

Theatrical Experimentation in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and its Adaptation

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Abstract—The paper is an attempt to study Thornton Wilder's style of theatrical experimentation in his first full length play *Our Town* (1938) and the adapted movie with the same title directed by Sam Wood. His passionate fondness of theatre plays left him a strong impression, especially those famous productions of Henrik Ibsen's. It is also an attempt to see how the play has been adapted in theatres and used as projects in schools and colleges worldwide. When adapted in the movie or theatre, one finds too much of intertextual tension between the adaptation and the play. From an extended research, it is learnt that the importance of the play does not depend on the settings of the stage but on the quality of the play. When adapted in theatre, it is noticed that they use less furniture and no scenery which can be compared with a popular art form of Manipur known as *Shumang Leela*. *Shumang Leela* is a form of drama that performs in a courtyard surrounded by audiences from four sides in which they use only one side table and two chairs. Here, tables and chairs can represent anything; rocks and branches of trees in mountain and forests, sofa in a drawing room, bed in a bedroom sometimes and several others. Wilder's play is also used as projects by students of both schools and colleges making them see drama in a new light and making them learn to interact with people more profoundly. Wilder's *Our Town* has also been adapted in Indian theatre by Akash Khurana.

The paper is a humble attempt to analyse Thornton Wilder's style of theatrical experimentation in his first full length play *Our Town* (1938) and the adapted movie with the same title directed by Sam Wood. His passionate fondness of theatre plays left him a strong impression, especially those famous productions of Henrik Ibsen's. He is rightly called an innovator who freed "the American theatre from its traditional forms through his experiments in *Our Town*" along with Eugene O'Neill (Kernan 53). His play was influenced by Gertrude Stein's novel *The Making of Americans*. Being a great walker, as mentioned by Ihab Hassan, Wilder had the habit of forming creative thoughts about the history and characteristics of small villages and towns of New England that made him produce a simple yet beautiful and meaningful drama of daily life of small town. (211 – 212) It can be said that his *Our Town* rises from his deep emotions ties he had felt

toward the small town-life in Peters borough, and he sought to put into simple dramatic terms the sense of timelessness, the eternal value of daily living, all too often over-looked in the rush, the ever-increasing speed of a scientific age. (Hassan 212)

The prefix "our" of the title of his play itself shows a sense of belongingness.

Wilder attempts to confine the story of the drama in a small world of a small town. A scene of a conversation between Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb can be recalled. When talking about their passion of outer world represented by Paris,

you'll get to see Paris [symbolises outer world], all right. Just keep droopin' hints from time to time – that's how I got to see the Atlantic Ocean, y'know. MRS GIBBS: ...once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don't talk in English and don't even want to. (Wilder 20)

Mrs. Gibbs believes in choosing a simple life in her small town rather than adopting the luxury life of big town. It can be said that she does not, like any other characters in the play, try to understand the importance and value of daily life. Not only Mrs. Gibbs but George also gave up the golden chance of studying at State Agriculture College by staying back in Grover's Corner. He too prefers simple life and old faces,

I guess new people aren't any better than old ones... I feel that you are as good a friend as I've got. I don't need to go and meet the people in other towns." (Wilder 67)

There is too much of intertextualities between the film and the play one of which is theatrical experimentation. As an attempt to use theatrical experimentation, Wilder did not consider the importance of scenery and props except for some furniture like table, chair and ladder in his play *Our Town*. He substitutes "symbolism for naturalism, ritual for illusion, and discards elaborate scenery for a bare stage." (Guthrie 47) However, it is said that when it was produced for the first time with the stage full of sceneries and props in Princeton and in Boston later

where they receive negative reviews of the play they had to cancel the second week. This results in creating the idea that the larger meaning and importance of the play might have lost because of the settings. Consequently, in the later productions of the play, use of furniture, scenery and props were minimised. According to Wilder, audiences pay more attention “on the quality of the living, not on its accompaniments.” (Birch 123)

Our Town has been adapted in movies and is staged in several theatres in U.S. starting from 1938 till now. And they have followed the settings of the stage in all the theatre except for the movie by Sam Wood. We could see the use of ladder representing the windows of Emily and George in theatres. The use of less furniture and no scenery reminds me of a popular art form Shumang Leela of Manipur. Like Wilder’s *Our Town*, Manipur’s *Shumang Leela* is a form of drama that performs in a courtyard surrounded by audiences from four sides in which they use only one side table and two chairs. Here, table and chairs can represent anything; rocks and branches of trees in mountain and forests, sofa in a drawing room, bed in a bedroom sometimes and several others. Wilder’s *Our Town* has also been adapted in Indian theatre by Akash Khurana. Akash also uses only two ladders, a table and three chairs along with painted scenery pasted on one side of the stage. Sam Wood’s movie, as well, is stylized and experimental as the play yet he diverges from the play in two aspects. First, he uses the technique of scenery to make it look more realistic in nature and secondly, his film is deviated from Wilder’s play by offering a happy ending; Emily comes back to life.

One important style of theatrical experiment in the film by Sam Wood would be the role of the stage manager. Here, the stage manager plays dual role. When he controls the onstage action, he can be seen as an almighty God who knows everything about the characters. He determines certain direction though not in whole by providing detailed information of present as well as future life of each character to the audiences and not to the characters. By providing such information of particular characters, especially about dead, he has covered all the tragic scenes by just narrating it as Wilder attempts to remove the tragic and painful scenes to maintain a daily life and simple activity within certain limit. He even removes “scenes of sickness, although instances are reported in passing” as mentioned above (Bogard 60) except for the death of Emily which is important. It is important because Emily can be seen as someone who connects life and death. Her death redefines the events.

The stage manager diminishes the interest of audiences. He reveals the fate of every character whenever they are introduced to the audiences. He often interrupts the characters when he finds it less important and when he finds the purpose of cueing next scene, providing the audience with relevant information, or commenting on the previous or the next scene to be performed. A scene can be recalled where Mrs. Gibbs

and Mrs. Webbs are having conversation. During their conversation, the stage manager “tips hat to the ladies, who nod their heads” and said “Thank you, ladies. Thank you very much.” (Wilder 21) and introduces Prof. Willard to provide brief notes on past history of the town. This technique sometimes might force audiences or the readers to see it as a rehearsal of a play to be performed later. Interrupting Prof. Willard, fearing that there would not be much time to show the whole play and to provide political and social report, Wilder’s technique for the stage manager to call out a character in the play directly and inviting questions from the audiences to be asked to Mr. Webb makes it look like a reality. Mr. Webb’s information on the details of his town does not look like a made up story. Here, Wilder seems to try to convince his readers and audiences that the “actors are only pretending to be characters.” (Bogard 61) However, the stage manager’s information sometimes does not let the story flows in linear as it should be. Another scene can be recalled from the love story of Emily and George. Before showing the scene of George’s confession of his love to Emily, audiences are provided the information of their marriages. The characters talks about who would and who would not attend the wedding ceremony. Such technique creates confusion amongst the audience. It is unable to clarify whether the wedding is taking place out of their love or family relationship because the information and scene of confession of love is provided to the audience after the conversation of wedding scene is played.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Wilder and his play *Our Town* is his attempt to present reality through this play with the help of stage manager and Emily. He attempts to remind the audience of how important and precious ones’ daily life is as it determines ones’ reality and endures identity from the relation towards things and events of daily life. (qtd. in Gallagher) It is shown clearly after the death of Emily. Emily even being in the moment of agony and refusing to Mrs. Gibbs’s warning not to go back to earth, she chooses to return to earth and tries to be a part of living. Much opposite to her expectation, she realises that human being when alive do not try to understand the importance of daily life, “EMILY: No... I should have listened to you. That’s all human being are! Just blind people.” (Wilder 101) and “cries out that man is unaware of joy as it passes, diminishes in the free slip of time.” (Bogard 62) Wilder tries to assert that only living can satisfy death by understanding and valuing the importance of simple daily life while still alive.

It is interesting to note that Wilder’s *Our Town* is not only adapted in movies and theatre but it has also become popular play in schools and community theatres. The play is often used as projects in some colleges. As a part of communication program at Wisconsin State College, River Falls, students were asked to read the play and study the use of symbols in the play by Wilder first and then to study the symbols used in movies to relate the symbols to that of their own town. Later, they made a table consisting three columns: symbol, meaning

of the symbol in the play and meaning of the symbol in their home town:

TABLE.

Symbol	Meaning in the play	Meaning to the student in their Home Town
Rooster crowing	Morning	Time to get up, or company coming (old family superstition)
Rooster crowing	Dawn	Trademark of Pathe newsreel
Hitching post	Everyday necessity	An ornament, an antique relic
Grave	End of earthly life	Small sister
Strawberry phosphates	Social life of "teen-agers"	Cokes
Paris	Symbol of outside world	Centre of fashion
Railway station	Connection with outside world	Industrial town
Doctor	One family doctor	Specialists
"Blessed Be the Tie That Binds"	Standard song of the community	Irish Melody
Handel's "Largo"	Wedding march	High school chorus
Simon Stimson	Church organist who drank	Town drunk

As students reported, they find Wilder's *Our Town* very helpful and it makes them aware of the significance of communication in their immediate environment. From this project, it can be said that Thornton Wilder did not only get to inspire his contemporary playwrights and readers but he has also succeeded in influencing minds and thinking of young people as well.

In one of the rural school in Hudsonville, when asked to relate the characters and the ordinary life of *Our Town* to themselves, students were not only able to relate to them but they were not able to grab the idea of the dialogue and movement of the characters as well. They found it hard to visualize and felt that it was trying to hide something from them because of its use of empty stage and props. To understand the difficulties of the play, they were asked to make notes while watching it and consider themselves as the director and the characters at the same time. Later, every student was asked to read aloud what they had observed. Such reading technique help them understand the play better and see drama in a new light. With the help of this project, they also learn to interact with people more profoundly and share their ideas widely.

By experimenting theatrical style in his play *Our Town* (1938), Thornton Wilder has been able to occupy a respectable position as a playwright. The play itself is one of the most frequently staged plays in the history of American theatre as well as in Indian theatre and in schools and colleges curriculum. His new technique could inspire worldwide. His passions for theatre plays made him produce many famous plays like that of Henrik Ibsen. His capability to influence schools and colleges' students to see drama in new light and hope cannot be denied. He has also proved that his play is one of the most enduring plays though it received charges like it is "too sentimental" from some critics.

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