

The Thornton Wilder Society Monthly Email: February

Hello, Fellow Thornton Wilder Society Members!

This month we talked to the writers of *Our New Town*, a new musical that revolves around a production of *Our Town*. It's always wonderful to meet other Wilder fans, especially fans who are drawing inspiration from Wilder in their own work. And for fans of our Zoom reading series, please stay tuned! The next reading for March/April will be announced soon.

As always, we'd love to hear from more of our members! All submissions and thoughts/questions about the monthly emails themselves can be sent to thorntonwildersociety@gmail.com. And if you are on Facebook, make sure you like and follow the [Thornton Wilder Society Facebook page \(@thorntonwildersociety\)](#) for more timely announcements and fun Thornton Wilder info, media, and discussion.

Need to renew your membership? Click [here](#).

Shoshana Greenberg
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 (Membership Committee)



Karen O'Donnell Photography

An Interview with the Writers of *Our New Town*

Our Town inspires writers in many ways. Librettists Gabriel Dean and Jessie Dean and composer David Dabbon have written the new musical *Our New Town*, which takes place when the surviving cast members of the university production of *Our Town* put together an unauthorized show as a way to unite after the deadliest shooting on a college campus in U.S. history. *Our New Town* premiered at Wagner College in 2019 and was recently featured in New York Theatre Barn's New Work Series. Gabriel, Jessie, and David answered some questions about the musical and their love of Wilder (Gabriel and Jessie even named their child after him!).

When and how did you first discover Thornton Wilder?

DD: I am one of those rare breeds of people that somehow never got the honor of growing up with *Our Town* in my life. We never did it while I was in middle school or high school. Once, I tried to see a revival of it in the West Village where they had one ticket left. My friend and I played rock, paper, scissors for that last ticket...she loved the show. It wasn't until we were working on *Our New Town* that I read *Our Town*. I knew it was an important piece to Gabe and Jessie, and I was excited to learn and understand the power and beauty of it.

JD: I read *Our Town* in high school. I would sometimes "skip" class (with permission from the teacher) and hang out in the library and read. It wasn't a play that stuck with me. I thought it was boring. I encountered it again in graduate school when we had to read it as part of an assignment and I remember weeping in my apartment when Emily asked the Stage Manager if anyone realized life as they lived it every minute

(I'm paraphrasing here) and the Stage Manager responded that the saints and poets do, maybe. Thornton Wilder's line changed the way that I wanted to live my life. I hoped I'd always live on the side of the saints and poets.

GJD: I guess I'm the odd one out here. I discovered Wilder in high school when we read *Our Town* as part of an American Literature class and I immediately loved it. I grew up in a rural town and could see a lot of my own family in the characters and I think I saw a bit of my own life in the budding love between George and Emily. As a sophomore in high school, I was a hopeless romantic who fancied himself a poet (no one will ever read those poems) and I was feeling those incredible highs and lows of teenage love. Later in graduate school, I rekindled my fascination with Wilder and read everything I could get my hands on. His huge heart and humanity just pulses in every word. He inspires me to realize the best of my own humanity each time I read him. Jess and I love him so that we named our son after him. Our Wilder is six and knows he was named after a writer, but that's about it so far. I'm excited to share Thornton Wilder with our son when he's older.

What led you to write this musical, *Our New Town*?

GJD & JD: When our Wilder was about one, the mass shooting in Roseburg, Oregon at Umpqua College happened. We read in the New York Times about how parents were asked to wait in the town fairgrounds for news about their kids. Honestly, like most people, we had become numb to this kind of news. But that image of parents waiting at the fairgrounds shocked us into thinking not only about the way we talk about victims and survivors of mass shootings, but how this could very well affect us personally at some point. We were also jolted by the paradox of this waiting space--a fairgrounds, which was recently home to cotton candy and family fun was now the location of this prolonged, silent, anxiety-filled waiting. We started to talk about how we would prepare Wilder for the potential of mass shootings. We were frankly terrified of sending him to school at all. We wondered how these shootings--one after another after another-- was affecting the psyche of an entire generation. We had so many questions and our outrage kept growing. We knew we should invest time and space and creative energy to investigate and write about it. And as musicians, we had the instinct that music, a language that gets beyond politics, should somehow be involved. And so we reached out to our friend and longtime collaborator, David.

How would you describe how *Our Town* is part of or works within this musical--is it an adaptation, inspired by, etc.?

GJD: In *Our New Town*, the deadliest shooting on a college campus in U.S. history has just occurred and it happened in a theatre during a production of *Our Town*. The conceit of our show is that the surviving cast members have put together an unauthorized theatre event as a way to heal the community and reclaim their corrupted theatre space. So, in a sense, *Our Town* is a backdrop in our story. But it goes deeper than that. *Our Town's* theme of celebrating life in spite of the inevitable eventuality of death takes on new meaning in the age of mass shootings. I don't

believe that *Our Town* is this nostalgic piece of Americana. Wilder wrestles in his quietly intense way with themes of globalization and war within the play. But, when the idea occurred to me that the play in this fictional world should be *Our Town*, I felt that the insertion of a mass shooting into the world of Grover's Corners was a powerful and modernly resonant juxtaposition. I began to wonder what Wilder would be writing on the subject if he had been a playwright living in our world now. How would Grover's Corners be corrupted by mass shootings? Our musical is in conversation with Wilder's distinctly American metatheatricality that was invented in *Our Town*. In my view, *Our Town* is the prototype for immersive theatre. It succeeds so well in removing the fourth wall and igniting the empathy and imagination of its audience. Experiencing it in the theatre is almost holy. The theatricality demands full participation. You become a citizen of Grover's Corners. We wanted the same to be true for the audience experiencing *Our New Town*. They become citizens of this community dealing with an incredibly unfair tragedy.

**Has writing this musical led you to understand the play *Our Town* differently?
Has *Our Town* led you to understand the musical's subject matter of mass shootings differently?**

JD: For me, *Our Town*'s theme of community and the way the story elevates and spiritualizes the ordinary acts of living is incredibly profound. Like Gabriel was saying above, in writing *Our New Town* we wanted to be in conversation with that idea from the perspective of a community that is trying to heal. Through our writing, I've wrestled with what violence does to an idyllic community and to a space and how we memorialize tragedy.

GJD: Living in our sort of reimagined version of Grover's Corners has made me appreciate Wilder's genius on new levels. His incredible ability to build a world in the imagination of the audience with nothing but words, his direct and precise poetry that's so naked and real it's power is undeniable, his courage to transcend the boundary of life and death in his work. And in terms of how Wilder has made me think about mass shootings...I think that the only way we can actually move toward sensible gun control in the U.S. is for people to experience what it means to lose someone at the hands of these inhumane laws. I don't wish that on anyone. But a Wilderian kind of theatrical experience has the power to let audiences experience that in a safe way. That's ultimately what we want the musical to do: put the audience in the seats of people who died, to truly feel what they can tune out when they hear about yet another shooting on CNN. And try to do it gently, humanely, respectfully, and at times, merrily...like Wilder.

DD: A major component to me that keeps popping up in my mind is the actual storytelling element in *Our Town*. Everything from the simplicity of set and props to dialogue and all the relationships on the page. One of the themes from *Our Town* that we have put into *Our New Town* is slowing down. For example, slowing down on all accounts of time, taking things in, listening, and not judging quickly. These are things that are ideal for me in my life and I hope I can continue to be in control of

while staying aware and in the moment.

Tell us more about your backgrounds with writing and musicals.

JD: This was the first musical I've written and I'm so glad I had the opportunity to work with such amazing collaborators. I grew up playing piano, singing in church choir, school choir, and performing in all my high school musicals, and professionally after college and grad school. But this was the first time I was asked to combine my love of research, writing, and music to create something that allowed me to voice my long-held fears.

DD: Growing up, we had a piano in my house because my sister, Lisa, was taking piano lessons. My mom noticed that I would just sit down at the piano and play things on my own. At that time, she signed me up for lessons. However, I wouldn't practice. I would just sit down and go ahead and play and write my own music. After 2-3 months, my mom stopped my lessons because I wouldn't practice the exercises my teacher gave me. But, I still kept writing for the years after that. I wrote my first full length musical at the age of 13. I didn't know what I was doing, but I went for it. I've been very fortunate as I've gotten older to have written many shows with many incredible collaborators. Gabe and I have written several musical works together. We are currently developing a musical commissioned by Geva Theatre Center in Rochester, NY.

GJD: I grew up singing and performing in my dad's gospel band and then later doing every musical at my high school and eventually going to NYU to study musical theatre as a performer. I didn't finish that course of study though. I realized, thankfully early, that I didn't want to just be an actor. I wanted to write. I had been secretly writing poems and stories for years. So, I left NYU and went to a small, rigorous liberal arts school, Oglethorpe University, where I could still do theatre while pursuing a degree in English and Creative Writing. I met Jess there, my art-partner, partner in life and mother of my children, and she has endlessly encouraged me to keep writing. Now it's my vocation. I write plays, screenplays, and book/lyrics for musicals (most of those with David). I always threaten to write a novel. Maybe someday. We can't all be as diversely prolific as Wilder after all!





