Research and Costume Design for "Our Town"

Alyssa R. Korol

University of Vermont

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Honors Thesis:

Research and Costume Design
For Our Town

Alyssa Korol
University of Vermont 2015
Vision Statement

“As an artist (or listener or beholder) which “truth” do you prefer—that of the isolated occasion, or that which includes and resumes the innumerable? ... The theater is admirably fitted to tell both truths.” ~Thornton Wilder (1957)

In Our Town, Thornton Wilder explores the relationship between the isolated, individual occasion, and the innumerable, repetitive patterns that emerge to create enduring truths. He considered scenery and costumes “bric-a-brac” that obstruct deeper meanings and realizations. This paradigm can create quite the challenge for a costume designer if the purpose of the production is to remain true to the playwright’s intentions. To confine this play to specific period costume would go against to the playwright’s vision of the show. The truths found in Wilder’s story encompass much more than one particular moment in time and place. However, the lives portrayed in Our Town are quite embedded in the reality of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire at the turn of the twentieth century. To completely detach the production from this social context would also be ungrounded. It was my goal to balance visual elements that conveyed that feeling of 1901 New Hampshire while honoring the playwright’s original intent.

Director’s Concept

As in all productions, the costume designer’s vision is built upon the artistic vision of the leader of the production, i.e., the director. In this production, my director’s concept was to relate the text and material to contemporary life and its ongoing realities. She wanted a relatively “neutral” look that would create a “bubble”, an alternative world that was modern, but transcended beyond its original style, with only vague references to historical period.
I achieved that by making the following choices:

Costumes were used as a bridge between the setting of the play and modern times. Drawing inspiration from both current and period styles, I looked for specific connections between the eras: contemporary fashions with historical influences, or trends that have existed in both times. Period-inspired vests and boots combined with more contemporary jeans and skirts added an understated period component to a modern interpretation of the production. Besides the historical accents, I chose clothing that had subtle and classic style lines.

It was important to my director that we capture the simplicity of rural small-town life. She wanted the clothing to establish the mood without burdening the actors with heavy period costumes. This resulted in me choosing simple skirts, wool caps, a mix of solid and plaid fabrics, and aprons for Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb. For Emily’s wedding, I gave her a simple white sundress worn with flat shoes with lace embellishments, and a small flower tucked in her hair. We wanted the clothes to look comfortable and lived in: well-worn, well-washed, and well-loved… and decidedly contemporary.

A specific color palette was used to unify the look on stage. Earth tone costume elements with sky blue and forest green accents, constructed in natural fabrics such as linen and cotton helped to connect the text’s focus to the larger natural world. Since the set was sparse, a natural color palette of rich browns, dark greens, and light blues helped to establish the play’s inherent connection to nature and a rustic environment. Although most of the clothes showed fairly even distribution of palette colors, I gravitated towards relating the two main families to each other through separate color themes of blues and browns.
As an example of my process, I will next discuss how I came to decide on choices I made in realizing the concept for the production in the context of specific characters and moments in the show.

One of the first characters I considered was Emily Webb. Her development through adolescence, love, and death is a key focus of the script. I saw Emily as belonging to both the Webb and Gibbs families, so I sought to connect her to both families’ color schemes. Like the earthy browns worn by her parents, Emily’s initial outfit included dark brown leggings and boots as well as a lighter beige skirt. The splash of blue from her collared shirt united her with George and his family, and gave her a livelier, more youthful appearance. Her skirt was a simple A-line design made from mostly sheer fabric that flowed gently as she moved. I also wanted her to feel passionate, so I chose to leave most of her hair down, with her bangs kept out of her eyes by a half French braid.

For George, the director and I wanted him to look playful, so I chose a pair of modern skinny-jeans that showed him as more youthful than the adult characters. Trendy boots added to his lighthearted, almost naive appearance while referencing period footwear. However, the play follows George’s process of growing into an adult. Therefore, I connected him to the adult world by adding elements that mimicked his male role models: a collared shirt like his father, Dr. Gibbs, and a vest like his father-in-law, Mr. Webb. The dark brown color of his vest also bridged the gap between the separate color schemes of his and Emily’s families.

I wanted George’s sister, Rebecca, to come across as opinionated, so I chose a loud plaid shirt. As one of the boldest patterns in the show, it helped to lay the groundwork for her stubborn and strong personality. I also wanted her to seem clever, so I chose a pattern with bright cheerful colors. To make her feel younger than the other characters, I gave her low
pigtails for her long curly hair. Later in the show, when Rebecca is grown up and attending her sister-in-law’s funeral, her hair was pulled back in a low bun and her bright shirt covered by a long dark coat, giving her a sense of muted maturity.

I wanted to connect Mrs. Soames to the other married women of the Grover’s Corners (Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs) so I chose a similar silhouette for her costume. However, her character serves a very different role than the two mothers, so I separated her from them by putting her in a dress instead of a skirt and blouse. I chose to build Mrs. Soames’s dress from a blue and white plaid fabric, which also contrasted with the simple solids of Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs. I wanted to present Mrs. Soames as a busybody, so I gave her a pleated style of dress. The resulting fuller skirt and overlapping layers of fabric had more movement onstage and laid the groundwork for the constant flitting motion of a busy neighborhood gossip.

For the Stage Manager, my director divided this character into three roles played by different people. We wanted them to appear related, yet distinct from each other, while still remaining part of the other characters’ world. To make them feel trustworthy and honest I used combinations of somewhat dressier collared shirts, vests, and pants, which represent a tradition of reliability and leadership. Choosing clothing in varied neutral tones resulted in setting them apart as narrators without seeming foreign to the play’s setting.

My Process

Costuming is more than draping clothes on people: it involves interpersonal interaction and teamwork. Through my work as the costume designer for Our Town, I came to fully value the collaborative process; sharing inspiration often leads to innovations and is vital in theater. I enjoyed gathering data through preliminary research, discussing and exploring options with my
director, and seeing my sketches evolve through the design process. It was exciting to be able to further my director’s vision of the play through my costuming experience—to tell her story through my medium, and have it become our story.

I also took part in the complex network of problem-solving that is involved in costuming a play—not only designing, but also deciding what pieces to build, pull from stock, or purchase, managing a budget, and learning how to use the construction team to best realize my designs. My first act as the costume designer of Our Town in the spring of 2014 was to read the script—many times. Using the character descriptions, given circumstances in the script, and my director’s vision, I began researching and discussing my preliminary ideas and sketches with my director and the design team. This process eventually led to completed designs. After finalizing my designs with my director, I compiled a list of all eighty-nine costume pieces needed for the show. I then had to decide the best method to produce each item. That process included answering the following questions: Did we already have a similar item in stock? Did that pulled piece need any alterations? Was the item available to be purchased while staying within the budget? Could it be bought locally, or did it need to be ordered online? Or finally, was it a design central to the concept of the show that needed to be constructed specifically for the production?

For every piece that needed to be built for the show, the crew in the costume shop drafted an initial pattern and built a mock-up in muslin fabric. Next, the mock-up was adjusted on the actor during a fitting. After I approved the fit of each mock-up, it was then used to create a new pattern fit directly to that specific actor. While the mock-ups were being sewn and fit, I searched local fabric stores to choose swatches (fabric samples) for the designs we were building. I then showed and discussed these fabric options with my director. After gaining director approval, I
returned to the store to purchase the correct yardage of each fabric. The corrected patterns from
the mock-ups were then used to cut the real fabric. Even after this step it could take up to two or
three more fittings to ensure that each costume fit correctly and best served the design. When
deciding the essential pieces I wanted to be built, I had to take into consideration the resources
available to the UVM costume shop. Most members of the costume crew were students from the
Fundamentals of Costume Design class and were fairly inexperienced stitchers. These students
were overseen and instructed by the full-time UVM staff member and costume shop supervisor,
Alan Mosser. All pieces I chose to have built needed to be able to be constructed in the limited
time available and be ready to be onstage by the first dress rehearsal. At the end of this process I
had designed twenty fully realized outfits, including fourteen individual pieces that were built by
the costume shop. Overall, this project represents roughly twenty hours of shopping and fifty
hours of fittings.

Having experienced the entire design process, I now have a better sense of what choices
are going to work, what is going to read to an audience at a distance, and how much I still need
to learn. This thesis project has been a vital part of my process of becoming a costume designer
and has shown me that this is the career that I want to pursue further. I am truly grateful for the
opportunity to have designed for a UVM Mainstage production and all the support I received
from the Department of Theater’s faculty, staff, and students.

The following documents my design process through organizational paperwork, budget
documentation, research, preliminary sketches, designs, and photos from the realized production.
## Costume Plot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage Manager (Brendan)</td>
<td>Striped collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, belt, T-shirt, dress shoes, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Manager (Grace)</td>
<td>White collared shirt, tan vest, brown pants, belt, dress shoes, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Manager (Garrett)</td>
<td>Orange striped collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, belt, T-shirt, dress shoes, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Willard (Garrett)</td>
<td>Jacket, orange striped collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, belt, dress shoes, T-shirt, socks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ScalaE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Gibbs (Ian)</td>
<td>Dark blue jacket, striped collared shirt, tan pants, belt, T-shirt, boots, socks.</td>
<td>SAME, but NO JACKET</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Gibbs (Julia)</td>
<td>Tan blouse, blue skirt, boots, hose, ADD apron during scene</td>
<td>SAME, but NO APRON</td>
<td>SAME, but ADD APRON</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME (NO APRON)</td>
<td>SAME (NO APRON)</td>
<td>SAME (NO APRON)</td>
<td>SAME (NO APRON)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Gibbs (Aidan)</td>
<td>Teal collared shirt, brown vest, jeans, T-shirt, boots, socks</td>
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<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>White shirt, gray vest, jeans, undershirt, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td></td>
<td>ScalaE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Outfit Details</td>
<td>Act 1</td>
<td>Act 2</td>
<td>Act 3</td>
<td>Act 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Gibbs (Katie)</td>
<td>T-shirt, plaid collared shirt, brown skirt, leggings, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME, ADD BLACK COAT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Webb (John)</td>
<td>Brown plaid collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, T-shirt, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME, but ADD BLACK COAT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Webb (Liz)</td>
<td>White blouse, brown skirt, slip, boots, hose, ADD apron during scene</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME, but NO APRON</td>
<td>SAME, but ADD APRON</td>
<td>SAME NO APRON, ADD BLACK COAT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Webb (Ally)</td>
<td>Sleeve-less white shell, blue collared shirt, tan skirt, brown leggings, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME, but NO HAIR CLIP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wally Webb (Ellis)</td>
<td>T-shirt, vest, jeans, baseball cap, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Crowell (Greg)</td>
<td>T-shirt, vest, jeans, cap, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howie Newsome (Jared)</td>
<td>Plaid collared shirt, suspenders, jeans, knit wool cap, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME, but NO WOOL CAP, ADD BASEBALL CAP</td>
<td>SAME as ACT 1 with BLACK COAT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belligerent Man (Greg)</td>
<td>T-shirt, vest, jeans, boots, socks</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman in the Balcony (Caroline)</td>
<td>T-shirt, sweater vest, jeans, boots, socks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady in a Box (Summer)</td>
<td>Shirt, jeans, T-shirt, boots, socks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Outfit Details</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Stimson (Avery)</td>
<td>Henley shirt, vest, tan pants, belt, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Soames (Erin)</td>
<td>Shirt-waist dress, sweater hose, shoes</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constable Warren (Conor)</td>
<td>Collared shirt, sweater vest, tan pants, belt, undershirt, boots, socks</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td>SAME</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si Crowell (Summer)</td>
<td>Collared shirt, jeans, baseball cap, T-shirt, boots, socks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam Craig (Caroline)</td>
<td>Black coat, T-shirt, sweater vest, jeans, boots, socks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Stoddard (Conor)</td>
<td>Black coat, collared shirt, sweater vest, tan pants, belt, undershirt, boots, socks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Costume Pieces: 89 Total Pieces in the Show

To Pull: 60 Pieces

Leggings (Emily)
Leggings (Rebecca)
Collared shirt (Dr. Gibbs)
Jacket (Dr. Gibbs)
Henley shirt (Simon)
Baseball cap (Wally)
Baseball cap (Si Crowell)
Baseball cap (Joe Crowell)
Baseball cap (Howie Newsome)
Newsboy hat (Joe Crowell)
Belt (Wally)
Belt (Stage Manager—Brendan)
Belt (Stage Manager—Garrett)
Belt (Constable Warren)
Belt (Joe Crowell)
Collared shirt—plaid (Mr. Webb)
Blouse (Mrs. Webb)
Skirt—Dark Blue (Mrs. Gibbs)
Blouse (Mrs. Gibbs)
Collared shirt, blue plaid, ¾ sleeves (Rebecca)
Skirt—brown (Rebecca)
Collared shirt—checked (Howie)
Collared shirt (Constable Warren)
Sweater vest (Constable Warren)
Sweater vest (Sam Craig)
Sweater (Mrs. Soames)
Collared shirt (Si Crowell)
Collared shirt (Stage Manager—Brendan)
Collared shirt (Stage Manager—Grace)
Vest (Stage Manager—Grace)
Collared shirt (Stage Manager—Garrett)

Jacket (Professor Willard)
Suspenders (Howie)
T-shirt (Wally)
T-shirt (George)
T-shirt (Rebecca)
T-shirt (Joe Crowell)
T-shirt (Sam Craig)
T-shirt (Dr. Gibbs)
T-shirt (Mr. Webb)
T-shirt (Constable Warren)
T-shirt (Stage Manager—Brendan)
T-shirt (Stage Manager—Garrett)
Boots (Emily)
Boots (George)
Boots (Rebecca)
Boots (Wally)
Boots (Mrs. Gibbs)
Boots (Dr. Gibbs)
Dress Boots (Mr. Webb)
Boots (Mrs. Webb)
Boots (Constable Warren)
Boots (Joe Crowell)
Boots (Si Crowell)
Boots (Sam Craig)
Boots (Howie)
Boots (Simon)
Dress Shoes (Stage Manager—Brendan)
Dress Shoes (Stage Manager—Grace)
Dress Shoes (Stage Manager—Garrett)
To Shop: 15 Pieces
Pants—tan/khaki (Mr. Webb)
Pants—tan/khaki (Dr. Gibbs)
Pants—tan (Simon)
Pants—tan (Constable Warren)
Pants—tan (Stage Manager—Brendan)
Pants—brown (Stage Manager—Grace)
Pants—tan (Stage Manager—Garrett)
Jeans (George)
Jeans (Howie)
Jeans (Sam Craig)
Jeans (Wally)
Jeans (Joe Crowell)
Jeans (Si Crowell)
Shoes (Mrs. Soames)
Wedding shoes (Emily Webb)

To Build: 14 pieces
Sleeveless blouse (Emily)
Collared shirt—Light blue (Emily)
Sundress—White (Emily)
Skirt—Brown (Emily)
Skirt (Mrs. Webb)
Collared shirtwaist dress (Mrs. Soames)
Vest—buttons, no collar (Wally)
Vest—pockets, buttons, no collar (Mr. Webb)
Vest—open, no buttons, no collar, no pockets (George)
Dress vest [for wedding] (George)
Vest—open, pockets, no buttons, no collar (Simon)
Vest—open, no buttons, no pockets, no collar (Joe Crowell)
Vest—pockets, buttons, no collar (Stage Manager—Garrett)
Vest—pockets, buttons, collar (Stage Manager—Brendan)
# Budget Sheet: Expenses for Our Town Costumes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Store</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Amount left in Budget</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/29/14</td>
<td>Jo-Ann</td>
<td>2 yard samples</td>
<td>$0.44</td>
<td>$2,399.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/2/14</td>
<td>Jo-Ann</td>
<td>5 yard white lining (Emilly)</td>
<td>$33.32</td>
<td>$2,366.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/2/14</td>
<td>Jo-Ann</td>
<td>red lining (Emilly)</td>
<td>$12.18</td>
<td>$2,279.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/3/14</td>
<td>Jo-Ann</td>
<td>2 yard red lining</td>
<td>$9.71</td>
<td>$2,279.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/10/14</td>
<td>Kmart</td>
<td>3 yard lining</td>
<td>$78.16</td>
<td>$2,201.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/16/14</td>
<td>JC Penney</td>
<td>Brown pants (Grace)</td>
<td>$19.99</td>
<td>$2,181.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/17/14</td>
<td>DZL</td>
<td>Shoes (John)</td>
<td>$89.00</td>
<td>$2,109.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/17/14</td>
<td>Aerospatile</td>
<td>Plaid shirt (Katie)</td>
<td>$35.49</td>
<td>$2,083.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/19/14</td>
<td>Kmart</td>
<td>Tan pants (Gannett Connor)</td>
<td>$19.99</td>
<td>$2,063.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/19/14</td>
<td>American Eagle</td>
<td>Points for Connor</td>
<td>$40.02</td>
<td>$2,023.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/20/14</td>
<td>Staples</td>
<td>Costume skirt</td>
<td>$7.00</td>
<td>$2,016.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/26/14</td>
<td>JC Penney</td>
<td>Belt for John (Avery)</td>
<td>$53.99</td>
<td>$1,962.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/26/14</td>
<td>Olympiaspots</td>
<td>Shoes for Connor</td>
<td>$2.69</td>
<td>$1,960.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/30/14</td>
<td>JC Penney</td>
<td>2 pairs shoes for Ian</td>
<td>$66.00</td>
<td>$1,894.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/31/14</td>
<td>Jo-Ann</td>
<td>Ribbon for Mrs. Webbs</td>
<td>$3.99</td>
<td>$1,890.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/3/14</td>
<td>K-Mart</td>
<td>Returning 2 pairs of pants</td>
<td>+32.98</td>
<td>$1,922.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/3/14</td>
<td>Rue 21</td>
<td>White shoes options for Emily</td>
<td>$18.00</td>
<td>$1,904.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/4/14</td>
<td>JC Penney</td>
<td>RETURN - 2 pairs shoes for Ian</td>
<td>+60.00</td>
<td>$1,944.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/14/14</td>
<td>Rue 21</td>
<td>RETURN - 1 white shoes options</td>
<td>+18.00</td>
<td>$1,959.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/14/14</td>
<td>Shoe Depart</td>
<td>RETURN - 1 white shoes options</td>
<td>+9.98</td>
<td>$1,969.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL SPENT:** $430.99
Our Town
By Thornton Wilder
Photo Inspirations
From Director

Ensemble Photo: In the Graveyard
OUR TOWN

ACT I

EMILY WEBB
OUR TOWN

ACTS II AND III

EMILY WEBB
George and Emily at their wedding
OUR TOWN

ACT I

GEORGE GIBBS
George and Emily:
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At the end of Act I
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MRS. GIBBS
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OUR TOWN
ACT I

MR. GIBBS
Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs
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Mrs. Soames
OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW

MRS. SOAMES
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STAGE MANAGER
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STAGE MANAGER
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STAGE MANAGER
A Stage Manager as Professor Willard
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SIMON STIMSON
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HOWIE NEWSOME
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SI CROWELL
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CONSTABLE WARREN
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SAM CRAIG
Ensemble Photos:

Choir Practice
In the Graveyard: Ensemble Photo
Bibliography:


