

Our Town Study Guide



AMERICAN REPERTORY BALLET
PRINCETON BALLET SCHOOL



Dear Educator,

Thank you for recognizing the importance of arts education in your students' development. ARB's Access and Enrichment mission is to expose New Jersey communities to the art form of dance, as active participants and informed observers, and to develop life-long dance enthusiasts. By exposing your students to dance you are enhancing their critical thinking abilities and improving their capacity for learning in other disciplines. And, most importantly, you expose them to the inherent value of art.

All of ARB's programs from the performance to the pre and post show activities meet the New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards and the Visual Performing Arts Standards. Our package also includes suggestions for integrating our performance with multiple curriculum standards for greater impact and sustainability.

I hope that you find this guide useful, and would love to hear from you. Let me know how you used this guide, what you might want in future revisions, or how much your students loved the show!

Sincerely,

David Wes Sadowsky
Director of Educational Programming
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About American Repertory Ballet

American Repertory Ballet's mission is to bring the joy, beauty, artistry and discipline of classical and contemporary dance to New Jersey and nationwide audiences through public performances displaying the ballets from the 19th and 20th Century alongside contemporary artists in the field.

The organization is comprised of:

American Repertory Ballet, the preeminent professional classical and contemporary ballet company in the state

Princeton Ballet School, one of the largest and most respected non-profit dance schools in the nation

ARB's **Access and Enrichment** initiatives, including the long-running and acclaimed DANCE POWER program and the new On Pointe series



The Story

Our Town starts with the introduction of the characters. The entrance of Mr. Webb, dragging a ladder on his back, shows the hardships of life. As the music starts, he lifts the ladder into place and his strong movements and gestures show his personal strength and perseverance. Mrs. Webb enters next, with a strong sense of purpose to her movements. She finds her way to her husband and together they evoke a sense of American fortitude. Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs enter and cross the stage. They falter and the Webb's come to their aid, exhibiting a feeling of neighborliness and community. The stage starts to fill with the characters all exhibiting a strong community attitude and a very determined focus.

All of the dancers freeze in poses that depict an aspect of their character. It is Emily, the main focus of the story who, acting as the Narrator, moves amongst the cast setting the story in motion. As we continue, each character is introduced along with their function in the story and their relationship to Emily.

At its heart this is the story of relationships in a small town – the individual expectations of each character, of their own lives and each other's – how one acts in public and private and how the community lives together.

As our story is told the relations of the characters unfolds – the drama of life from the ordinary - a choir practice, to a budding young relationship (George and Emily) the relationships of parents and children, brothers and sister and friends of all ages. Great hopes for extraordinary accomplishments are dreamt of but unrealized and the reality is too much to bear (Mr. Stimson)

The story matures to the resolution of love and marriage as the stories finds its earthly conclusion. As lives come to a end, we are confronted with the memories of those lives. The story culminates with Emily's struggle to come to accept her new existence and is filled with both memories and realization.



Facts About This Show

Thornton Wilder was born on April 17th, 1918 in Madison, Wisconsin and was educated at Yale and Princeton. Mr. Wilder won three Pulitzer Prizes: In 1928 for a novel called *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, in 1938 for the play *Our Town* and in 1943 for the play *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Our Town the play is a classic tale of love, loss and life. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* was first staged at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, N.J., in January 1938. McCarter Theatre was also the setting for ARB's premiere of *Our Town*; the ballet by Phillip Jerry. In an otherwise negative review, *Variety* remarked, "It probably represents an all-time high in experimental theatre." The play broke from tradition as it did not have a realistic set as most popular plays of that time. There were ladders and some chairs but the cast mimed all of the props. When it moved to Henry Miller's Theatre in New York a month later, Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*, "*Our Town* has escaped from the formal barrier of modern theatre...Under the leisurely monotone of the production there is a fragment of the immortal truth."

Phillip Jerry created *Our Town* the ballet. The ballet remains faithful to the play while making a few changes. The telling of the ballet is set around Emily and she doubles as the Narrator, which is a separate character in the play. Mr. Jerry also introduces girlfriends for Emily to fill out the story line.

Mr. Jerry conveyed the heart of the story using simple expressive movements. The ballet is told through human emotions and is reliant on the dancer's ability to express themselves both through movement and acting. The staging is extremely minimal. Two ladders represent the houses and six chairs represent the graves.

Mr. Jerry began working on the ballet with Fort Wayne Ballet and then continued to work on it with other small companies. Most of the dancers were not professionals. So, when he became Ballet Master of ARB and was given the opportunity to finish and stage it on ARB, he was thrilled to work with a professional cast.

An extremely gifted performing talent, Phillip Jerry spent 15 years as a principal with the Joffrey Ballet. He performed a variety of roles and was most noted as a gifted actor and partner. After retiring from ballet, Mr. Jerry returned to college at Princeton University and graduated with an art history degree. While at Princeton, he worked as Ballet Master for American Repertory Ballet. It was during this time that Mr. Jerry reworked and staged *Our Town*.



The town mourns the loss of Emily. Photo: George Jones

Full cast photo. Photo: George Jones



Emily and George in love. Photo: George Jones

Emily enjoying herself. Photo: Leighton Chen



The History of Ballet:

The story of ballet begins nearly five hundred years ago, in the elaborate dances the de Medici family would put on in the vast palace just off the Piazza del Signoria in Florence, Italy. When Catherine de Medici married Henri IV, the King of France, in the 1500's she brought a taste for these splendid entertainments with her. The French court, with its love of pomp and ostentation, combined with a fascination for complex rules of etiquette, soon enlarged the Italian court dances into opulent pageants of glittering brilliance. In the 17th century, the very king himself, Louis XIV, who prided himself on his technical mastery of dance, invented new steps, and left as his legacy, the French names that ballet dancers use to this day.

In the late 18th century, the French choreographer Noverre moved away from the rigidly formal court *masques* and introduced the *ballet d'action*, in which plot and emotion became essential to the movement. This turn away from the Age of Reason's celebration of the cerebral led to the emergence of the Romantic Era in the first few decades of the 19th century. The ballets of this time were dark, melancholic and obsessed with the supernatural: *Giselle*, with its vengeful ghosts of jilted maidens, and *Robert le Diable*, with its equally eerie flock of mysterious nuns, are typical ballets of the movement. Abetting the portrayal of weirdly ephemeral beings was the emergence at this time of the *pointe* shoe, a rigid confection of silk and dried hardened glue that paradoxically enabled female dancers to appear more vaporous and other-worldly than ever.

Accompanying the growing strength of European imperial powers in the second half of the 19th century came a similar development in ballet, nowhere more visibly than Czarist

Russia. With the might of a huge, empire-supported school behind it, the Russian ballet soon became the jewel of the continents. The fiendishly difficult steps that Marius Petipa created for his masterpieces such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Nutcracker* demanded to be seen; the long flowing tulle dress of the Romantic movement was soon discarded for the short, stiff classical tutu enabling the audience to better see the steps.

The early 20th century saw the emergence of modernism in art, architecture, and music; in many ways, dance led the way. Americans Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan, and especially Martha Graham, epitomized the modernists' desire to discard form without meaning. These women jettisoned the *pointe* shoe, finding it an artificial and cumbersome restriction. At the same time, however, Russian émigré George Balanchine was developing his vision of ballet in which form was the meaning. George Balanchine's neoclassicism stripped the ornamentation from Petipa's style, and revealed in its essence: sheer movement.

Art and the vagaries of style continue to change. Choreographers continue to explore all possibilities of the way the human body can move. The boundaries separating ballet, modern dance, and jazz have more fluid, offering today's choreographer an expanded vocabulary from which to build a dance. Dance, like language, is constantly evolving, absorbing influences from other continents, other cultures, other centuries: more than any spoken tongue, dance remains the universal language.

- Philip Jerry

Ballet Terminology:

ADAGIO (ah-dah-zhee-oh) – slow and sustained movements

ALLEGRO (ah-lay-groh) – fast movements, typically jumps

ARABESQUE (ah-rah-besk) – one leg supporting the other at a right angle with the other leg in the air behind the body

ATTITUDE (ah-tee-tood) – similar to *arabesque*, except the knee of the raised leg is bent



Attitude | Photo by George Jones

BATTEMENT (baht-mah) – a beating action of the leg

CHAÎNÉS (sheh-nay) – a series of rapid turns
CHANGEMENT (shanzh-mah) – a change of feet, jumping steps in which dancers change the placement of feet in the air

CHASSÉ (shah-say) – a slide, where one foot

chases the other

CHOREOGRAPHER – the person who creates, or composes, dance

CORPS – the supporting group of dancers

DEMI-PLIÉ (deh-me plee-ay) – half bending of the knees



Fouetté | Photo by Valerie Ford

FOUETTÉ (fweh-tey) – a whipping movement

GLISSADE (glee-sahd) – a gliding step from one side to another with the supporting foot following the working foot

JETÉ (zheh-tay) – a

throwing step as a light jump to alternate

feet

PAS DE DEUX (pah duh duh) – a duet

PIQUÉ (pee-kay) – “pricking;” stepping directly on pointe of the working foot, a sharp step like a pricking

PIROUETTE (peer-a-wet) – a complete turn of the body

PLIÉ (plee-ay) – a bending of the knees

PRINCIPAL – The lead dancer

RELEVÉ (reh-leh-vay) – a raising of the body on pointe or demi-pointe

ROND DE JAMBE (rawn deh zhamb) – circular movement of the leg performed at the barre

TUTU – a ballet skirt made of many layers of net



Behavior at a live performance is important to the experience of the show for all audience members. Here are some tips to getting the most out of your experience as a polite audience:

BE PREPARED

Please arrive at the theatre at least 30 minutes before the show. Make sure your cell phones are off – looking at silent text messages is still distracting in a dark theatre. Finish all food and drinks, as they will not be allowed inside. Visit the restroom in advance as intermission could be far away.

BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR

Remain seated at all times during the performance. If you must leave at anytime during the show, please wait for a proper break in the show or intermission. Refrain from using cameras and camcorders as it is harmful and distracting to the dancers and often forbidden by the theatre. Please limit the amount of perfume or cologne you wear as it can cause respiratory reactions from those around you. There is no talking during a show.

REACT TO SHOW

Appropriate responses to a show include applause, laughter and crying. Verbal calls are NOT appropriate.



This production can be integrated into a number subjects across all grades. Below, we have some examples and how they pertain to individual curriculum standards. Many of these examples can be used and tweaked to meet multiple standards. Each activity is closely connected with another activity as well as multiple curriculum standards.

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards Visual and Performing Arts (NJCCS)

Visual and Performing Arts (1); Comprehensive Health and Physical Education (2); Social Studies (6)

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS)

RL (Reading: Literature); RI (Reading: Information Text); W (Writing); SL (Speaking and Listening); L (Language)

- Read the History Of The Ballet from this guide (NJCCS 1.2)
- Separate into groups and discuss the experience of the performance (SL.11,12)
- Have students do their own research projects on dance (CCSS W.7,8; SL.4)
- Analyze the impact of the choreographer's choices regarding how he or she developed and related elements of the story into dance including how the dance was structured. (NJCCS 1.1,4) (CCSS RI.9; RL.3,5,6)
- *Our Town* attempts to express a New England town of the early twentieth century and how change is beginning to affect it. Relate industrial growth to the need for social and governmental reforms. (NJCCS 6.1)
- Draw a costume idea for any one of the characters with focus on their mood, their moral and ethical attributes, and colors that portray their emotions. (NJCCS 1.4)
- Working alone or in a group, choreograph a new dance for a specific scene of the book. Have students keep a journal about the process that includes notes on eating habits and the physical ability it takes to dance. Keep balance, breathing, and stretching in mind as well as healthy eating. Keep a journal of your progress. The journal should include healthy eating habits, stretching before choreographing, and any issues during the process. There should be a concluding entry about the overall project and your choice of scene and movement. (NJCCS 1.1; 2.1,2,5) (CCSS W.10)

Are you a teacher? Have you used this performance in your classroom?

Let us know how you have integrated our assembly and we will update the online version of this guide.

Please email us at dsadowsky@arballet.org



American Repertory Ballet's Website has additional resources about this piece:

<http://goo.gl/yV186>

Dancer Michelle de Fremery talks about Our Town:

<http://goo.gl/n30Ws>

Dancer Edward Urwin talks about Our Town:

<http://goo.gl/Jv39g>

Watch Rehearsal Footage:

<http://goo.gl/fSoD7>

