent productions. I also looked at the script itself and what it needed to be produced onstage. With design research and information about what the play wanted scenically and thematically, I worked to create a set that would help create the world of *Our Town*.

I chose to create a wooden set because wood, just like humans, has a life and an end. I kept the elements simple and bare boned to show that life even in its most simplistic form is an extraordinary blessing. Wilder uses *Our Town* as a way to show his audience that time is fleeting and we need to appreciate every moment we have no matter how small it may seem. My set is built on the idea that when our memories fade into a skeleton of the original moment, we will spend eternity knowing every second we lived is irreplaceable.

Designing the set for *Our Town* has been a massive learning experience. I spent countless hours on the research, design, and models to create my final scenic design. A significant amount of time was focused on learning how to use Vectorworks to create a ground plan as well as 3-D renderings of my set. I know any future scenic designs will result in another product I am excited to share, but designing for *Our Town* has shown me a remarkable amount about the effort that goes into any scenic design. From the set pieces themselves to the texture or paint choices on them, every detail is important and gives a designer the opportunity to help propel the story forward.
*Our Town* may be a classic American production, but without new designs, each production would be quite similar. Creating a set for a show is essentially creating a reality for the characters to exist inside of and is a chance to give the show a new life. Through my research, I have created what I believe would be an effective and interesting set for a production of *Our Town.*
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Appendix

Fig. 1

Fig. 2
Fig. 7

Fig. 8
Fig 17

Fig 18

Fig 19, Fig 20, Fig 21, and Fig 22 are on the following pages in that order.
Fig. 30
Images

Fig 1: *Our Town.* Chopin Theatre, 2008

http://www.bricoleuse.net/portfolio.html

Fig. 2:


Fig. 3:


Fig 4: Late 19th Century French Beech Wood Library Ladder


Fig 5: Erie Trestle Construction

https://www.atchuup.com/trestle-railroad-bridges-of-the-1800s/

Fig 6:


Fig 7: Palace Grande Theatre. Dawson City, Yukon.

https://www.mountainsoftravelphotos.com/Canada%20Yukon/09%20Dawson%20City/slides/22%20The%20Palace%20Grand%20Theatre%20Was%20Built%20In%201899%20In%20Dawson%20City%20Yukon.jpg

Fig 8: Sierra Arbor
Fig 9:
https://www.apieceofrainbow.com/21-diy-trellis-structures/

Fig 10: Antique cherry wood kitchen table
https://www.pamono.de/antiker-kuechentisch-aus-kirschholz-1890er

Fig 11:

Fig 12:

Fig 13: Vogelsang’s Drugstore. Chicago, 1890s

Fig 14:
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/33425222207606383/

Fig 15: Original sketch Act 1

Fig 16: Original sketch Act 1 with ladders

Fig 17: Original sketch Act 2

Fig 18: Original sketch Act 3

Fig 19: Original ground plan A1

Fig 20: Original ground plan A1 with ladders

Fig 21: Original ground plan A2

Fig 22: Original ground plan A3
Fig 23: Original color model Act 1
Fig 24: Original color model Act 1 with ladders
Fig 25: Original color model Act 2
Fig 26: Original color model Act 3
Fig 27: Original rendering A1
Fig 28: Original rendering A1 with ladders
Fig 29: Original rendering A2
Fig 30: Original rendering A3