

MEDIA RELEASE

Soulpepper reprises its Dora Award-Winning *Our Town* Directed by Joseph Ziegler

Toronto, ON – March 9, 2011 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of *Our Town* will preview on April 7 and open on April 13, 2011 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

Soulpepper's beloved version of Thornton Wilder's masterpiece *Our Town* not only won the Dora for Best Production in 2006 but was the first play to be performed in the Young Centre for the Performing Arts and seems only fitting it be a part of Soulpepper's largest season to date. *Our Town* reminds us to make the most of life's every blessing through the lives, loves and losses of the Gibbs and Webb families. Wilder's gentle, humorous and poetic theatrical meditation takes us to the community of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, where the simplest acts can leave the greatest impressions. *Our Town* had its New York City debut at the Henry Miller's Theatre in 1938 the same year Wilder won the Pulitzer Prize for this poignant play.

Founding member **Joseph Ziegler** directs a stellar cast that includes **Douglas John Alan, Diana Bentley, Derek Boyes, Kevin Bundy, Owen Cumming, Oliver Dennis, Michael Hanrahan, John Jarvis, Jeff Lillico, Toby Malone, Diego Matamoros, Dominique Matamoros, Nancy Palk, Krystin Pellerin, Brenda Robins, Albert Schultz, Michael Simpson, Jane Spidell, Charles Vandervaart & William Webster.**

Our Town previews April 7, 2011 and opens April 13, 2011 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$28 - \$65 (plus HST) and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting www.soulpepper.ca. \$22 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at www.stageplay.ca. StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

The production sponsor for *Our Town* is Polar Securities Inc. 2011 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access programs.

BACKGROUND NOTES

Our Town has a long and tender association with Soulpepper. It was first produced in 1999 at the Royal Alexandra Theatre. It was warmly received then and our audience has embraced it every time we bring it back. Perhaps most memorably for us, in 2006 Our Town was the first play ever staged in the Young Centre, with Artistic Director Albert Schultz in the role of the Stage Manager.

On that unforgettable opening night, the acting company got together and - unbeknownst to Albert - decided to do something to mark the occasion. When Albert walked out on stage there was a tumultuous ovation and it was several moments before he could do his first bit of business. At last, as rehearsed, he walked along the back wall and ran his hand affectionately across its old bricks, speaking the first lines of the play. On the other side of that wall in the Wright Studio, the entire company stood in a line, their hands pressed into the bricks on their side, with him all the way. When he learned of it later, Albert was deeply touched - and very glad he hadn't been told. He wasn't sure he could have gotten through it, he said.

It is perhaps a little ironic that that extraordinary moment arose from a play that celebrates ordinary life. Our Town is concerned with regular people going about their business, and it pays deep respect to the momentous questions that occupy us all - who should we marry, how can we live peaceably with our families, how can we reconcile our longing for adventure with our need for stability. The play finds poetry and depth in the mundane little tasks that take up our days: making breakfast, reading the paper, preparing for an algebra test. It honours and illuminates the small moments: a lonely choir master walking home drunk again, a milkman dealing with a change in his daily route.

Thornton Wilder created Our Town because he was dissatisfied with the state of theatre. He found the plays of his time to be bland, toothless. "The tragic has no heat," he said, "the comic has no bite and the social criticism fails to indict us with responsibility." Avoiding grand gestures and heroic figures, Wilder turned his attention to simple working folks living typically anonymous lives and he mined the heat and bite of their experience to create this timeless classic.

All of Wilder's great works, both plays and novels, dealt with the hugeness, and the simplicity, of the everyday. Perhaps he expressed it best in his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*:

"But soon we will die ... and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. This is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love. The only survival, the only meaning."

Background Notes

by Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing

ARTIST PROFILE

Actress Jane Spidell takes time from rehearsals to talk about her role as Mrs. Webb in Our Town, the rehearsal dynamic and the enduring legacy of Thornton Wilder.

Nathan Kelly

What excites you about doing a play like Our Town, a production that has such a long history with Soulpepper?

Jane Spidell

I'm excited to be with the people again, and to introduce new ones to Grover's Corners as well. This is my third time around with this particular production - I wasn't in the first Soulpepper production at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, but I joined in for 2006 and 2007. This was the very first production that Soulpepper produced in the Young Centre when it opened in 2006, so it's special to me for that reason as well. I lived in the Distillery District before Soulpepper moved in, so the history I have with the place is another factor.

It's just lovely to be able to come back with this particular group of people and do this play, which I believe contains a lot of magic. The challenge is to keep it fresh and new while still maintaining the integrity of the original production. That's taken care of by the strong hand of our director, Joseph Ziegler and the fantastic words of Thornton Wilder. The play never gets tired for me; there's always something new to hear, there's always a new way in, there's always some new truth that speaks to the condition of what it means to be human.

It's a play about a community and I feel like I'm a part of this community here at Soulpepper, and we're doing it in a place that has a special meaning for me - which is what I think makes this Grover's Corners what it is.

NK

You are reprising your role as Mrs. Webb, after performing it in 2006. What's it like coming back to the character? What's different for you this time around?

JS

Coming back to Mrs. Webb - the more ingrained in my body and in my mind this play becomes - the more I tend to want to simplify. In earlier productions I tried to make Mrs. Webb "interesting" with my own personal brand. And what's really nice to discover this time around is that I really don't have to do anything to make her interesting - she's already fascinating.

Thornton Wilder describes Mrs. Webb as "thin, serious, and crisp" and I don't think I'm any of those things! I'm just finding great joy in trying to simplify my approach to the character. The first two times I did it my daughters were younger - now I have a 12 year old and a 14 year old, so my daughters are closer to the ages that Emily ranges, which makes it easier to access.

Continued ...

ARTIST PROFILE CONTINUED

I also have a new Emily this time, which is a significant change - Emily was played by Martha MacIsaac the first two times and now we have Krystin Pellerin. That's one of the great ways to keep it fresh - just having a whole new person beside you makes it a brand new scene. It keeps you very present.

NK

For this year, the rehearsal room has been filled with familiar faces as well as some new ones. How has that affected the rehearsal process?

JS

The bones of the production are already there, which I think makes it easier for any new person coming in to see what it is that they're stepping into. There's a very strong structure for them to build on, to jump in and start playing. But there is a rhythm and a pace to this production that still needs to be fulfilled. But it's a bit like Jazz - it's collaborating, jamming - things that I thought had to be a certain way, maybe they don't. I think that spending a few years away from the text and perhaps maturing in the meantime has also helped our approach.

NK

Thornton Wilder's choice to focus on ordinary people living ordinary lives was somewhat of a departure from the theatre of his time. Why do you think this theme has resonated so well with audiences?

JS

I think it's the truth of the play that speaks to audiences. This play celebrates the connections between people, and I don't think that's something that's going to change. And it's not just the connections between people but the connection between a person and their own life. This play goes beyond hindsight - it actually allows a character to go back and see their previous experiences. And that experiment packs a pretty huge emotional wallop. It's just such a great examination of what time does to a life, and when you lose that time, there's nothing to do but move forward. Our Town places us in a lot of metaphysical situations - and the audience is in them and observing them at the same time.