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On the Growth of Diamond in George Macdonald's At the Back of the North Wind

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摘 要

桑顿·怀尔德是迄今为止唯一获得普利策戏剧和小说两个奖项的作家。《我们的小镇》作为他的戏剧代表作，获得了巨大的成功。在戏剧形式和舞台表演方面，此剧有其独特风格。首先，戏剧情节和时间是非线性的，经常性的倒叙以及提前交代人物命运让观众清晰了解了剧中人物过去、现在和将来；其次，不用幕布、没有布景、没有道具，演员通过面部和身体动作虚拟表现出诸如做饭、送牛奶以及喝汽水等情景；第三，舞台监督直接向观众介绍剧中人以及表演。怀尔德对这些非现实风格戏剧技巧的运用能够调动观众的想象力，使观众参与其中一起思索小镇的深刻意义。

简单的舞台，有限的道具以及戏剧表现手势等肢体语言作为表演方法，灵活的时间以及空间处理，加上程式化和自发性等等相同的表现技巧，京剧可被视作《我们的小镇》的艺术的原型。加之怀尔德的中国经历，从中国戏剧的非幻觉表现手法中，怀尔德认识到平凡生活的重大事件也可以在开放的舞台上表演，不需用现实的道具布景，通过想象即可创造出虚拟世界中的人际关系。探寻他戏剧中的京剧元素非常有意义。

本文分为五章来比较和探讨《我们的小镇》中的京剧元素。第一章主要介绍了怀尔德的生平及其主要作品、《我们的小镇》以及文献综述。第二章介绍了京剧的特点和其对怀尔德创作的影响。第三章从剧场技巧方面进行比较，包括舞台和道具、舞台经理以及音乐的使用。接下来第四章从表演、叙事结构、寓言性的故事循环以及词语重复几种戏剧元素进行比较。第五章是结论，怀尔德所有这些对京剧技巧的吸收和运用都是为了打破现实主义戏剧的垄断，创造新的戏剧模式来表达深层含义，把社会生活的意义提升到一个更高的层次，揭示生命的真意。

关键词：桑顿·怀尔德；《我们的小镇》；京剧元素

Abstract

Thornton Wilder remains the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes in both drama (for *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth)* and fiction (for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey).* As one of his representative works, his play *Our Town* is a great success. It is unique in the dramatic form and stage presentation, the likes of which had not been seen on American stages before its premier in 1938. First, plot and time are nonlinear; flashbacks and foreknowledge of characters' fates give the audience a complete awareness of the past, present, and future. Second, there is no curtain, no scenery, no props; actors pantomime such stage business as cooking breakfast, delivering milk, and sipping ice cream sodas. Third, the Stage Manager repeatedly comments directly to the audience on the characters and actions. The function of these nonrealistic theatrical techniques is to put emphasis on the ideas Wilder trying to go after and to encourage audiences to use their imagination to picture perhaps their own towns, thus creating the empathy that makes *Our Town* moving and thought-provoking.

With its simple stage setting, limited props, its gestures and pantomimes as the means of dramatic expression, and its flexibility in space and density in time, as well as its integration of conventions and spontaneity, Beijing opera may be considered as the artistic prototype of *Our Town.* There are so many artistic techniques in common between *Our Town* and Beijing opera. Together with his experience in China, Wilder learned these techniques from Beijing Opera. From the non-illusionist approach in Chinese theatre, Wilder recognized that even the important events of everyday life can be presented by actors on an open platform, reacting not to a realistic setting but to the private thoughts and personal relations of the characters in the fictive world on that platform. So it is possible and worthwhile to examine the elements of Beijing opera in his plays.

This thesis is divided into five chapters to examine and compare the elements of Beijing opera in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town.* Chapter One includes the introduction to Wilder and his literary career, the play *Our Town* and Literature Review. Chapter Two studies the characteristics of Beijing Opera and its possible influence on Wilder. Then in Chapter Three, Theatrical devices in *Our Town* are demonstrated, including the stage and props, the Stage Manager and the use of music. The dramatic elements of the play, from

the performance, narrative structure, and allegorical cycle of the play to the repetition of words are investigated in Chapter Four, which also indicates the elements of Beijing Opera. Chapter five makes the conclusion that all the absorption and application of Beijing Opera elements in *Our Town* by wilder aim to break the monopoly of theater of realism, to create new modes to express philosophical meaning and then to elevate the true sense of life.

Key words: Thornton Wilder; *Our Town*; elements of Beijing Opera

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1. Introduction

1. 1 Thornton Wilder and his works

One of the most versatile writers in American literature, Thornton Wilder was the author of plays, novels, screenplays, essays, librettos, and journals. He remains the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes in both drama (for *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth)* and fiction (for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey)*; he also won the National Book Award for *The Eighth Day.*

Born in Madison, Wisconsin, Wilder spent part of his childhood in China, where his father served as a diplomat. The experience in China exerted a subtle influence in Wilder's literary creation. Wilder attended the Thacher School in Ojai and graduated from Berkeley High School in 1915. He attended Oberlin College for two years and served in the United States Army Coast Artillery Corps during World War I before he graduated from Yale University in 1920. He had early developed an interest in the theater, performing with his brother and sisters in his own plays at home and as an extra in the Greek dramas produced by a university theater at Berkeley. While in high school he frequently attended plays at the Liberty Theatre in Oakland. After eight months studying at the American Academy in Rome, he taught French at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey from 1921 to 1928. During this period he also attended Princeton University, earning a master's degree in French literature in 1926.

Wilder began his professional writing career while he was a full-time teacher. His first novel, *The Cabala* (1926) was well received and made him enter the world of writers, critics, and intellectuals. During the 1920s he met leading writers, including George Bernard Shaw, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and the critic Edmund Wilson. His second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), examines the theological significance of the deaths of five travelers when a bridge in eighteenth-century Peru collapses. It won the Pulitzer Prize and became an international best-seller, establishing Wilder among the most promising young writers of the 1920s. After quitting his teaching job, he traveled in Europe, lectured in America, and published his third novel, The Woman of Andros, in 1930, the same year he accepted a teaching position at the

University of Chicago.

In 1936 Wilder left teaching to turn his attention to writing for the stage. In a remarkably productive five years, he produced his three famous full-length plays. *Our Town* (1938), in which Wilder borrowed from an entirely different theatrical tradition. Wilder dispensed with scenery in his most famous play, and "used the Chinese theatrical convention of the property man as narrator to portray life in a small town in New England." (Gray, 2004: 456)

The play won Wilder his first Pulitzer Prize in drama. Then another Pulitzer Prize–winning drama, *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) followed. Wilder's farce *The Merchant of Yonkers* (produced 1938) was not successful in critics and commerce; however, slightly revised and retitled *The Matchmaker*, it became a best seller when it was produced in 1955. He also wrote the first draft of the screenplay for director Alfred Hitchcock's movie Shadow of a Doubt (1943).

After the war he struggled to complete works except for his epistolary novel about Julius Caesar, *The Ides of March* (1948). An incomplete series of one-act plays expresses a darker view of life than is evident in his earlier works, which perhaps reflects the aftereffects of his war experience and his reaction to the deaths of his mother and Gertrude Stein. During the 1960s Wilder's health began to fail, though he still managed to produce his longest novel, *The Eighth Day* (1967), which won the National Book Award. He published his last novel, *Theophilus North*, in 1973, and died in his sleep at his home in Hamden, Connecticut in 1975.

Wilder was a writer of considerable originality and eclectic intellect. He first attained literary success as a novelist but asserted in 1938, "Everything I have written has been a preparation for writing for the stage ... For the drama, it seems to me, is the most satisfying of all art-forms." So came the most innovative and vivid American drama of the 1930s—*Our Town*, a play of simple clarity and exquisite form of expression.

Thornton Wilder was a playwright who avoided the theatrical realism and utopian answers offered in other dramas of the decade in favor of a focus on the small in order to illuminate the universal and to affirm, through family and community relationships, the joy and pain experienced in life and the sadness and inevitability of death. One proof of the power of *Our Town* lies in its popularity: It has been the most performed American play of the 20th century, in repertory and particularly in schools, where it is appreciated

because it has a large cast, features straightforward American colloquial language, and, with its minimum of sets, is easy to produce. However, *Our Town* is not as simple in style as it would appear on the surface.

1.2 *Our Town*

Perhaps more than any other work written for the American stage, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* deserves to be called the Great American Play. Since its Broadway premiere on February 4, 1938, for an initial run of 336 performances, no play written by an American playwright has been produced by professional and amateur theatre companies and schools as frequent as *Our Town*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in drama. Malcolm Cowley says "There is possibly not a night in any year when *Our Town* is not being played somewhere in the Western world, often in a dozen towns at once, with the audience in each feeling that it was written especially for them..." (Cowley, 1956) Though it is an embodiment of American culture, Wilder's play appeals to audiences around the world.

As a modern morality play, *Our Town* raises timeless philosophical issues about life. Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, is the setting and *Our Town*. But the play asks its universal questions in a distinctive American context: daily life in a small New England village at the turn of the twentieth century demonstrated mainly by two neighboring families, the Webbs and the Gibbs. The setting, characters, and actions are all concretely American, yet foreign audiences and readers can relate to what is revealed about the human condition. The Stage Manager, first appeared in *The Happy Journey*, is wilder's innovative narrator in this play, reminds the audience that human beings have the activities of daily life in common, whether they live in present-day America or ancient Babylon.

Another reason for the long-lasting appeal of *Our Town* is the way Wilder dramatizes the conflict between everyday demands on our attention and a more existential awareness of life. When Emily revisits her twelfth birthday after she has died, she asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it,—every, every minute," to which he replies, "No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some." (Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York: Harper, 1938), *Act Three 38*. Henceforth, all quotations from *Our Town* are from this edition, and the references will

appear in the text.) Most audience members and readers are deeply moved by this tragic understanding Emily acquires only after it is too late.

Maybe the most important aspect that makes *Our Town* a great play is its theatrical style, the likes of which had not been seen on American stages before its premier in 1938. First, plot and time are nonlinear; flashbacks and foreknowledge of characters' fates give the audience a complete awareness of the past, present, and future. Second, there is no curtain, no scenery, no props; actors pantomime such stage business as cooking breakfast, delivering milk, and sipping ice cream sodas. Third, the Stage Manager repeatedly comments directly to the audience on the characters and actions. The function of these nonrealistic theatrical techniques is to put emphasis on the ideas Wilder trying to go after and to encourage audiences to use their imagination to picture perhaps their own towns, thus creating the empathy that makes *Our Town* moving and thought-provoking.

In *Our Town*, only a few chairs and ladders are economically used instead of piles of actual properties. Wilder employs the skill of pantomime to present every existent appearance in our daily life by means of imagination. Moreover, he produces a central figure, the Stage Manager, to remind the audience of their nearly forgotten memories through regular routine, love, marriage, and death to understand life further and to feel its ardor and continuity. The most substantial but complicated entanglement in human life are all displayed here.

With its simple stage setting, limited props, its gestures and pantomimes as the means of dramatic expression, and its flexibility in space and density in time, as well as its integration of conventions and spontaneity, Beijing opera may be considered as the prototype of Wilder's play.

1.3 Literature review

Wilder is "the most neglected author of a brilliant generation" (Cowley, 1975). Despite the achievement in American letters—Wilder remains the only writer to win the Pulitzer Prize in both drama and fiction—his works were relatively neglected by academia in the last quarter of the twentieth century. He has received little or no attention in recent critical studies of twentieth-century American drama and fiction, and his works do not appear in recently published anthologies of American literature and drama. This omission may be explained in two aspects of Wilder's writing: First, the perception that

the body of his work is small; second, its affirmative tone coming from his spiritual interpretation of daily life and history, which is a stark contrast to the skeptical, cynical, even nihilistic tone of most modern American literature and drama admired by scholars and critics.

Critics from *Herald-Tribune, World Telegram, Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* and *Sunday Mirror* all praised the play's staging, acting, direction, and themes (Tappan Wilder, 115). Brooks Atkinson, of the *New York Times,* was enamored of *Our Town* from the start and gave it some of the best reviews, suggesting that through this work Wilder had "escaped from the formal barrier of the modern theatre into the quintessence of acting, thought and speculation" and "transmuted the simple events of human life into universal reverie" (Atkinson, 1938: 18). Atkinson also called the play "hauntingly beautiful" and "less the portrait of a town than the sublimation of the commonplace".

The play has achieved great popular and success, and it has also won the praise of the critics. Playwright Donald Margulies, in his foreword to the 2003 reprint of the play, suggests that it could be "the great American play" (xi), as he describes his transition from viewing it as a corny piece of nostalgia to realizing its true subversive power. Drama critics both then and now have tended to lionize Wilder for his philosophical themes, alongside his innovations and experimentation. Many credit him with revitalizing American theater in the 1930s. Theater critic Travis Bogard views Wilder as a man who, along with O'Neill, freed the American theater from its traditional forms through his experimental productions. Though many of the play's conventions, such as its direct address, telescoping of time, lack of scenery, and use of mime and a narrator, may not seem unusual now, next to the comedies mostly playing on Broadway in 1938, they were truly radical.

As a dramatist, Wilder is said to have learned from German expressionism, though some scholars have denied that his techniques are expressionistic; Louis Broussard deduced that since Wilder lived in China he must have borrowed from the Chinese theater, but Jean Gould and Ethan Mordden have noted that this is an unsupported assumption. Wilder's dramatic mode has also been described as theatricalist, surrealistic, romantic, and didactic. Like A. R. Fulton's "Expressionism—Twenty Years After"; Douglas C. Wixson Jr., "The Dramatic Techniques of Thornton Wilder and Bertolt Brecht: A Study in Comparison"; and Donald Haberman, *The Plays of Thornton Wilder*

for discussions of Wilder's plays as expressionistic; Louis Broussard, *American Drama: Contemporary Allegory from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams;* and Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama since 1870* for exclusion of Wilder from that aesthetic. And there are some other descriptions of Wilder's dramatic mode, like, respectively, John Gassner, *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre*; Burbank, *Thornton Wilder*; Joseph Wood Krutch, *The American Drama since 1918: An Informal History*; George D. Stephens, "*Our Town*—Great American Tragedy?" and Firebaugh, "Humanism."

The recent study of Wilder as dramatist, Paul Lifton compares Wilder's dramaturgy to "symbolism, naturalism, expressionism, futurism, and existentialism" and also to "classical Greek, Medieval, Elizabethan, Renaissance, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese theater, as well as American popular folk entertainment." (Lifton, 1995:10) Scholars are always seeking the source of Thornton Wilder's artistic feature, from Chinese drama to Greek drama, Shakespeare, Pirandello and so on. Although some of them have referred the Chinese style of *Our Town*, they discussed in general instead of specific, and have never given the concrete comparison and how the Chinese techniques were used in the play.

Today in China, many scholars and students take interests in Wilder's works. Like the thesis "The special views reflected in *Our Town*" written by Shen Min in May 2001, the author points out that Wilder borrows and innovates much in theatrical modes and techniques as to better demonstrate the theme; and Dan Hansong's *To Realize the Universal: A Critical Study of Allegorical Narrative in Thornton Wilder's plays and Novels* shows us the allegorical narrative in Wilder's novels and dramas. And some Chinese scholars paid attention to the relationship between Wilder's art and Chinese plays, such as *The Adoption of Theatricality from Traditional Chinese Opera in Our Town* by Yuan Xia, Nanjing Normal University, and Thornton Wilder and Chinese Opera by Zhang Jinliang and Qi Shuling from Tianjin University of Technology.

2. Thornton Wilder and Beijing Opera

In the long and rich Chinese cultural tradition, theatrical performance is one of the most popular artistic forms. Many dramas have been performed for about a thousand years and are still popular. Among the various forms of drama, Beijing opera is the most influential and successful and it is said that wherever there are Chinese, there is Beijing opera. Although its origin can be traced back to ancient times, Beijing opera, as performed today, is largely a product of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). In 1790, Emperor Qian Long of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) invited several drama groups to the capital, Beijing, to give performances for the celebration of his eightieth birthday. Afterwards, these drama groups stayed in the capital and continued to perform, thus bringing about a flourishing period in dramatic performance in Beijing. From the dramatic performances given by different drama groups, a new type of drama emerged gradually. It took shape as a combination of the dramatic elements from both the ancient tradition in performance and local dramatic genres. Since this new type of drama was first performed in Beijing, it was traditionally called "Beijing opera" or "Peking Opera" by some foreigners. However, the Chinese people prefer to call it "National Drama". This was not only because the term "opera" may mislead Westerners with the concept of "opera" in the Western dramatic tradition, but also because Beijing opera has become an important part of Chinese culture, and because it is a dramatic embodiment of Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, and ethics (Scott, 1957).

Undergoing more than two thousand years of development and with thousands of dedicated dramatists striving for its perfection, Beijing opera evolved from primitive religious rituals to a highly developed artistic form of dramatics. It is a dramatic performance of symbolic gestures, dance-like body movements, poetic dialogues, singing, and dancing in harmony with music and rhythm. With different historical, social and cultural backgrounds, essential differences inevitably exist in both dramatic aesthetics and theatrical practices between Western and Eastern traditions of drama. These differences fascinated and influenced some of the most representative modernist dramatists in the Western theatre, such as Constantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, and Thornton Wilder. Eastern dramatic traditions have either inspired or were embodied in their theories of drama and theatrical practice.

2.1 The influence of Beijing Opera on Thornton Wilder

Wilder had grown up in different places where the local cultures or education might be influential either large or small on his art. Travel was an important part of his childhood as his family resided alternately in the United States and in china. Wilder had firsthand experience of china and its culture in the early 1910s. Moreover, he was educated in china, in German language schools, in America and in Rome. In 1906, the family moved to Hong Kong, where his father served as the American consul general, and Thornton wilder's traveling began. The family returned to America after living there for six months, but they again immigrated to shanghai in 1911. Hence, wilder once stayed in china for years or more. As a result of his early relationship with the orient, Thornton Wilder's plays have always been suspected of having an association with the stage techniques presented in the way of Chinese theatre. For example, T'eng I-lu in his critical essay, "The Human comedies of Thornton wilder," discusses the connection between wilder's theatrical devices with that of Noh plays in Japan and the Beijing Theatre in China.

In his preface to Three Plays, Wilder himself assesses the theatrical style of both his one-act plays and *Our Town*: "I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods and I hope a remover of obtrusive bric-a-brac". Removing the obtrusive bric-a-brac of realistic scenery is the reformation in theatrical style. Clearly, Wilder was influenced by a variety of literary and theatrical traditions while creating his own original art.

Wilder's interest in Chinese theater can be seen in his own statement in his "Preface" to Three Plays:

> I . . . tried to capture not verisimilitude but reality. In Chinese drama a character, by straddling a stick, conveys to us that he is on horseback. In almost every Noh play of the Japanese an actor makes a tour of the stage and we know that he is making a long journey. (Wilder, 1976: x-xi)

The influence of the oriental theatre seems evident in wilder's stage performances, but actually, wilder himself never directly admitted this argument that his theatrical inspiration was proceeded from the Chinese theatre, especially Beijing Opera. As he once defended:

> Some people have said that my boyhood in china had an influence on my theater style, of not using scenery, since this is also the style in Chinese theater. When a man goes on a journey, he puts a broomstick between his legs to represent a horse and you believe it. But I couldn't possibly have been influenced by Chinese theater because I never saw a play there. My influence came from the world theater, from the Greek drama, and Shakespeare. These were works that call for the same sort of imagination. (Coy, 1992: 111)

Despite his living for two extended periods of his childhood in china, wilder never saw a full-length performance of a Chinese play. In other words, he did not have direct and entire contact with any characteristic Chinese play, either as a child or as an adult, either in his hometown or abroad. However, Haberman and some other critics assert that, if possible, wilder has inspired in 1930 by a New York performance by Mei Lanfang, a legendary Chinese actor in the Peking theatre. (Haberman, 1989: 42) Due to that effect, he afterward transposed to the Chinese "property man" into the Stage Manager or announcer and stressed on the minimalist stage setting in *Our Town*. In style, his theatre and the oriental style have many nonrealistic qualities and imaginary ways of acting in common, so it is reasonable that their theatrical connection and interaction are often put into comparable consideration.

No matter how we define Wilder's plays, they clearly belong to the period of nonrealistic experimentation in dramatic form and production techniques reacting against late nineteenth century realism. Since modern nonrealistic theater was initially a European movement, scholars have assumed that the formal characteristics of Wilder's plays (and novels) are European in origin; thus the contemporary figures Wilder is said to have been influenced by or directly borrowed from are European: Pirandello, Obey, Jarry, Proust, and Joyce. (Goldstone, 1975) These European contemporaries gave inspiration and sources to Wilder's drama and fiction, since he acknowledged reading many of their works.

Since the influences on a playwright are numerous, we cannot pin down exactly the influence of Chinese theater on Thornton Wilder. However, although it is impossible to make sure the influence of Beijing opera on Wilder, there are so many artistic techniques in common between *Our Town* and Beijing opera, which made it possible to find out the elements of Beijing opera in his plays.

2.2 A brief introduction to Beijing Opera

2.2.1 Symbolism

In traditional Western theatre, the text is the most important element, and the theatre is there only to add certain intellectual arguments, so as to bringing about their mutual confrontation. The fundamental difference between Western theatre in general and Beijing opera lies in the different concepts of stage presentation: realism in traditional western theatre and symbolism in Beijing opera. Beijing Opera is a theatre of symbolism where imaginary acting, limited stage props, backdrops, and the fixed music express the dramatic scenes and the emotional condition of the characters. For the avoidance of the clutter of realism, Chinese opera relies on the bareness of abstraction to evolve fluidly and continuously as the drama unfolds. In contrast, the colors and designs of the elaborate costumes, from the face painting to the headpiece and so on, all have a symbolic significance that contributes to the characterizations of the role types.

In Beijing Opera, what performs on stage is the reflection of the essence of life, not superficial resemblance. Artists present their own perception of life by deconstructing and reconstructing raw materials from life, recasting them with a special artistic language which often formally goes beyond or transcends ordinary life. Theatre artists are free to abstract visual things and visualize invisible things; their freedom in presenting time and space on stage is limitless. For example, in Beijing opera, almost all indoor scenes — an imperial palace, a nobleman's house, a Buddhist temple, a scholar's study-are simplified so that the scene needs only a table and two chairs, or just one chair. Battlefields, mountains, rivers, and sea are often abstracted-shown strictly through the performer's movements on an utterly bare stage. The external world is represented in the actor's body, hands, eyes, and voice, realized in the audience's imagination engendered by the acting.

That is to say, players in performance use the physical language like gestures, mimes, and body movements and also by means of facial expression. The performance ranges from the delicate gestures of fingers, hands, feet, arms, and legs to active movement of the whole body. It also includes a complex series of movements made with the actor's sleeves, the plumes worn on head dresses by certain characters, the beards worn in the sheng and jing roles, and other props. It is an important means in not only in performing dramatic actions, but also in creating theatrical sceneries and displaying

various emotions from different characters on stage. With specific gestures and body movements and with the help of a limited number of props, the actors can demonstrate effectively many specific scenes on stage. For instance, if an actor comes on stage with a whip, it means that he is riding a horse. If he is taking an oar, he is rowing a boat. A white flag indicates waves at sea, while a black flag is used to signify strong wind. A performer opens and closes a door where there is no door at all. This is true of mounting or dismounting a horse, going upstairs or coming downstairs, going on board a ship or leaving a ship. As a consequence, in Beijing Opera acting, imitation brings out symbolism. A performer imitates and beautifies life's actions. At the same time, movements on the Beijing Opera stage should be dance-like, have a rhythm and are pleasant to look at. This makes the exaggeration and pantomimic variations necessary. "A combination of symbolism and movement-to-graceful-dancing conversion has resulted in conventionalized acting that is unique to Beijing Opera. That is to say, many human actions have gradually been adapted for the theatrical stage and fallen into fixed patterns to become intricate conventions which generations of performers have conformed with and which people are familiar with." (徐城北, 2003: 114)

2.2.2 Conventions

All arts, including theatre, are based on life and reflect the reality of life, each particular art form having evolved a particular style of representation. Beijing Opera is a theatrical art based on conventions (chengshi). No matter how special they may seem, Beijing Opera conventions are derived from life, having passed through a long process of artistic refinement—direct expressions of simple content have become complex expressions of multifaceted life. Though conventions come from life, they are more than simple imitations or magnifications of life: imagination, exaggeration, omission, and ornamentation are all involved in the creation of conventions—even deformation is implied in this process. Conventions are creations based on both the logic of life and the logic of art.

In Beijing Opera, there are not only specific tunes of singing and particular ways of speaking, but also specific patterns of mime, gestures, and body movements with special meanings. For instance, the imaginary door on stage must be pulled from the inside, whereas the imaginary window must be pushed open to the outside. When crossing an imaginary threshold, an actor must lift his right foot first or should first raise his right

arm. When performing crying, an actor shall raise his left arm toward his face, pull his left sleeve with his right hand while shake and bowed his head. Each type of role has its own style of singing, speaking, walking, and gesturing. In order to express the feeling of anger or despair, a hua dan (young female) may bite her handkerchief, a qingyi (adult female) may throw off and catch her long sleeves, a lao sheng (old male) may shake his beard, a xiao sheng (young male) may sway his hair, and a wu sheng (military male) may shake his plumes. These patterns and rules have been formulated through long historical processes and have become conventions of drama. These conventions have to be followed in performance, as they are the basis of communication between actors and audience.

Conventionalized acting in Beijing Opera does not come into existence overnight. It is accumulated by a succession of performers and passed down from generation to generation. While standards are to be followed, a break with accepted routine is allowed. Acting conventions develop in the process of being inherited.

In a word, Beijing Opera is governed by conventions—the conventions constitute the style and are its most fundamental means of artistic expression. Conventions are the powerful and unique means of creating characterization and image. The strong expressive power, artistic appeal, and intellectual content of Beijing Opera reside precisely in the beauty of its conventions.

Based on these characteristics, to find out the elements of Beijing Opera in *Our Town*, the comparison between Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and the Beijing opera's art can be done from theatrical devices, such as stage setting and props and the Stage Manager to dramatic elements, such as imaginary acting in performance and narrative structure.

3. Theatrical Devices

Our Town embodies many elements of Beijing opera. There is no scenery, no realistic props except for necessary tables and chairs. And the Stage Manager can be the "invisible" Chinese property man in the view of the audience, make self-introduction of the characters, and play the actors in multiple roles and music which is essential to Beijing Opera is used in this drama. These are the employment of major Chinese theatrical devices.

3.1 Stage setting and props

Because of the symbolism and convention, staging in Beijing opera is conventional and presentational. The performance space was a platform surrounded by audience on three sides. The places are defined by acting and speech. The backdrop's scenic painting is neutral and merely decorative. The stage is nearly empty, with just tables and chairs to signify locations. The lack of props and realistic scenery is essential because it frees space for players to perform.

What traditional, "realistic" Western dramatists try to do is to make use of every theatrical means to create an illusory reality on stage. They intend to make the audience forget that they are watching a play, but indulge themselves in the illusory life created by the stage performance. In contrast, in Beijing Opera the acceptance and implementation of obvious falsity of the stage presentation has been the fundamental principle in its long historical period of development, which determines the concepts of space and time on the stage. In order to make full use of space and time on stage and for the benefit of the swift change of place, time, and characters, Beijing Opera has a simple stage setting with only a backdrop and a red carpet. On each side of the backdrop, there is a curtained doorway: on the right is the entrance, on the left the exit. On this almost empty stage, a table and a few chairs, and a limited number of props are all that is required. However, these props are put to various uses. For instance, a chair in front of a table indicates a room; but if it is put behind the table, it symbolizes a study, a judge's seat, or even a commander-in-chief's headquarters; if a chair is put on top of a table, it signifies a hill; if two tables are put one above the other, it indicates a high wall. This spatial flexibility is

also accompanied by the theatrical device of double or multi-spaces on stage. Sets are not used on the Beijing opera stage, since all changes of place must occur within the mind of the audience, and the abstract space of the bare stage is transformed to a specific locale by the words of the actor.

In *Our Town*, wilder replaces realism and naturalism by symbolism and expressionism in the ways of disposing of elaborate and actual props and scenery by a bare stage to achieve his aim. In terms of wilder's theatricality, the symbolic and expressionistic characteristics and other skills are widely exhibited in his plays in order to include the ideas he tried to express. Wilder would stimulate the audience to activate their imaginations and enlist their empathy by making them picture the images of a small town setting—perhaps their own town—as the Stage Manager talks and points to areas of a bare stage.

At the beginning of the play, the character of the Stage Manager, the narrator, brings chairs and tables and sets the stage, explaining their significance to the audience. The play begins with such description: "No curtain. No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light." (5).

"No scenery" is required for this play. Perhaps a few chairs and tables and proscenium pillar can be seen downstage. Giving a brief account of the "visible" narrator and the setting, then the narrator—Stage Manager literally describe, "This play is called *Our Town*. It was written by Thornton wilder...The name of the town is Grover's corners, New Hampshire...The first act shows a day in our town. The day is 7 May 1901. The time is just before dawn." (5)

Except for the bare stage, the minimalist props strike the audience. A table and several chairs represent the house of the Gibbs and the kitchen of the Webbs: "[*He approaches the table and chairs down stage right*] This is our doctor's house, —Doc Gibbs'. This is the back door."(5) And a board across two chairs becomes a counter: "*He places a board across the backs of two chairs, parallel to the footlights, and places two high stools behind it. This is the counter of* Mr. Morgan*'s drugstore.*" (42) Hence a ladder is used to indicate the second story of a house: "*Two ladders have been pushed on to the stage; they serve as indication of the second story in the* Gibbs *and* Webb *houses.*" (26)

The absence of scenery and of realistic properties in *Our Town* may strike the audience and distract them. But if the play is reasonably well acted, we quickly accept

the convention and forget that the real stove, the real dishes, the real newspaper are not there. And this convention is in Wilder's concept. Although the story of the play takes place in a small town in New Hampshire at a specific time and it is concerned with individuals, yet it aims to illustrate a truth that holds for men and women everywhere, in the big city as well as the small town, and in every time, in 1938 or 1959 as well as in 1901. "Scenery and realistic properties would have tied *Our Town* too firmly to the particular time and place, would have made it the nostalgic, sentimental play of life in the vanished American small town, for which it is sometimes mistaken." (Hewitt, 1959: 115)

Wilder tries every effort to traverse the theatrical limitation of visible pops and the control of form at that time for he has sensed the theatrical weakness of the nineteenth century drama:

> They loaded the stage with specific objects, because every concrete object on the stage fixes and narrows the action to one moment in time and space... when you emphasize *place* in the theater, you drag down and limit and harness time to it... (*preface* 108)

Therefore, we realize that why he always longs to represent the symbols of things and the embodiment of abstract ideas through the theatre. The general information about the play is clearly told. The very beginning of the play deliberately subverts the theatrical regulations of realism. As for the banishment of burdensome stage properties, we initially reach wilder's nonrealistic dramatic usage.

However, without any realistic scenery on stage, and without reference to any outstanding characteristic of the town, Grover's Corners remains a common town, a generalized town, any town in the vast stretches of history. "The absence of scenery," Wilder says, "intimates the universe" (Coy, 1992: 44) and with repetitive references to the sky, the stars the sun and the moon, he gives Grover's Corners a vast, cosmic significance. Human life is blended with a force larger than itself. Rebecca's speech furthers the significant location of the town. She recounts the amazing address on the letter sent to Jane Crofut:

> Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America . . . Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God. (45)

Grover's Corners and its people are situated in the infinite universe and encompassed in the eternal mind. This dimension gives the whole play a celestial, ritual characteristic as well as a universal significance.

It is hard to imagine how the climax of *Our Town* could be achieved at all under the conditions established by the lack of scenery. Without scenery, the transitions in scene can be as swift as the imagination, not only in time and place but back and forth from life to death. In *Our Town*, Wilder amply illustrates what was one of the primary functions of drama in his thought: "A play visibly represents pure existing." With the simplicity Wilder gives us the fictional and imaginary community of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, during the years 1901 to 1913. The audience sees an empty stage in half-light. Visual completeness is supplied by the characters and their interactions with one another, a few set props introduced to suggest the homes of the central characters' families, and the audience's imagination and collective memory and experience. Wilder sought to achieve the sense of an ultimate perspective by immaterializing the sense of dramatic place on stage. The bare stage of *Our Town* with its chairs, tables, and ladders, together with the Stage Manager's bald exposition, are all use by Wilder to create the town.

3.2 The Stage Manager

In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager is in fact the most important role in the play. He can do everything, and repeatedly leads the audience's imagination of Grover's Corners. He sets each scene and describes the missing props, offering a visual picture of what the missing scenery might have supplied. He provides the essential background of the town and its people, with the help of a local professor and the editor of the town's newspaper. As a narrator, he is able to bridge any gaps in time, for he speaks to the audience and the actors directly, telling the latter which scenes to play, or when to leave in order to move things along, and even acts some of the minor roles himself, such as Mr. Morgan, the owner of the town drugstore, an old lady, Mrs. Forrest, and the minister at the wedding, thus participating in the action. He also provides a philosophical commentary on the events we witness. As a whole, the Stage Manager embodies similar elements of the characters and techniques of Beijing opera.

3.2.1 Fu mo

In Beijing Opera, the *fu mo*, usually an old man, always tells the audience the plot in

the opens of a play with poetic words and then performs as minor characters as the plot develops. As early as eighteenth century, the French translations of Chinese Zaju and Chuanqi plays informed the reader about these conventions. Thornton Wilder employed a similar device in the Stage Manager of *Our Town*. The fu mo switches in roles, stressing role-playing as role-playing and "connecting the world of illusion where the dramatic action develops and the world of reality where the singer leads the audience to contemplation" (Du, 1995: 318). All these above-mentioned devices are reminiscent of Chinese theatrical conventions.

For example, at the beginning of *Our Town* the Stage Manager addresses the audience and informs them about the title of the play, its author and the name of the very theatre-hall where it is being performed:

> This play is called "*Our Town.*" It was written by Thornton Wilder, produced and directed by A... The name of the town is Grover's Comers, New Hampshire, — just across the Massachusetts line: latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes. The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901... So — another day's begun. There's Doc Gibbs comin' down Main Street now, comin' back from that baby case. And here's his wife comin' downstairs to get breakfast. Doc Gibbs died in 1930. The new hospital's named after him. Mrs. Gibbs died first—long time ago in fact." (5)

The Stage Manager plays minor characters such as the boss of a drug store, Mr. Morgan:

> Stage Manager: [*As* Mr. Morgan:] Hello, George. Hello, Emily. What'll you have? Why, Emily Webb, what've you been crying about?
>
> *George:* [*He gropes for an explanation*] She . . .she just got an awful scare, Mr. Morgan. She almost got run over by that hardware store wagon. Everybody always says that Tom Huckins drives like a crazy man. (50)

He also assumes a role in Grover's Corners at the most important moments in the lives of George and Emily, as a witness to their love and marriage—the Clergyman for their wedding:

> In this wedding I play the minister. That gives me the right to say a few more things about it.
>
> [George *slips away and takes his place beside the* Stage Manager—Clergyman.

Emily proceeds up the aisle on her father's arm]

Stage Manager: Do you, George, take this woman, Emily, to be your wedded wife, to have . . . (61)

And in Act One, he becomes an old lady, Mrs. Forrest: "George: Excuse me, Mrs. Forrest. Stage Manager (as Mrs. Forrest): Go out and play in the fields, young man. You got no business playing baseball on Main Street." (22)

Each of the three acts has its own title and is introduced by the Stage Manager, serving as the omniscient narrator, comments directly to the audience on the characters and actions takes on several different but key roles within the play, and knows the past, present, and future of each character.

3.2.2 Property man

A Beijing Opera is usually divided into several acts. Traditionally, when there is a change of acts, a group of men called stage checkers would change the setting. Wearing long gowns but no facial expression whatsoever, they would come onto the stage after an act is over, reshuffle the table and chairs, indicating a change of place and time, and leave the stage in silence. Sometimes, they would produce some stage effect. In *Inter-linked Military Tents* (*lian ying zhai*), for example, to show Liu Bei making his escape in a violent situation of war and fire, a stage checker standing on the side of the stage would light pieces of paper and throw the burning paper onto the actors, who thereupon do escaping or extinguishing acts.

Based on the function of a stage checker in Beijing Opera, the western dramatists give the stage checker another name: property man. The use of the visible property man in virtually every Chinese styled play in America sprang from the popularity of The Yellow Jacket in 1912, the first American play done in a total Chinese manner. And Wilder made his Stage Manager the property man in *Our Town*.

For example, in Act Two of *Our Town* the Stage Manager "places a board across the backs of two chairs, parallel to the footlights, and places two high stools behind it. This is the counter of Mr. Morgan's drugstore" (42) and "The Stage Manager lays the same plank across two chairs that served as a drugstore counter and it has now become Mrs. Gibbs's ironing board." (48)

3.2.3 Self introduction

In Beijing Opera the characters usually do not keep secrets from the audience. By

such methods as self-introductions (zi bao jia men), spoken and sung monologues (du bai and du chang, respectively), and asides (pang bai), the audience is always informed of the plot, the conflict between characters, and even the inner secrets of characters. Information that is supposedly unknown to other characters on the stage is divulged to the audience. From a Western point of view, a story with a known plot might appear dull. The audience of Beijing Opera, however, is fascinated by the development and ultimate resolution of conflict even though it knows the plot well in advance. In Beijing opera, on the program the characters are announced as well as the names of the actors. The entrance of an important player is immediately followed by a self-introduction in which he talks of the person he is to present; sometimes he will recount in detail his family history, why he appears, where he is from, and what he desires to accomplish during the entire period of the play; he may even repeat certain of these speeches upon a second and a third entrance. Throughout a performance an intimate relation is maintained between the characters and the audience.

In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager announces the place. He presents Grover's Corners in detail—its location on earth, its scenery, its history, its geological formations and its sociology. And the Stage Manager integrates the three elements of Beijing Opera, becoming an omniscient narrator, interrupt the play at any time: "Stage Manager: Thank you. Thank you! That'll do. We'll have to interrupt again here. Thank you, Mrs. Webb; thank you, Emily. [Mrs. Webb *and* Emily *withdraw*] There are some more things we've got to explore about this town." (24)

He can freely flashback or forward:

> *Stage Manager:* Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Now I have to interrupt again here. You see, we want to know how all this began, — this wedding, this plan to spend a lifetime together. I'm awfully interested in how big things like that begin.... George and Emily are going to show you now the conversation they had when they first knew that . . . that . . . as the saying goes . . . they were meant for one another. (43)

He can also skip some time periods and then fill them by narration: "Stage Manager: That'll do. That'll do. Thank you very much, ladies. [Mrs. Gibbs *and* Mrs. Webb *gather up their things, return into their homes and disappear*] Now we're going to skip a few hours in the day at Grover's Corners." (15)

He also reminds the audience in Act One that there is only a play on stage, not the real life: "Stage Manager: There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery. There's a garden here. Corn . . . peas . . . beans . . . hollyhocks. . . heliotrope. . . and a lot of burdock." (6)

He also makes the audience know how he arranges the plot: "The First Act was called the Daily Life. This Act is called Love and Marriage. There's another Act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about." (36)

By using the comments either derogative or commendatory, the Stage Manager can keep in touch with the audience, thus developing an independent perspective which makes him can communicate anything at any time.

When these Beijing Opera techniques were used as unfamiliar devices to break away from the Western realistic tradition, the audience was purposefully to be kept detached in the process of identifying with characters throughout the performance. Wilder elevated Western knowledge of Chinese theatrical conventions to a theoretical level and put them into innovative practice. To some extent, the Stage Manager has more uses than the three functions of Beijing Opera. He helps to create a special community in the vast stretches of time and space. He celebrates life and emphasizes universal human emotions.

3.3 The use of music

The aural aspect of Beijing Opera includes singing, instrumental interludes, speech, and percussion patterns. Singing can occur at any moment of the drama. It can be the main feature of an act, or it can simply serve as a routine structural element concluding a scene. A long passage often can be sung by just one person expressing his or her feelings, narrating a sequence of events, or expounding a long argument. Alternating dialogue singing between two characters is also frequent. The amount of singing that occurs in an opera depends mainly on the nature of the story. Some operas feature singing almost throughout, whereas others may have spoken dialogue and acting, with some singing inserted here and there.

That is to say, in the performance of Beijing opera, most of the spoken words are sung. With the music, every movement is danced. So the performance is pleasing to the ears and eyes. Moreover, all the singing and dancing are unified and rhymed with music,

which is essential to the performance of Beijing opera. All the singing, dancing, gesture, imaginary acting, and body movement on stage must be consistent with the rhythm of music. Meanwhile, the rhythm in singing and speaking is also counterbalanced by the rhythm in gestures, mimes, and body movements. The dramatic performance and the rhythmical music not only restrict each other, but also support each other during the performance.

The music in *Our Town* is also very important. The choir practice in Act One "A choir partially concealed in the orchestra pit has begun singing 'Blessed be the tie that binds.' Simon Stimson stands directing them." (act one) and the music at the wedding in Act Two (which includes the song sung at the choir practice) are all sung at the church, and invoke love and community spirit. The hymn at the funeral, which is also the same song sung at the choir practice, invokes universal feelings and serves as a mass for a deceased person. The music emphasizes the ritual's universality:

> *The choir starts singing "Love divine, all love excelling—."(57)*
> *They subside. The group by the grave starts singing "Blessed be the tie that binds"*
> And I mean fore*ver*. Do you hear? For ever and ever. [*They fall into each other's arms. The March from "Lohengrin" is heard*]
> Well, let's have Mendelssohn's "Wedding March"!
> [*The organ picks up the March. The bride and groom come down the aisle, radiant, but trying to be very dignified*]
> *A Woman Among The Dead:* I always liked that hymn. I was hopin' they'd sing a hymn. (69)

4. Dramatic Elements

4.1 Imaginary acting in performance

Beijing opera integrates conventions and spontaneity, a combination of old traditions and new conceptions. Within the framework of various rules, conventions and traditions, actors and actresses are demanded to perform spontaneously and are allowed to develop freely their own characteristics in performance. Accordingly, actors become the center of the performance and their qualities and popularity determine the success of the performance. In many cases, plays are specially created in order to develop and emphasize an actor's specific qualities. The plot of a play and its major tunes of songs are specially selected for the demonstration of the actors' techniques and qualities in performance.

The audiences of Beijing opera come to the theatre in particular to watch the performance by actors whom they appreciate and love. Their dramatic techniques and the quality of performance are the most attractive aspects to the audience, who do not care if the plot of the play might be thousands of years old, and is well known among them. Without doubt, Beijing opera is the art of actor. What the Chinese audience appreciates most is not the story of the play but how it is performed on stage, as is the case in ancient Greece: "The plots of all Greek plays were already well known to the audience. The interest for them lay not in the novelty of the story, but in seeing how the dramatist had chosen to deal with it." (Hartnoll, 1989: 9)

The performance of *Our Town* is a migration of the Chinese Xu ni (imaginary acting) on the western stage, and is most consciously used by Thornton Wilder. For Wilder persists that too much scenery on stage confines the audience's creativeness and interferes the action of the play. He realizes that the impact and influence of a play is stronger if the audience could participate in the performance with his own imagination. Therefore, the bare stage and the pantomime, the imaginary behaviors or movement used in the play are the best ways to invite the audience's imagination. They are effective stage manners in order to attract the audience into the action and draw their imagination out. For instance,

[*Dr. Gibbs has been coming along Main Street from the left. At the point where*

he would turn to approach his house, he stops, sets down his—imaginary—black bag, takes off his hat, and rubs his face with fatigue, using an enormous handkerchief. ...MRS WEBB... she goes through the motions of putting wood into a stove, lighting it, and preparing breakfast. Suddenly, JOE CROWELL, JR... hurling imaginary newspapers into doorways] (6)

Three characters all perform in mind one by one within this elaboration. And in the following story, the "imaginary" acting keeps behaved by other characters. Taking more examples, "... George returns reluctantly to the kitchen and pantomimes putting on overshoes" (56); "[Emily, *carrying an armful of— imaginary— schoolbooks, comes along Main Street from the left*]" (43); [Si Crowell *has entered hurling imaginary newspapers into doorway...*] (35); and the Stage Manager is also arranged to do so such as "he sets the imaginary glasses before them". (64) With such descriptions of a great of theatrical intensity, a stage performance seems lively presented in front of the reader who can feel the same way as the theatergoer do.

Except for expressing by words, Wilder in *Our Town* also uses the body movement to create a scene. For example:

[*Dr Gibbs has been coming along Main Street from the left. At the point where he would turn lo approach his house, he stops, sets down his — imaginary — black bag, takes off his hat, and rubs his face with fatigue, using an enormous handkerchief. Mrs. Gibbs has entered her kitchen, gone through the motions of putting wood into a stove, lighting it, and preparing breakfast. Suddenly, Joe Crowell, Jr., starts down Main Street from the right, hurling imaginary newspapers into doorways.*] (7)

In act two, "Emily, carrying an armful of— imaginary— schoolbooks, comes along Main Street from the left". (43)

There are also Mrs. Gibbs and her imaginary chicken: "

All: Good-by. [*The children from the two houses join at the center of the stage and go up to Main Street, then off left.* Mrs. Gibbs *fills her apron with food for the chickens and comes down to the footlights*]

Mrs. Gibbs: Here, chick, chick, chick. No, go away, you. Go away. Here, chick, chick, chick. What's the matter with you? Fight, fight, fight, —that's all you do. Hm . . . you don't belong to me. Where'd you come from? [*She shakes her*

apron] Oh, don't be so scared. Nobody's going to hurt you. (12)

As a contrast, in Beijing opera, the mimes, gestures, and body movements—all the imaginary acting developed far beyond the reality and logic of life. When watching the distinguished actor Mei Lanfang performing a play, Bertolt Brecht observes: "A young woman, a fisherman's daughter, is shown on the stage, rowing a boat. She stands up and steers the (non-existent) boat with a little oar that hardly comes down to her knees. The current runs faster. Now it is harder for her to keep her balance. Now she is in a bay and rows more quietly. Well, that's the way to row a boat. But this voyage has an historic quality, as if it has been sung in many songs, a most unusual voyage, know to everyone. Each of this famous girl's movements has been preserved in pictures. Every bend in the river was an adventure that one knows about. The bend she is now approaching is well-known." (Martin and Bial, 2001: 16)

Thus, Beijing opera combines the abstract with the concrete, symbolism with realism, and natural behaviour in life with pleasant songs, beautiful dances, graceful movements, and delicate lines of art. As mentioned above, the door, chickens, and a boat on stage are symbolic, imaginary, and abstract, while the way of knocking on the door, feeding the chickens, or rowing a boat are realistic, natural, and concrete. Beijing opera is an artistic distillation of the essence of life, an illustration of universal truth and artistic beauty in life. Like Wilder's *Our Town*, it is appealing to the reality and the life experience of the audience, but higher than the reality of life.

4.2 Narrative structure

In a period when realism dominated the stage, like Bertold Brecht in Germany and Luigi Pirandello in Italy, Wilder was trying to find a different means of presentation, stripping away props and scenery to encourage audiences to pay closer attention to the play and what is said. But where Brecht and Pirandello sought to alienate their audiences, Wilder seeks to engage them both emotionally and intellectually. (*Abbotson*, 2005: 29)

With its bare stage, *Our Town* goes beyond the limit of particular time and place, presenting a universal vision of what Wilder saw as the meaning of life, lived from day to day, wonderful in the very details of its ordinariness.

In chapter two of this thesis we know that Wilder explains in his *Preface to Three*

Plays, his writings aim to capture not verisimilitude but reality. In another "preface" for the play that Wilder wrote for the *New York Times,* he explains his decision to approach from an archeologist's point of view, given his training in that field. He sought to discover the larger issues of life from close observation of the smallest details, just as archeologists piece together how someone lived long ago from the tiny pieces of everyday evidence they unearth. *Our Town* is constructed in much the same way as a jigsaw puzzle. Being disinterested in conflict which is usually at the core of most theatrical plots, Wilder prefers to present an episodic structure that, once all the pieces come together, will depict the life of a town. What is more, these episodes have no firm continuity, as the narrative flow is interrupted by set pieces such as Professor Willard's geography lecture or the Stage Manager interrupting the wedding ceremony to go back in time to the start of the couple's romance.

4.2.1 Wilder's manipulation of time

George Kernodle and Portia Kernodle, in their *Invitation to the Theatre*, comment on the present-day Western stage in its relation to Chinese theatre: "Authors write monologues and direct addresses to the audience. Scenery is changed, often in full light, before the eyes of the audience; the use of masks, symbolic properties, and fragments of settings is acceptable to the theatregoers. Time and space can be made completely flexible." (Kernodle, 1978: 162) Most of these features, which began to be reflected in early twentieth-century expressionist and surrealist plays and seem commonplace nowadays, remind us of Chinese dramatic techniques.

In terms of theatrical production, the theatre and world analogy has a direct impact on the stage picture, especially the shift of location and the passing of time. On a realistic stage where the "three unities" are observed, everything is relatively static. Space is mostly confined to a single location and time moves linearly. As the world represented on the Chinese stage is constantly changing, the location and time depicted on it are anything but stagnant. On such a stage, time can jump back and forth and location can shift according to the demands of the plot and the needs of emotional revelation. A brief pause between scenes may indicate a lapse of years, while a small space between two characters may represent a distance of a thousand miles. Time and space on the Chinese stage acquire a highly imaginative quality and become the dramatist's means to break through the stage's physical limitations and reach the essence of this world. Guided by

this theatre and world analogy, the theatrical performance cannot be restricted to a mimetic presentation of actual life. Therefore, the free manipulation of time is one of the elements of Beijing opera: time can be condensed, slipped, reversed, or split. This is made possible because time (like scenery) is set with words, and it changes only within the consciousness of the audience.

On account of the traditional Chinese theatre's being characterized by its free spatial and temporal structures (Chen Jingsong, 1997: 39), we can say *Our Town* is a play influenced by the anti-illusionistic conventions of the Asian theatre: a narrator, the Stage Manager, who disrupts the illusion of present-tense reality and the rule of sentiment onstage; "No curtain. No scenery" (5), no props to speak of; characters who address the audience (like Professor Willard and Editor Webb) and acknowledge the existence of the Stage Manager; an episodic dramatic form stretching over twelve years (Act I takes place in 1901, Act II in 1904, and Act III in 1913) that allows for flashbacks (the courtship of George and Emily in Act II, Emily's twelfth birthday in Act III) and flash-forwards (the Stage Manager's foretelling, in Act I, of the invention of the automobile and the deaths of Dr. Gibbs, Mrs. Gibbs, and Joe Crowell).

In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager sets the time, and he manipulates it freely. He exists in the audience time, in the time of right now, and introduces the play: "This play is called '*Our Town.*'" (5). Then he slips back into the past immediately, sets the time in Grover's Corners, and starts to describe the town in the present tense: "The day is May 7, 1901... This is our doctor's house" (5). Time is reversed as the past comes after the present and the past becomes "now" on the stage. However, time is not simply reversed and the past made to come after the present; the past and the present intermingle, or rather, co-exist throughout the play. While the daily life in Grover's Corners continues, Mr. Webb is called out from Grover's Corners time to give a political and social report to the audience. He even converses with the audience, and then slips back into the town again. The Stage Manager himself leaps back and forth in time: he exists in the audience time, but he easily assumes the roles of the druggist and the minister in Grover's Corners time, and he talks to the dead in Act Three.

The flashbacks, often seen in Beijing opera, further intermingle all time. In Act Two, while George and Emily prepare for their wedding (Grover's Corners time, that is the past from audience time), the flashback brings a further past event, the beginning of their

love, to the "now" on stage, with the Stage Manager (audience time) assuming a role in it. In Act Three, the dead Emily (Grover's Corners time) talks with the Stage Manager (audience time), and the flashback enables her to both relive her twelfth birthday (a further past) and observe herself living (Grover's Corners time) at the same time. The first flashback of the lovers does not go beyond the time span of the play, 1901-1913, however, the second flashback of Emily's return to her birthday in 1889 goes back in time beyond the very beginning of the play. Time is reversed, skipped, rearranged, and intermingled. It almost becomes an "abolition of time." (Cowley, 1956: 51)

The announcement of George and Emily's forthcoming wedding leads to a flashback to their courtship, throughout which we already know the outcome. After the flash-forward to the wedding itself, layerings move backward and forward in time as characters discuss previous marriages and the Stage Manager prophesies about the likely outcome. In Emily's revisiting scene at the end of Act III, at least six different planes of experience radiate in one performance space. This astonishing arrangement of the theatre creates a comprehensive simultaneity that cannot be reproduced on screen or in other media.

The future presented in the play, however, is not limited to the future of Grover's Corners time but stretches towards the future of audience time. The Stage Manager says that he will put a copy of *Our Town* in the cornerstone of the new bank in Grover's Corners "for people to dig up ... a thousand years from now."(24) Time stretches towards the future endlessly, and it also stretches towards the past, as the Stage Manager mentions of past civilizations:

> Babylon once had two million people in it, and all we know about'em is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts . . . and contracts for the sale of slaves. Yet every night all those families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney, — same as here. And even in Greece and Rome . . . (24)

Every human life is a part of the vast stretches of history. It is unique but it is repetitive and universal.

Wilder's preoccupation with human life in connection with time was developed through his study of archaeology at the American Academy in Rome, and it became one the main ideas in his plays:

> One of those ideas is this: an unresting preoccupation with the surprise of the gulf between each tiny occasion of the daily life and the vast stretches of time and place in which every individual plays his role. By that I mean the absurdity of any single person's claim to the importance of his saying, "I love!" "I suffer!" when one thinks of the background of the billions who have lived and died, who are living and dying, and presumably will live and die. (Coy, 74-75.)

However, even though Wilder realizes that his joy or his grief is "but 'one' in the ocean of human life," (Wilder, 1957: 14) nevertheless it has its reality, and he sees himself "making an effort to find the dignity in the trivial of [his] daily life . . . and the validity of each individual's emotion." (Coy, 76) Wilder's affirmation of life—his belief in the preciousness of the smallest events in life—is expressed in Act Three through Emily's final farewell to the earth:

> Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners ... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking ... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? — every, every minute? (78)

The Stage Manager answers: "No. Pause. The saints and poets, maybe — they do some." (78). And, of course, Wilder, the playwright does, who believes that "the pure event, an action involving human beings, is more arresting than any comment that can be made upon it." (Goldstone, 1958: 99)

Though made up of a series of what might seem like set pieces, the disparate acts are tied together with various common threads, including the singing of the same hymn, "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds," in each act. Each act, however, has an explicit function. Act One depicts the daily life of Grover's Corners. The emphasis is on social rather than individual relationships—we are learning here about the nature of a community, a town, rather than single people. In act Two, we gain closer focus on Emily and George as representatives of their typical families and, in a sense, representatives of humankind's "urge to merge." As Mrs. Gibbs declares, "People are meant to go through life two by two. Tain't natural to be lonesome." These are the two whose actions (marriage and children) will ensure the continuity of the town. We get a little closer to George and Emily through Wilder's affecting descriptions of their courtship, but they are really never

more than representatives, and our emotional involvement is more for the abstract concept than the particular ideal. George and Emily symbolize youth and all its promise.

In Act Two, Wilder, through the Stage Manager, manipulates time so that the audience can not only participate in the wedding of George and Emily, but also see how and when this romance began in earnest. "I'm awfully interested in how big things like that begin"(43), the Stage Manager declares. Throughout this act we are reminded of the vast continuum not only of human existence, but of the residents of Grover's Corners. In three years since Act One, the sun has "come up over a thousand times." The mountain has eroded ever so slightly and "millions of gallons of water [have gone] by the mill." Babies aren't babies any longer, and some inhabitants have grown older. Other residents have fallen in love. It is against this vast backdrop that Morgan's drugstore becomes the focal point for the moment when George declares his affection for Emily in the halting shy way that countless others have attempted to express their deepest feelings.

The third act transports us to an even more universal plane as we go through death to contemplate eternity and are awarded with the knowledge that it is the tiniest detail of the here and now that makes life worth living, whatever its precariousness. Although the focus seems to be on Emily, there is a whole community of the dead backing her up and sharing her insight, so that it remains more representative than specific. Despite a stage populated by the dead, what we are made to realize is that life in the collective persists, whatever its individual brevity or sadness, and that, Wilder insists, is the cause for celebration.

4.2.2 The allegorical cycle

The structure of the play combines both the linear and the cyclical patterns: the birth, the marriage, and the death presented through the three acts are unique events for the individual (linear pattern), but are "universal repetitive rituals for the community (cyclical pattern)" (Porter, 1969: 214-224).

The combination of the linear and the cyclical patterns can be seen in the compilation of Beijing opera. In Beijing Opera, two or even more dramatic scenes can occur simultaneously on stage. If an actor moves in a single circle on stage, it may indicate that he has moved from one place to another, or even that he has traveled thousands of miles away. This theatrical device of swift change of place, as well as two or more scenes on one stage strengthens the dramatic effects through contrast and

intensifies the dramatic conflicts in the play. Spatial flexibility also brings about the density of time on stage. Beijing Opera does not require that space and time on stage should agree with space and time in real life. It demands, however, that they must meet the need to unfold the plot, to develop the dramatic conflicts, and to portray the characters of the play. Anything unnecessary to the fulfillment of this demand will be condensed, simplified, or even cancelled.

In *Our Town*, Wilder is trying to make the audience conscious of time and the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. The interruptions by the Stage Manager and the subsequent jumps in time reflect one of the things Emily comes to realize: "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another" (77). Similarly, the audience's disorientation caused by the jumps in time is a theatrical means of stimulating an epiphany in the audience: they suddenly realize that a lot of time has passed—whether a few hours (as in Act One) or a few years (Act Two) or many years (Act Three) — and perhaps this helps them share in Emily's realization.

The structure of *Our Town* forms a clearly visible cycle. It begins with the act entitled "Daily Life," where the first conversation tells of "some twins born over in Polish Town" (8). The birth motif having been emphasized five times (7, 8, 9, 10, 15), the play then proceeds to show the daily life of the town, represented by the Gibbs and the Webbs: children getting up, having breakfast, going to school, returning home, and doing homework while the parents guide and provide for their natural growth. With its serene mood, Act I sets the tone of praising life for the entire play. In the second act, "Love and Marriage," the Stage Manager takes some time commenting on the passing of time and on nature's "pushing and contriving" (34), while the audience is also presented with characters as they grow up and fall in love, followed by a ritualistic wedding ceremony. Here we see life prospering in love and marriage, but more notably, in growth. In Act III, Emily dies giving birth to her second child and subsequently relives her twelfth birthday. Her firstborn son, however, lives and he loves "spending the day" at Mr. and Mrs. Carter's (56), which signifies the continuity of life and the growth nurtured by the community in the town. Wilder does not explicitly tell us the name of this act. However, it might be appropriately called "Death and Rebirth." After she dies, Emily is physically born to life again on her twelfth birthday; and in death, Emily realizes the value of life, achieving spiritual rebirth both for herself and for the group-mind of the audience.

At the beginning of the play, the Stage Manager mentioned the death of Mrs. Gibbs, but it was simply a statement of fact. Now, to learn that Mrs. Gibbs has died and is buried in the cemetery along with Wally Webb and Mrs. Soames and Simon Stimson strikes a responsive chord. These are no longer just names; the audience has met them and the characters they represent have become real. Death becomes less of an abstraction and more a part of the universal experience. Everyone—the characters in the play, the author, the audience, the reader, the critic—is going to die. That is part of what it means to be human, and one of the two events that all humans share no matter what their station, background, or ability.

The dead in the Grover's Corners cemetery are waiting, says the Stage Manager, for the earth part of them to be burned away and for the "eternal part in them to come out clear." (34) It is this idea that the dead hardly remember what it was like to be alive that Wilder seeks to emphasize here. It is this movement toward the "eternal" rather than an emptiness or void that Emily joins but is not yet ready to accept. When she realizes that she can return to earth to relive her life, she persists in making it happen, even though the dead and the Stage Manager strongly advise against it.

It is when Emily relives her twelfth birthday (her happiest memory) that she comes to realize that the living don't appreciate being alive. "They're sort of shut up in little boxes," (37) she says. With her knowledge of past, present, and future time, she becomes overwhelmed at the realization that the tiniest moments of everyday life are full of the essence of being alive. "Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you." (41)

As the Stage Manager draws a black curtain across the scene, the cycle is complete. The play began at daybreak and ends at night. It began with birth and ends with death. It began with the particulars of daily life and ends with eternity.

We can conclude that the play is an allegory of life structured over three days. Wilder begins the play at the crack of dawn, when the town is waking up, and concludes the play with the dead in the cemetery. The repetition of the sun's cycle parallels the life cycle, with one important distinction. The human lifespan is not as long as the sun's. And unlike a sun, when a person dies, he does not rise again. There is hope, however, in the human life cycle: reproduction. Significantly, Emily dies while giving birth to her second child. Although it is unclear whether her baby lived, we do know she has at least one child to survive her and continue the circle of life.

4.3 The repetition of words

The repetition of the words "hundreds" and "thousands" is also often seen in a Beijing Opera. It underscores the vast stretches of time and space, and gives human experience and emotion universal significance. Wilder aims at this universal significance, however, he also attempts to present the vast range of time and space in which each individual plays his role. Grover's Corners as Wilder says, is presented as if it is seen "at ever greater distances through a telescope." (Coy, 75)

Thornton Wilder points out in the preface to a 1957 collection that includes *Our Town* that "the recurrent words in this play (few have noticed it) are 'hundreds,' 'thousands,' and 'millions.'" How can people comprehend such vast numbers? Wilder maintains that they do not—"each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner." The only way to make sense, then, of this "crazy world" is to look at those things that are real and important, those that happen on the inside. The action on the stage is not important in and of themselves; what becomes important, then, is how the individual responds to them. And, because the actions of the play are part of the overall human experience, the response becomes one of connectedness and not alienation.

The constant repetition of the words "hundreds" and "thousands," and the references to nature makes Grover's Corners locate in "the omnispatial, omnitemporal 'now' and 'everywhere' of the eternal mind," (Porter, 1969: 213) and present the town as an archetypal community. They enable Wilder to raise the action "from the specific to the general," (Wilder, 1941: 113) and to address the play to the "group mind". (Wilder, 1941: 106) They emphasize universality, and at the same time, they underscore the horrifying vast stretches of time and space in which an individual lives his/her life. And it is through these elements that Wilder attempts to relate the unique to the universal, and to find a value for the smallest events in the daily life of the individual against the boundless dimensions of time and space. Wilder says in his speech:

> Now, how would we "present" any individual, or ourselves — ourselves in this room — existing and somehow related to totality? How do we do it in such a way that we would be freed a little from the terror of shrinking to nullity? First we would seek for our place in myths. Myths are the dreaming soul of the race, telling its story. (Wilder, 1957: 15)

5. Conclusion

The success of Wilder's *Our Town* has greatly encouraged western playwrights and producers to use more flexible, imaginative, and anti-illusionistic staging, with open platforms, little or no scenery, suggestive pieces, and narrators to interrupt the actor or bring him in, talk to the audience in almost any time and space that the audience can be persuaded to imagine. Wilder makes use of Beijing Opera devices not so much to break the illusion of reality as to enhance it—to create something timeless and universal on the stage, by still maintaining the illusion on the stage, letting the uniqueness of the format serve as a way to strengthen the timelessness and universality.

In fact, everything in *Our Town* is representative or symbolic of something else; it is an allegory. Thornton Wilder described *Our Town* as an "allegorical representation of all life." (Coy, 16) Set in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, and completely devoid of any real stage props, the play relies upon the audience's imagination to generate a picture of life in the rural New England town. The residents of Grover's Corners represent all human beings in all towns or cities all over the world. Although the year is explicitly stated as 1901, it could be any year over time, from 476 A.D. to 2003 A.D. The characters are written with not so many individual character traits because they are merely to represent girl, boy, mother, father, no more beyond that. For example, George likes baseball and isn't very good in school. He could be any American boy in the early twentieth century. Emily likes school and worries about her appearance. She could be half of the American teenage girl population of this year. Each character serves as a portrait of a stereotype: the busybody, the typical housewife, the local farmer, the athlete, the professor, and others are all included and represented by different characters.

By presenting *Our Town* as an allegory, Wilder is teaching us to look beyond the plot into our own lives and to examine our own convictions and beliefs about love and death. For elevating his theme, Wilder in *Our Town* uses artistic techniques which embody many elements of Beijing opera. There is no scenery and few basic props. The characters are presented as types, and they often act in mimes. Time is not restricted to the conventional flow of time but is scrambled and liberated, and there is no plot in the conventional sense of action. The Stage Manager acts as a representative of the audience and as an artist who manipulates the play. The play has strong ritual characteristics, and

the structure embodies both linear and cyclical patterns.

The elements of Beijing opera mythicize the small town and enable Wilder to search for the individual's relation to this "totality". The events in the life of an individual are unique and linear in pattern, but for the community, the same events are universal rituals and cyclical in pattern. The life of an individual is but a spot in human history, but is nevertheless a part of the vast stretches of history. The unique is a part of the universal.

> This ritual, non-realistic technique tries to express the complex of attitudes that comprise the myth in its own terms, that is, as ideal interpretations of experience by the community. *Our Town* is a play that uses this technique, which expresses an American myth — the ideal of equality, democracy and meaningful daily life for the common man that emanates from a specifically American complex of attitudes — in a ritual mode. (Porter, 1969: 202)

Whether Wilder was aware of the elements of Beijing opera in *Our Town* or not, these elements, which are completely free from the limitations of realism, and which have strong ritual characteristics as well as the other worldliness, enable the playwright to create a theatrical image larger than life.

At least from the Chinese symbolism and make-believe on the stage, Wilder realized the fundamental conditions of drama—that is, that the theatre is an art which reposes upon the work of many collaborators; it is addressed to a group mind based on a pretense, its very nature calls out a multiplication of pretenses, and its action takes place in a perpetually present time. The conventionalized performance of Chinese acting, in spite of its obvious theatricality, convinced him that convention was very important in the interaction between actors and the audience, that it was an agreed-upon falsehood, a permitted lie to provoke collaborative activity of the spectator's imagination and raise the action from the specific to the general. All the absorption and application of Beijing Opera elements in *Our Town* by wilder aim to break the monopoly of realism theater, to create new modes to express philosophical meaning and then elevate the true sense of life.

Wilder's plays indeed offer readers a general yet fascinating beauty and opportunity to discover his potentiality at work and the workings of his unique and innovative theatricality inherited from the classical, traditional, and even cross-cultural sources. (Lifton, 1995:169) Never being restrained by conventional modes of the theatre, Wilder

develops a singular theatrical world and a skillful and impressive art of his own. These qualities make him as one of the most popular playwrights of the twentieth century theatre and establish his boundary-breaking characteristic with a higher and broader horizon that his plays tend to display.

Wilder has experienced a multi-leveled scope in life and studied widely for mastery in art. In addition to his dramatic productions, he wrote numerous articles on other American writers and theirs works, too. Drawn from various types and different origins of literary and philosophical sources, Wilder's plays eventually deserve their worldwide reputation and position in the realm of modern drama. In fact, not only his universal ideas, but also the innovative dramatic techniques have penetrated in Wilder's plays and make them more comprehensive and multiform. The diversity of his theatrical influence has spread the American theatre and the world through its popular appeal of the plays.

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