

***Another Day's Begun: Thornton Wilder's Our Town in the 21st Century.* Howard Sherman. London: Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2021; Pp. 268**

Another Day's Begun, Howard Sherman's first full-length book, centers theatre-makers and how they approached *Our Town* from 2002 to 2019. Sherman is known for his work with the American Theatre Wing, which co-produces the Tony Awards, and his numerous high-profile administrative positions with significant arts organizations, leading to his large social media presence and frequent writing about the industry. His pulse on the American theatre zeitgeist situates his approach to exploring a play such as *Our Town*.

Scholars consider Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* as seminal within the American literary and dramatic canon—and Sherman argues effectively for its legacy. Having opened on Broadway in 1938, it explores themes of American life and mortality in the bucolic, fictional New England town of Grover's Corners from 1901 to 1913. The play ends with Wilder's spin on the *dance macabre*; we learn about the fates of the townsfolk, following Emily as she reflects upon her life as a departed soul. The play was revolutionary for many reasons, as Sherman argues, particularly its infamous opening stage direction: "No curtain. No scenery." Besides using a bare stage and mimed properties, *Our Town* is recognized for its narrator-turned-psychopomp, The Stage Manager. Since its premiere, numerous high schools, community theatres, professional producing houses, universities, and audition rooms have visited Grover's Corners. While Sherman is not a conventional scholar, *Another Day's Begun* presents a robust examination of the continued influence of *Our Town* on storytellers across mediums and genres.

Sherman's divides his book into two main sections: the history of *Our Town*, and then a series of interviews with artists who have worked on productions since 2000. Chapter 1, "Building Grover's Corners," chronicles the play's development and original reception. Sherman's writing balances clarity with curation, connecting the play to Wilder's life and the historical context in which the thrice Pulitzer prize-winning dramatist wrote. The chapter emphasizes the play's early impact in the United States and abroad post-World War II, noting that it was the first American play produced in Berlin after the war's end in 1946. Sherman explains the Department of State pushed to produce American plays "vigorously" in both Germany and Japan during the war, with the Army negotiating directly with playwrights rather than through their agents. He quotes *Variety* describing this move to use "theatre as a means of bringing democracy to presumably truth-starved German teen-agers." (15) Sherman considers the play's life from mid-20th century into the 21st century.

Chapter 2, "Expanding Grover's Corners," analyzes the play's impact on a much broader scale. Sherman explores its cultural legacy through numerous adaptations, parodies, derivative stories, and references that spread across almost every storytelling medium. While Sherman includes aesthetically similar adaptations (such as the television musical version starring Paul Newman and Frank Sinatra in 1955) and other more robust re-imaginings — including ballet and opera adaptations — he argues for *Our Town's* strong influence in popular culture. One example is his analysis of sitcoms such as *Cheers*, *The Nanny*, and *Growing Pains*, which included diegetic performances of *Our Town*. Sherman notes that these popular citations require the audience's knowledge to make sense. He cites contemporary references too, like Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's television hit *Riverdale*, whose first episode has a "decidedly Wilderian feel" and how, in a later

episode Veronica Lodge, a character, mutters, “I feel like I am wandering through the lost epilogue of *Our Town*” as a “throwaway aside.” (40) Sherman smartly traces changing receptions of the play and does not shy away from negative responses, presenting a healthy balancing of perspectives on Wilder’s seminal work. Chapter 2 evidences the ubiquity of *Our Town* in creative output since its premiere.

The book’s primary contribution to scholarship sharpens in its second half, titled “*Our Town: Production Oral Histories 2002-19.*” Here, Sherman archives interviews with artists who have worked on the play since the turn of the millennium. While he conducted most interviews, the author also includes artist statements transcribed from a 2006 video interview with Paul Newman, who played The Stage Manager in 2002 at Westport Country Playhouse (251).

These oral histories, which serve almost as case studies, begin with David Cromer’s groundbreaking 2002 production. Despite its “utter simplicity and lack of artifice,” signaled by having actors wear contemporary street clothes, Cromer carried out a “*coup de théâtre*” on the audience: the Stage Manager, played by Cromer himself, revealed a detailed vintage kitchen with real bacon cooking and full period-specific costuming for Mr. and Mrs. Webb as their daughter, now deceased, visits this memory. (46) Another notable production discussed is Michel Hausmann’s interpretation at Miami New Drama, which incorporated Spanish, English, and Creole – the “three dominant languages of the city.” (167) The book’s strength derives from this variety of focal productions; from professional to educational productions to more avant-garde interpretations, Sherman ensures a diverse portfolio of perspectives. Having interviewed many theatre-makers over his career, Sherman knows to allow the artists to speak directly to readers about their experiences and approaches to *Our Town*.

These interviews are not only archival but insightful about the craft of theatre-making. Sheryl Kaller, who directed Deaf West and Pasadena Playhouse’s 2017 production, for instance, which centered American Sign Language (ASL) and English, noted that their costume design was period-appropriate but “stayed in hues of blue, gray, and white,” a color palette designed to make the actors’ signing more visible. (198) The interviews reflect on disparate practices and contexts of production; readers directly observe how artists of differing backgrounds, resources, and notoriety discuss their artistic approaches to Wilder’s (nearly) century-old play.

In his “Epilogue: 11 O’clock in Grover’s Corners,” Sherman summarizes his experiences of researching and writing the book. Beyond words that often came up in the interviews—universal, mundane, favorite, White, greatest, cheesy, and sacred— he was most surprised by how many interviewees confessed they never read it until they worked on it. *Our Town*, he argues, has thus “permeated the collective consciousness” of American theater and served as a conduit for American cultures. (247)

Howard Sherman’s debut publication is well-researched and well-structured. For those who teach American drama, Wilder, or *Our Town*, the book has pullable sections that one can assign to add context and perspective to a play that many students might see as antiquated, or unrelatable. *Another Day’s Begun* provides the perfect dramaturgical companion for any director, scholar, or producer about to visit Grover’s Corners.

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