

*'Our Town':  
Some Suggestions for the Director*

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IT is important to maintain a continual *dryness* of tone,—the New England understatement of sentiment, of surprise, of tragedy. A shyness about emotion. These significances are conveyed by the eyes and a sharpening and distinctness of the voice. (So in the Stage-Manager on the Civil War veterans: “All they knew was the name, friends,—the United States of America. The United States of America.” And in all the dealings of the mothers with their children where a matter-of-factness overlays the concern.)

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It has already been proven that absence of scenery does not constitute a difficulty and that the cooperative imagination of the audience is stimulated by that absence. There remain, however, two ways of producing the play. One, with a constant subtle adjustment of lights and sound effects; and one through a still bolder acknowledgment of artifice and make-believe: the rooster’s crow, the train and factory whistles and school bells frankly man-made and in the spirit of “play.” I am inclined to think that this latter approach, though apparently “amateurish” and rough at first, will prove the more stimulating in the end, and will prepare for the large claim on attention and imagination in the last act. The scorn of verisimilitude throws all the greater emphasis on the ideas which the play hopes to offer.

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It seems advisable that at the opening of the play where the audience is first introduced to pantomime and imaginary props, that Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb in the preparation of breakfast perform much of their business with their backs to the audience, and do not distract and provoke its attention with too distinct and perhaps puzzling a picture of the many operations of coffee-grinding, porridge-stirring, etc.

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At the beginning of the wedding scene there is an abrupt change of approach. The audience is hearing the thoughts of the characters and is seeing a symbolical statement of attitudes

which never were consciously expressed by the characters in their daily life. This change is greatly aided by the entrance of the bride and groom through the aisles of the auditorium; and by the fact that it is accompanied by the very soft singing of the hymns by the congregation. It would be well that George on arriving on the stage draws back well toward the proscenium, indicating that this scene does not literally take place in the church or before the church. After Mrs. Gibbs's line: "George! If anyone should hear you! Now stop! Why, I'm ashamed of you!" George passes his hand over his forehead, as though emerging from a dream, and with a complete change of manner, returning to realism, explains: "What? Where's Emily?" Mrs. Gibbs and George do not touch each other during the scene until she straightens his tie, and the strong emotion is indicated by tension, not by weeping. In the following scene between Emily and her father, however, Emily is in tears and flings herself into her father's arms.

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The Stage-Manager-Clergyman's speech: "I've married two hundred couples in my day," etc., is not delivered to the village congregation before him, but across their heads, an almost dreamy meditation, during which the tableau on the stage "freezes."

In the last act it is important to remove from the picture of the seated dead any suggestion of the morbid or lugubrious. They sit easily; there is nothing of the fixed and unwinking about their eyes. The impression is of patient composed waiting.

Emily's revisiting her home and her farewell to the world is under strong emotion, but the emotion is that of wonder rather than of sadness. Even the "I love you all, everything!" is realization and discovery as much as it is poignancy.

T.W.