

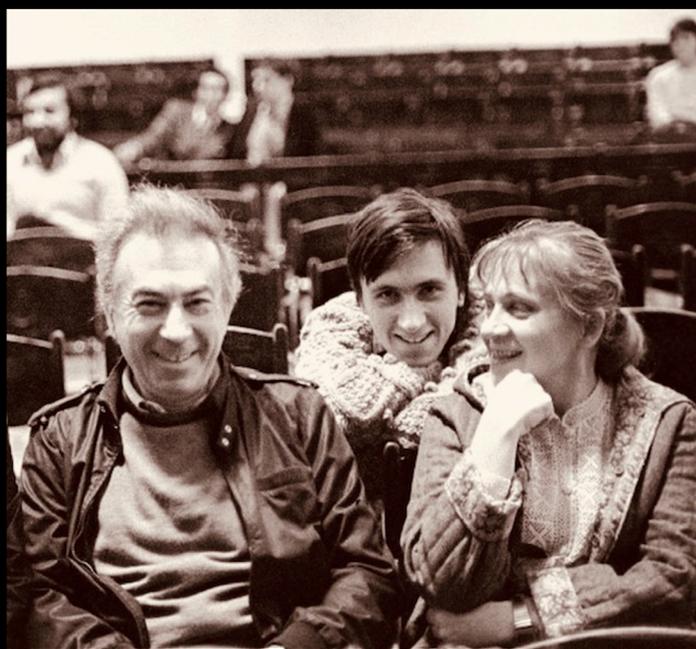
ANATOLY EFROS on THORNTON WILDER'S play "OUR TOWN"

One time I asked my students to read Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town". They didn't see the play, which produced such a strong impression on us in its time. An American theatre brought it to Moscow. It was the work of the director Alan Schneider from the Arena Theatre. The Americans performed in the new MAT building on Tverskaya Boulevard. It's bulky and somewhat ridiculous, and it's difficult to radiate a warm artistic impression from the stage.

But the Americans did it. I don't remember what they said about this play in the press, but here was the chance to talk about the fact that certain of our settled opinions were erroneous. For example, we became accustomed to consider that our art is the most heartfelt and sincere, that our Stanislavsky revealed the secret "the life of human spirit" on stage, etc. And we have become accustomed to criticize the Americans for profane Hollywood luxury and cold business craft. All these customary, common truths are very relative. I don't know whether Schneider broke any traditions or continued them, but *Our Town* was one of the most heartfelt and wisest performances I have seen. Besides which there were no star actors in it, such as you often see in the best American films. There was no particularly spectacular direction whatever. There was no "Americanism" whatever, which dazzles but doesn't heat, at least as we have become accustomed to think about it.

American theatre gave us a lesson in heartfelt art, remote from any sort of sensationalism. Personally, I wept the entire play, from the first appearance of the man whom the author called the Stage Manager, and up to the last minute. On stage everything was very real: a provincial town, two families, ordinary life. But from the first words of the Stage Manager it became clear that this life had already departed somewhere, it is no more. An elderly man spoke about his town and its inhabitants, he appeared on stage, but for some reason the other characters didn't notice him. They never came into contact with him, and he didn't contact them, although it was clear that he loves these people greatly and he knows all the details of their mode of life perfectly well. The lifestyle is quite ordinary (kitchen, house, school, children growing up, a wedding, etc.), no social explosions, everything peaceful. But there was something shrill and disturbing in this peaceful flow of life. Some secret idea of the author governed his slowness. Specifically, the slowness cast a spell. I didn't read the play and didn't know how all this would turn out. What will happen to this peaceful mode of life? War? Conflicts? Hardly.

Nothing foretold even those shocks which we know take place in American small towns. Nothing of this existed. There was only this: they bewitched us by a miracle of the most ordinary life, and then they showed how brief it was. That's all.



Anatoly Efros, Natalia Krymova and Dmitry Krymov

I suggested to my students not to simply read through Wilder's play, but to think about it, even to consider producing it.

"It's not a Russian play," said one student. "It's not penetrating. And there are no interesting roles. You want to play someone's destiny, but in this play there is only some foggy generalized meaning."

A second student began to discuss Wilder's seemingly ordinary resolution, where the end explodes with meaning, of course, but until then there are two whole acts—what is there to hold onto in them? What is there to play in them? Maybe it's necessary to change the composition somehow? To begin directly from the finale in order to give the spectators a "thump on the head," and then to play the rest? After which it might be possible to repeat the finale, having slightly modified it...

A third student began to reflect thoughtfully about the fact that life is a type of conveyor belt, and this play was written about such a conveyor belt, and it was no accident that it was written by an American. Someone else added that Wilder's psychology was embedded in ordinary life, and that I myself divert the students in every way possible from ordinary life, so that they are not even able to create ordinary life.

Simply said, the play didn't arouse any interest. I felt again how difficult it is to lay out the path that must become habitual for a young person. This is the path along which you get to the sense, the essence.