

George Gibbs (Michael Shelfer) and Emily Webb (Jordan Marcum) have a moment just before going to the altar in Monticello Opera House's "Our Town."
MONTICELLO OPERA HOUSE

AT
HOME
WITH

'Our Town'

Themes strike a chord in Monticello Opera House setting

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Director Jeff Mandel first saw the dramatic play "Our Town" during his high school and college days. When the script came across his desk again this winter, his first thought was that it would be an easy endeavor to stage given that it is routinely performed in high school repertoires across the country.

After several read-throughs, Mandel began peeling back the layers of this complex work written by Thornton Wilder. He subsequently realized why the play has had such staying power in America's cultural lexicon since its debut in 1938.

"The play is very rich with themes about life and death, about America, about small town living," says Mandel. "It doesn't fit into nice, neat category

If you go

What: Our Town

When: 2 p.m. on Sunday, March 3

Where: Monticello Opera House, 185 West Washington St, Monticello

Cost: \$22

Contact: For more information, visit <http://www.monticelloopera-house.org/>.

like comedy or drama, and that complexity appeals to me because there are wonderful characters in there."

Monticello Opera House's run of "Our

See OPERA, Page 6C



The Monticello Opera House is presenting "Our Town" March 1-3. JEFF MANDEL

Opera

Continued from Page 1C

"Town" will conclude on March 3, and Mandel couldn't be prouder of his strong and talented cast. He's also honored to have a setting for the work that mirrors the time period of the play—the plot of "Our Town" begins in 1901 and the opera house was built in 1890.

"The local historical society did an event where they assembled old pictures of Monticello in the opera house," says Mandel. "It reinforces the feeling that even though the play is about a fictional town in New Hampshire, the town is the same size as Monticello is today. There are a lot of connections there."

Living in a town on the outskirts of New York City, Mandel was exposed to theater at a young age. He recalls seeing "Oklahoma!" on Broadway and being delighted by its western scenes. "Fiddler on the Roof" was another favorite, and Mandel would go on to play Lazar Wolf, the village butcher in a Quincy Music Theatre production.

Though he enjoys musicals, Mandel is more partial to dramas like Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh" and George Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan."

As an actor for the Florida State University's film school, he is often cast as the heavy—or main antagonist—taking on the roles of gangsters, mob bosses and crooked businessmen. However, Mandel has since shifted his focus from actor to director in recent years. He directed his first show, "Look Homeward Angel" by Thomas Wolf in his early 20s, taking inspiration for his approach to directing from his high school English and drama teacher.

"I got from him the idea that the director has to have an artistic vision of the whole production," says Mandel. "Even if you have 20 good actors, you can't have them doing 20 different styles. In the end, the director has to have a sense of shaping the actors toward a vision."

Mandel finds the most joy in that shaping process, molding actors into their characters and allowing them the freedom to make choices early on in the rehearsal process.

"I'm always looking for what made the character say that or what happened right before the line," says Mandel. "Is there something hidden? Is the line the opposite of what the character means? When you start digging into that, wonderful things emerge."

Mandel found the casting process for "Our Town" to be complex and quips you "can't cast an actor in a vacuum." While some people may immediately appear to fit a role, he remarks on how they also must contain the right amount of chemistry for onstage relationships.

For his creative process with "Our Town," Mandel spent a lot of time with



Monticello Opera House COURTESY OF JEFFERSON COUNTY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

the female lead discussing how to make quick emotional leaps in the face of the character's conflicts. He also wanted to highlight the many relationships in the town and relished in developing each character with his cast.

"At the first rehearsal I tell the actors that they have a few weeks to try out anything," says Mandel. "Do something utterly different from the night before or what I suggested. At some point you have to nail it down and start rehearsing, but there's a wonderful period of freedom at beginning."

After six weeks of research into the playwright, previous staging and history, as well as pinning down technical elements like lights, sound, sets and costumes, Mandel commends his cast and crew for their hours of hard work before they hit the stage. Everyone is a volunteer who is committed to their craft—it's this focus that Mandel finds to be most rewarding as a director.

Moving to Tallahassee nearly 35 years ago, he's proud to see the ever-expanding opportunities for thespians in the city. He encourages everyone to "show up" to auditions and not be afraid to reach out and join the welcoming, instant community that's created in concentrated theater settings. As he "walks the boards" of the Monticello Opera House, he hopes audiences will feel a similar chord has been struck about the importance of community and telling one another's stories.

"It's an emotional play," says Mandel. "I hope people will be moved and think about the themes of what community and life are about. For our time here on earth, what should be important to us and how should we relate to others? Whether or not they agree with the playwright or how I portrayed it, if people leave thinking and talking about the work, then we've done our job."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).