

HOLYOKE

HCC's 'Our Town' production reflects city's diversity

Playwright Thornton Wilder could hardly have imagined the Holyoke of today when he wrote "Our Town" in the late 1930s.

He had lived for a while in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and set his famous, Pulitzer Prize winning play in a small New Hampshire town he called Grover's Corners between the years 1901 and 1913, a time when the population would have been largely, if not entirely, white.

Current census figures describe the city of Holyoke now as more than 51% Hispanic or Latino. Meanwhile, more than 40% of students who attend Holyoke Community College — since 2016 a nationally recognized Hispanic Serving Institution — identify themselves as belonging to a racial or ethnic group that is Hispanic/Latino, Black, Asian, or more than one.

It follows that the cast of the HCC Theater Department's fall production of Wilder's classic take on daily life, love and death would naturally reflect that diversity.

"I thought the timing was right to do this play because of the makeup of our present student body," said director and HCC theater professor Patricia Sandoval. "The cast is brown, black, white, and more. The result is a beautiful display of HCC's finest, many of whom

are students of color, because that is our town in 2019."

HCC's production of "Our Town" runs tomorrow through Saturday, with performances each night at 7:30 p.m. and a Saturday matinee at 2 p.m. All shows are in the Leslie Phillips Theater in HCC's Fine & Performing Arts building. The Friday performance will be ASL-interpreted.

Taking on what is perhaps the most frequently produced play in America proved challenging, says Sandoval. Not only does it have a large cast (21), but most people are likely to have seen the play before or even perhaps played a part in a high school production, and so they might have certain expectations, though she hopes that familiarity will also draw them in.

"It's such an important work and just a wonderful play," she says. "It says so much about life and living in the moment and accepting death and ourselves in the universe."

Wilder's story does not follow a traditional narrative arc, with the usual conflict, climax and resolution.

"There are no fight scenes," says Sandoval. "The difficulty for the actors is that they have to find motivation and intention with everything they do, but then life is like that too. Every day does not have a narrative arc, and sometimes



HCC students Caleb Curd, of Westfield, as the stage manager, Jayda Aponte, of South Hadley, as Emily Webb and Brandon Rodriguez, of Springfield, as George Gibbs rehearse a scene from the HCC Theater Department's production of "Our Town."

our lives don't either."

What little action there is follows the courtship and marriage of the two principal characters, Emily Webb (played by Jayda Aponte of South Hadley) and George Gibbs (Brandon Rodriguez of Springfield).

"Our Town" is presented as a play within a play, with the stage manager describing the town, narrating the action, and taking on certain stage roles while frequently breaking the fourth wall to interact directly with the audience. In keeping with Wilder's preferences, the play is frequently performed with little or no scenery or props, the actors employing pantomime instead.

"We're having a set, though," says Sandoval, "which I'm really glad for. I think it's more interesting for the audience and it's easier for the cast to have it grounded in something. They have to rely on their imaginations for enough."

She also incorporated a few props, such as a bowl to hold imaginary green beans in a

kitchen scene.

"There's a lot of drinking coffee, and we're not going to have mugs," she says. "We're trying to honor Thornton Wilder as much as possible while also finding a balance."

And while Sandoval did not alter the script to make it more current — "It's too beautifully written to change in any way," she says, "and you really can't. It's protected" — she did tailor some of the acting parts.

For instance, Sandoval split the stage manager's role into two, one played by a male actor (Caleb Curd of Westfield) and the other by a woman (Moirra Hannon, also of Westfield), the latter who also takes on the part of the minister, a role traditionally played by a man. A female actor also plays the male choir director.

Tickets for "Our Town" are \$10 general admission, \$8 students and seniors and \$5 for HCC students and faculty members.

For more information or to reserve a seat, call the box office at 413-552-2528