



Our Town at 75:

Its Global, Personal Impact

BY ALVIN ENG

Our Town's 75th Anniversary is an occasion to celebrate Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning play as both a seminal American drama and a timeless, global instrument of teaching and inspiration. In 2011, I had the honor of realizing two *Our Town*-inspired projects in China. On a Fulbright Specialist residency in Theatre/U.S. Studies at City University of Hong Kong, in collaboration with my wife, actress/director Wendy Wasdahl, I co-conceived

and directed "*Our Town: China/USA*." In this residency, CityU students wrote and performed their own short plays in response to *Our Town*, which actually has some Chinese theatrical influence. Concurrently, the U.S. Consulate Guangzhou invited us to conduct workshops and stage a performance of my *Our Town*-inspired memoir monologue, *The Last Emperor of Flushing*, in the capital city of my family's ancestral Guangdong Province.

I first saw *Our Town* on Broadway in 1988. The casting of the late Spalding Gray as Stage Manager



JOEY STOCKS

was the perfect bridge for neophyte theatre practitioners at the time, like myself, raised on raw, “downtown” visual and street art-infused theatre. *Our Town*’s expressionistic stagescape and visceral exploration of community and mortality spoke strongly and directly, merging the best of “downtown and uptown” theatrical values.

In 2006, while preparing to teach a class on *Our Town*, I read *The Letters of Thornton Wilder and Gertrude Stein*. Imagine my surprise, when I read the following passage:

26 October 1937, Wilder writes: “Maybe *Our Town* will go to New York for the Xmas season... And for excitement’s sake, guess who may act the long lanky New England Talkative Stage-Manager in it (who as in the Chinese theatre hovers about the action, picking his teeth, handing the actors their properties and commenting drily to the audience) – Sinclair Lewis”

Wilder spent part of his childhood in Hong Kong and Shanghai when his father was U.S. Counsel General to these cities in the 1910s. In

the 1930s, Wilder saw Peking Opera master, Mei Lanfang, on Broadway just as he was starting to compose *Our Town*. The minimalist staging and performance aesthetic of Peking Opera played heavily on Wilder's creation of the play. Upon learning of this Chinese influence and inspiration, we contacted Fulbright's Hong Kong America Center about how interesting and exciting it would be to have 21st century Chinese students respond to *Our Town*.

Although "*Our Town: China/USA*" was grounded in a 1938 play, we wanted the students to dramatize their current lives. We aimed to call the culminating evening of new plays, "Hong Kong Time Capsule 2011." This title, as well as

our first playwriting exercise, was inspired by a scene from Act I. The Grover's Corners townspeople are creating a time capsule for the cornerstone of a new bank being built downtown. The following objects were placed in their time capsule: The New York Times, the Grover's Corners' Sentinel [newspaper], a Bible, the Constitution of the United States, Shakespeare's plays and the *Our Town* script.

After reading this scene, we also read the Wilder-Stein letters. The students were amazed that this Americana play has some Chinese roots. (In later sessions, they wondered if the couples in the play were a result of arranged marriages.) The students were then assigned to make a list of



objects for a Hong Kong Time Capsule. The size of this Time Capsule was limited only by one's imagination. Most students chose Victoria Harbour. With increasing land reclamation (known as "landfill" in America) making the harbour narrower every year, the students feared that it would soon no longer exist. Samples of Hong Kong water and air were also popular choices. They wanted to see if the quality of either would improve in 1000 years. In response to the current crackdown on street vendors, many students also chose the stalls and carts used by their beloved curbside and alleyway hawkers of Hong Kong foods and goods. The students' answers made it clear that while finance may still be Hong Kong's *raison d'être*, this post-SARS, post-economic crises generation had very different values.

The next step was to transform their "Time Capsule" objects, as well as the spirit of Grover's Corners 1938, into foundations for plays about Hong Kong 2011. In bringing the omniscient Stage Manager back to China, the students transposed him into a Mongkok street magician/trickster. Teenagers Emily & George became Lan Kwai Fong buskers and siblings in the historic Po Leung Kok orphanage. Parental figures Julia & Doc Gibbs and Myrtle & Editor Webb became a well-to-do Central architect, a proud Kowloon street monger of fish balls and even a CityU Professor!

From these colorful character studies, the students started to construct witty English language plays that dug beneath the slick surface of Hong Kong's sophisticated, urbane consumer culture. Of the eighteen students, only two spoke English as their first language and most had no theatrical experience as practitioners. Some had never even seen a play or musical.

Beyond the classroom it was also fascinating to see American and Hong Kong culture co-existing. While conferring with a maintenance

staffer who spoke very little English, we wanted to confirm that an appliance needed to be replaced, not repaired. To confirm that we were all on the same page, the staffer proudly proclaimed, "Yes, change – Obama!"

Such good-natured cultural camaraderie was in stark contrast to chilly relations between the U.S. and China during my 1970s childhood. My parents were illegal immigrants from the southern Chinese village of Toishan. They ran a Chinese Hand Laundry in Flushing, Queens, NYC. Only one of them spoke English. I grew up standing in the shadows of the Cold War.

I started writing *The Last Emperor of Flushing* in 2003, a year after my mother, the non-English speaking parent, passed away. My father had passed away in 1977. The passing of a second parent left me feeling unmoored, adrift between the mortal and the eternal life. Around this time I re-read *Our Town*. This time its impact was profound. To try to rekindle the embers of my parents' and my family's journey from China to Flushing, I set out to write an *Our Town*-inspired minimalist memoir monologue.

As the CityU students went off to complete the writing of their plays and before tech and dress rehearsals began, Wendy and I had a few days to conduct a cultural exchange in nearby Guangzhou. The *The Last Emperor of Flushing* performance was to take place in People's Hall of Xiaozhou Village, a 45-minute drive from downtown Guangzhou, that is fast becoming a cultural and artist center – similar to Beijing's 798 or Shanghai's Moganshan districts.


The landmarked hall is an imposing yellow building that looms just inside the walled village entrance. The red star prominently displayed over the entrance underscores the structure's 1950s Soviet-style architecture. Inside the long, cavernous People's Hall, Consulate staffers told us that it was a "hands-on" meeting hall during

the Cultural Revolution. At the far end of the football field length meeting area, red-carpeted steps lead to a narrow concrete platform some five feet off the ground. I imagine the platform as pedestal for a dais full of Chinese Communist Party officials meting out the party line. As I stood on the platform where I was to perform that night, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine other events that may have happened here. Particularly troublesome were thoughts of the purging of artists and intellectuals during “hands-on” Cultural Revolution meetings. When I opened my eyes, I looked out onto aisles and aisles of paintings and photographs. In 2011, the hall functioned primarily as an art gallery and cultural center.

That evening’s performance of *The Last Emperor of Flushing* was everything I could have hoped for. Every line and word had a newer, deeper meaning in the context of being performed in a city where my ancestors once roamed this Earth. Now, as in *Our Town*, our family’s hopes and fears, accomplishments and failures, loves lost and found, bought and sold, will forever reverberate in the dark night that emanates from the walls of Xiaozhou Village People’s Hall out onto the streets of Guangzhou and beyond.

Back at CityU, the Wei Hing Theatre is set for “Hong Kong Time Capsule 2011.” To evoke *Our Town*, there is minimal lighting, no props

and only a few spare functional pieces of furniture. All eighteen students enter the stage at the beginning and remain on stage for the duration of the performance. The students who are not acting in scenes sit in chairs on the stage’s perimeter – creating a malleable ensemble that is a combination of village neighbors, elders and spirits all rolled into one. After a very short rehearsal period, the CityU students masterfully bring their carefully constructed plays to life. Their confident performances capture every shade of their theatrical portraits of Hong Kong life. The plays take on a life of their own. Wendy and I are in tears afterwards and join the audience in a well-deserved standing ovation. We are cheering and crying for the CityU students, and for the timeless, borderless power of theatre in general and *Our Town* in particular.

To convene the souls and spirits in one’s heart and imagination with the souls and spirits in the audience is the most important goal of theatre. Perhaps no other American or even English language play convenes all of the souls and spirits in the theatre like *Our Town*. Here’s to the next 75 years. 

ALVIN ENG is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Theatre at Goucher College. His latest play, *Three Trees*, had its World Premiere with the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in NYC, March/April, 2013.