2016-17
HOT SEASON for YOUNG PEOPLE
Teacher Guidebook

American Shakespeare Center
ROMEO AND JULIET and OUR TOWN

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For over 130 years Regions has been proud to be a part of the Middle Tennessee community, growing and thriving as our area has. From the opening of our doors on September 1, 1883, we have committed to this community and our customers.

One area that we are strongly committed to is the education of our students. We are proud to support TPAC’s Humanities Outreach in Tennessee Program. What an important sponsorship this is – reaching over 25,000 students and teachers – some students would never see a performing arts production without this program. Regions continues to reinforce its commitment to the communities it serves and in addition to supporting programs such as HOT, we have close to 200 associates teaching financial literacy in classrooms this year.

Thank you, teachers, for giving your students this wonderful opportunity. They will certainly enjoy the experience. You are creating memories of a lifetime, and Regions is proud to be able to help make this opportunity possible.

Jim Schmitz
Executive Vice President, Area Executive
Middle Tennessee Area
Dear Teachers,

We are so happy to have the American Shakespeare Center returning to Nashville and TPAC! The productions of Romeo and Juliet and Our Town will bring love, life, family, and tragedy to our stage. We hope this guidebook will provide you and your students with information and ideas that will help you engage with these masterful works of literature.

We look forward to seeing you at the theater!

TPAC Education

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The American Shakespeare Center (ASC) is an internationally recognized home for the study of Shakespeare’s works using their original staging conditions -- with a focus on the language, using a stage unimpeded by sets, and with the audience sharing the same light as the actors. As an essential part of our mission to be a place to enjoy and to study Shakespeare in performance, the American Shakespeare Center is pleased to open its rehearsals to scholars, students, and researchers who wish to deepen their understanding of the process of staging a play.

www.americanshakespearecenter.com

Notes from the Artistic Director, Jim Warren

Staging Conditions
I started this company to show the world (or anybody we could cajole into seeing/booking us!) that re-creating Shakespeare’s Staging Conditions allows these plays to come alive in vibrant and exciting ways that sometimes get lost when you play with all of the cool theatre tricks we’ve invented in four hundred years. “We do it with the lights on” is one of our company mottos because bathing the audience in the same light as the stage is what I consider the most important staging conditions for which Shakespeare (whom I often call Genius Boy) wrote. We often call this staging condition UNIVERSAL LIGHTING. Genius Boy wrote most of his plays to be performed at an outdoor theatre at 2 o’clock in the afternoon; he couldn’t turn off the sun, so that meant on a good day at the Globe (a three-story donut open to the sky) he had three thousand people sitting and standing around the stage (with no one more than 54 feet away from that stage). We think Shakespeare wrote that visible audience into every scene of every play, that Hamlet and Lady Macbeth and Lear and Cleopatra all spoke directly to the lit audience as characters in the play. And we think including the audience in the world of the play was the norm for all English plays in the early modern period of the Renaissance. So one of the reasons we use universal lighting is because that’s the theatrical environment for which Genius Boy wrote (if he had a light board, I believe he would have written his plays much differently). The other huge reason we use universal lighting is because it’s exciting, engaging, dynamic and a whole lot of fun for a modern audience to be inside the world of the play, taking the same ride as the characters rather than sitting in the dark and pretending to watch a movie or tv show.

Show selection
Each year, the ASC always tours with the same cast performing 3 different titles in rotating repertory. We only have 38 plays that we think Shakespeare wrote or co-wrote. At our home theatre – the Blackfriars Playhouse, the world’s only re-creation of Shakespeare’s indoor theatre – we’re open twelve months a year and perform 15-16 different titles. So we have to do plays by folks other than Shakespeare or we’d be recycling the Shakespeare titles too quickly. So sometimes we tour with 3 Shakespeare titles; sometimes it’s 2 by Shakes and 1 by a contemporary of Shakes; sometimes it’s 2 by Shakes and one classic like SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, OUR TOWN, THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST, CYRANO DE BERGERAC, THE THREE MUSKETEERS, SAINT JOAN, ROSECRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD, etc.

In looking for modern plays to add to our reps, the most important things I look for are:

- plays that are language-based
- plays that allow us to “do it with the lights on,” use no lighting cues, speak directly to the audience, and include the lit audience in the world of the play
- plays we can do with 11 actors
- plays we can do completely unplugged with live sound effects and music, nothing piped in over speakers
- plays that we think will delight and surprise our audiences
- plays that will provide something special when added to the other plays in the repertory
Common Themes
As I was putting together the shows for the ASC 2016/17 Artistic Year, it was time for us to consider *Romeo and Juliet* again, so I did a lot of thinking about what titles would go well with it. **Our Town is a great companion to Romeo and Juliet because it centers around a couple of teenagers who experience daily life, love and marriage, death and dying.** Both plays deal with parents navigating their way through how to raise their kids. Both plays deal with the lives of the people around those teenage lovers. Both plays deal with matters of the heart, the politics of their towns, and the tragedy of those you love dying.

Shakespearean Staging Conditions
*Our Town* had been on my list for years because it’s a modern play uniquely designed for Shakespeare’s Staging Conditions. So, while many classical theatre companies all over the world have done *Our Town* over the decades since it debuted, it seems even more appropriate for the ASC to do it because Wilder wrote it with Shakespeare’s Staging Conditions in mind.

Wilder seemed to be disenchanted with the state of modern theatre when he wrote *Our Town*. Wilder wrote: “I began writing one-act plays that tried to capture not verisimilitude but reality…Think of the ubiquity that Shakespeare's stage afforded for the battle scenes at the close of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. As we see them today what a cutting and hacking of the text takes place – what condescension, what contempt for his dramaturgy.” Wilder’s quest for his flavor of reality onstage led him to provide layers of “unreality” requiring the audience to use their imaginations to create the sets and props. I believe Wilder’s artistic heart connected with Shakespeare’s Staging Conditions: mostly a bare stage with a few tables and chairs; no elaborate sets; actors speaking directly to the audience and including them in the world of the play. By freeing himself and his audience from the trappings of his modern theatre, he was able to craft a story that the audience helped imagine themselves.

And here the method of staging finds its justification – in the first two acts there are at least a few chairs and tables but when she revisits the earth and the kitchen to which she descended on her twelfth birthday, the very chairs and table are gone. **Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind – not in things, not in “scenery.”** The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us.

*Our Town* - Why should we care about this play three quarters of a century after it was written?
Some folks are drawn to *Our Town* because they think it’s a play about small town American life in the early 1900s. Yes and no. Wilder does paint a picture of simpler times and simpler ways, but I think that’s actually just the canvas for something even bigger. I don’t think the play is about this specific fictional town or small towns in general. That’s why he didn’t name the play Grover’s Corners. I think he called it *Our Town* because, ultimately, it’s not a play about people in 1901 in a village in Massachusetts. It’s a play about all of us, it’s a play about all of towns and our lives, no matter where or when. **Just as Romeo and Juliet is about us, our parents, our friends, our neighbors, so is Our Town.** It became an enduring classic because it somehow reaches beyond just being about a single town; it’s about life. Wilder wrote: “*Our Town* is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village; or as a speculation about the conditions of life after death...It is an attempt to find value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life.”

I didn’t choose *Our Town* for this Season because I thought it was a quaint look at a quaint time. I chose it because I believe this play is about our lives – right here, right now. There’s nothing idealized about Grover’s Corners when you take a hard look at it. Look for the subtle hypocrisies of the parents, the tragic cries for help from the alcoholic choirmaster, and the fears of young adults on their wedding day. **The play takes us through the whole arc of existence: Daily Life; Love and Marriage; Death and Dying. We get a look at life that asks us to look at our own lives, and a plea to remember that each day matters.**

Wilder reminds us of our mortality throughout *Our Town*. The Stage Manager introduces characters and immediately tells us when they die. In Act III we discover a lot of information about how characters we met and loved earlier in the play have died. **Life, Love, Marriage, Death. The heart of the play is the encouragement to make our lives count.** Don’t wait to tell others what you really think. Don’t wait to live the life you want to live. And I guess that’s why we’ve got to love those people who deserve it like there’s no tomorrow; because when you get right down to it, there isn’t.
The American Shakespeare Center performs Shakespeare's works under their original staging conditions -- on a simple stage, without elaborate sets, and with the audience sharing the same light as the actors. By following the basic principles of Renaissance theatrical production, the American Shakespeare Center gives its audiences some of the pleasures that an Elizabethan playgoer would have enjoyed.

**UNIVERSAL LIGHTING**
Shakespeare’s actors could see their audience; ASC actors can see you. When actors can see an audience, they can engage with an audience. And audience members can play the roles that Shakespeare wrote for them — Cleopatra’s court, Henry V’s army, or simply part of innumerable jokes. Leaving an audience in the dark can literally obscure a vital part of the drama as Shakespeare designed it.

**DOUBLING**
Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has more than forty parts; Shakespeare's traveling troupe may have had fewer than fifteen actors. Like the Renaissance acting companies, the ASC doubles parts, with one actor playing as many as seven roles in a single show. Watching actors play more than one role, an audience can experience another aspect of Elizabethan playgoing - the delight of watching a favorite actor assume multiple roles.

**GENDER**
Women didn’t take to the English stage until after the Restoration (1660), so all the women in Shakespeare's plays were originally played by young boys or men. Shakespeare had a great deal of fun with this convention. In a production of *As You Like It* in 1600, a boy would have played Rosalind, who disguises herself as a boy, then pretends to be a woman. Let's review: that’s a boy playing a woman disguised as a boy pretending to be a woman. Because we are committed to the idea that Shakespeare is about everyone, the ASC is not an all-male company, but we try to re-create some of the fun of gender confusions by casting women as men and men as women.

**LENGTH**
We cannot know the precise running time of a Shakespeare play in the Renaissance, but the Chorus in *Romeo and Juliet* promises “two hours' traffic of our stage.” The ASC tries to fulfill this promise through brisk pacing and a continuous flow of dramatic action.

**SETS**
Shakespeare's company performed on a large wooden platform unadorned by fixed sets or scenery. A few large pieces - thrones, tombs, tables - were occasionally used to ornament a scene. The ASC will sometimes use set pieces or boxes to indicate location and, like Shakespeare's company, we use these items to spark the audience’s imagination to “piece out our imperfections with [their] minds.”

**COSTUMING**
Costuming was important to the theatre companies of Shakespeare’s day for three reasons. First, the frequently lavish costumes provided fresh color and designs for the theatres, which otherwise did not change from show to show. Second, costumes made it easy to use one actor in a variety of roles. Third, as they do now, costumes helped an audience "read" the play quickly by showing them at a glance who was rich or poor, royalty or peasantry, priest or cobbler, ready for bed or ready to party, "in" or "out." Costumes are important to the ASC in the same way. But costumes were NOT important to Shakespeare and his fellows as a way of showing what life used to be like in a particular historical period. They performed *Julius Caesar*, for example, in primarily Elizabethan garb, not ancient Roman clothing. For them, as for us, the play always spoke to the present. That's why we use costumes that speak to our audiences in the most familiar language possible while staying consistent with the words in the play.

**MUSIC**
Shakespeare had a soundtrack. Above the stage, musicians played an assortment of string, wind, and percussion instruments before, during, and after the play. The plays are sprinkled with songs for which lyrics, but not much of the music, survive. The ASC sets many of these songs in contemporary style. The result is emblematic of our approach—a commitment to Shakespeare's text and to the mission of connecting that text to modern audiences.
Discuss: How many of you generally prefer that a novel, movie, or play have a happy ending? Why?

What is the difference in a tragedy and a comedy? Compare the student responses to the dictionary definition, then to Shakespeare’s meaning. Is *Romeo and Juliet* a comedy or tragedy? Would *Romeo and Juliet* with a happy ending increase or decrease your enjoyment of the play? Why?

**Part One:**

**Activity:** Can one choice change a story and the outcome? What are some of the most important choices made in *Romeo and Juliet*? At what point in the story did things begin to go wrong? Whose fault was this? Discuss how the choices of the following characters affected the outcome of the play: Romeo, Juliet, Friar Lawrence, Mercutio, Lord Capulet, Tybalt.

As a class, create a list of moments from the story when a different choice would have changed the outcome of the play.

Some examples could be:
- If Romeo heeded Escalus’ warning and declined to duel with Tybalt, how would the outcome have changed?
- How would the story change if Romeo had received the letter?
- What would have happened if Romeo had stopped to consult Friar Laurence before he went into Juliet’s tomb?
- What if Friar Laurence had declined to marry Romeo and Juliet until they had known each other longer?

After creating the list, divide students into groups. Each group will pick a turning point in the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* from the list, consider how the action of the play would have been altered had a different choice been made, and predict the characters’ actions throughout the rest of the play. What is the new outcome? Does this change make the play a comedy?

In their groups, students will create a general plot outline, and fill in a Venn Diagram comparing the plot from the original story with their new and improved plot, and the places where the two plots intersect. These should be completed before continuing to Part Two.

**Part Two:**

Once plot outlines have been created, each group will prepare to present their story to the class. To do this, each group will choose one option from the list below. Each option has a writing element and a presentation element.

- Write a “choose your own adventure” version of the story, including several different choices and outcomes; Read your story to the class, sharing the choices that led you to the plot outline created yesterday.
- Rewrite the entire scene as a play script; Perform the scene for the class.
- Create a comic strip or storyboard of your scene retelling, including dialogue for the characters; Share your images and read the text to the class.
- Rewrite the story as a screenplay; Present a “table reading” of the scene adding “Director’s Commentary” of the changes that were made.
- Create a news interview, writing questions and answers from key characters in the play, discussing how they prefer the new ending; Present as a staged interview, with a reporter and characters answering the questions.
- Create a script for a talk show panel, staging a reunion of characters that died in the original version of the play and discuss the changes in your version; Present as a talk show panel, with a TV host and characters.

**Closure** – Groups present their stories and discuss. Ask students to provide feedback for each other - What were their favorite elements of each presentation? Why did each group choose the presentation element they used?
PART ONE

Warmup: Split the class in two groups (ideally, they are far enough apart from each other not to see or hear the other group easily). Give one set of the following instructions to each group (printed or verbally if there is more than one instructor to side coach two groups at the same time):

**Your group is called “the numbers.”** See if you can use your bodies as a group to physically create the number 1. Once you’ve mastered that, try it with the number 2 and then the number 3. Next, stand in a circle and one by one count aloud. See how many numbers you can say in one minute’s time. (Maybe try it again in another language if the group is bilingual). Lastly, brainstorm as a group on how/when/where/why we use numbers on a daily basis. Why are they important?

**Your group is called “the letters.”** See if you can use your bodies as a group to physically create the letter A. Once you’ve mastered that, try it with the letter B and then the letter C. Next, stand in a circle and one by one say the alphabet aloud. See how you many times you can get through the alphabet in one minute’s time. Lastly, brainstorm as a group on how/when/where/why we use letters on a daily basis. Why are they important?

Activity: Bring the two groups together briefly and pass out the first four lines of the prologue of *Romeo & Juliet*. Have the students notice that the lines are written in iambic pentameter (in short, each line has 10 beats) and that lines 1 & 3 rhyme, as well as lines 2 & 4.

Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

Students return to their groups and create 4 iambic lines with the same rhyme scheme that glorifies their particular “numbers” or “letters” group. An example might be:

We are the greatest numbers on the block,  
You can count on us forever and a day,  
Numbers go on and on and never stop,  
We rock! We rule! What do you say!?

After each group has written their lines, ask them to rehearse their piece as a group. They might decide to perform it all in unison, split up lines, have certain lines be said in a solo voice, have certain lines be said by multiple voices…whatever gets them pumped up to work together and believe their group is the “superior” group.

After they’ve had time to create and rehearse, have the two groups return to a “neutral performance space” (aka, just not the home “turf” they’ve been bonding in, instead the middle of the room) and perform their pieces for each other. One group should sit and watch while the other stands and performs. Next, ask them all to stand and face each other and perform the pieces again (one group first, then the other follows). Encourage lots of boos and hisses and maybe some “talk to the hand” gestures from the “numbers” group while the “letters” groups performs and vice versa. You have been slowly creating a feud between the two groups and now is the time they really get to show it.

Wrap-up: Have the two groups reflect on the bonding, creating, rehearsing and performing experience. How did you do physically creating your numbers/letters? How many did you verbally say in a minute’s time? Share what you found important about numbers/letters in your discussion. How did you go about putting this into rhyming
lines? How did your two performances of the piece differ—one with an attentive audience and one with an audience booing and hissing you? How would an outsider really judge who was the superior group? Is there even such a thing as a superior group? Why or why not?

Hand out the entire prologue now and ask them to read through it before part 2. If time permits, read it out loud and discuss any unfamiliar words.

PART TWO

Warmup: Have the two groups from lesson one return to the playing space, with a copy of the prologue in their hands. Have the “numbers” group start reciting the piece with the first line, “Two households, both alike in dignity,” while the “letters” group responds with the second line “In fair Verona, where we lay our scene” and so on until the two groups recite the entire prologue. They may already be embodying the feud after the first lesson, but have them recite the prologue again, encouraging the warring factions even more this time—never getting physical, just body language etc. Have the players sit down and briefly discuss what we learn about the entire play in this prologue? Responses might include: “the two houses are equal—one is not better than the other”, “the play takes place in Verona, Italy”, “this war has been going on a long time”, etc.

Activity: Ask for 6 volunteers (3 from each group) and pass out the following edited version of the first scene from Romeo & Juliet to them. Cast anyone from the “numbers” group as a Montague (Benvolio, Balthasar, Abraham) and anyone from the “letters” group as a Capulet (Sampson, Gregory, Tybalt). If you happen to have pool noodles or some other fun/safe “weapon” for the characters to intimidate with, all the better. Have the volunteers perform the scene once, followed by a brief discussion on what was happening/clarifying any unfamiliar words, then perform it again (perhaps with different volunteers if you have a lot of eager participants):

**SAMPSON**
Let us take the law of our sides; let them begin.

**GREGORY**
I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.

**SAMPSON**
Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them; which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it.

*Enter ABRAHAM and BALTHASAR*

**ABRAHAM**
Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

**SAMPSON**
I do bite my thumb, sir.

**ABRAHAM**
Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

**SAMPSON**
[Aside to GREGORY] Is the law of our side, if I say ay?

**GREGORY**
Say ‘better’: here comes one of my master’s kinsmen.

**SAMPSON**
Yes, better, sir.

**ABRAHAM**
Do you quarrel, sir?

**SAMPSON**
If you do, sir, I am for you: I serve as good a man as you.

**ABRAHAM**
No better.

**SAMPSON**
Well, sir.

**GREGORY**
Say ‘better’: here comes one of my master’s kinsmen.

**SAMPSON**
Yes, better, sir.

**ABRAHAM**
You lie.

**SAMPSON**
Draw, if you be men. Gregory, remember thy swashing blow.

*Enter BENVOLIO*

**BENVOLIO**
Part, fools!

**TYBALT**
What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds?

**BENVOLIO**
Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death.

**SAMPSON**
What, drawn, and talk of peace! I hate the word,

**TYBALT**
As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee:

Wrap-up: Reflect on watching/performing the scene. Did you find yourself rooting for your “side” in the fight? Is there really a “right” side and a “wrong” side, based on what you’ve learned in the prologue and first scene? The cause of the “ancient grudge” between the Montagues and the Capulets is never explained. Why do you think Shakespeare chose not to tell us? What do you think might have been the cause? As you watch the play at TPAC, see if you can find legitimate reasons these two families are at war…and whether the consequences of this feud are worth it.
Warmup: Have the students sit in a circle and silently think about their favorite food. Ask them questions like: How do you eat it? With your hands or utensils? Is it hot or cold? Is it messy? Do you put salt and/or pepper on it?

Ask one student to demonstrate eating the food in a pantomime and see if the others can guess what the food is. Go around the circle and have each student perform eating their food, while the others guess. Encourage the performers to be very specific and to take their time to really chew, etc. When the item isn’t actually there the performer must still act as if it is during the pantomime.

Discussion: What did it feel like to act without props? As an audience member watching others, what are some things the performers did that led you to easily guess? What are some things that made it difficult to guess?

Next, share the fact that Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* uses non-realistic techniques such as a bare stage and actors who “pull up an imaginary window shade” or “go through the motions of putting wood into a stove” despite there being no actual shade, wood or stove. This demands that the actors performing in his play become quite skilled at pantomime. The Thornton Wilder Society says, “the idea was that the play itself was a distillation of life, a commentary on its essential moments.” During the height of theatrical realism, Wilder’s pared down style was a radical departure from the conventions of the time.

Ask the students: Would that surprise you to see actors pantomiming instead of using items today? How do you think that will add to or subtract from the play?

Activity: Have students pair up and give them the following text: (For variety’s sake, you might give each partnership two different colors to say—perhaps Green/Orange and Yellow/Purple etc. What they are saying doesn’t matter as much as how they are saying it, and furthermore what they are pantomiming while saying it).

A: Red
B: Blue
A: Red
B: Blue
A: Red
B: Blue
A: Red
B: Blue
A: Red
B: Blue
A: Red
B: Blue
A: Red
B: Blue

Challenge them to decide where their scene will take place (a kitchen, living room or other space that generally has a lot of items), what the relationship is between them (family or friends, but not strangers) and what kind of activity they are involved in while they talk (preparing and drinking tea, filling in a crossword puzzle etc.). After they’ve made decisions, ask them to rehearse their scene without props. They should easily be able to memorize the scene so they are not even holding the paper. Encourage them to be just as specific as they were in the warm-up.

Lastly, have them perform the scenes for each other, with the audience guessing the location, the relationship and the activities each was involved with. If the audience is stumped, side coach the actors to make some tweaks (think about whether these people would touch, what tone of voice they would use with each other, slow down the pantomiming etc.) and perform the scene again.

Wrap up: Ask the students: What did it feel like to act without props AND have text to say? As an audience member watching others, what are some things the performers did both physically AND vocally that lead you to easily guess the location, relationship and activities? What are some things that made it difficult to guess? Why do you think Thornton Wilder would choose to write a whole play with minimal set and props?
Journaling - Have Emily’s quote (right) posted as students enter the room. Ask students to read the quote, and write a journal entry. What do they think the meaning is? What do we not realize in our lives every minute? What are things that you might take for granted in your own lives? Ask students to take a few moments to reflect on their own lives - the ups and downs, the good and the bad, and consider how they’ve become the person they are today.

Discuss: Ask for volunteers to share what they think the meaning is for the quote, and even some of what they might take for granted.

*Our Town* is split into 3 acts - Act I – Daily Life, Act II – Love and Marriage, Act III – Death and Dying. This quote is from the final act – does this change what students think the quote means, or confirm their thoughts?

Read some of the notes on the following page from the Artistic Director of ASC about *Our Town*. Why should we make every moment count?

Activity: Read the first few pages of *Our Town* as a class. What do you think about the beginning of the story? Why is the story focusing on such simple parts of a day, instead of looking at important moments? Many will find this beginning to be “boring” or “slow” or “unimportant”. Why? Consider another quote from *Our Town* “Choose the least important day in your life. It will be important enough.” What does this mean?

Imagine you are going to write your life story, including some of the regular, every day activities. What would you want to include? Give students the following questions to answer to help them think through parts of their life story. Make sure students know this part of the assignment will be shared in small groups, so they should be as personal as they feel comfortable.

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My "Life Story"

- My earliest memory:
- Some of my best life memories and how they made me feel:
- Some of my worst life memories and how they made me feel:
- The greatest challenges or hardships I have overcome:
- Accomplishments / Things I am proud of / Personal Growth:
- The most important personal beliefs/values that give me strength: (i.e. religious faith, everyone is created equal, to be kind, honesty, etc...)
- Characters in my life story:
- What do I want for my future?
- 3 simple things in my life I am thankful for:
- Elements of my daily life that are a part of my story:

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Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it – every, every minute?

~ Emily in *Our Town~

Aleca Piper as Rebecca, J.C. Long as Dr. Gibbs, Sara J. Griffin as Mrs. Gibbs, Ross Neal as George, Andrew Goldwasser as the Stage Manager, Cordell Cole as Wally, Constance Swain as Emily, Kyle Powell as Mr. Webb, Zoe Speas as Mrs. Webb. Photo by Michael Bailey.
After students have had time to write answers to the questions about their own life stories, put them into groups of about 4. In their groups, students will share 3 things about their own stories and while using 3 important communication skills – Listening, Asking Questions, and Giving/Receiving compliments. This is how it will work: Student A will share 3 things about his life story. The rest of the group only listens. Next, students B, C and D will each ask a question that A will answer. Finally, B, C, and D will all give a compliment to A (It can be on the presentation, the way A lives, personality, etc.) Then B will take their turn, and so on.

Closure/Reflection: When all groups are finished sharing, return to your seats and discuss. What did you hear from a classmate that surprised you? What are some of the simple things you were thankful for? Assuming you are living in the Act I of your life, what do you hope will happen in Act II and III?

From Artistic Director, Jim Warren, about Our Town

It’s a play about all of us, it’s a play about our all of towns and our lives, no matter where or when. It became an enduring classic because it somehow reaches beyond just being about a single town; it’s about life.

Wilder wrote: “Our Town is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village; or as a speculation about the conditions of life after death...It is an attempt to find value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life.”

The play takes us through the whole arc of existence: Daily Life; Love and Marriage; Death and Dying. We get a look at life that asks us to look at our own lives, and a plea to remember that each day matters.

Wilder reminds us of our mortality throughout Our Town. The Stage Manager introduces characters and immediately tells us when they die. Life, Love, Marriage, Death. The heart of the play is the encouragement to make our lives count.

Don’t wait to tell others what you really think. Don’t wait to live the life you want to live. And I guess that’s why we’ve got to love those people who deserve it like there’s no tomorrow; because when you get right down to it, there isn’t.
Warmup: Bring students to a standing circle and have a volunteer pick a quote out of a hat (famous quotes from plays listed below for your use) and read it aloud, with the other students repeating the words. If the quote is rather long, they can break their reading down into 2 or 3 lines so the repetition is easier.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow,
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.

See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!
O that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek!

Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

Only it seems to me that 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.

Look at that moon. Potato weather for sure.

Wherever you come near the human race there’s layers and layers of nonsense.

Brainstorm: It is suggested that students be somewhat familiar with both stories before continuing this lesson. Start by brainstorming about *Romeo & Juliet*. Ask what words, images, famous lines or themes come to mind when they hear the title and fill half the board with their ideas. Repeat the process on the other half of the board for *Our Town*. 

![Constance Swain as Emily, Ross Neal as George. Photo by Michael Bailey.](Image)

![Constance Swain as Emily, Ross Neal as George. Photo by Michael Bailey.](Image)
Next, have the students note overlapping ideas between the two as you draw literal lines of connection. Some specific commonalities might include: "both have a prologue" or "both involve lovers courting from heights," while broader overlap observations will likely illicit "both have young people falling in love," or "people die in both plays" or "family seems important in both plays."

Activity: Break the students into 4 groups and assign each group a different scene - Romeo & Juliet prologue, Our Town prologue, Romeo & Juliet balcony scene, Our Town ladder scene. Notice those specific commonalities of prologues and "courting" from heights in the chosen scenes (edited version of each can be found on the following pages). The groups should then read the scenes round-robin style with the first student saying one line, the next student saying the next line etc. After the reading, the groups should discuss and note any references to love, death and community.

Next, combine the two “prologue” groups and combine the two “heights” groups. As two larger groups, have the students share their observations on love, death and community found within their particular scenes.

These new, larger groups will now create a performance piece using the 2 texts and their discussion thoughts as inspiration. The piece can have direct text from both plays, tableaus, sound effects, props, costumes, whatever! There is no “right way” to create this performance—as long as everyone in the group is involved and as long as the two texts and the larger group discussion on overlapping themes drive the creation process. After some time to create, the two groups perform for each other.

Reflection: After the performances, bring the group together for reflection. What struck you in watching the other performance? What did you struggle with in your process? What were you most proud of in your process? How well/not well did the two texts mingle? What do you learn about the broader themes of love, death and community by creating, performing or watching?
ROMEO & JULIET PROLOGUE:

CHORUS:
Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents’ strife.
The fearful passage of their death-marked love
And the continuance of their parents’ rage,
Which, but their children’s end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage;
The which, if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

OUR TOWN PROLOGUE:

STAGE MANAGER:
This play is called “Our Town.” The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New Hampshire –just across the Massachusetts line: latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes.

The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn.

The sky is beginning to show some streaks of light over in the East there, behind our mount'in.
The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go – doesn't it?

Well, I'd better show you how our town lies. Up here is Main Street. Way back there is the railway station; tracks go that way. Polish Town's across the tracks, and some Canuck families. Over there is the Congregational Church; across the street's the Presbyterian. Methodist and Unitarian are over there. Baptist is down in the holla' by the river. Catholic Church is over beyond the tracks. Here's the Town Hall and Post Office combined; jail's in the basement. William Jennings Bryan once made a speech from these very steps here. Along here's a row of stores. Hitching posts and horse blocks in front of them. First automobile's going to come along in about five years-belongs to Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen...lives in the big white house up on the hill. Here's the grocery store and here's Mr. Morgan's drugstore. Most everybody in town manages to look into those two stores once a day. Public School's over yonder. High School's still farther over. Quarter of nine mornings, noontimes, and three o'clock afternoons, the hull town can hear the yelling and screaming from those schoolyards.

This is our doctor's house, – Doc Gibbs'. This is the back door.

There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery. This is Mrs. Gibbs' garden.
Corn...peas...beans...hollyhocks...heliotrope...and a lot of burdock. In those days our newspaper come out twice a week – the Grover's Corners Sentinel – and this is Editor Webb's house. And this is Mrs. Webb's garden. Just like Mrs. Gibbs', only it's got a lot of sunflowers, too. Right here's...a big butternut tree.

Nice town, y'know what I mean? Nobody very remarkable ever come out of it, s'far as we know. The earliest tombstones in the cemetery up there on the mountain say 1670-1680 – they're Grovers and Cartwrights and Gibbses and Herseys—same names as are around here now. Well, as I said: it's about dawn. The only lights on in town are in a cottage over by the tracks where a Polish mother's just had twins. And in the Joe Crowell house, where Joe Junior's getting up so as to deliver the paper. And in the depot, where Shorty Hawkins is gettin' ready to flag the 5:45 for Boston.
(A train whistle is heard...The STAGE MANAGER takes out his watch and nods.)
ROMEO & JULIET BALCONY SCENE:

JULIET
O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I’ll no longer be a Capulet.

ROMEO
[Aside] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

JULIET
’Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What’s in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself.

ROMEO
I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

JULIET
What man art thou that thus bescreen’d in night
So stumblest on my counsel?

ROMEO
By a name
I know not how to tell thee who I am:
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,
Because it is an enemy to thee;
Had I it written, I would tear the word.

JULIET
My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words
Of that tongue’s utterance, yet I know the sound:
Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?

ROMEO
Neither, fair saint, if either thee dislike.

JULIET
How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?
The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
And the place death, considering who thou art,
If any of my kinsmen find thee here.

ROMEO
With love’s light wings did I o’er-perch these walls;
For stony limits cannot hold love out,
And what love can do that dares love attempt;
Therefore thy kinsmen are no let to me.

JULIET
If they do see thee, they will murder thee.

ROMEO
Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye
Than twenty of their swords: look thou but sweet,
And I am proof against their enmity.

JULIET
I would not for the world they saw thee here.

ROMEO
I have night’s cloak to hide me from their sight;
And but thou love me, let them find me here:
My life were better ended by their hate,
Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.

OUR TOWN LADDER SCENE:

(EMILY leans out the window and peers at GEORGE a moment, then works again.)

GEORGE. Hssst! Emily!
EMILY. Hello.
GEORGE. Hello!
EMILY. I can't work at all. The moonlight's so terrible.
GEORGE. Emily, did you get the third problem?
EMILY. Which?
GEORGE. The third?
EMILY. Why, yes, George – that's the easiest of them all.
GEORGE. I don't see it. Emily, can you give me a hint?
EMILY. I'll tell you one thing: the answer's in yards.
GEORGE. In yards? How do you mean?
EMILY. In square yards.
GEORGE. Oh... in square yards.
EMILY. Yes, George, don't you see?
GEORGE. Yeah. (He does not see.)

EMILY. In square yards of wallpaper. (giving him more than a hint.)
GEORGE. Wallpaper, (a great light breaking) – oh, I see. Thanks a lot, Emily.
EMILY. You're welcome. My, isn't the moonlight terrible? And choir practice going on. (listens hard a moment) – I think if you hold your breath you can hear the train all the way to Contoocook. Hear it?
GEORGE. M-m-m – What do you know!
EMILY. Good night, Emily. And thanks.
GEORGE. Good night, Emily.

(BOTH return unwillingly to work, but almost immediately give up and gaze at the moon, chins on hands.)
Discussion Questions – Before and After

Romeo and Juliet

Before viewing the performance:

✓ What is the dominant theme in the play, love or hate? Support your answer with examples from the play.

✓ What scene are you most looking forward to seeing performed live?

✓ Which character do you like the most? Why? What do you like about them?

✓ Suicide is often described as a permanent solution to a temporary problem. What does this mean? What are other options Romeo and Juliet had other than suicide?

✓ Why is Romeo and Juliet one of the most popular works of literature still today? What themes continue to resonate with its readers across generations and continents? Is the story universal or dated?

✓ The plot line in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet fits together like pieces of a puzzle. In other words, if any small event of the play did not take place, the ending would not have been as effective or the tragedy itself might not have taken place. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?

✓ There is quite a bit of humor in Act 2. Why is that? Why is humor important in a tragedy?

After seeing the play at TPAC:

✓ Think back to specific moments in the performance – which were most memorable for you? What was it in those moments that most excited, moved or surprised you?

✓ Brainstorm a list of moments that gathered a strong response from the audience in general. Did different members of the audience respond in different ways? Are there places where the boys responded differently that the girls? Places where teachers responded differently than students? How do you account for these differences? Did you think the audience response was appropriate to the situation and the content of the performance?

✓ Shakespeare’s language can be difficult to understand in modern times. How did the actors make the meaning of their words clear? Were there changes in tone, volume, pitch or speed that helped important words or ideas stand out to the audience? Discuss the actors who were most successful in making their words “live” – how did they use their words to make the meaning clear?

✓ What did Shakespeare hope to accomplish with this play? Is there a message that stands out? Did this production convey that message?

✓ Did the performance meet your expectations? With your class, discuss all the elements of the performance: set, costume, and lighting design; music, acting, and directing. What worked for you? What didn’t? What made you see the story and characters in a new way? What confused you?
Before viewing the performance:

- What is the traditional role of a stage manager? Why do you think Wilder uses the character of a stage manager as his narrator? How do the stage manager’s actions reflect the role of a stage manager during the production of a play? How do they differ from the traditional understanding of what a stage manager does?

- Analyze the unconventional character of the Stage Manager. Some critics have suggested that he plays a role similar to that of a Greek chorus; others have suggested that he may be meant to personify Death. Some critics have even suggested that his presence hints at the presence of God. How do you believe his character should be interpreted? How does his presence in the play impact the development of plot and theme?

- What do you think the Stage Manager is suggesting when he tells the audience, “The First Act was called Daily Life. This act is called Love and Marriage. There’s another act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that’s about”? How does this foreshadowing impact the audience’s reaction to the second act?

- How is your town or neighborhood similar to Grover’s Corners? Describe the similarities and differences between the two places. How significant is the setting in Our Town? Could this play have taken place anywhere or at any time? Could it be set in a big city? Another country? What would the play gain or lose in those settings?

- In Act III of Our Town, Emily decides to revisit one day in her life. She chooses a day that is somewhat happy and somewhat ordinary: the day of her twelfth birthday. If you could relive a time in your past, what time would you choose and why? Knowing what you know now, would you want to relive a special occasion, or just an ordinary day?

- Thornton Wilder once wrote: “I’ve always thought [Emily should live]. In a movie you see the people so close to that a different relation is established. In the theatre they are halfway abstractions in an allegory; in the movie they are very concrete. So in so far as the play is a Generalized Allegory she dies - we die - they die; in so far as it’s a Concrete Happening it’s not important that she die. Let her live - the idea will have been imparted anyway.” How do you interpret this quote? What implications does it have for your reading of the play? If you were directing a film of Our Town, would you let Emily live?

After seeing the play at TPAC:

- Wilder was very specific about the set design and staging of his play. How much control should an author have over the way that his or her text is interpreted and/or adapted? Do you believe directors and/or actors have a responsibility to honor an author’s wishes, or do they have the right to interpret texts in their own way?

- The play contains few dramatic events, and offers only these stage directions: “No curtain. No scenery.” Does the lack of props and scenery add to or detract from the play? Why do you think Wilder chose to present the play this way? Did your opinion on this change after seeing it performed live?

- In a foreword to the play, Donald Margulies suggests that the reader may have been forced to read Our Town “when you were too young to appreciate it.” Do you think you are old enough to appreciate the intent of the story? Think back on a time that you experienced something that you were initially “too young to appreciate.” How did your experience change? What life experiences gave you the context to understand or appreciate the experience?

- Examine the three questions asked by the “audience” members, about drinking, social injustice, and culture. What’s the purpose of these interruptions? Do they add or detract from the play? If you were updating the play, would these questions change? If so, how?

- How does watching a production of the play affect your perception of the characters on the page? Do they seem more or less “archetypal” on stage than on paper?
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