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Sound Design for Our Town

Anna Warda Alex

Minnesota State University - Mankato

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THE SOUND DESIGN FOR

OUR TOWN

by

ANNA WARDA ALEX

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IN
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Sound Design for *Our Town*

Anna Warda Alex

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s committee.

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ABSTRACT

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This document is a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree in theatre. It is a detailed account of the author, Anna Warda Alex’s artistic process in developing the sound design for Minnesota State University, Mankato’s production of *Our Town* in the fall of 2014. The thesis documents the designer’s process from the pre-production analysis through the designer’s afterthoughts on the design in five chapters: a pre-production analysis, an historical and critical perspective, a process and rehearsal journal, a post-production analysis and a process development. Appendices and works cited are included.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author of this thesis, Anna Warda Alex, is proud of this achievement but knows she did not get to this point without the help and support of so many. Firstly, she would like to thank the Theatre and Dance Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato for providing her with the resources and support to make this project possible. She would like to give special acknowledgment to Paul J. Hustoles for being such an influential professor, director and chair of the department. His love of theatre and passion for teaching is inspirational. She would also like to thank her academic advisor, George Grubb. For three years Grubb has given her unconditional support as an advisor and as a friend. Alex would not have been as successful in the program as she was without him.

She would also like to acknowledge her fellow classmate, Matthew Caron. They began this journey together and along the way have become wonderful peers, collaborators and friends. She thanks him for having faith in her abilities and giving her the chance for such an unconventional design for this show. Lastly, she would like to thank her parents. She thanks them for exposing her to the arts and giving her every possibility imaginable. This thesis is dedicated to them, without their influence and guidance she would have never found her true passion.
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CHAPTER I

PRE-PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

*Our Town*, written by Thornton Wilder, is a Pulitzer Prize awarded piece of American drama. The play will be produced at Minnesota State University, Mankato in the Ted Paul Theatre in the fall of 2014. The production will be directed by Matthew Caron, Jamie-Brooke Ruggio designed the set, Steven Smith designed the lights, Heather Grandprey designed the costumes and Jayme Beerling was the stage manager. The sound designer and author of this thesis is third year Master of Fine Arts candidate Anna Warda Alex. This design fulfills the thesis project requirement for the MFA program at Minnesota State Mankato.

*Our Town* is a classic in the American dramatic canon. The play is set in the fictional town of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire at the turn of the 20th Century. The action of the play is narrated by the character of the Stage Manager. His role is essential to the progression of the story. The Stage Manager creates a bridge between Grover’s Corners and the audience in the theatre. Wilder titled the play *Our Town*, giving the sound designer the impression that every person who sees the play has a relationship to this town, and the specific town of Grover’s Corners is not important. The Stage Manager is a device used by the author to lessen the aesthetic distance created by the
imaginary fourth wall in the theatre. Taking this concept a bit further, the Stage Manager takes questions from characters that are planted in the audience.

The style of writing also supports this idea of a universal story. The play has a small amount of dialogue. Much of the text is direct address from the Stage Manager to the audience. Because so much of the action is not being played out, it gives the opportunity for every individual watching to use their imagination. As well as narrating, the Stage Manager also plays minor roles and assists in the practical side of things such as moving scenery. This involves him in the world of the play. The town and characters, excluding the Stage Manager, are firmly rooted in reality. The Stage Manager is all knowing. Being separate from the rest of the action on stage makes him the driving force of the play.

With the Stage Manager as the story’s guide the play begins in 1901. The story is centered around the Gibbs and Webb families. The two families that are showcased represent the archetypal American family. Doctor Gibbs and his wife have two children, George and Rebecca. Their next–door neighbors, the Webb family, also have two children, Emily and Wally. The similarities between these two households is highlighted more than their differences. The purpose is to showcase Grover’s Corners and its residents as living in universal situations with the portrayal of people anyone can relate to. The acts are divided into the three phases of life as seen by Wilder. Act one is entitled, “Daily Life,” act two, “Love and Marriage” and act three is not given a title but can be assumed to be, “Death.”
The first act mainly focuses on the town itself. With the Stage Manager’s assistance everything about Grover’s Corners is discussed; from the town population to the geological makeup of the town’s dirt. The population is consistent, meaning the number of births to deaths is equal, and for the most part everyone has a place and a purpose and is content with life. This section of the play paints a picture for the audience of how these New Hampshirites see the world and live in it.

The central character-driven plot, which comes to pass during the second and third acts, is the love story between Emily Webb and George Gibbs. Their relationship can be described as the picture-perfect story of young American love. Emily and George grew up as next door neighbors and became each other’s first love during adolescence. George played baseball during high school with aspirations of greatness. Emily was a smart girl with a comforting and caring demeanor. Upon graduating from high school, George decides to stay in Grover’s Corners to marry Emily. The future is bright and hope seems never ending.

The third act of the play focuses on the final act of life, death. After marrying George and settling down into their lives, Emily dies during childbirth. This leaves George in a depressed and lost state. The play leaves the world of Grover’s Corners and transports the audience to the cemetery where Emily is with every other citizen from the town that has ever passed on. With every ounce of her being, Emily wants to go back with the living. The dead try to explain to her the differences between her and the world she used to be a part of. Emily, so recently taken from her life, cannot grasp the concept.
Against the advice from the deceased, Emily decides to relive her 12th birthday amongst the living. Along with the Stage Manager they travel back to 1899. Quickly Emily is overwhelmed with emotions watching the living go through life without truly understanding how important every moment is. It is during this transgression that the central theme of the play is exposed in an anagnorisis by Emily, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” (Wilder 100). It is not until after she has left the world of the living that she sees how quickly life goes by and how much of life is wasted.

The play is centered around Grover’s Corners and specifically the two families previously mentioned, but Wilder made it apparent that the play is meant to be universal. Along with the Stage Manager’s role and the thematic material, another way he succeeded in universality was with his use of technical aspects. In the stage directions and throughout the dialogue of the show it is stated that there is not a realistic set. Much of the action on the stage is mimed by the actors. This allows the audience to use their imagination. There is an investment made by the individual watching the action that brings their memory or some personal aspect of their life to the characters on stage, making the play more tangible.

The sound design for this production will attempt to incorporate a culmination of these themes into the design. It is important that the audience relates to the town and the way of life in the first act. The character-driven plot is rather loose and does not have a strong dramatic rise or climax. The audience has to become connected to the town and
the way of life to be invested in the play. The characters of the play love their lives and
the town. This production needs to embrace that essence. One way to make that
connection using sound is to have the sounds instantly recognizable. The sound cues that
are written into the script such as the cock crow, school bell and factory whistle would
sound as authentic as possible. The sounds would not be stylized or interpretive.
Repetition can also be used in this design to assist in establishing the essence of this town
being any small town in America, playing with the idea of a universal setting with the
purpose of making the themes accessible to all. Act one and act two begin very similarly
in the text even though three years have passed between. The train to Boston still blows
its horn at 5:45 a.m. and Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs are awake making breakfast for their
respective families. Whatever sounds are selected to underscore the opening of the play
could be replicated for the opening of act two, signifying that life is moving through the
seasons but the daily actions are forming in patterns that do not change over time.

The sounds could also be composed in a minimalistic manner. For example, in
the first act the Stage Manager describes the town’s morning ritual in detail. The sound
design does not need to create an aural representation of this description. Instead it
would be interesting to emulate the concept Wilder has set up for the scenic and property
design; meaning, selecting certain sounds to play while leaving others up to the
audience’s imagination. Like the play, the sound design will need to be encompassing
two different worlds, one world being the realistic setting of Grover’s Corners, or any
small town in America, during the early 20th century. Historically accurate sound effects
for all atmospheric sounds would make the most sense. This play (especially the first two acts) are firmly rooted in the time period. In the 3rd act the play enters a new world. The story plays with reality and how people perceive time. The sound designer would like to use sound as a medium to help create the distinction between the first two acts and the final act.

The sound design could also go in a completely different direction. An interesting idea would be for the sound design to replace the properties and scenic design instead of following suit. If the director follows the author’s intent and pantomimes all of the action on stage, there could be sound effects enhancing the mimed actions. The concept of this is truly fascinating to the sound designer. The play is a glimpse into the past, a way of life that no longer exists. The character of the Stage Manager states that he put a copy of *Our Town* into a time capsule for future generations to see the daily life at the turn of the previous century. The sound designer has some reservations about suggesting this concept to the production team for fear that it cannot be executed properly. The intricacy of that design would be very complex and perhaps improbable with student actors and crew. But on the other side, if it can be accomplished it could be very powerful.

Music could play a large role in the play. Choir music is a part of daily life in Grover’s Corners. The Congregational Church, attended by the majority of the town as well as the two highlighted families in the show, has choir music referenced in the show. The music is not only written in the stage directions but in the dialogue as well and therefore needs to be in the show. Any other music used in the show, chosen by the
designer, must fit with that. This does not mean that all the music has to be church music but it does need to have some of the same aspects so that it is a cohesive design. At this time the designer is not sure what that entails.

If the director’s concept is to pay special attention to the way of life for the town’s residents the sound design could encompass more atmospheric sounds to highlight this. For example, transition music between scenes or acts could be choir music as if the choir is practicing. The director might want to emphasize the love story between George and Emily. In that case, the sound design could be more stylistic. A sound design that focuses on love, or any emotion, rather than being grounded in reality typically can be more ethereal. Whereas the idea to have the choir underscoring certain transitions or scenes, music that is not socially or historically accurate, but fits with the emotional content of the scene, could be used. That idea might not work as well; it could seem out of place with the rest of the design. The music could enhance that idea. Act one captures the slow pace of this town. The people are content with their lives and the days pass by fluidly. In this act the innocence of the children in the show, especially George and Emily, is also seen. Incorporating music to fit this could be done in a few different ways, specifically, music that is not cluttered with multiple instruments, music that has a slower tempo but at the same time is repetitive in the melody, similar to the writing style Wilder used for this show. Act two is the act of love. For this act, music could have a fuller and more upbeat, optimistic feel to it. In the Western music culture, chord progressions in a major key have harmonious tones that can play on the feelings of compatibility between
George and Emily. Music in a minor or diminished key would not work for this act because the clashing resonance of notes can express a disconnect which does not reflect the emotional mood of this act. The third act focuses on the final cycle of life. When Emily dies it separates the characters into two categories, the people who are left to deal with her absence and Emily’s new place among the rest of the deceased. There is a sadness that underlies the entire act but there is also hope. Change is never easy. Both groups of people have to accept their new place in the world, or out of the world, and find the same contentment that was present in the first act. Selecting music that is as dynamic as the mood of the act will be a challenge for the sound designer. The style and direction that Caron takes with this act will greatly affect the choices made by the sound designer. The main concern for the sound designer is that the design choices all fit the vision of the director as well as aid in creating a unified world for the production. Too often design decisions are made before the concept has been established and the outcome tends to be separate individual concepts throughout the design fields.

Sound design, for Alex, is creating the non–visual world of the show. This can be broken into two separate categories, enhancing the world and enhancing the mood. The first are incidental sounds, sounds that serve a direct purpose to the action on stage such as a telephone ringing or a doorbell. In this show there are minimal incidental sounds indicated. Wilder wrote the play to be as minimalistic as possible. The entire production could be produced without a single sound, the entire aural world left up to the audience’s imagination much like the scenery and properties. The conceptual style that this
particular production takes will determine how many or few incidental sound effects are incorporated into the show. The other side of sound design is setting the emotional moment or mood within the play. This can be accomplished in many different ways but for this play more than likely music will be the tool used. As stated above, choir music is written into the script. From the stage directions it appears that originally it was a live choir singing on stage. If this is replicated in this production that could be very evocative. Choir music underscoring certain parts of this show, a mixture of live and pre-recorded, possibly could create a powerful moment on stage.

Supporting the director’s concept as well as the story is the goal for the sound design. Using sound to help set the mood and reinforce the themes of the play is important in creating an aural world surrounding the action on stage. The sound designer will work closely with the production team to ensure a unified design. This design is also representative of Alex’s three years at Minnesota State Mankato. Every design has its challenges and from those challenges new skills are acquired. Alex would like this design to elevate her artistry to a new level.
CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL/Critical PERSPECTIVE

Our Town, written by Thornton Wilder is one of the most produced plays of American theatre. The world premiere of the play on Broadway was at Henry Miller’s Theatre on February 4, 1938. Wilder was a writer and traveler whose personal experiences flavored his writing in a unique way. His life was full of adventures, most of which he sought out to give himself something to write about. He was an influential novelist as well as playwright who left a large impact on the 20th century that still continues today. Looking into his life gives Our Town more meaning than the words of the play itself.

Thornton Wilder and his twin brother were born on April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wisconsin. Wilder’s twin brother was stillborn, “leaving his brother Thornton a haunting legacy of loss and incompletion” (Niven 1). From his first moment on Earth, Wilder’s views on life and death would be different. There are parallels between this early instance in his life and how death is dealt with in Our Town. A recurring theme in the play is that humans are not made to go through life alone, but as a pair. Mrs. Gibbs says to her husband in act 2, when talking about her son’s upcoming wedding, that “people are meant to go through life two by two. ‘Taint natural to be lonesome” (Wilder 56). Wilder was born as a pair and when he lost his twin it left a scar that he never recovered from.
Even though he wrote that it was not natural to go through life alone and without a partner, he himself did. He had friends and many meaningful relationships with others, but never found his other half.

In his youth the Wilder family was constantly broken. His father, Amos Parker Wilder, was the editor for the Wisconsin State Journal, similar to Mr. Webb’s profession in Our Town (Strub). His father was regularly away from his family with work as well as for his political engagements. He was very active in politics and when Wilder was in his early teens his father even spent a handful of years away from his family working in China. Amos Wilder was inevitably an educated and intelligent man. He earned his doctoral degree from Yale University in Sociology and Government (Niven 10). He was also a man of high moral character. He was on the forefront of the suffrage movement and equality for all. He placed a great deal of importance on the teachings of the Congregational Church. He did not partake in any form of drugs or alcohol and expected his family to follow suit. His personal morals transferred to his business practices. He is quoted saying that he “took pride in the fact that his was the first daily paper which refused to accept liquor advertisements” (Niven 15).

Wilder’s mother, Isabella Wilder Niven, was also educated and cultured, especially for a women in the late 19th century. She was an avid reader, loved the arts and traveling. Her love of traveling and his father’s career were the main factors in Wilder and his three siblings being scattered across the globe for much of their young lives. It began when Wilder was only nine years old. His father moved the family from
Madison to Hong Kong where he would act as the U.S. Consul General (McArdle 1).

Both parents placed a great deal of importance on their children’s education. There were not many options in China for what they deemed as “proper education,” so they enrolled Wilder in a German school which appeared to have the highest standards (Niven 19).

None of the children spoke any German or any of the local languages. This must have been a struggle for the children but it created a strong bond amongst the family. The children adapted well under the circumstances but Amos Wilder, in a letter to his mother, “worried that Thornton was too much of a dreamer and admirer without application to be a scholar” (24). Wilder’s imagination would make him famous later in his life, but caused many concerns in his youth.

They were living in China as a family for almost half of a year before they separated. The education in China was not up to the standards of Wilder’s father. His mother was also having trouble adjusting to life in China. She and the children moved back to the United States and rented a home in Berkley, California (McArdle 2). It was during this time in California that Wilder would find his passion for live theatre. His mother became a seamstress at the Greek Theatre and her children were cast in minor roles in a handful of the plays. Wilder would climb trees or sneak into the theatre to watch rehearsals (Niven 28). This would begin his love affair not only with live theatre, but more importantly with the lifestyle that went with being a theatre practitioner (28). Isabella Wilder loved that her son was so involved and enthralled with theatre. Amos
Wilder, on the other hand, was not. Upon hearing about his son’s interest in the Greek Theatre, he wrote his concerns to his son.

Some of it, pictures, drama, music, is good as an incidental and (sic) diversion in life, but character is the thing to strive for. There are people who know all about pictures and Greek tragedy and the latest opera who are not interested in the poor and know little about kindness…. I want you to appreciate all good wholesome things of every age, but don’t get side–tracked by dramatic art or Wagner music from present day living, throbbing problems and needs. (Niven 34)

This letter, among many other talks from his father on this topic, left a lasting impression on Wilder. The Wilders were an educated and upper-society family. Amos Wilder did not want his children to grow up not being “in touch with the poor and simple” (35). In an interview in 1965 Wilder was quoted saying, “My father thought we should see all–the rich, because knowing them it was impossible to envy them, and the poor, so that we should never be fenced out from them” (Vos 34). His solution for this was to send his sons, Wilder and his older brother, Amos Niven Wilder, to spend their summers working on farms. Wilder spent almost a decade of summers all over the United States from California to New Hampshire.

When Wilder was 14 he moved back to China, this time by himself to attend an English boarding school. By 1911 the Wilder family was spread across the globe and would not be reunited for another 3 or 4 years. Part of the family was in Europe, part on the west coast of the United States and Wilder in China (Niven 49). Although the
hardships that came out of this situation were numerous, one aspect had a lifelong effect on Wilder, letter writing. It began when Wilder was a young boy and his father traveled for work. His father would send weekly letters, one to the family as well as individual letters to each of his children, and the family would respond. The letters encompassed as much of their daily lives as possible. They would describe their home lives, school, friends, religion and all of their feelings. Becoming accustomed to writing so much of his daily life obviously left a lasting impression on him.

After one year in China, Wilder moved back to the States and attended an all boys school, Thatcher, located in California (68). This was a drastic cultural change. Another example of the importance of Wilder’s letter writing was keeping in contact with the friends he had made in China.

He had already learned, chameleonlike, to assume a definite persona for each recipient of a letter, changing colors as need be when he finished a letter to one person and began one to another, tailoring his voice and subject to the needs and interests of his correspondents. There seemed to be as many Wilders as there were friends and relatives. (67–68)

This is an early sign of Wilder’s ability to create characters. He analyzed his audience, in this case the reader of his letters, and wrote specifically for that person. His letters that have survived show a loneliness during his adolescence. He yearned for a “normal” family life where the entire family lived under one roof. In Our Town, Wilder wrote about two traditional families. These archetypal American families live their lives as a
cohesive unit. The play highlights the repetition and lack of change that the families go through year after year. Wilder, perhaps, was writing what he himself wanted so desperately but never got to experience. In act 3 the theme is that living people do not take the time to enjoy and actually live their lives when they have the chance. This, perhaps, is Wilder’s commentary on his own childhood. His father was so focused on his career, it appeared that his family came second. Perhaps the characters and plot of Our Town are what he wished was his life, but because it was not, he wrote about it.

It was during his adolescence that he actually began to write plays, and even got the chance to see his work performed. The Thatcher school had a Greek style theater on the campus. Wilder’s play The Russian Princess: An Extravaganza in Two Acts was produced in 1913 (Oczkowicz 1). He not only wrote the play but directed and acted in it. His love for theatre was becoming more and more prevalent and it began to consume all of his time. He loved to act as well. He got the role of Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Ernest. His father sent a letter to the head of the school stating that he did not want his son to play a female role (Niven 73). Wilder was removed from the production. This instance, along with many others, was a struggle for Wilder. He desperately wanted his father’s approval and to be an equal to his brother in his father’s eyes. Even with that desire, he pursued his passion.

Upon graduating from Berkeley High School, he pleaded with his father to allow him to attend Yale University. His father would not allow this and sent him to Oberlin College in Ohio with the caveat that if he did well he would reconsider in a year. His
father had hoped that while attending Oberlin, Wilder would “be safe there from the distracting influences of alcohol, theatre, plays, and actors” (95). His father was financially supporting Wilder, so he went to Oberlin but continued to write and pursue theatre. While attending college he participated in the choir and developed a particular love of the organ (Fisher 6). This is portrayed in Our Town. The pieces of music written in to the show are church hymns played on an organ. Like the families in Our Town, Wilder attended the Congregational Church. What drew him to the services more than the theology was the music (Niven 97).

Wilder’s entire life up until this point was filled with writing for pleasure as well as the practical side of writing to his family and friends. His time at Oberlin began to shift his reasons for writing and he began to write more fiction. He would take long walks and think out scenes for plays, plots and music melodies (100). This became a lifelong habit of his. The more he was exposed to at Oberlin, along with his growth as a playwright, he began to see what he liked and disliked in plays which helped to create his own style. He wrote a friend that “Great plays need great, but natural language” (101).

World War I broke out while Wilder was studying at Oberlin. His older brother Amos Niven joined as soon as he could. He served as a volunteer in the ambulance service in Paris (Vos 35). Wilder wanted to be a soldier but he was not ready to enlist and leave school. Oberlin offered an on–campus training for the male students to become non-commissioned officers; Wilder joined (Niven 129). He did not want to participate in the war because he believed in the cause or to please his family. Instead he wanted to
gain experience to “inject greatness” into his writing (129). As the war continued, Wilder began to have serious reservations. He hoped that his poor eyesight would keep him from being sent overseas to fight. Realizing that his life might expire before he reached the greatness he had always expected forced him to make the decision that writing is the only thing he wanted to do. His fear, although he never did serve in action, gave him the courage to throw himself into his writing and devote his life to his passion.

For his junior year of college he transferred to Yale University. That same year, 1918, he received news that he had been drafted to serve on active military duty. Due to his vision problems and that he was pursuing a college degree, he was selected to serve as an office orderly for the Coast Artillery Corps in Rhode Island (Fisher 6). While serving, Wilder continued writing. He was infatuated with the idea of a tragic hero in war. He vividly imagined his own death and used that as the basis of his writings during that time (Niven 167). He wrote a playlet entitled *In Praise of Guynemer*, which had two characters based on a French war hero.

When he was discharged from the military he returned to Yale to complete his junior year. Wilder wrote about the change in himself as well as the other men who returned after their service. He sensed a “restless” and “curious” nature that was not present in these men before (173). This new outlook on life made Wilder even more focused on his writing and desire to travel the world, especially Europe. He finished his degree in 1920, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree. Wilder was 23 and knew what he wanted to do with his life: write. It was time for him to devote himself solely to that.
Money was his only concern. He convinced his father to let him spend a year in Rome and upon graduating he boarded a ship. At last he had the freedom he had wanted for so long.

While in Rome, Wilder experienced an archeological dig that had a large impact on his writings, particularly *Our Town*. The team discovered a tomb from the first century, in it a painting of a family called Aurelius (Haberman 55). He wrote that the idea that something could be uncovered two thousand years in the future giving insight to how humanity was, was a concept that resonated deeply with him. He became fascinated with the idea of people clutching at the past, looking for “the universal and the timelessness in human experience, and groping toward the future” (Niven 185). This became his central inspiration for *Our Town*. His love of traveling and archeology really was a passion for anthropology and sociology. He spent his youth moving all over the world; from that he learned how to make friends easily. He was exposed to so many different cultures, social classes and environments that he looked beyond that when meeting new people. Perhaps that is why *Our Town* focuses on the universality in the world instead of the specific.

Wilder would become infatuated and consumed with plays and novels. He would read them over and over again, taking notes and analyzing all aspects. He would read German and French plays in their original language but for Spanish he had to rely on translations. From reading constantly he saw what worked for him and what he felt was lacking. This shaped his writing style more than anything. He wrote, “unlike a book, a
play must be seen quickly and quick projection in writing counts. Ibsen mulled over (his plays) with his sketches too much. I must never write one again without having a scenario first” (Niven 214). This observation on other writers could explain his use of the Stage Manager in Our Town. He used this character similarly to a narrator from a novel. If he would not have written a character who could directly address the audience, all of that information would have needed to be exposed through action on stage, which would not be what Wilder considered a well written play.

After teaching for a few years, Wilder decided that he wanted to go to Princeton Graduate College for an M.A. in Old French (Oczkowicz). During this time he continued to write for pleasure as well as being published in magazines and scholarly journals. His first novel was also published, Macantonio. It was written during his year in Rome. Even though he wanted to focus on writing plays and seeing them published, he was ecstatic that he was moving forward in his wiring career. Not very long after this, he got his wish and the first of his plays was produced in New York, The Trumpet Shall Sound (Niven 253). Richard Boleslavsky, who produced his play, called it “one of those realistic and common life plays at the first reading, and on the tenth reading it becomes a deep, rich confession of blind human souls, seeking for light and unable to find it, the eternal fairy of the Prometheus flame” (285). Wilder had found his personal writing style. This same concept would be seen in Our Town: a simple plot that has so much depth it is almost impossible to grasp the first time seeing it.
In the mid 1920s Wilder would make a name for himself worldwide with his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. The novel quickly received both critical acclaim as well as popularity in sales. Its success spanned two continents (Koster 29). On March 28, 1928, Yale University awarded Wilder an honorary Master of Arts degree (Niven 321). His success was apparent and for the first time in his life he was doing what he loved and being paid for it. He earned $79,128 in royalties from the novel, which was equivalent to $1.15 million dollars in 2012 (28). He used this money to travel. After spending rather lucratively he decided to go in “for Voluntary Poverty. Voluntary Poverty is practically indistinguishable from Involuntary Poverty, but the hair’s breadth of distinction makes a world of difference” (347).

In the 1930s Wilder spent many years writing *Our Town*. He wrote the majority of it in transit between the United States and traveling through Europe. He had enjoyed attending theatre his whole life, a passion he and his mother shared together. During this time that interest started to wander. He wrote a letter to a friend saying, “I no longer get much pleasure out of theatre–going, but I never get tired of the atmosphere about theatre” (418). Perhaps this partially contributed to the style of *Our Town*. He wanted to create a play that broke the conventions of theatre that he was becoming disillusioned with. While writing *Our Town* he looked to Ibsen, Dante, Moliere and Gertrude Stein for inspiration. From his own life he used his parents, his travels and all of the theatre he had seen since boyhood to create his masterpiece.
In 1937 while writing *Our Town*, the country was in the middle of the Great Depression. At the same time Europe was on the brink of World War II. Wilder wrote an American tale. The play is set in a quintessential, archetypal American town. He was writing about themes and people that every American could relate to. Wilder “realized that as the Depression and the looming war threatened to fracture the world as they knew it, Americans needed diversion and some kind of hope” (Niven 427).

In the late 1930s, Jed Harris, a producer, expressed interest to Wilder about producing *Our Town* on Broadway and wanted to know if it was an appropriate show to open for the Christmas season (441). They met in Paris in 1937 to read the play and discussed the options. The main problem was that Wilder had not finished writing the play yet. Harris was enthralled with what he had heard and placed a lot of pressure on Wilder to finish it. Wilder moved back to the United States and shut himself away in a cabin to finish the third act. Finally he finished, the show was cast and rehearsals began in New York almost immediately.

At the first read through, the entire cast wept (445). It was not long after their collaboration began that Wilder and Harris began to have creative differences. The theatre, acting style and lighting design was not what Wilder had envisioned for his play. He felt his play should be in a high-fashioned barn, not a large stage (446). Even though he was riddled with fears about how his play was turning out, it did not stop the process. The play opened January 22, 1937, in Princeton’s McCarter Theatre. Unfortunately, the opening was overshadowed by the death of Rosamond Pinchot. Harris had a reputation
and history as a ladies’ man. Pinchot was one of his many mistresses. He got her a job running sound for the production of *Our Town* (Niven 449). She was found dead two days after the opening. She had committed suicide. The Boston Post had the headline “Link Suicide To New Show Here. Rosamond Pinchot Said to Have Been Brooding Over Failure to Win Part in *Our Town*” (Niven 450). This would soon be old news but it haunted Wilder that a great opening would always be remembered along with her death.

There were 41 critics in the audience on opening night. It opened to mixed reviews. Harris canceled the second week of performances but another producer, Marc Connelly, loved it. Connelly moved the show to the Henry Miller’s Theatre in New York. The play opened there on February 4, 1938. *Our Town* continued to baffle its audiences. Some people loved it while others found it dull or boring. Eleanor Roosevelt was quoted saying it was “interesting” and “original” but still “moved and depressed beyond words” (Bunge 356). The play would run for more than ten months with 336 performances. The income that Wilder earned from this play took away all of his financial burdens. It freed him up to write and travel without consequence. He was finally in a steady enough place that he could support and take care of his mother, something he always wanted to do. While enjoying his relaxation Wilder spent a great deal of time reading and responding to letters that were generated from the success of *Our Town*. Old teachers and friends congratulated him and others asked questions, mostly about the third act. In April 1938, *Our Town* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. He
was the first writer to win one for both fiction (The Bridge of San Luis Rey) and drama (Niven 459).

*Our Town* would continue to be performed steadily after its original Broadway run. In 1945 Raymond Massey took the play on tour to the American G.I. troops. He reported tears streaming down the hardened soldier’s faces (Koster 55). *Our Town* would continue to be performed around the world (Strub). The play has been produced for the theatre, film, television and radio. The play just had its 75th anniversary and it is still one of the most prominent pieces of American theatre. Examining Wilder’s life gives a deeper meaning to the themes of the play. *Our Town* is a simple story performed, typically, in a simple manner but the complexity of the characters is a reflection on Wilder’s personal history. Even though he is known as a writer, Wilder was an anthropologist. Throughout his world exploration what he wrote about most was the people he met, not the situations. It is fitting that Wilder’s legacy would be a story not set in an exotic location but, instead, a quaint town and the characters would not be nobles but people that every audience member can relate to. Wilder was exposed to so many different cultures and types of people and chose to write about the similarities shared among all humans: birth, love and death.
September 8th, 2014

This morning at 8 a.m. was the first production meeting for Minnesota State University, Mankato’s production of Our Town. The production team is comprised of two faculty members, three graduate students and one undergraduate student. Working with such a diverse group of experience levels will be exciting. This is the third production that director Matthew Caron and I have collaborated on. Caron’s Minnesota State Mankato directoral debut, A Plague of Angels, was my first dramatic non–musical sound design for the department. For Caron’s thesis production, A Piece of My Heart, I was the scenic designer. These productions were two extremes for me; the first was in my comfort zone, a conceptual sound design where I blended soundscapes and original music composition into a dark stylized telling of the Typhoid Mary story. Caron and I worked very well together in that capacity. He understands how to direct designers toward the overall image for his shows but never is specific enough that it feels as if he is designing it himself. The second time we worked together was in a completely different environment. In the 15 years that I have been a theatre practitioner I have only designed sound. Designing the set for A Piece of My Heart was fulfilling one of the main reasons I came to graduate school,
to learn about and gain practical experience in another field in theatre to broaden my marketability. I never would have imagined that my path would have led me here.

As well as working on shows together, we are also the only two third-year graduate students. We have taken the majority of our classes together and over the last two years have created a great working relationship, as well as becoming friends. When Caron announced that he would be directing *Our Town*, a play that I have always wanted to design, I knew this was the perfect capstone to my Master of Fine Arts degree.

Caron wants our production to focus on community and family. He wants to emphasize the three chapters of life as stated in the titles of the acts, as well as highlighting the fact that all of the characters go through life with someone by their side (a partner or a spouse), and the importance that holds. Caron stressed the universality of the themes of the play. Most of what he wants for our production are the same things that I mentioned in my pre-production analysis. One aspect that really stuck with me was Caron’s concept statement. He feels that “the play is the concept.” Thornton Wilder’s vision of the play having a minimalistic set puts the audience’s focus solely on the story and words of the play. He wants to use sound and lights to supplement the lack of physical items in the show. This was very exciting. Creating an environment with sound will be very challenging but if executed properly, very effective. It is not very often in my career that I have been able to create what I see as a cinematic sound design. In theatre, much of the time
the sound design is more suggestive. I asked him if adding sound effects to supplement the properties interested him and he was intrigued by the idea and asked for more details for the next meeting. I am under the impression that Caron wants this design to be extremely realistic and precise. This gives me so many opportunities to create sound effects that are recognizable to the audience and match the miming of the actors perfectly. I will need to attend rehearsals early on and start incorporating those sounds as early in the process as possible to ensure that both my design and the actors are comfortable enough that the actions on stage seem natural and not separate from the sounds. If this concept is not executed properly it will not be effective and actually do harm to the overall quality of the show by taking the audience out of the play.

September 15, 2014

At the second production meeting the designers brought their reactions to the initial concept meeting. The handful of ideas presented by the scenic designer, Jamie-Brooke Ruggio, were larger than I was expecting. My understanding was that we would be keeping as true as possible to Wilder’s vision of the show. If we move forward on this path and actually build two houses on stage and create physical environments instead of miming the actions, the concept for the sound design will need to be altered. I discussed some of my concerns about having so many real tangible items being used by the actors while also having sound effects for others as
Caron had stated in the previous meeting. I stated that these two concepts will not make sense to the audience or the play. In one of Ruggio’s sketches she had a church upstage center throughout the entirety of the show. In the script there is a live choir that sings hymns throughout the show. Sometimes they are in the church practicing and at other times I had thought the choir could be used to enhance the emotional moment of a particular scene. In the first concept meeting Caron and I had discussed the possibility of using pre-recorded choir music in other sections of the show to create the same response as the live choir. I latched on to this idea for many reasons, the first being that it gives consistency to the music selected in the show and the music Wilder has written into the script. It also fits in to Caron’s concept of focusing on community and people congregating together and being a part of something bigger as a collective. In the play, church is not solely about religion. It is very much about community. By having choir music as a part of the sound design it enhances Caron’s concept for the play. The concern I had about having a church upstage center, which in theatre holds a lot of importance, is that makes it a central focal point throughout the play. With that in mind, adding religious music throughout the show might be giving the audience the wrong message. This play is not about religion but with the scenic design and sound design being heavily influenced by religion, it might come across that way. Caron agreed with the points that I stated and decided that the church as an element of the set would create a message that he does not want.
**September 20, 2014**

The majority of the third production meeting was designated for locking into a set design. Caron and Ruggio decided that simple was better for two reasons. The main reason is the tradition of the play. The second reason was the intentionally limited scenic budget for this particular production. Once again I brought up the idea to have sound cues to enhance the mimed actions on stage. I think a delicate and subtle approach needs to be taken with this concept. I do not want it to become all about the sound design. That would defeat Caron’s concept of highlighting the story and words of Thornton Wilder. On the same note, I think that this could elevate the production and add something new to a classic that most people are familiar with. I made sure to state how intricate this design would be. This is no small design. The production team seemed enthused and interested by this concept. Caron wants to explore this option and has faith that we can make it magical. One of the reasons I love academic theatre is the opportunity to take large risks. I am very excited to move forward with this design.

Auditions for the show were this evening. As a sound designer I have never had the opportunity to be a part of this process. Caron welcomed anyone from the production team to attend the auditions so I decided to. It turned out to be a wonderful experience. Caron, Jayme Beerling (the production stage manager) and myself were present. Caron supplied me with a blank cast list and as the people auditioned he encouraged me to write my ideas and thoughts about each person I saw.
We saw just over 40 students present a one minute monologue either from the show or not. The majority of women were auditioning for the role of Emily and there were many credible candidates. The men auditioning were almost equally split between the role of the Stage Manager and George. Caron, Beerling and I went to the conference room afterwards and began going through his notes as well as mine on the auditions and began the elimination process. It was such an interesting experience seeing my notes compared to his and how two people can see the exact same thing and have a completely different reaction. It took almost an hour and then he had a finalized cast list that was posted as a swarm of students surrounded the call board, excited to see if they made it. Overall this was an amazing experience for me. Seeing all of the work that goes into selecting a cast and the process that the actors have to go through gave me new insight.

**September 27, 2014**

The initial sound plot is due at the next production meeting, September 29th. Most of the deadlines set on the show calendar and department calendar make sense to me but for this show this seems very premature. The read through does not even happen until October 6th. This is a delicate situation with the concept of sound effects syncing up with actions from the actors. I do not want to go through the script and make my own assumptions about how Caron will block the show. I also do not want to completely disregard the show calendar. My compromise was creating a
very vague working sound plot (Appendix A). I use my sound plots as a tool of communication with the director. It is a way to have a written document that both the director and designer can use to make notes and stay connected with the design as it inevitably changes. The document gives Caron a good understanding of how I plan on underscoring the show without locking myself into anything in particular. The working sound plot will go through many phases before opening night. Even at this early stage in the process this sound plot has helped me feel more grounded about where the design is heading. At the first and second production meetings when we discussed the idea of having sounds for all of these actions I had some trepidations that it might just become too much. Not too much for me to design but too much for the needs of the show. Going through the script creating the plot, I noticed a few things that I had not before. The first is that there is not nearly as much pantomime as I originally thought. Essentially the sections utilizing this would be the opening of Act 1, Act 2 and possibly Emily’s 12th birthday flashback during Act 3.

The realistic pantomimed sound effects take place when Wilder has placed the importance on town life. The scenes that center around the character-driven plot, Emily and George’s love story, could be underscored with atmospheric sounds as well. The third act is where I am still compiling my ideas for the design. So far I know that the sound must aid in transporting the audience out of Grover’s Corners to the land of the dead where they are detached from the world and time is meaningless. Intertwined in this idea, Emily’s journey is the focus. Figuring out how to interweave
sound from the funeral which is dark, sad and full of human emotions and the land of
the dead where those human feelings no longer exist will be an interesting part of the
design. Of course this cannot be accomplished with sound alone, I will have to wait
to see how Caron is directing Act 3.

September 29, 2014

At the production meeting this week we were presented with the final concept
for the scenic design. Caron and Ruggio simplified the set, a black floor with a black
hill-like ground row far upstage. Steven Smith, the lighting designer, presented his
conceptual images as well. Smith wants to play with the idea of nostalgia. He thinks
that can be achieved by using certain qualities of light. By using warmer colors and
using side light to create shadows on the floor as well as the actors’ silhouettes he can
achieve that. The images he showed really gave the production team a clear
understanding about what looks he wants to create for certain moments of the show.
With the minimalistic set, Smith’s lighting ideas will create a lot of texture and visual
stimulation. I think it will be a nice complement to the sound design.

I presented my working sound plot to the team. As I stated in the previous
entry, it is early in the process to present the director with this document in my
opinion. He and I are both hoping to make this an organic design process, meaning
that I will be present at many rehearsals writing down his blocking and the actors’
actions to replicate sounds for these motions. Caron and I also discussed at this
meeting the possibility of incorporating sound as early as possible so that timing can be finessed early in the game. I plan on attending all blocking rehearsals and to start playing with creating sounds the first week. By the second week of rehearsal Caron has worked throughs of the three acts scheduled and really encouraged me to start playing sounds through the sound system. I think this is the only way to properly execute this concept. I am glad that Caron is so welcoming to my ideas as well as understanding how much time and work needs to go into this style of design to make it as effective as possible.

October 7th, 2014

Today was the first day of blocking rehearsal. Beauty and the Beast is still in performance on the Ted Paul stage so we are using the classroom, PA 113. Caron spent the first 30 minutes working solely with the character of the Stage Manager, played by Benjamin Stasny, and the opening sequence. In the script the Stage Manager is explaining the town’s makeup, where the churches are located, the train that arrives every morning at 8:45 a.m., etc. It was important that I was there because I need to know where the sounds should be coming from. We have decided that there will not be a prerecorded cell phone announcement, a standard that is almost always done in this department. Wilder has essentially already written a pre-show announcement, so my idea to plug in a few key points about cell phones being silenced makes sense. Caron and I will write the section sometime this week. Caron
wants the opening to have no sounds until the first sound cue in the script which is a cock crow. The curtains will fly in and the lights will turn on and the theatre will be transformed into Grover’s Corners as the Stage Manager is describing the setting. I had talked to Caron about having ambient morning sounds underlying this entire opening scene after the cock crows and he loved the idea. While in rehearsal I got the idea to mimic the theatre transformation in my opening sound design. The cock crow will initialize the beginning of the play. My initial idea was that the cock crow would also be surrounded by morning sounds of nature and the train and other atmospheric sounds. But in rehearsal I could visualize the opening sequence and thought that it would fit the style better if instead of the sound going instantaneously from nothing to a full soundscape, what if it also was transforming? It begins with the cock crow and then the morning insects start, followed by a slight wind. Then it would add the train and continue to build elements into the morning ambience and when the stage is set and the character action begins, the sound has evolved into a full soundscape. The ambient sound will then be background underscoring for the remainder of the scene. I am going to bring this idea up at the next production meeting.

The Gibbs house will be downstage right and the Webb house downstage left. The church choir will be upstage center and Main Street will be somewhere upstage across the entire stage area. Caron is using most of the stage but has clearly defined what area will be what location. This is helpful to the sound design because I can
designate speakers for specific locations. I discussed the plan for the pantomime with the actors before rehearsal. I explained that the overall intent is that after the first few moments the action and sounds should be so natural that the audience forgets that there are not tangible properties being used. The point of this is for the audience to fill in the blanks and become personally invested in our production. I mentioned the importance of consistency and how we will work together to make that so. The actress playing Mrs. Gibbs said that having rehearsal properties would make the consistency easier. By having actual things to set and play with she can lock into the muscle memory once the items are removed. I thought that was a great idea. Caron suggested not worrying about locking any of the pantomiming down until the blocking is set. So for now these rehearsals are more about location of sounds for me rather than sounds based on the actions of the actors.

October 8th, 2014

Tonight’s rehearsal was for act 2. I wanted to see how closely Caron was sticking to Wilder’s concept that the two acts should be as similar as possible. Caron made it very clear and the actors understood. Once again we talked about the pantomime being almost identical to the first act which should make the memorization of these sequences slightly less difficult.

The live choir is going to be 9 people, 5 women and 4 men. During a production meeting we discussed having the choir upstage of the first scrim to give a
shadowy glow to them. The scenic designer provided the team with a ground plan and the first scrim is much farther upstage than I was envisioning. The team, including myself, really likes the idea of the choir behind the scrim but I foresee some sound challenges. There are two parts to my concern. The first is simply that there are only 9 people singing upstage and the house seats around 551. I do not imagine the sound traveling with any sort of presence to the back of the theatre. The other part that I think might become challenging is naturally blending the choir in and under scenes as written in the script. Most sound upstage of the proscenium travels directly up into the 60 foot fly loft, not directed out towards the audience. It would be made even worse if the scene shop divider doors were not closed giving even more space for the sound to dissipate. I am contemplating the idea of reinforcement. Nothing visible, so I will not be using choir microphones that are hung from a batten or microphones that are on stands directly in front of the singers. My initial thoughts are to place boundary microphones in front of the singers on the floor. They will not be seen and will provide the correct style of reinforced sound that I am looking for. If I go with this option I could also use the microphones on the choir in act 3 during the funeral sequence. In the working sound plot (Appendix A) I was contemplating what I could do with sound to help the transition from the funeral scene to Emily talking to the dead. If I had a microphone on the choir I could use that possibly with some sort of effect. That could be a really interesting idea to play with.
The other option to help reinforce the choir is to have a supplemental prerecorded choir track playing simultaneously with the live choir. If we went with this option I would like to record a group of 6–10 people singing the four hymns we are using in the show. I would play these sound effects from speakers located on stage so that the sound is still coming from the same location as the live sound. I am not going to make any decisions until we get on the stage this week. I will also explain both of these options to Caron to hear his opinion.

October 14, 2014

Tonight’s rehearsal was in the Ted Paul Theatre for the first time. During the rehearsal I quietly observed as Caron worked through Act 1. After rehearsal I brought up some of my observations and concerns. When I had initially expressed my interest in underscoring the pantomimed actions with sounds I did not realize how much simultaneous staging was going to be happening. At the beginning of Act 1 there are the two houses both preparing breakfast while upstage Howie Newsome is delivering milk and talking to Joe about the weather. Visually having three separate actions taking place spreads the audience’s focus across the stage. Only one group is talking at a time and the audience should focus on that. What would detract from this is if all of the action onstage is making sound. I think that the best option is that the persons who are speaking, their pantomime will be underscored but if they are in the background, their actions will be silent. Caron agreed that this will help lessen any
possible confusion. He had not noticed the amount of mimed actions that the background actors were doing until I brought it to his attention. I do think that we need to bring this up at the production meeting because it will change the overall pace of the opening scenes in both Act 1 and 2. The lighting designer, Steven Smith, wants to use side lights but his one caveat to Caron was that it is hard to isolate between both of the houses. Since the sound will now be more isolated to the action with dialogue it might become confusing if the lights are on the entire stage but the sounds move from group to group. By the same token, it might not be strange at all. Maybe the sound plays as the element that shifts the audience focus and is successful in that manner. Either way, I will bring it up to the team.

The other things that I discussed with Caron after rehearsal were some possibilities for the pre-show music. The show begins with an entirely blank stage, including all of the masking flown out. The Stage Manager begins talking about our production and says the cell phone announcement live. A cock crows and that signals the transformation to Grover’s Corners. Conceptually I feel like there should not be any music or sounds before the cock crow. But aesthetically I enjoy pre-show music. Sitting in the theatre twenty minutes before the show begins, reading the program, it is nice to have some flavor of the style of show or time period. Caron agrees with both sides of this. I will put this on the back burner for now but at this moment I am leaning towards using music.
October 15, 2014

There was no rehearsal tonight because it was the student preview of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It was such an enjoyable production overall. One thing that I did notice was the lack of any sound during pre-show. The sound designer, Luke Walchuk, intentionally made the choice not to have music or sounds before the show. Caron and I saw the show together and both agreed that we should find a way to incorporate sound during this section in a tasteful way that still fits with the opening sequence he has staged.

October 16, 2014

After seeing a rehearsal in the theatre and having a finalized ground plan from the scenic designer I am ready to start my drafting. The first drafted document I like to create is my signal line diagram (Appendix B). This shows the entire sound system and how each element is connected. I used the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) symbols and layout standards. This document could be sent to almost any theatre in the country and be understood. Creating my line diagram helps me organize my thoughts when planning the sound system. After the diagram, I created a speaker plot (Appendix C) also using the USITT standard symbols. This drafting is about where the equipment is. For my previous sound designs at Minnesota State Mankato I have used the Ted Paul Theatre drafting that was created 20 years ago. For this show I wanted to take the time and actually create
my own drafting completely from scratch. I printed off the 2D Ted Paul drafting and with my scale ruler measured every aspect of it and created my own document from a blank template. I also was able to tailor this drafting more to a speaker plot than the original copy. The most prominent aspect of the speaker plot should be the speakers. I removed some of the clutter that is necessary for other design fields, but not for my purposes. After I had my 2D drafting I went into the theatre with a 100’ tape measure and measured all of the verticals in the theatre. I then used this information to create a 3D drafting of the Ted Paul Theatre. My next step was to add the sound gear. I am using the “house system” which consists of two EAW DSA loudspeaker clusters located on each side of the proscenium and four EAW VR51 speakers surrounding the audience, two on the house right wall and two on the house left wall. I am adding speakers as well to fit the needs of my sound design. The scenic and lighting designer both selected which line sets in the fly system they will be using at the last production meeting and neither one is using line set six located directly overhead of the acting area for the two families’ houses. This is the ideal location to fly an Innovox FR6527 speaker over each of the houses to help localize the sounds of their houses. I am also planning on using two speakers on the ground upstage of the black scrim. To Kill A Mockingbird is using the majority of the speakers in our inventory so I am having to use whatever I can find instead of what is best for my design. The speaker on the floor stage right will be an Innovox FR6527. On the opposite side of the stage there will be a JBL JRX100 speaker. Ideally I would like to have a JBL
speaker on each side of the stage that way the sound is consistent. But part of theatre
is working with what you have, so I will just have to use other techniques to get the
sound I want. These speakers will be for the sounds that come from Main Street as
well as the choir and organ. It is important to me to have the sounds come from the
general direction of where the Stage Manager says the buildings are located in his
opening monologue. I want to give as much consistency to the lack of scenery as
possible and I think this is one way to do so.

October 18, 2014

Today I hung my speaker plot. I am hoping to start playing with sound in the
space in the next day or two. I find it easiest to design in the space because the room
has such a large effect on the quality of sound. So many times in my career I have
spent numerous hours fine tuning a sound cue only to play it in the space and realize
that it sounds completely different. With enough finesse I would like the sound
design to be like a movie with subtitles, after a few minutes the audience does not
even realize there are sound cues.

After sitting in on rehearsals this last week I have compiled a list of all of the
sound effects that I will need. The placement and order of the majority of the mimed
sound effects are still undetermined but knowing what they are is what is important at
this point in the rehearsal process. While watching rehearsal I wrote down the
actions that I recognized, then I met with the actors and went through their actions
that I was unclear on. Today I spent the day recording most of the sound effects. I
need the sounds to be homogenous. I don’t think I could have achieved that if I used
pre-made sound effects. I need the same dish on the same surface being picked up,
placed on the table and eaten off of. I made all of the sound effects using actual
properties and saved them in a folder on my computer.

To create the kitchen sound effects I used the dishes that the actors have been
using as rehearsal properties and the tables that will be used for the show. I set up a
recording station on the Ted Paul stage using my own equipment. I recorded
approximately 100 different sounds so that I have plenty of options to use in case we
add things that I am not expecting. One sound that I found extremely difficult to
locate was the reel type of push lawn mower. The pre-recorded files that I found all
had ambient noise as well. I asked people I know in the area and unfortunately no
one owns one. I am going to spend more time trying to find it, but if I cannot I will
have to create a cue out of other sounds that replicates the mower blades turning.

No one was in the theatre today so I uploaded the folder of sound cues to the
sound playback computer in the Ted Paul booth. I will be using the audio playback
software, SFX. I do not use this software in my professional career so it is always a
little bit of work to remember how to use it. Fortunately, I am programming this
show over a week before the first sound rehearsal so I will have plenty of time to get
re-acclimated to it. I sat in the auditorium in the 5th row and wirelessly networked
into the sound computer. This way I can program levels, effects, fades, etc., while
sitting in the house for a more accurate sense. I went through and programmed most of act 1. I am finding some problems with discrepancies in the speakers. The two speakers flown on stage are showing serious signs of damage.

We have six of this type so I did a bench tune on them all. A bench tune is a technique I learned in my undergraduate program. Before every speaker hang we would collect all of the speakers that were the same and flat tune them. I plugged the two speakers in, on the ground, and played pure tones through them from the sound board. I started with 400hz, a mid range frequency that will not fatigue my ears during this test. The tone was matched between both speakers which is a good sign.

The next step was to send white noise to both of the speakers. White noise contains many audio frequencies at the same level. To the untrained ear it sounds like static. I used a tool called a Real–Time Analyzer (RTA) to read what frequencies were being produced from the speakers. Because white noise is sending all frequencies I wrote down the frequencies that were in fact not being matched. Then using another software called Drag Net, I equalized the speakers (Appendix D). I took the frequencies that were not being produced and essentially pushed them higher than others. After doing that, I re-did the RTA analysis. Now when I play a sound effect of a coffee mug being set down for the Gibbs’s family stage right and then play the same sound from stage left for the Webb family they will sound the same. When I play sound effects that come out of both speakers simultaneously they will sound
blended. I am happy with how they sound now and can continue programming the sound cues for act 2.

October 20, 2014

At this morning’s production meeting I brought up the topic of the pre-show music once again. After a lot of contemplation, I have decided that I cannot justify any pre-show music or sounds of any type. The opening show sequence has established that the cock crow sound effect signifies the beginning of the transformation from an empty theatre to Grover’s Corners. I think that moment will loose some of its magic and significance if there is sound leading up to that moment. I brought this up at the production meeting and Caron agrees completely even though, as an audience member, he would prefer music.

I have now seen all three acts at least once. The show is really coming together nicely. Caron has used the space very effectively. The actors are now “off book” making their hands available to become more comfortable and consistent in their mimed actions. We have agreed on all of the mimed actions for the first two acts. I incorporated some sound effects tonight to start working on timing and volume of cues. The show has a lot of ambient sounds, which aid in creating this unseen world surrounding the play. Simple, easily recognizable sounds, sticking to my concept, such as birds, crickets and rain were incorporated tonight. Creating these nature sounds took a lot of research. In the show, Mr. Webb comments on how
the townspeople love their environment and spend a lot of time listening to the birds. I researched what types of birds and insects inhabited New Hampshire during the early 20th century. After compiling my list I listened to all of their different calls. I divided my research into day, afternoon and evening birds and insects. One of my favorite aspects of sound design is using subtle details. Even though they are rarely noticeable, I believe that they give a depth to my designs that is noticeable even if the reason is not apparent. For these ambient effects I used different bird calls for specific scenes. In act 1 when the two mothers are stringing beans and gossiping, I selected 2 distinct bird calls that mimic the sound of the women conversing. For the flashback to when George and Emily first knew they were in love, I used sparrow and finch mating or love calls. These nuances add a nice depth to the scenes.

Most of the actors easily adjusted their speaking volume on stage to be heard over the sounds. Some of the younger performers, especially the child actors, were struggling a bit. Caron does not want to lower the volume of the sound, because it is just on the verge of being too soft in his opinion, but instead he took time for vocal projection exercises with the cast. Overall, the sounds fit naturally into the show. In rehearsals leading up to the first sound tech, in just over a week, I will continue to incorporate more of the mimed sounds. Bringing sound this early in the game has helped the actors get more comfortable and consistent with their miming and it gives me time in the theatre to finesse the cues. I am constantly worried that I am distracting the actors by incorporating sounds that are not yet finalized even though
Caron assures me I am not. It feels strange to play sounds that I have not had time to adjust or edit fully. But on the same note, for this play I really need to play with sounds in real time because they are so dependent on the action from the actors. I decided that I will video record the designer run tomorrow. This will give me the chance to spend as much time as I need playing with location of sounds and timing. I checked out a high quality digital camcorder from the library with a tripod. What a great campus resource.

October 23, 2014

The last few rehearsals have been beneficial to me. All of the sound effects, not including the pantomimed cues, have been worked into the show. The reel lawn mower sound effect that I was having difficulty locating has finally been solved. I was driving home from dinner last night before rehearsal and I saw a man using one on his front yard. I pulled over and asked him if I could quickly grab my recording equipment and record his mower. He was very pleasant and got a chuckle out of the situation but had no qualms. I recorded it in his garage so there are no other sounds on the recording. What the sound was missing was the grass being spun around. I collected the grass clippings from his yard and created a 2’ by 2’ square of grass on the concrete floor and mowed over that. It worked better than I had anticipated. It is interactions like this that make me love my career.
Being able to be at rehearsal testing placement and volume of the sound cues makes a large difference in the design. It gives me the chance to take risks, well in advance of the first sound technical rehearsal, and if they do not work it does not set me behind in the process. While “playing” around with sounds during the rehearsals I am also becoming more concerned about the consistency of the actors. Many of them are still uncomfortable with their lines and blocking, making it nearly impossible to have consistency in their mimed actions. The first sound technical rehearsal is Tuesday the 28th. After the rehearsal tonight I asked Caron if we could use that slot as a sound “cue to cue.” This would entail running through the sound heavy sequences with the actors to make both the stage manager calling the cues and the actors more comfortable. I made up a list of the scenes that I think will need to be worked and handed it to Caron. He seems to like this idea and thinks that taking the time will be immensely helpful to both the actors and the stage manager.

October 24, 2014

There are no classes today so the building is still and quiet, a perfect day to program my sound cues in the Ted Paul Theatre. The playback software, SFX, is designed to import audio files and play them through a sound system. I began this process by creating a folder on my computer of all the sound effects that I have created and recorded for this show. With my script in hand I start at the top of the show and, one by one I import all of the sound cues into SFX. Once the files are all
in the same place and in the proper order I begin to assign the sounds to specific speakers. I have been to so many rehearsals that I am familiar with all of the blocking, another positive aspect of being involved with the rehearsal process early on. The speakers that are flown over the two houses are doing a fine job of creating the illusion that the sounds are coming from the respective areas. The speakers that I have on the floor upstage left and right were not giving as much distance as I wanted. I am using those speakers for cues that are meant to be a mile or two away from the houses. To solve this I turned the speakers upstage, away from the audience, and effected the audio tracks. With distance, higher frequencies are lost giving the sound a muffled quality. Along with removing those frequencies from the desired tracks, I also added a reverb effect to them. This creates an airy quality to the sound, helping establish the distance. These few techniques really accomplished the desired effect.

After the sound cues were being sent to the correct location, it was time to set the volume of the cues. Everything sounds much louder in a quiet theatre. I have learned from many attempts of setting volume levels in a silent theatre, it never works. First sound technical rehearsal begins and nothing can be heard. A method I use is to play an audio book through the sound system at a a similar volume to what the actors are producing. The night before I used my sound pressure level (SPL) meter and found that the show fluctuates between 54dB and 68dB. I set my audio book at 65dB and started programming sound levels.
October 28, 2014

Beerling and I met earlier today to have a “paper tech” in order to give her all of the sound cues including their placement in the show, what sound they are and what they are labeled. Sound cues are almost always labeled as letters because light cues are labeled using numbers. Because there are more sound cues in the show than there are letters in the alphabet, I decided to use both letters and numbers. The second time through the alphabet will be labeled A1, B1, C1 and so on. Then the next time through A2, B2, C2, for this show the final cue in the show is L6.

Although it appears that we are going through the alphabet 7 times, that is not the case. There are certain letters that sound designers tend to stay away from. Many do not use the letters G, O or Q. G and O could easily sound like the word “go” which is the signal given by the stage manager to execute a cue. For a similar reason, it would be strange to call cue Q and could also cause confusion.

The first official sound technical rehearsal was tonight. I asked at the production meeting if there were any objections for tonight to be a cue to cue rehearsal even though we typically do not have that style of rehearsal in this department. A cue to cue is a rehearsal where instead of performing the entire show without stopping we run the show from cue to cue skipping sections that do not have cues. For this production in particular it seemed very beneficial. It also gives the stage manager and sound board operator more time to work on the more complex sequences without prolonging a traditional rehearsal. We worked the five sequences
in the show that have a large quantity of sound cues. It was great to have a rehearsal solely designated to these difficult sections. Tonight we made a large leap in the progress of the pantomimed sections. The actors are feeling so much more comfortable with the timing and precision of the sound cues. I had programmed most of the sequences in advance, based on what I had watched during the rehearsals. One of the largest sections, the top of act 2, had some major programming issues. The cues were very much out of sequence and I am not entirely sure where the miscommunication occurred. We ran this scene 3 times until the action on stage and programmed sequence in SFX matched. Overall it was a great use of time and I do not think that we would have had such a noticeable improvement if we would have just run through the show.

October 29, 2014

Tonight had more challenges than I would have liked. After last night’s rehearsal I was feeling confident that this concept would work, my doubts are resurfacing. The problem has shifted from the actors’ consistency to the stage manager calling the sound cues and my sound board operator, Yeonwoo Sung, executing the cue. A few of the problems that I saw tonight I think I can resolve before tomorrow’s rehearsal. The largest of the problems is how the cues are being called, not because of Beerling’s abilities, but the quantity can be intimidating for a sophomore stage management student. I have complete faith in her ability to call this
show, I just need to find a way to simplify some of these scenes. The first thing that I am going to do is link as many cues together as possible. For example, in the soda shop sequence where the Stage Manager is making strawberry ice cream sodas, nine cues happen relatively quickly. The actor, Benjamin Stasny, and I have been working together for the past week before rehearsal getting that section as precise as possible. His actions are deliberate and his timing is the most consistent in the production. At one point in the scene he removes a stopper from the bottle and pours syrup in two glasses. I made this one cue for Beerling to call. She will call the stopper being removed and then the other sounds are timed out to play on their own. I went through my sound plot and tried to consolidate as much as possible. I cut 28 cues that Beerling has to call, this has to help in some way. I do not want to have to start removing sound cues because they are not being called properly but it might come to that if tomorrow night does not go more smoothly than tonight.

Another problem I want to address with Beerling and Sung is how those difficult sequences are being called. I have been sitting close enough to Beerling that I can hear how she is calling the show. One element that is creating a bit of confusion is the labeling of the cues. Beerling is calling the entire label of the cue, even during the most complex sequences. If the cue is labeled F4, cut the number and just call cue F. Sung is pushing the space bar to make the sound cues play and all of the cues are in order, there is no need to waste the time saying the entire cue label. On the same issue, I talked to Sung about her reaction time. English is Sung’s second
language and I am certain that is causing some of the lag in execution of the sound
cues. I approached the situation with the attitude of, “how can I make this easier.”
Her first response was that it would be easier if she could hear the sound cues. She
has no idea if the cues are on time or late because she just pushes the space bar and
due to the distance of the sound board to the stage she cannot hear. Of course that
would cause problems! I added a small speaker with its own discrete volume control
by her station. I also talked to her about her reaction time. Making it very clear to
her that you can never push go before the stage manager calls the cue but during
those pantomimed sequences that are all being called from visual cues on stage,
anticipation is vital. Beerling needs to anticipate the actor’s actions and Sung needs
to anticipate Beerling’s “go.”

I have to give a lot of credit to both of these students for their attitudes and
hard work. I know my concept is demanding and in hindsight maybe a bit too
ambitious. But it is also a great learning experience and I am so fortunate that the
crew is working so hard to make this possible. This has been such a collaborative
process. Not very often does the sound designer get to work so closely with the
actors. No matter what the outcome is, I do not regret attempting such a difficult
concept for this show.
October 30, 2014

Caron has been struggling with making definite choices about the staging of act 3. I have been waiting to solidify my cues until he figures out the direction. Last night he had stated that he wanted the sound design for Emily’s flashback to be a replica of the act 1 and 2 morning scenes. Typically I am very open to directors suggesting how they envision the sound for pivotal moments, but in this instance I really disagree. From my first reading of the script I knew that acts 1 and 2 needed to have many similarities while act 3 needed to be starkly different. With the evolution of this show and design I think the most obvious difference would be to design act 3 in the opposite manner. The first 2 acts are full of sound. The 3rd act should be as minimalistic as possible. I still think that the incidental sound effects written in the stage direction and referenced by the characters are a necessity, such as, the train at the end of show which signifies the show coming to an end but the story continuing on in its never ending cycle. Caron is okay with trying this tomorrow, but I could tell he does not like the idea. I think when he sees it, he might change his opinion. If he does not I will try to think of some way to meet in the middle.

October 31, 2014

The silence in act 3 gave the exact reaction I wanted. It is such a noticeable difference between it and the other acts. Caron was also very receptive to it, even though he had doubts initially. I did make one more suggestion that I was so glad he
used. When Emily enters her house during the flashback, I had tried to incorporate a wind sound effect that increased in volume as the scene reached its climax. I did not like the wind, it was a little cliche, but I liked having the emotional moment of the scene highlighted. I suggested to Caron to have the “dead” characters hum Emily’s favorite hymn, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” It was told to the actors during notes and tomorrow we shall see.

Tonight has started to ease my previous doubts while bringing up new concerns. From a sound perspective the rehearsal went so much better than the two previous rehearsals. The adjustments that I made are making an obvious difference which is very comforting. For the first time, everything was in the proper order and executed effectively. What I want to happen now is a little more anticipation from the stage manager. The cues are happening a little late, and if we can tighten that up I think the show will be in a good place. Unfortunately some new problems arose tonight that I was not expecting. The lighting designer had spoken to my advisor, George Grubb, and Caron about his concerns with the quantity of sound cues in the show. That in and of itself does not bother me; I am also worried. What was troublesome to hear was that he does not want to add any light cues to the show because of the sound cues. My design should in no way inhibit another designer’s job and it upset me that it appeared to be the case. Smith had expressed none of his concerns directly to me so I asked to speak to him after rehearsal. I stated how I felt about hearing his concerns and told him everything that I had been doing with
Beerling and Sung to make this an easier process and it is getting better. Smith is frustrated because a handful of his cues are being called late because of sound cues. I asked to see his list and in all 5 instances I was able to shift where the sound cues were being called making it easier for the lighting cues to be executed properly. This is the type of behavior that is frustrating to me. Smith and I have been sitting next to each other at rehearsals for a week now and instead of discussing his concerns with me, he spoke to others about his frustrations but not the one person who could fix the problem. I also told him that I think it is absurd not to add light cues to the show because of 3 cue heavy sections of the show. Where Caron wanted the added cues is in the third act which only has 3 sound effects. Although it was not pleasant having to discuss these issues with Smith, I am glad that I did. I am a direct person and I think that the most beautiful part of theatre is the collaborative environment. I hope that Smith sees my intent and we can move past this and work towards solutions instead of feeling stuck with frustrations.

November 2, 2014

Tonight was another rehearsal where we made a great deal of progress. At this rate of improvement I am reassured that the show will get to where it needs to be by opening night. Smith is still having concerns with a few of his light cues being called late. I asked for his list of missed cues and compared them with my sound plot. I was glad to see that none of the light cues overlapped sound cues. As long as
Beerling can keep her focus I am certain that she will be able to properly call both sound and light cues for this show.

The “dead” characters hummed the hymn during Emily’s flashback and it was beautiful. The contrast of almost no sound cues during the 3rd act and the hauntingly beautiful humming was evocative.

Throughout the show the sound cues are not the focus of the scene. They are there to supplement and aid in the action on stage. The one moment of the show where that is not the case is during the soda shop scene where the Stage Manager is making the beverages for George and Emily. That section is all about the action and the sounds become an intricate part of the scene. Tonight it was executed flawlessly. In that one instance my vision for the sound design came together. It was such a satisfying feeling. I am hoping that in the next three rehearsals before we open the other sections can reach the precision that was accomplished there.

**November 3, 2014**

Tonight’s rehearsal began with the light board operator not showing up. Beerling quickly informed Smith of this and the search for a new crew member began. Within 30 minutes Smith was training the new light board operator. The new crew member has never run a light board before and tonight’s rehearsal was a reflection of that. Many of the sound sequences that had been polished last night were not called or executed properly. It was frustrating during the rehearsal because
there were so many glaringly obvious mistakes. Afterwards I spoke to Beerling and Sung to see what caused the mistakes. Like I suspected, it was the new crew member making rookie mistakes that threw off the cue calling sequences. I completely understand and was relieved to know that it was not a step backwards in progress.

November 4, 2014

Tonight was the final rehearsal before our student preview. It was reassuring to have the show called as tightly as it was the night before last. There is still the occasional delayed cue, but so many of the cues are being executed effectively that I cannot complain. I set my standards very high for this show. For weeks I have worked with the actors, sound board operator, director and stage manager in an attempt to elevate this design. The first time I saw a flawless execution of a mimed sequence with sound it produced a visceral reaction in me. What I had imagined for this production came to life and validated my bold design concept. I wanted the entire show to reach that quality. Tonight for the first time I have accepted that that is not going to happen. I have to remind myself that this does not mean the concept, design or production is a failure. I chose to take a risk in an academic setting where the crew and actors have a vast range of experiences. Even with the sound design not reaching what I think was its full potential, we have created a beautiful production. When I began this process I enjoyed the play. Through this process I have become
emotionally attached to it. I am excited to hear the audiences’s reactions. It is a powerful piece of theatre that I am proud to have been a part of.

November 5, 2014

Tonight was the student preview. It did not go as smoothly as anticipated. Beerling and Sung let their nervousness run the show. The horse walking on stage kept walking on stage for 10 seconds after Howie had stopped. The entire breakfast scene was completely silent, including the school bell that is essential for the dialogue on stage to progress. Cues that stand alone were called drastically late. The organ did not play so the actor moved on with his lines, rightfully so, and then halfway through his speech the organ started, ruining the moment. This continued throughout the show. I was sitting towards the back and could hear so much noise coming from the stage management booth it was even more distracting than the sound cues. After the rehearsal I met with Sung first to discuss the problems. She had played a cue too early and instead of following the contingency plan that she and I have talked over and rehearsed a dozen times, she panicked and did not know what to do. I met with Beerling and asked the same questions. I needed to know how to make sure this never happens again. Tomorrow we are going to have a meeting as a group to go over the protocol, once again, if a cue is missed.

I keep reminding myself that they are undergraduate students and this is one of their first shows. It is still frustrating. The amount of work that the actors have
put into this show, honestly they deserve better than the product that I saw from the crew tonight. I hope that Beerling and Sung learn from tonight’s show and tomorrow focus like I know they both can.

November 6, 2014

Opening was a completely different show from the previous night. As I suspected, nerves had gotten the best of some people and tonight we ran the show like I knew we could. The response I received from audience members was reassuring. The most common compliment I heard was that they wanted coffee and bacon. I guess my attempt to create a visceral reaction with the sound effects was successful at least for a few people. I congratulated Beerling for a show called well.

November 7, 2014

The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival responder, Jim Williams from Winona State University, saw the show tonight. He watches the show and then discusses our performance with all of the designers, cast and director. Williams responded to my sound design last year for Crumbs From the Table of Joy and had a very positive reaction to the production and my design. He remembered me and that production, commenting on how after seeing two of my designs he knows that I know what I am doing and am very successful at my job. Overall he thought the design was very well done. The sounds transported him to the time and
place of the play, an element that is usually done only with the costumes. The quality of sounds was another thing he discussed. He felt like every sound was exactly what it should be and had a layer of depth that is not always inherent in collegiate sound designs. The other aspect of the design that he thought was executed very well was the speaker plot and volume of the sound cues. I successfully created distance for the sound effects such as the train and school bell. The birds and other atmospheric sound effects were balanced well and not distracting. At times he would forget that the mimed actions had sound effects, which was my intent, but when one was missed or off, it instantly pulled him out of the story. This had been my greatest fear and I was not shocked to hear him say it. On a positive note (especially for Beerling), he said that only happened two times in the entire show. Although this concept was a huge risk and he was not sure if he would ever try it, he commended Caron and myself for attempting it and being as successful as we were. This was a reassuring response, to say the least. I still am unsure if this was the correct concept for the production, but I am not unsure about sticking with this choice and making it work as best as we could.
CHAPTER IV

POST-PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

Minnesota State University, Mankato’s production of *Our Town* had one student preview and eight performances. The sound design for this production had some successes as well as some unsuccessful aspects. Looking back at the sound designer’s original concepts shows the evolution of the design as well as the show. The experiences gained from this design are exactly what she had hoped for.

The first goal that the sound designer wanted to reach was creating an environment for the first two acts that the audience could relate to. She wanted the sounds chosen to be authentic and instantly recognizable. It was important to her that the audience quickly grow to recognize this fictional town as some place they have been, or at least imagine. The objective was to have the audience become invested in Grover’s Corners, mainly because that is what the first act is all about. In some ways the designer was successful in this. The cock crow, train and bird sounds all established time and place. The sounds fit their respective purposes and did not take away from the action on stage, but enhanced it. The bird atmospheric sounds were a success in the designer’s opinion. They were environmentally accurate and period appropriate without becoming distracting. The sound designer took a lot of time adjusting the volume of the sound and changing the patterns of the calls so that it
would not sound too repetitive. The same treatment was done for the insects that were played during the outdoor scenes toward the end of act 2. The attention to detail made those moments successful and worthwhile.

The sound designer also wanted to stress the importance of ritual and help reiterate the town’s consistency even as the years go by. She had expressed interest in repeating the sounds played during the opening of the show and during the opening of act 2. This idea was used in the design and it worked. Along with the director, Matthew Caron’s staging, the idea that the town continues on the same routine year after year was apparent. The sound during this section aided in that. The sequences began with Howie delivering the milk, the screen door opening and the milk being set on the table followed by Howie and his horse exiting. All of the sound effects were the same for both acts with slight variations such as the number of milk bottles delivered.

Another idea that the designer had thought about was designing the sound in the same manner that Thornton Wilder had suggested for the scenery. The idea was to select some sounds to play but leaving most of the sounds up to the audience’s imagination. Or the sounds could be used in the opposite manner and compensate for the lack of scenery and properties in the show. The latter being the direction the designer took. The sound designer is still debating if this was the right choice. She is happy with how the sound cues sounded. The sound cues were historically accurate, which helped place the show in its appropriate time and place. The screen door
sound effect was recognizable and gave an essence of what the rest of the house would look like. The designer wanted to help the audience imagine what Grover’s Corners looked like by using sound effects. In this aspect, she was successful.

From the beginning there were fears that the concept would not be doable with the resources available. Although it never reached the precision that the designer had hoped for, it was not a failure. A lot of this is a credit to the cast and stage management team. The sound designer was responsible for integrating the sound effects as early in the process as possible, but that was only part of the equation. The actors worked very hard memorizing their actions and making their actions as realistic as possible. This helped Jayme Beerling (stage manager) with calling the sound effects. The sound designer could not be more appreciative of everyone who helped make this design happen.

At the four performances that the designer attended, she felt as though all of the positive aspects put aside, the design as a whole was not as successful as she intended. She had hoped that the sounds for the mimed actions would become unnoticeable after the concept was established and fit naturally in the show, similar to subtitles on a foreign film. This did not happen. The sounds at times took away from the action and words on stage. The show is not about the sound design nor was that the intent of the designer, but unfortunately that seemed to have become the case.

The music for the production worked very well. The design consisted solely of hymns that Wilder had written into the play. The sound designer only played with
the placement. Wilder had written “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds,” “Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid” and “Love Divine” into the show. The first two are sung during the choir practice scene and “Love Divine” underscored the wedding along with “The Wedding March.” All of those were played in their respective sections as written by Wilder. The sound design could have used many different styles of music. Quickly, the sound designer realized that any music selected needed to fit with the hymns. As the show progressed, any additional music started to seem unnecessary. With the realistic sound effects underscoring the scenes, music would feel out of place. The transition between acts 1 and 2 became non-existent. The Stage Manager interjected and there was not even a breath’s pause, creating a nice flow without the aid of music.

The sound designer wanted to have two drastically different concepts for the first two acts and the final act. The director really wanted a lot of sound during the third act. He envisioned wind during the cemetery scene, which the sound designer did not. There was no need to have sound under that scene, especially because it is written in the script that the funeral goers hum “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds.” The sound designer felt this was important because Wilder wrote it in the stage directions, it is referenced in the dialogue and it fits the emotional moment of the show. Once the director heard that scene with the wind and the humming he agreed that the moment was powerful enough and did not require the wind to make it work. In this
particular instance, the staging and lighting effects were conveying everything that needed to be conveyed.

The sound designer was pleased with act 3. It was undecided for so long and she was unsure about the director’s idea for the act. It can be very difficult to disagree with a director and successfully express why. This is a skill that the designer is always working on. Every director is different and figuring out the best approach can be challenging at times. Caron is very open to opinions but sometimes his lack of decisiveness makes it difficult to move forward. He felt that there should be so much sound in the flashback scene that it drives Emily to her realization that life moves too fast. The sound designer felt the opposite would work better. It made sense to her that the stark difference of the sound filled first 2 acts and silence in the third act would communicate this to the audience. The sound designer suggested having the choir hum Emily’s favorite hymn under the flashback scene, which was very effective. It can be unsettling not solidifying ideas until just days before the show opens, but there is also something exciting about it. Working with a director that understands that the technical rehearsals can be a time to try things was refreshing and if they do not work, try something else. Act 3, as seen in performances, was very evocative. The sound design, or lack thereof, and music was a part of what made it work.

The sound designer wanted this show to be challenging. Not only is it her thesis project, but it is also a play that has been produced so many times she wanted
to bring new life into it. This project in some regards was the most challenging
design yet, but not in the way she anticipated. She had never had to spend as much
time working with the stage manager. Typically she would hand the stage manager a
finalized sound plot (APPENDIX E) and that would be all the designer need do. This
sound design made her rethink how she will handle both simple and complex shows
in the future. Being able to tailor the paperwork specifically for the show and create
the easiest way possible for the show to be executed is a skill she had not put much
thought into before.

The sound designer also had tremendous growth with the audio playback
software, SFX (APPENDIX F). This was not her first time using the software, every
design of her’s for the department has used it. For her other designs she would create
each sound cue, in its entirety, then import it to SFX to be played through the sound
system. This is only using the most basic function of the software. The reason she
did this was because she wanted to strengthen her knowledge about audio editing
softwares that she had not previously worked on, such as Adobe Audition and
ProTools. Going into this project she wanted to utilize the playback software more
than the editing software. An example of this could be heard in the atmosphere
sound cues. The sound cue that played underneath the two mothers snapping beans
consisted of six discrete sound effects. There were three different birds calls, a slow
low wind, a faster high pitched wind and the sound of leaves rustling. The first bird
call was executed on SFX and the other five cues would automatically play as well.
Using this method gave the designer the ability to adjust cues in real time during rehearsal. She could make one aspect of the soundscape louder or adjust the pacing of the birds without having to open up another software. The skills that she acquired from designing in this style are numerous. She now feels confident in both of these methods giving her more techniques to use in her career.

The sound design for *Crumbs From the Table of Joy*, which was the sound designer’s “major project” for the department, did not have the most effective speaker design. The speakers located on stage to play sounds coming from the apartment upstairs were unsuccessful. She could not figure out the best way to use the equipment to give the effect of distance to the sound cues. Knowing that this show needed a similar plot, she made sure to learn from her previous mistakes. Taking the time to move the speakers all over the theatre in an attempt to have the train sound appear to be coming from a distance or for the school not to be located directly next to the houses was a challenge that in the end was successfully completed. It was very satisfying to hear the KCACTF responder, Jim Williams, compliment that exact aspect of the design.

In every design, whether in school or professionally, there is always something gained from the experience. For this process, the sound designer’s main area of growth was in communication. Like many of her designs for the department, she has had an inexperienced sound crew. It is always a challenge for her to explain what she wants clearly without becoming too technical or specific, which can result
in confusion among her crew. Each time it has become better but never to the point
where she felt it was as successful as it could have been. With her sound board
operator, Yenwoo Sung, she approached the situation with paperwork. English is
Sung’s second language and Alex did not want to confuse, or worse, intimidate her
with sound jargon. The paperwork was a detailed list of her responsibilities before
the show, during the show and after the show every night (Appendix G). This was
given to Sung a week before she was required to be at rehearsals so she could study it
and ask any questions she might have. In the past, the sound designer would
typically give this document to the operator at the first sound technical rehearsal.
That has not always worked well with first time sound operators. By giving Sung the
paperwork so far in advance, she had memorized the steps, having a chance to reflect
on it and come up with questions about how the system was set up. This worked
very well for two reasons. The first was that the first sound rehearsal was less
stressful for both operator and designer. The tasks were clearly laid out, which made
the many steps seem less daunting. The second reason this was worthwhile was
because it gave Sung the chance to learn more about the sound system instead of
simply knowing the steps to power it on. Because the first three sound technical
rehearsals were not dedicated to her memorizing the steps and being confused about
the steps, those first three rehearsals became ideal opportunities to expand her
knowledge of sound. The signal line diagram (Appendix A) and speaker plot
(Appendix B) were both given to Sung on the first rehearsal showing her the larger
picture. The sound designer also made sure that Sung was comfortable with SFX, which is not typically done. The department usually teaches the bare minimum about SFX, just enough so the operator can adjust volumes during rehearsals and execute the cues. This is mostly due to the lack of time and not wanting to overwhelm the operator with too much information at once. By starting the process early and having a written document this was not a problem. Due to the complexity of this show the sound designer wanted Sung to have a larger amount of knowledge in case something went wrong during a performance. Taking the time to properly explain the entire sound system proved to be very effective. Sung did a wonderful job of running the sound board. What was even more gratifying was seeing a student who had no interest in sound design now having one. Teaching has never been an aspiration for the sound designer, but from a moment like that, she now understands how gratifying it can be.

With all of the highs and lows during this process, the designer is pleased with the outcome. Even after the show closed, whether the concept for the design was successful or not, what was learned and achieved will be useful in the designer’s future. The thesis project does not need to be the most complex or difficult design of the program, but the sound designer does feel that the thesis should push the designer’s abilities to a new level. For this design, that was achieved. She used all of her skills, bettering many of them, as well as learning new techniques that will prove to be beneficial in designs to come. This program has given her many opportunities
and she has taken advantage of them all. This environment has proved to be everything and more she expected from a graduate program.
Ann Warda Alex started her graduate degree in sound design at Minnesota State University, Mankato in the fall of 2012. She completed her undergraduate degree in theatre with a minor in history. Upon graduating from Northern Kentucky University, she worked professionally as a sound designer in many venues. Working consistently in her field was a wonderful experience, but the constant traveling for work was becoming a strain. To work consistently and stay in one place, Alex felt that broadening her theatrical knowledge to make herself well rounded would, in turn, make her more marketable. After a year of searching, she decided that the program at Minnesota State Mankato had the most to offer her.

Alex believes that research and history are essential for all the design elements. In Theatre Dramaturgy taught by Heather Hamilton, Alex took her first class on the subject. In her non-collegiate career, she had worked with dramaturges but in a very different capacity than what the class was dealing with. Throughout this course, Alex was able to study two plays in-depth. Given the amount of time and quantity of the projects, she was able to collect more information on the chosen topics than she ever could have in her professional career. The largest benefit from that class was learning about the sources that the university offers and how to access.
them. This became essential in the research for every other course and project she was a part of. This course also prepared her to be a dramaturge for *Crumbs From The Table Of Joy* directed by Lou Bellamy. Bellamy used Alex’s research and writing skills to help the actors in the play better understand the time period and the emotional state of the characters. This project fulfilled her “out of area project” requirement for the degree.

Understanding how to collect information from many sources and compile it into a concise document became beneficial in Theory and Criticism also taught by Hamilton. From her undergraduate degree, Alex had a basic understanding of the well–known theatre theoreticians. This course took that basic knowledge and opened it up for a semester long discussion. The format of the class left an impression on Alex. Being able to argue, share knowledge and debate all the great thinkers of theatre was inspiring. Theatre Research, another course taught by Hamilton, focused on academic writing and research. The premise of the class was to write three papers on a topic that has not been written on before. In theory that is a fascinating idea and a very useful skill. The problem became time and length of the paper. Finding an undocumented topic, having four weeks to research it and write a short 10 page paper on your findings was difficult. The papers became surveys of topics that might become full papers with more time and broader guidelines. What was gained from the course was the chance to explore the research options on and off campus as well have peer reviewed papers. This same semester Alex was taking Hamilton’s Theatre
History II. This course, in a way, was filled with supplementary information to Theory and Criticism. Learning about the social issues of the time period and the actual application of theatre made the theories have even more of an impact. Being able to place people in history is essential to understanding their ideas and theories.

The program offers some classes on a two year cycle. The year a student enters determines in which order those classes can be taken. Because of when Alex began she took the theatre history classes out of sequence. The year after taking Hamilton’s Theatre History II, Alex took Theatre History I taught by Paul J. Hustoles. The classes were structured in very different ways. Hamilton’s course focused on the essence of the time period, where Hustoles’s class placed the importance on specific dates, people and events. Both classes were educational but there was a disconnect. Instead of having a solid understanding of the through-line of theatre history, it felt as if they were two discrete courses when they should have been one.

To fulfill an elective requirement, Alex took another course taught by Hustoles, Musical Theatre History. The original reason was because the topic was interesting to the student. The outcome was much more than that. Learning how to analyze musicals and the individual song types proved to be a very valuable skill for a sound designer. The summer following that course, Alex used many of the skills learned while designing musicals. Knowing the style of song shows where the importance should be placed. Depending on the song type it could be on the lyric,
music or both which greatly influences how a sound designer sets the volume levels of microphones for different scenes.

Besides the academic curriculum Alex took two courses in sound design from George Grubb. Alex enjoyed the freedom offered in the classroom setting. In her professional career there was no opportunity to make large design decisions or create strong concepts without consulting the director, producer and the rest of the design team. In the sound design classes she was given the opportunity to play both designer and director, taking risks that she normally could not do. Another class that gave her the freedom to take risks to see how they would work was Portfolio Seminar taught by John David Paul. Alex has a resume and portfolio that she has used for jobs as well as getting accepted to graduate school. The most beneficial part of this course was the peer and faculty comments and constructive criticisms. The class that Alex was very much looking forward to taking was Advanced Theatre Drafting taught by her advisor, Grubb. Unfortunately the class was not as beneficial as she had hoped. The first half of the semester focused on hand drafting, a skill she was glad to acquire. The second half of the class was learning about digital drafting. The class structure was designed well, following an obvious progression of skills starting with drawing circles to drafting an entire 3D set. Every project taught something new that was essential to successfully completing the next assignment. It was not until over halfway through the semester that the first assignment were returned to the students. Mistakes made on the third assignment made it impossible to successfully
accomplish any of the other projects assigned after. Looking back at her education from this department, this was the one course that did not rise to the standards set from her other coursework.

Alex took a class in each of the other design fields—scenic, lighting and costumes. Lighting design, taught by Steven Smith, was completely new territory for Alex. The class gave insight on the process that lighting designers go through. It gave Alex the vocabulary needed to help aid in communication with lighting designers at production meetings. Much like lighting design, the costume design course taught by David McCarl was informative about the steps that are involved in that field which Alex had never thought about. It is also inspiring to see two professors so passionate about their careers. The other design area, scenic design taught by John David Paul, went a step farther for Alex. Throughout Scenic Design I she discovered a passion for drawing and creating the physical world of plays that she never knew she had. This led her to design the set for a realized production in the fall semester of her third year, *A Piece of My Heart*. Taking the skills learned from a class and creating a finalized design was a rewarding part of her masters program. In her final semester, Alex will be taking Scenic Design II and Scene Painting from Paul.

Another class that left a large impact on Alex was Director/Designer Communication seminar lead by Hustoles. A large challenge for many designers is communication, something Alex has mentioned throughout this document. The skill
to take a director’s concept and create a product that inhabits both of the artists’ visions while still working within the parameters of the show can be very difficult. This class was an open environment where graduate student directors and designers could discuss tactics for beneficial communication among the production team. Through the course Alex was able to be lighting designer, scenic designer, costume designer, director and sound designer on five separate, unrealized productions. The opportunity to see the production meeting format from all viewpoints was eye opening and so beneficial to Alex’s own communication in production meetings. In a similar manner, Theatre Management, also taught by Hustoles, gave Alex insight on the producing side of theatre, something that she had never explored or really paid much attention to. Learning about the financial side of theatre was fascinating. The information learned about budgets, grants and fundraising was also beneficial in her professional career. While working at Summer Repertory Theatre in California the following summer she took the knowledge learned and applied it to the job. Understanding how theaters break down budgets gave Alex the information needed to have educated negotiations.

Along with the coursework, what made this program so appealing to Alex was the many opportunities to design. Her first design for the program was the musical romantic comedy *I Love You Because* directed by third year Master of Fine Arts student, Adam Sahli. This design was full of firsts for Alex. It was the first time she worked with an inexperienced sound engineer. Learning how to teach the basics
of sound while getting the intended results was a challenge. Through the process Alex learned what works and what does not when working with student sound engineers. The show also fulfilled a “minor project” for the department. The writing required for this project was very beneficial. Documenting every step of the process and being able to concisely write about ideas both successful and not was a great learning experience. Looking back at the end and seeing what changed and the growth of the sound designer was a wonderful opportunity. For her second project, a “minor design without paperwork” Alex sound designed *A Plague of Angels* directed by first year MFA student, Matthew Caron. He gave the sound designer 100% creative freedom and trusted her abilities. She enjoyed the collaborative nature of the production team and the product was proof of how well it worked.

Alex’s “major project” was for the show *Crumbs From The Table of Joy* directed by guest artist Lou Bellamy. The design was given a certificate of merit award from The Kennedy Center American Theater Festival. That same year she was given the chance to design two musicals without being tied to a project. *Kiss of The Spider Woman* was performed in the Andreas Theatre. This is the same theatre that her first musical for the department was produced in. Learning from her previous experiences she was able to create a cohesive, successful sound design. This design led her to expand her knowledge of sound system reinforcement in a black box theatre, a skill that she had not been able to explore in her career before attending this program. After accomplishing that design in a difficult theatre configuration, Alex
designed her next musical, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, in the Ted Paul Theatre, which is a proscenium house. This design gave Alex a chance to work on her teaching abilities with first time sound engineers. Using the knowledge she had gained from her teaching experience over the previous two years she focused her time on that aspect. Her final semester here she will be designing two more shows. Another musical, *Assassins*, which will be produced in the Andreas Theatre and the Spanish classic, *Life is A Dream*, in the Ted Paul Theatre. She hopes to continue working on her ability to effectively communicate her design concepts and be an engaging teacher to the students she will be working with.

While taking classes and designing, Alex also worked 20 hours a week for her graduate assistantship. Before graduate school, Alex had never worked in a scene shop. This has turned out to be among one of the most beneficial experiences of graduate school for her. As a supervisor in the shop, Alex has been able to work on her leadership abilities and ability to manage large groups of people. As well as being a manager, Alex has been able to learn basic set construction. This is exactly the type of knowledge and practical skill she was looking for in a graduate program. The other part of her assistantship is assisting Grubb in the sound department. This has given her the time and ability to become knowledgeable in equipment set up and maintenance. It has also given her more opportunities to work on her teaching. Each semester she has an undergraduate student receiving credit to assist and learn about sound. She was also given two opportunities to teach in the classroom setting. The
first course was Sound Production for the Dance Major. This was a one credit course that was a brief survey of sound technology tailored to the specific needs of a dance major. After completing this class she wanted to take that information and teach a more in-depth class on the same topic. In her final semester she will be teaching Sound Technology, a three credit class that focuses on sound equipment and how to effectively use it. She is very much looking forward to being able to end her collegiate career teaching a course that is so interesting to her.

The coursework and project work has culminated in enhancing Alex as a sound designer and theatre practitioner. The department has given her so many opportunities, even more than she had originally anticipated. She worked closely with the dance faculty, Daniel Stark and Julie Kerr-Berry, and the dance students as the technical coordinator for The American College Dance Festival, hosted here on campus. She was in charge of all of the technical aspects of the festival. Alex was also elected as the Graduate Student Representative to the Faculty of the Department of Theatre and Dance for one year. This gave her insight in to how the department runs. She attended the weekly faculty meeting and acted on behalf of her graduate cohort. The meetings were very interesting and showed her a side of the academic environment that most students do not have the chance to see. In a similar manner she was selected as the student representative on a faculty search committee. The most beneficial aspect of this was seeing a large amount of resumes and portfolios from professionals and hearing the faculty’s critiques on those items. She will
certainly take that knowledge and use it when she is applying for jobs. Alex’s approach to her field is ever changing, producing better and more innovative designs. As her journey through the program continues, the benefits and possibilities will only become more noticeable.
SPEAKER PLOT FRONT VIEW
SPEAKER PLOT STAGE VIEW
APPENDIX D

DRAG NET
DRAG NET DELAY TIMING
APPENDIX E

FINAL SOUND PLOT

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<td>SR/SL flown</td>
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<td>Slight Rain at the funeral</td>
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<td>L6</td>
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<td>Clock strikes 11pm</td>
<td>Stage Right Floor</td>
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APPENDIX F

SFX PROGRAMMING SAMPLE
## SFX Programming Detailed

### Track List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Loop</th>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Pan</th>
<th>Mute</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Screen Door</td>
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<td>00</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Properties

- **Track Name**: Screen Door
- **Loops**: Off
- **Volume**: 0
- **Pan**: 0
- **Mute**: Off

---

**Note:**

- Track 1 and Track 2 are set to loop off, volume 0, pan 0, and mute off, indicating no looping, no volume, centered, and unmuted respectively.
- The screen door SFX is set to a specific start and length, and is placed in different tracks for varied use or effects.
APPENDIX G

PRE-SHOW CHECKLIST

- **Power on M7CL**
  - □ Button on the back of the board
  - □ Load File - Our Town Show

- **Power on the Main Rack Power**
  - □ Switch located at the bottom of the rack
  - □ NOT the red master switch - the black switch labeled Our Town

- **Power on Amp rack Down Stage Right**
  - □ This gives power to the 2 flown speakers on Line Set 6

- **Power on Amp rack Up Stage Center**
  - □ This gives power to the 2 floor speakers upstage

- **Power on Computer**
  - □ Located in Main Rack in booth. Open the blue door, flip the switch on the right.

- **Turn on Channels 1 - 8 on M7**
  - □ The lights on the channel should turn on and glow orange
  - □ Make sure that all faders are set to unity (0) - there should be a green light on the channel located on the touch screen.

- **Open SFX on computer**
Show file - Our Town
Run Speaker check cue - in house

Com Check
Have one person on com (does not matter who or where)
Check every com - Sound board, light board, SM, fly rail, SL and SR deck.

Turn on Monitors
In the Andreas Sound Room
Coats and Con, Andreas Green Room, PA Green Room, PA Dressing Room.

Open Sound Booth Windows

Post Show Checklist

Turn Off Monitors
In the Andreas Sound Room
Make sure ALL of the switches are set to center.

Turn off Channels 1 - 8 on the M7

Power off Main Rack Power
Not the red master switch- the black switch labeled Our Town

Power off Amp Down Stage Right

Power off Amp Up Stage Center
Power M7CL Off

Power off Computer

☐ Quit SFX - Do NOT save
☐ The standard way - file shutdown on the computer.

Close Sound Booth Windows
WORKS CITED


WORKS CONSULTED


