

ELLEN MCDUGALL ON *OUR TOWN*

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION

[INTRODUCTION]

Welcome to the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre Podcast. In this episode we hear from Director Ellen McDougall on what *Our Town* means to her and about the landscape in which Thornton Wilder was writing his Pulitzer Prize-winning play.

[ELLEN MCDUGALL]

I'm Ellen McDougall and I'm directing *Our Town*.

So the play is told in three acts. Act I is called the Daily Life and it introduces the community of the town, so we meet everyone from the paper boy to the doctor; Act II is called Love and Marriage and, as you might guess, it features the marriage of two of the people that we've met in Act I and it tells the story of how they fell in love and decided to get married; and then, act III is set in a graveyard and is about the death of one of the characters that we've met. (I won't say who because it's a spoiler alert, I guess). The other main thing that I always say to people who ask me about the play, I suppose, is it's meta-theatrical, so the story is told by a character who is called the Stage Manager who introduces the play, introduces who's in the play and then tells us about the town. And, throughout, the Stage Manager is there to guide the story, sometimes interrupt a scene and take us somewhere else and give us a bit more information about something else, so that role sort of guides us through the story right through to the end.

I've wanted to direct this play for a really long time; I think it's an incredibly special and unique piece of writing. I find it incredibly moving. I think it just has this incredible power that I find very unique, in terms of other plays that I read, and it's always stood out to me in that way. It feels very unassuming as a piece of writing; it feels very... its power feels very understated; it creeps up on you. It seems to be about nothing and then suddenly it's about everything and you think, my god, what am I to do? I think the opportunity to do it in Regent's Park is a really really special one. Again, to quote Thornton Wilder, he says, this is a play about the life of a village mapped against the life of the stars.

The play was written in 1938 and I've been reading a lot – he wrote a lot of letters through the time that he was also writing the play, which is a wonderful way to get an insight into the thoughts he was having, and the friendships he had, that informed that writing, and one of the reasons he wrote lots of letters was because he was in Europe and obviously most of his family and friends were still in the States. And so he really saw around him the rise of the far right and fascism and the march towards the Second World War as he was writing this play, and one of the things that I find so extraordinary about the play is that, it seems to me that, it's underpinned by a really deep love of humanity, and there's a letter – that I think is written to his mother – where he's talking about the political situation around him in Europe and he says that, despite everything, he's decided that the human race can be given the benefit of the doubt. It seems to me that to have faith in humanity at that

moment in history is an incredible thing, and that really underpins and holds the deepest ideas in the play.

I think there's something about the writing which is really interesting in relation to that political moment, as well and to our own, which is that (I mean you can tell from the title, it's called *Our Town*) it's about a community and, yes, while there are these two characters – who, loosely their experience is kind of centred through the three acts – really the gesture is about the multiple people who live in the community, and, for me, that kind of stands it apart from so many of the plays in Western literature that centre on a singular experience of a protagonist. What Thornton Wilder is doing is opening that up to talk about community, which feels so important right now, but, also, I can really understand why that might have felt important in that moment as well.

I think stylistically he's also a very political writer, and, I think, maybe not often given much credit for that. I think he really understands that form is political, so when he puts the Stage Manager into the play and says this play should be performed without a set or without props, it's a political gesture as much as an artistic one. He writes about that in his introduction to the play; he talks about his understanding of Victorian middle class theatre, in which plays were put into box sets – in what one imagines is a kind of proscenium arch theatre – and his feeling about that is that what it does is put the action somewhere else than where the audience are, so the action is always held at a distance from where the audience sit, which enables them to sympathise with the characters and their experiences but never to feel as though it could be them in the same way, or they're never implicated in the action, it's always, as he puts it, safe and comforting. So we can walk away from a play about terrible trauma and think that's awful for those people, how lucky we are that that's not what we're going through. And, of course, that can be true of many different things but his conjecture is that, when you look back to the Greeks and Shakespeare, there's barely so much as a chair on stage, and the way those auditoriums and, of course, the auditorium at Regent's Park Theatre feels is much more like we're in a shared space and we're with one another in the act of telling that story; we're all performing an act of make believe in sitting and watching or in telling that story, and, one of the things that the Stage Manager is doing is inviting all of us to actively participate in the telling of that story.

In terms of how relevant the play is to an audience now, I suppose it's that thing I was talking about, in that it seems to be very simple and yet it's incredibly profound, and it goes to the deepest questions about what it means to be alive. There's a realisation towards the end of the play (and I'll try to keep any spoiler alerts out of this) but there's a realisation towards the end of the play that – and actually that's another quality of this community: the people in this community work from dawn 'till dusk, they barely stop, they barely have time to do anything other than survive, and there's a realisation towards the end of the play that – we don't have time to look at one another and we don't have time to see the world around us clearly. I think that feels incredibly powerful and has a kind of deeper political significance right now as well.

Casting the play was a really exciting thing because all of the roles are brilliantly written, even down to the smallest part that has a couple of small scenes, all of the characters feel really really fully imagined, so it was a real gift to have that as a task to find people who could bring life to all of those different voices. I made the decision (I mean it's part of my

practice as a Director anyway) but I made the decision to cast the widest possible range of actors in the play, so we have a really diverse cast and a really wide range of ages and needs in the room, and so we feel already like a community, I suppose, and that's been really wonderful. But I think what it does as well is maybe present a kind of progressive idea of what we might want a community to look like now. While the play itself is set in a town at the turn of the century 1900 in America, that is a much more homogenous community than the ones that we live in now in London, certainly, I was really excited meeting that with a really contemporary idea of what a community looks like.

It'll make you laugh; it'll make you cry; it's about everything. It's about people, it's full of a love of humanity and I think it's a gift; I think it's a really wonderful thing to come and sit and have the opportunity to think about what might be the most important thing in your life.

[End Note]

That was Ellen McDougall, director of *Our Town*. For more information about Regent's Park Open Air Theatre and to book tickets, visit openairtheatre.com