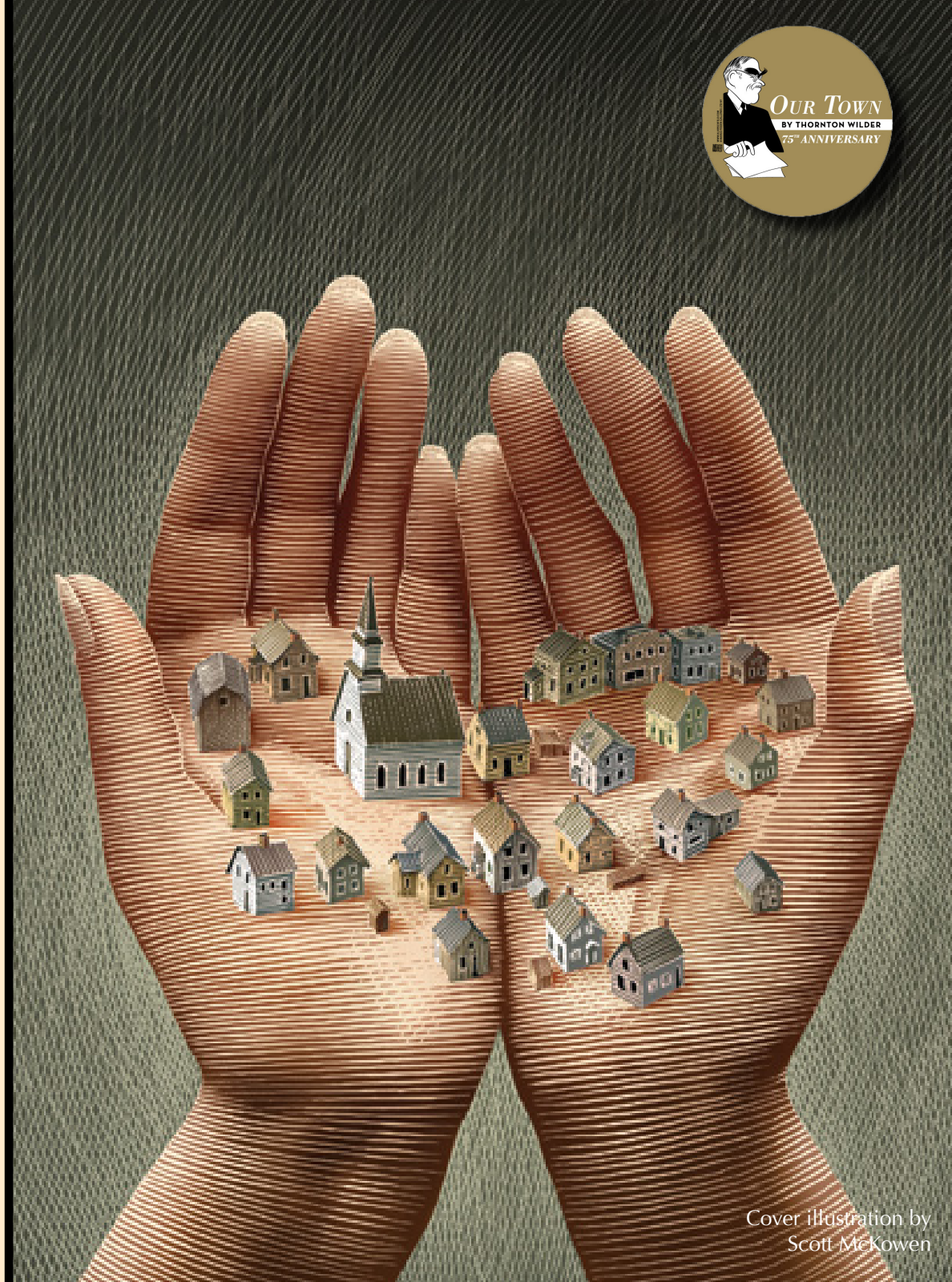


# *Our Town*

by  
Thornton Wilder

## Classroom Activities Guide

researched and written by  
The Education Department of  
The Shakespeare Theatre  
of New Jersey



Cover illustration by  
Scott McKowen



# In This Guide

- About This Guide.....2
- Who Said That?.....3
- *Test Your Understanding*.....4
- Additional Topics for Discussion.....6
- About this Production.....6
- Follow-up Activities.....7
- Meeting the Core Curriculum Standards.....8
- Sources and Further Reading.....9
- About the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey.....10
- Additional Opportunites for Students and Teachers.....11





# About This Guide

Some of the principal goals of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's education programs is to demystify the classics, take them "off the shelf" and re-energize them for students and teachers alike. Toward these goals, this study guide provides educators with tools to both allay their own concerns and to expand the theatre-going experience for their students beyond the field trip to The Shakespeare Theatre.

The information included in this guide will help you expand your students' understanding of classic literature in performance, as well as help you meet many of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. We encourage you to impart as much of the information included in this Study Guide to your students as is possible. The following are some suggestions from teachers on how you can utilize elements of the guide given limited classroom time.

- Many teachers have found that distributing or reading the Short Synopsis and Who's Who pages has greatly increased students' understanding and enjoyment of the production. It provides the students with a general understanding of what they will be seeing and what they can expect. Some teachers have simply taken the last five minutes of a class period to do this with very positive results.
- When more class time is available prior to your visit, we recommend incorporating the background information on the era in which the play is set as well the play itself. One teacher divided her class into groups and assigned each group research topics based on the divisions found in the study guide. Using a copy of the corresponding study guide page as a launch pad, the students had one week to research the topics. The students then presented their information to the class in three- to five-minute oral reports. Including the questions that evolved from the presentations, the entire project took only one class period.
- Using the questions found in the "TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION," many teachers will opt to take a class period after the trip to The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey to discuss the play with their students. The questions help keep the comments focused on the production, while incorporating various thematic and social issues that are found in the play.
- One school spent two days working through performance-based activities (a few of which are suggested in the "FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES" section) with a particularly "difficult and rowdy" class. They were astounded with the results.

Again, we hope you will incorporate as many portions of this study guide as you are able into your classroom experience. If you have any suggestions for activities or topics not already found in the Study Guide, please contact our education department. We are always interested in hearing new ways to excite young people (and teachers) about Shakespeare and live theatre.

Hannv Teaching

Brian B. Crowe,

## "What's My Line?" Promoting Active Listening

Teacher-tested, student-approved!  
Try this exercise with your students:

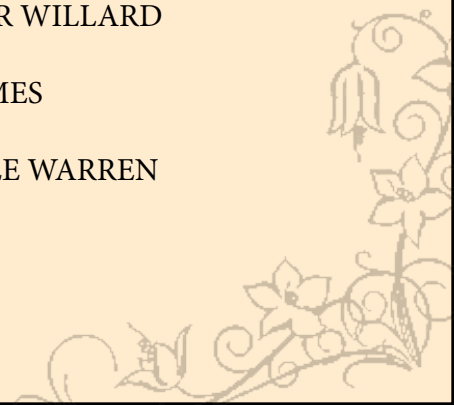
Before attending the production, give each student one line from the play to listen for. Discuss the meaning of the line and encourage their input in deciphering what the intention of the line might be. How would the student perform the line? Why is the line important to the play? Does it advance the plot, or give the audience particular insight into a character or relationship?

Following the production, discuss the line again. Did the actor present the line in the way your student expected? If not, how was it different?



# WHO SAID THAT? - Match the spoken line to the character who speaks it. Three characters do not speak any of the quotes listed below.

- |    |   |                   |
|----|---|-------------------|
| A. | “Gee, I wish a person could get married without all that marching up and down.”   | THE STAGE MANAGER |
| B. | “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.”               | MR. WEBB          |
| C. | “Oh, Ma! By ten o’clock I got to know all about Canada.”  | MRS. WEBB         |
| D. | “Mama, do you know what I love most in the world, do you? Money.”   | EMILY WEBB        |
| E. | “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?”   | WALLY WEBB        |
| F. | “Yes. Now you know. Now you know: that’s what it was to be alive.”  | DOC GIBBS         |
| G. | “Everybody’s resting in Grover’s Corners. Tomorrow’s going to be another day. You get a good rest too. Good night.”   | MRS. GIBBS        |
| H. | “I was the scardest young fella in the state of New Hampshire. I thought I’d made a mistake for sure.”  | GEORGE GIBBS      |
| I. | “Come on, Bessie!”  | REBECCA GIBBS     |
| J. | “A man looks pretty small at a wedding, George. All those good women standing shoulder to shoulder, making sure that the knot’s tied in a mighty public way.” | SIMON STIMSON     |
| K. | “Chew that bacon good an’ slow. It’ll help keep you warm on a cold day.”  | HOWIE NEWSOME     |
|    |   | PROFESSOR WILLARD |
|    |   | MRS. SOAMES       |
|    |   | CONSTABLE WARREN  |





# TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING - Circle the letter that BEST answers the question.

1. According to the Stage Manager, the first scene of the play takes place in :  
a) 1842  
b) 1920  
c) 1901  
d) 1066
2. What is Simon Stimson's job?  
a) Milkman  
b) Choir director at the Congregational Church  
c) Editor of the Grover's Corner Sentinel  
d) Principal of the Grover's Corner Middle School
3. This play is broken up into how many acts?  
a) 1  
b) 2  
c) 3  
d) 5
4. Which of the following characters is still alive at the end of the play?  
a) Emily  
b) George  
c) Mrs. Gibbs  
d) Simon Stimson
5. About what country is Wally studying in the first scene?  
a) Canada  
b) Poland  
c) Germany  
d) The United Arab Emirates
6. What day does Emily choose to revisit?  
a) her wedding day  
b) her 12th birthday  
c) the day her first child was born  
d) the day she met George Gibbs
7. What drink do Emily and George order at the soda shop in Act Two?  
a) egg cream  
b) chocolate milk  
c) strawberry ice cream soda  
d) Diet Coke
8. According to the Stage Manager; which famous figure once gave a speech from the steps of the town hall?  
a) William Jennings Bryant  
b) Theodore Roosevelt  
c) Abraham Lincoln  
d) Thornton Wilder

## DID YOU KNOW?

*Our Town* was adapted into a 1989 Ballet, choreographed by Philip Jerry and a 1955 "Made for TV" musical starring Frank Sinatra.





# TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING - Circle the letter that BEST answers the question.

9. What is inscribed on Simon Stimson's gravestone?  
a) a prayer  
b) his likeness  
c) a few notes of music  
d) a poem
10. What does the second-hand furniture man want to purchase from Mrs. Gibbs?  
a) Doc Gibbs' favorite armchair  
b) Grandma Wentworth's highboy  
c) her dining-room table  
d) Cousin Wilcox's grand piano
11. Where does Mrs. Gibbs desperately want to visit?  
a) Paris, France  
b) New York City  
c) Washington, D.C.  
d) The Atlantic Ocean
12. Who speaks the last line of the play?  
a) Emily  
b) George  
c) The Stage Manager  
d) Simon Stimson
13. Where does Mr. Webb say he went to college?  
a) Hamilton College  
b) Rutgers University  
c) Princeton University  
d) The University of New Hampshire
14. What chore is George accused of neglecting in the first act?  
a) mowing the lawn  
b) cleaning his room  
c) chopping firewood  
d) taking out the garbage
15. What subject does Emily help George with during the homework scene?  
a) History  
b) Biology  
c) Algebra  
d) Animal Husbandry

## DID YOU KNOW?

In the 1940 film version of *Our Town*, many of the original Broadway actors reprised their roles, including Martha Scott, the young actress who played Emily Webb. In the movie, however, Emily lives at the end.





# ADDITIONAL TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How is the Stage Manager different from the other inhabitants of Grover’s Corners? How does this difference affect his function in the play? Do you think the play would be different without the Stage Manager? If so, how?
2. Compare and contrast the characters of George and Emily? How are they different/similar at the start of the play, and how do they change and grow as the play moves along? Is there a scene in particular where this growth is apparent? If so, what scene and why?
3. *Our Town* was written in 1938 and set in the early 20th Century. How do you think that era differs from our own? How is it similar? Do you think a production of this play set in 2013 could be successful? Why or why not?
4. Based on the evidence that Thornton Wilder supplies in the play, what do you think he was trying to say about people and their relationships to one another?
5. *Our Town* is one of the most produced plays in the United States. Why do you think this play has endured for so long and appealed to so many people? Support your answer.

# ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

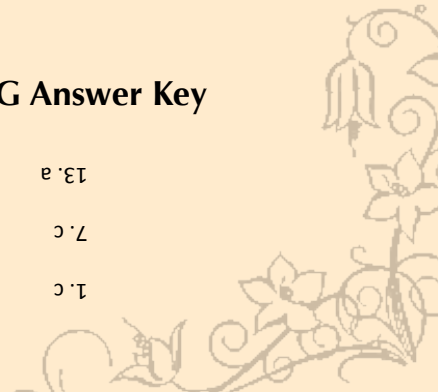
1. Most of the props in this play are mimed by the actors. Why do you think the playwright has created this physical approach for the play? Is it effective? How so? How do you feel this affected your experience of the play? Why?
2. The set for this play is evocative of an empty theatre with only a few suggestive set pieces to designate the various locations. How do you think a “realistic” or “modern” setting would alter your experience of the play? Be specific.

## WHO SAID THAT? Answer Key

- |                      |                  |
|----------------------|------------------|
| A. George Gibbs      | F. Simon Stimson |
| B. Mrs. Gibbs        | E. Emily Webb    |
| C. Wally Webb        | D. Rebecca Gibbs |
| H. Doc Gibbs         | I. Howie Newsome |
| G. The Stage Manager | J. Mr. Gibbs     |
|                      | K. Mrs. Gibbs    |

## TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING Answer Key

- |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. c  | 2. b  | 3. c  | 4. b  | 5. a  | 6. b  |
| 7. c  | 8. a  | 9. c  | 10. b | 11. a | 12. c |
| 13. a | 14. c | 15. c |       |       |       |





# FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

## CRITIC'S CORNER

Write a review of this production of *Our Town*. Be sure to include specific information and your own reactions to both the acting and the design elements (like set, costumes and sound). Explain what you liked about the production, and what you disliked, and support your opinions. Then submit your review to The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's Education Department, or see if it can be published in your school newspaper.

## "Alert the media!"

*Our Town* takes place in a small town where the only regular source of news would be Mr. Webb's paper, the *Grover's Corners Sentinel*. Select a series of events from the play, and "cover" them in the style of a newspaper. For example, create a news bulletin or obituary for one of the characters in the cemetery, a social column on the wedding of George and Emily, or interviews with Doc Gibbs, Professor Willard, Simon Stimson or Howie Newsome about their jobs and families.

## "I learn by this letter..."

Write a letter from the point of view of one of the characters, discussing an event or situation in the play. For example, a letter from Emily to a friend about the changes in George, or a letter from George to a friend about his relationship with Emily.

## CASTING CALL

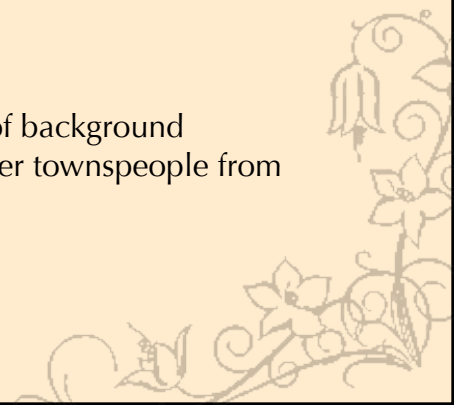
Imagine that you are a movie director about to put together a new film version of *Our Town*. Choose the eight main characters (in your opinion) and list five words that describe each character. Using these descriptions decide what actor you would cast in each role. Defend your decision by explaining why that particular actor seems right for the character Thornton Wilder depicts.

## THE FIFTEEN-MINUTE *OUR TOWN*

Divide into three groups, and have each group take one act of the play. Your task is to create a five-minute version of your act, using only Wilder's words. Choose carefully the lines from your act that carry the most important information and advance the story. When each group is done, you will have a 15-minute version of *Our Town* which you can perform for the class. Afterwards, discuss both the process of adaptation and how your "abridgement" compared to the full-length performance.

## *OUR TOWN*: A BIOGRAPHY

Thornton Wilder provides a lot of information about some of the main characters in *Our Town*, but only small bits of background information about some of the other characters we meet during the show. Create a biography for one of the other townspeople from Grover's Corners using the information that Wilder provides as a jumping off point.





# MEETING THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

In 1996, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted Core Curriculum Content Standards that set out to clearly define what every New Jersey student should know and be able to do at the end of his/her schooling. The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is committed to supporting teachers by ensuring that our educational programs are relevant to standards-based teaching and learning.

Viewing a performance at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and participating in the post-performance discussion can serve as a powerful springboard for discussion, writing, and other outlets for higher-order thinking. On this page you will find suggestions for ways to align your study of our production to each standard.

## LANGUAGE ARTS LITERACY STANDARDS

As a theatre dedicated to the classics, we are continually engaged in exploring some of the world's greatest literature, and the relationship between the written text and performance. Our philosophy and practice follow the four underlying assumptions of the Language Arts Literacy CCCS: that "language is an *active process* for constructing meaning," that "language develops in a *social context*," that language ability increases as learners "engage in texts that are *rich in ideas* and increasingly complex in language," and that learners achieve mastery not by practicing isolated skills but by "*using and exploring language* in its many dimensions." In the practice of theatre, we merge all areas of the language arts, as the standards suggest, "in an integrated act of rehearsal, reflection, and learning." Below, you will find just a few of the possibilities for aligning your study of our productions to each of these standards.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

*Read a scene from the play as a class and use context clues to interpret new words and expand vocabulary*

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5** Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

*Analyze a portion of the text, isolating specific imagery, meanings, references, and then compare those instances to other passages in the play.*

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

*Compare and contrast the printed text with the staged version you have just seen, as well as any number of staged versions available on-line. Maintain a reading journal/active blog, that classmates can comment on using specific prompts about the play.*

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

*Participate in a post-show discussion*

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.2** Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

*Write a new ending for the play in modern prose.*

## VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS STANDARDS

According to both No Child Left Behind and the New Jersey CCCS, the arts (including theatre) are a core subject and "experience with and knowledge of the arts is a vital part of a complete education." In the area of performing arts, performances, workshops and study guide exercises developed by The Shakespeare Theatre address all five state standards.

Below, you will find just a few of the possibilities for aligning your study of our productions to each of these standards.

**STANDARD 1.1:** All students will use aesthetic knowledge in the creation of and in response to dance, music, theatre and visual art.

*Discuss the use of metaphor in both the text and the design of the production; discuss how the play expresses cultural values of its period and/or of today.*

**STANDARD 1.2:** All students will utilize those skills, media, methods, and technologies appropriate to each art form in the creation, performance, and presentation of dance, music, theatre and visual art.

*Perform a monologue or scene from the play; participate in a classroom workshop that develops the physical and technical skills required to create and present theatre.*

**STANDARD 1.3:** All students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles of dance, music, theatre and visual art.

*Participate in a post-show discussion of elements such as physicality and creating motivated action; discuss the relationship between play text and production design.*

**STANDARD 1.4:** All students will develop, apply and reflect upon knowledge of the process of critique.

*Write a review of the production using domain-appropriate terminology; develop a class rubric for effective theatrical presentations; compare and contrast the play with work by other artists.*

**STANDARD 1.5:** All students will understand and analyze the role, development, and continuing influence of the arts in relation to world cultures, history, and society.

*Discuss the representation of social issues (class, political leadership, etc.) in the play; research how the historical period affected the writer's work; compare the play to work from other historical periods.*

# Sources & Further Reading

## On Thornton Wilder:

Hewitt, Barnard. "Thornton Wilder Says "Yes""", *The Tulane Drama Review* 4.2 (1959): 110-20. Print.

Herron, Ima Honaker. *The Small Town In American Drama*. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1969. Print.

Kuner, M. C. *Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark*. New York: Crowell, 1972. Print.

Porter, Thomas. *Myth and Modern American Drama*. Detroit: Wayne State Univ Pr, 1969. Print.

Siebold, Thomas. *Readings on Our Town*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven, 2000. Print.

Simon, Linda. "Thornton Wilder." *Critical Survey of Long Fiction*. Pasadena, CA: Salem, 2010. N. pag. Print.

Theodore, Terry. "Thornton Wilder." *Magill's Survey of American Literature*. Pasadena, CA: Salem, 2007. N. pag. Print.

Wilder, Tappan. Afterword. *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*. New York: Perennial, 2003. N. pag. Print.

Wilder, Thornton. Preface. *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*. London: Samuel French, 1965. N. pag. Print.

## By Thornton Wilder:

### Plays:

*The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1919)

*The Angel That Troubled The Waters and Other Plays* (1928)

*The Long Christmas Dinner, The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, Pullman Car Hiawatha, Queens of France, Love and How to Cure It, Such Things Only Happen in Books* (1931)

*Lucrece* (Translation/Adaptation 1932)

*A Doll's House* (Translation/Adaptation 1937)

### **Our Town (1938) Pulitzer Prize Winner**

*The Merchant of Yonkers* (1939)

### **The Skin of Our Teeth (1942) Pulitzer Prize Winner**

*The Matchmaker* (1954)

*A Life in the Sun* (1955)

*The Drunken Sisters* (1957)

*Three Plays* (1957)

*Plays for Bleecker Street* (1962)

*The Alcestiad* (1977, published posthumously)

### Novels:

*The Cabala* (1926)

### **The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) Pulitzer Prize Winner**

*The Woman of Andros* (1930)

*Heaven's My Destination* (1934)

*The Ides of March* (1948)

### **The Eighth Day (1967) National Book Award Winner**

*Theophilus North* (1973)



# About the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

The acclaimed Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving approximately 100,000 adults and young people annually, it is New Jersey's largest professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare's canon and other classic masterworks. With its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the East Coast and the seventh largest in the nation, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2012, and is proud to be launching into its second half-century with a brand new support facility housing all its administrative and technical shops, as well as a new rehearsal hall, classroom spaces, and extensive costume, property and scenic inventory.

The company's 2014 Main Stage Season will feature six productions presented in its 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre from June through December. In the summer, an Outdoor Stage production is also presented at the Greek Theatre, an open-air amphitheatre nestled in a hillside on the campus of the College of Saint Elizabeth in nearby Morristown.

In addition to being a celebrated producer of classic plays and operating *Shakespeare LIVE!* (one of the largest educational Shakespeare touring programs

in the New York/New Jersey region), The Shakespeare Theatre is also deeply committed to nurturing new talent for the American stage. By providing an outstanding training ground for students of the theatre, and cultivating audiences for the future by providing extensive outreach opportunities for students across New Jersey and beyond, The Shakespeare Theatre is a leader in arts education. For additional information, visit our web site at [www.ShakespeareNJ.org](http://www.ShakespeareNJ.org).

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 23 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company's dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence helps set artistic standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the nation's most exciting companies under the leadership of Artistic Director, Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is a member of ArtPride, The Shakespeare Theatre Association, and is a founding member of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's programs are made possible, in part, by funding from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional major support is received from The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the F.M. Kirby Foundation, The Edward T. Cone Foundation, The Shubert Foundation, and Drew University, as well as contributions from numerous corporations, foundations, government agencies and individuals. The Shakespeare Theatre is an independent, professional theatre company located on the Drew University campus.



NEW JERSEY  
STATE  
COUNCIL  
ON THE  
ARTS



SHAKESPEARE  
IN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES



ART WORKS.  
arts.gov



DISCOVER  
JERSEY  
ARTS



new jersey  
theatre alliance



New Jersey

THE WESTIN  
GOVERNOR MORRIS  
MORRISTOWN



# ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS



## THE SHAKESPEARE THEATRE ACADEMY

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is proud to announce the launch of The Shakespeare Theatre Academy. The Theatre now offers youth and adult classes in a wide range of disciplines connected with classic theatre. Each series of classes meets once a week in one of the Theatre's beautiful facilities, and gives participants the opportunity to work under the instruction of The Shakespeare Theatre's renowned artistic and educational staff as well as guest teaching artists. Spring and Fall Classes Available.



## SHAKESPEARE LIVE! TOURS AND WORKSHOPS

This acclaimed touring program brings dynamic and visually engaging one-hour productions of Shakespeare's classics directly into the schools. Each performance includes a comprehensive study guide and a post-performance discussion with the actors. Fun and interactive workshops give students a chance to explore the actor's approach to bringing Shakespeare's language to life.



## PAGES TO PLAYERS: IN-SCHOOL RESIDENCIES

Residencies provide an opportunity for classroom English teachers in grades 5-8 to partner with the Theatre's skilled teaching artists to explore Shakespeare's text in-depth in an exciting, performance-based way that evokes collaboration, self-confidence and creativity while reinforcing language arts skills.



## SHAKESPERIENCE: NJ STUDENT SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

This annual spring festival, developed in partnership with the Folger Shakespeare Library and Rider University, gives middle and high school classes the opportunity to spend a day at the Theatre experiencing Shakespeare as both actors and audience. The Shakesperience: NJ Festival celebrates the power of performance as a teaching tool on a statewide scale.



## THE JUNIOR AND SENIOR SHAKESPEARE CORPS

Young actors are given the opportunity to participate in the excitement of the Theatre's summer season through this program, which offers classes, a final presentation, as well as behind-the-scenes and front-of-house experience. Geared for students in grades 6 through 12, admission to this program is through an audition and/or an interview.

[www.ShakespeareNJ.org/Education](http://www.ShakespeareNJ.org/Education)