

Our Town on TV

A noteworthy production of Thornton Wilder's masterpiece is captured on the small screen.

By Gerard Raymond



Bill Bernstein

Spalding Gray as the Stage Manager marries George (Eric Stoltz) and Emily (Penelope Ann Miller) in *Our Town* on Great Performances, PBS.

Rarely is a stage play successfully transferred to another medium, but the televised version of the Lincoln Center production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is a remarkable achievement. More than just an excellent record of a noteworthy stage production, this adaptation, which will air in New York on November 3rd as part of Channel Thirteen's Great Performances Series, is great television as well.

Gregory Mosher, who directed the play on stage, says *Our Town* is "notoriously tricky" to adapt because "its genius is that it announces that it is a theater event all the time."

The Lincoln Center production was
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hailed by some critics as an important re-examination of *Our Town*. "I think for the first time, in a long time, the play is being seen as a very dark play," Mosher comments. "It very much reflects Europe in the 1930s and it is clearly about the imminence of all of the destruction that followed."

According to Mosher, *Our Town* is not, as some critics have described it, Thornton Wilder's *Ah, Wilderness!*. "That is a convenient, deeply lazy, comment it seems to me. Wilder did not get along with his father and had a very complicated relationship with his mother. He grew up in a rotten marriage. So it doesn't make sense that this man

would idealize marriage. I find nothing nostalgic in this play. Over and over again we are reminded about the end of something. It is a memorial service, more than anything else."

This production of *Our Town* marks the first time that Mosher has worked in television and, at the start, he was curious about the medium. "If the point of film is, as Eisenstein said, to juxtapose images to create emotional response, how does television work?" he asked Kirk Browning, the director of the TV version. Browning told him that television was more of an emotional medium than a visual one.

"Studies have shown," Mosher said,

Herman would rather speak about *The Grand Tour* in generalities than specifics: "By then, I was ready to study design and architecture the way I'd planned as a kid. We've all seen the change in Broadway, and it's sad, because I'm hopelessly in love with musical *comedy*. I've watched musicals get away from melody, glamour, traditional values and, well, I'm sorry, I'm right, they've thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Thank God for Steve Sondheim; without him we'd have nothing American. We've lost our art form, and," he concedes, "I'm sad I'm not doing anything now to help the situation."

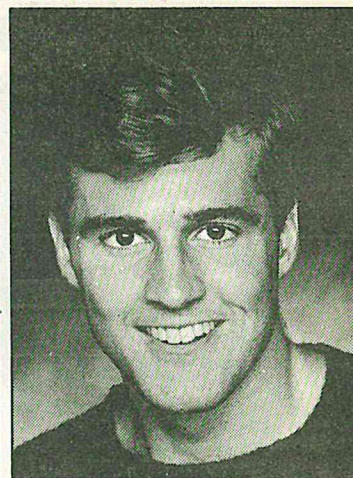
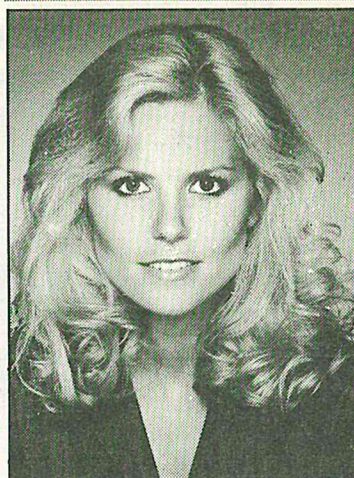
Even so, *La Cage* provided a burst of glory: "I'd seen the movie, inquired about the rights, and learned they'd been bought by Allan Carr who was doing it as *The Queen of Basin Street*—book by Jay Presson Allen, music and lyrics by Maury Yeston—set in New Orleans. But it was completely scuttled—and I never heard it—by the time I was approached by Barry Brown and Fritz Holt."

Other shows: "I don't like interfering with anyone's work, and only do it when people are very dear to me. If Tommy Tune and Alex Cohen were on the top of the Alps and needed help, I'd go, so when they asked me to come to Baltimore for *A Day in Hollywood*, I went."

And what about those legends that some songs in *his* shows were written by others? "I have read things in books about myself that are absolute blatant lies, and all I can say is if a person wants to be irresponsible and won't contact the living person who can tell him the whole story, it's ludicrous. I was *threatened* by Merrick to have all sorts of people come in, but that's how he operated. I've never collaborated and never will. If that happened, I would go into the pit and pull my score—did you know that composers own the actual music in the pit? The cost of printing it is taken out of our royalties—and that would be that."

In summation? "My only real regret is that my mother died at 44 and missed all the success. It's the only tragedy in my life. The rest—even when things didn't go well professionally—has been very happy." □

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"that from about six feet away you pay attention to the information. Closer than that, you only pay attention to the emotion. Politicians have understood this for a long time," he notes. "So I said let's be brave and trust it, let's get in the actors' faces."

The result is a showcase for wonderful acting. The ensemble quality of the company—which includes Spalding Gray, Eric Stoltz, Penelope Anne Miller, Frances Conroy and Roberta Maxwell—is captured on the small screen. Mosher was not surprised at this: "I always saw the actors's faces up close, from five feet away, in the rehearsal room. I knew that they were not faking these performances, so that when you got in close there was going to be something to look at," he says.

The cast members, says Mosher, "are all experienced in film and television. They have all done it before, so it wasn't a big deal. I just reminded them of the obvious, which is that they have to be simple and truthful and the camera would do the rest." The fact that they had a couple of weeks off before the taping for television helped, "so it is not like they went immediately from projecting to an 800-seat theater" to acting for the television camera.

The great moments from the stage production—the soda fountain scene when George and Emily decide to get married, and Emily's tearful farewell to all the things in life that one seldom appreciates—are as powerful on the TV screen as they were in the theater.

What the television adaptation doesn't capture is, of course, Mosher's stage pictures. The moving third act tableaux with the mourners on one side of the stage and the dead on the other, for instance, is necessarily sacrificed. "Certainly you miss the whole fun of the two sets of families having their breakfast in the morning and the delight of being able to watch both of them together," concedes Mosher. "Two is always funny," he says, "so a lot of the lightness of the first act goes away, when you can only look at one thing at a time."

Mosher is pleased that the play was videotaped in the empty Lyceum Theater, where the stage production opened in December last year. "There is something wonderful about empty theaters, but also something very lonely and sad about them as well." □

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