THEATRE ETIQUETTE

Have you ever gotten annoyed after seeing someone on their phone in the middle of one of your high school’s plays? Does excessive texting at the movie theatre really grind your gears? Do you hate it when audience members walk in and out of the theatre at inappropriate times? If you answered “YES” to any of these questions, you already know the importance of theatre etiquette. That being said, it’s important to issue a few reminders. While enjoying MSU’s production of *Our Town*, please keep these rules of theatre etiquette in mind:

- Remain quietly seated and keep your attention focused on the stage.
- Wait until scene changes to enter or leave the theater.
- Turn off or silence all electronic devices (cell phones, MP3 players, cameras, etc.).
- Refrain from communicating (talking, texting, etc.) during the performance.
- Be respectful of the theater and others by not consuming food or drink, and covering your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze.

MSU’s students and faculty are very happy that you are here to watch our production of *Our Town*. We hope you enjoy the show!
PLAY SYNOPSIS

Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* opens with an overview of daily life in Grover’s Corner, New Hampshire in the year 1901. In Act I, the Stage Manager – a narrator who interrupts, describes and interprets the events of the play – introduces the audience to the town. Through this all-knowing narrator, the audience meets the play’s major characters – the Webb and Gibbs families. In the first act, the play chronicles the daily routines of its main characters. Dr. Gibbs returns home early in the morning after a late night delivering a baby. George Gibbs and Emily Webb share a nice walk home together after school. And Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Soames exchange gossip after a late night choir rehearsal. These events are part of an average day in Grover’s Corner.

Act II focuses on the relationship between George Gibbs and Emily Webb. The Stage Manager notes that three years have passed and much has changed in Grover’s Corners. The act opens on the day of George and Emily’s wedding, but the Stage Manager flashes the action back to the couple’s first date in an ice cream parlor. On this date, Emily confronts George on his arrogance and George accepts her criticism and vows to change. The two then admit their affection for each other and make plans to commit to a long-term relationship. The action then returns to the day of the couple’s wedding. Before the ceremony, both George and Emily feel anxious and hesitant about their future. After receiving some calming advice from their parents, the couple expresses their love for one another and moves forward with the ceremony.

At the beginning of Act III, we learn that Emily Webb has died during childbirth. As the Gibbs and Webb families mourn, Emily joins the dead – including her brother Wally, Mrs. Soames, and Mrs. Gibbs. Despite the warnings
of the dead, Emily chooses to relive a memory from her past in the hopes of making her death more bearable. With the help of the Stage Manager, she returns to the day of her twelfth birthday. While observing her young parents, she becomes frustrated with their lack of appreciation for everyday life. Dispirited, Emily asks the Stage Manager, “Do human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?” The Stage Manager responds, “No,” and Emily returns to the dead with a greater awareness of human failure.

**WHO’S WHO IN GROVER’S CORNERS**

**GIBBS FAMILY TREE**
- Mrs. Gibbs
- Dr. Gibbs
- Rebecca Gibbs
- George Gibbs

**WEBB FAMILY TREE**
- Mr. Webb
- Mrs. Webb
- Emily Webb
- Wally Webb
CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

- **Stage Manager**: The play’s narrator, the Stage Manager, acts as the audience’s guide to Grover’s Corners. He provides descriptive details on the layout of the town, background information on its citizens, and commentary on the action of the play.

- **George Gibbs**: George is a wholesome high school basketball player and class president. He falls in love with and marries his neighbor, Emily Webb. He is the son of the town doctor.

- **Emily Webb**: Emily is an inexperienced, but intelligent, young woman. She falls in love and marries her classmate George Gibbs. She is the daughter of the editor of the town’s newspaper.

- **Dr. Gibbs**: Doc Gibbs is George’s father and the town doctor.

- **Mrs. Gibbs**: Mrs. Gibbs is George’s mother and Dr. Gibbs’s wife. She dream of one day taking a trip to Paris.

- **Mr. Webb**: Mr. Webb is Emily’s father and the publisher and editor of the Grover’s Corners Sentinel.

- **Mrs. Webb**: Mrs. Webb is Emily’s mother and Mr. Webb’s wife.

- **Mrs. Soames**: Mrs. Soames is the town gossip who sings in the choir with Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs.

- **Simon Stimson**: Simon is the alcoholic director of the choir and the subject of much of the town’s gossip.

- **Rebecca Gibbs**: Rebecca is George’s little sister

- **Wally Webb**: Wally is Emily’s younger brother. He dies very young of a burst appendix.

- **Howie Newsome**: Howie is the town’s milkman.

- **Joe Crowell, Jr**: Joe is the town’s paperboy.

- **Si Crowell**: Si is Joe’s younger brother. He takes over the paper route from his brother.

- **Professor Willard**: Professor Willard presents information and analysis on Grover’s Corner to the audience.

- **Constable Warren**: Constable Warren is the local policeman.

- **Samantha Craig**: Samantha is Emily’s cousin.

- **Joe Stoddard**: Joe is the town’s undertaker.
THE STYLE OF OUR TOWN

When *Our Town* was first performed in 1938, it was considered radical in its style and innovations. Instead of encouraging an elaborate design for the show, Wilder argues for a minimalist approach. Minimalism is a style of art that is stripped away to its simplest form. In *Our Town*, Wilder indicates that productions should only use minimal furniture and props to create Grover’s Corner on stage. In making this choice, he wants the audience to fill in the details with their imagination. The minimalist set also relates to the play’s theme of appreciating the simplicity in everyday life.

Another theatrical convention that Wilder breaks in *Our Town* is the idea of the fourth wall – or the invisible barrier that separates the audience from the performers. With the character of the Stage Manager, Wilder breaks the fourth wall by having the Stage Manager directly interact with the audience and provide descriptive detail for the show’s setting. Again, in doing this, Wilder is encouraging the audience to use their imagination, as well as reinforcing the play’s themes.

To gain a greater understanding of the play’s style, complete one of the activities below:

**Activity 1: Make A Meal!**

In *Our Town*, the actors playing the roles of Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb have to pretend to cook breakfast without use of any props. Using only your body and imagination, pretend that you are preparing a meal for your family or a group of friends. Be specific. What is your main dish? What ingredients will you need to make it? Are the ingredients slippery, sticky, or messy? What kitchen utensils will you use to cook it? For how many people are you cooking? The more specific you are in the details of your imaginary meal, the more likely an audience is to buy into your performance.
**Activity 2: Two Chairs, Ten Environments**

The actors in *Our Town* have to use simple props and stage furniture to create entire environments on stage. Using two chairs, attempt to create multiple environments. Get creative. How many different ways can you manipulate chairs to create new locations? You could possibly create a roof, a car, or even a jail cell. Think outside the box to come up with ten different environments using two chairs, your body, and imagination.

**Activity 3: Stage Manager Freeze!**

In *Our Town*, the character of the Stage Manager often stops the action of the play to provide more information on the characters, transition to new scenes, and comment on the action of the play. Choosing one person as your Stage Manager, start an improvised scene of your choice. Be sure there is a clear conflict and relationship between characters in your scene. At any point during the scene, the Stage Manager can freeze the action and give the audience new information about the characters. Once the Stage Manager unfreezes them, the actors have to incorporate this new information into the scene. Remember to say YES to all new ideas and keep the scene moving forward.

**POST-SHOW PONDERINGS**

After watching the show, take some time to consider, discuss, and answer the following questions:

1. Act I of *Our Town* focuses mostly on everyday life in Grover’s Corners. Why do you think Thornton Wilder made this decision? Do you think people in general appreciate the small moments in everyday life? Or do they rush through life not noticing all the beauty that surrounds them?
2. In Act I, Mrs. Gibbs reveals to Mrs. Webb that one of her major desires is to travel to Paris, France and explore a foreign culture. She fears that she may not get the chance to live out this dream before she dies. Why does Mrs. Gibbs think she might not get to go to Paris? Do you think your parents (or any other adult in your life) have dreams or desires that they did not get the chance to pursue? What do you think prevented them from pursuing their dreams?

3. Simon Stinson, the choir director of the local church, is widely regarded as the town drunk. As the subject of the town’s gossip, Simon is alienated from the rest of the community. Why does Wilder include this character in his depiction of small-town life? Do the citizens of Grover’s Corners fully value Simon? In Act III, how do we see the consequences of gossip and alienation in dead Simon Stinson’s attitude towards the living? What are the disadvantages to living in a small town like Grover’s Corners?

4. In Act II, Wilder focuses on the love and marriage of George Gibbs and Emily Webb. Before the ceremony, both George and Emily express some fear and anxiety about making such a big change in their lives. George tells his mother, “Ma, I don’t want to grow old. Why’s everybody pushing me so?” Why do you think George and Emily are so nervous about getting married? Have you ever experienced a big change in your life? What made you nervous about this change? How did you overcome your anxiety and accept change?

5. Act III focuses on death. Emily Webb joins the dead and discovers that they hold a rather negative view of the living. When Emily desires to revisit a memory from her life, dead Mrs. Gibbs warns against it, “When you’ve been here longer you’ll see that our life here is to forget all that, and think only of what’s ahead, and be ready for what’s ahead.” Why do the dead feel so negative and ambivalent towards the living? What or who do you think the dear are waiting for?

6. When Emily revisits the memory of her 12th birthday, what brings her joy in revisiting Grover’s Corners? What frustrates Emily as she watches her parents? What conclusions does Emily draw once she returns to the dead?
7. This show used minimal scenery and props to convey its environments. How successful were the director, actors, and designers in carrying out this concept? Specifically, what moments worked? What moments did not work? How would you have improved them?

8. Do you think the themes of this play are relevant to high school students and why? Which character(s) did you find most relatable and why? Did this play cause you to come to any new realizations about life?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
Several MSU students involved in the production shared their thoughts on rehearsing and designing the show.

What have you enjoyed most about working on this production?

“This is probably going to end up being my final mainstage at MSU, and the department just hired a pretty fantastic woman named Melanie Dreyer-Lude that I was afraid I wouldn't get to work with at all. Luckily, she directed this production, and she's been amazing. I love learning from new people and perspectives; she has truly brought this show to life for me. It's about appreciating what's around you; taking in each moment and realizing life for what it is. Every day I rehearse this play, and every day it's a reminder to open my eyes and really see what's around me while I can.”

-Rachel Schmeling (Actor – Emily Webb)

“I love the way Melanie runs rehearsal and interacts with her actors. I have also enjoyed discovering George and constantly figuring new quirks and opinions that he has. The whole cast has been working hard and efficiently and there is a great ensemble comradery within it.”

-Michael Reiser (Actor – George Gibbs)

“I have enjoyed being able to play with interesting shapes and structures and work more sculpturally than in a traditional scenic design.”

-Deborah Baxter (Scenic Designer)
What have you found most challenging about working on this production?

“One of the most challenging things I’ve had with this show is miming a baseball mit for an entire scene; getting to the point where I can keep my hand in that position without thinking about it has been tough. The last act is emotionally taxing for me, and it’s not a happy place to go mentally or emotionally. It’s certainly not easy to go there either. But because of my training I have methods to help me let go of those unhappy hard feelings, and return to the “real world”.”

-Michael Reiser (Actor – George Gibbs)

“The character of Emily has been challenging. She is a young, naive girl, though extremely smart. I am a little more world worn, and bringing that innocence and pure life that Emily needs doesn't come as naturally anymore, sad as that sounds. But Melanie has really helped me on this journey, can't thank her enough.”

-Rachel Schmeling (Actor – Emily Webb)

“A challenge has been finding a way to convey Thornton Wilder's original themes in a fresher way that a contemporary audience can appreciate.”

-Deborah Baxter (Scenic Designer)
ALIGNMENT TO STANDARDS

Show-Me Knowledge Standards

In Communication Arts, students in Missouri public schools will acquire a solid foundation which includes knowledge of and proficiency in:

- reading and evaluating fiction, poetry and drama (2)
- comprehending and evaluating the content and artistic aspects of oral and visual presentations (5)

In Fine Arts, students in Missouri public schools will acquire a solid foundation which includes knowledge of:

- process and techniques for the production, exhibition or performance of one or more of the visual or performed arts (1)
- the principles and elements of different art forms (2)
- the vocabulary to explain perceptions about and evaluations of works in dance, music, theater and visual arts (3)
- visual and performing arts in historical and cultural contexts (5)

Show-Me Performance Standards

- comprehend and evaluate written, visual and oral presentations and works (1.5)
- discover and evaluate patterns and relationships in information, ideas and structures (1.6)
- identify, analyze and compare the institutions, traditions and art forms of past and present societies (1.9)
- exchange information, questions and ideas while recognizing the perspectives of others (2.3)
- present perceptions and ideas regarding works of the arts, humanities and sciences (2.4)
- perform or produce works in the fine and practical arts (2.5)

Missouri Learning Standards:

- Apply stage movement and pantomime technique to express thoughts, feelings and actions of a character (Theatre 9-12.PP.1B)
- Model appropriate audience behavior at various performances (Theatre 9-12.PP.1E)
- Define the terminology and process of evaluation and apply this process to performances using appropriate theatre vocabulary (Theatre 9-12.AP.1A)
- Identify, compare and contrast the lives, works and influences of representative theatre artists from various cultures and historical time periods (Theatre 9-12.HC.2A)
- Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2)
- Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3)