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New musical 'Our New Town' centers students in the gun violence conversation

by SARAH JAE LEIBER

A group of students has forcibly taken over a theatre space on their college campus. The room hasn't been touched in a year — not since a school shooting rocked the very foundation they're playing to, in the middle of a performance of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." The survivors have come together to hold a last hurrah: part vigil, part documentary, part call-to-action. See, the building is scheduled for demolition tomorrow — and, while they can, the students want to remind their community of what happened and what is at stake if they don't act.

This is "Our New Town," a new musical from married playwrights Gabriel Jason Dean and Jessie Dean and composer David Dabbon. It premiered in early October at Wagner College under the direction of Theresa McCarthy.

The Deans originally conceived "Our New Town" in workshop with the Civilians theater company. This world-premiere production was developed over the past year through a program called Originals@Wagner, described as a way to bring professional writers into the rehearsal room with students to workshop new musical theatre pieces.

"The most moving part of the process is to see these incredible writers hone their work with precision, insight and grace," said McCarthy. "I am moved by their faith in me and my students as we worked our way through this process.

"I am also moved by my students, who worked with such delicacy and openness to discover this work and to bring in their vibrant impulses and personal understanding," she said.

Gun violence is topical and difficult. "Our New Town" sits in the weight of its subject matter without being sensational — it is careful and true, sobering and funny.

"I worked with the actors to understand the rhythms and shifts that are present in the script. We decided collaboratively when the moments were right for rage, sorrow, joy, whimsy," said McCarthy. "I encouraged actors to exercise restraint at times, and I noticed where restraint was impossible."

The creators acknowledged that the raw grief associated with gun violence is visceral and real and impossible to undercut. They also realized if "Our New Town" relied too heavily on those deep moments of trauma that it may not invite the audience to stay for very long.

“I think there’s incredible power in the tension between humor and grief, and I really wanted this piece to balance a bit of both of those feelings,” said Jessie Dean.

“Our New Town” was written in conversation with Wilder’s 1938 play, which is one of the most widely known and performed contemporary dramas in the United States.

Gabriel Jason Dean said he considers Wilder the quintessential American playwright because his work wrestled with some of the most complicated aspects of American identity.

“While we still share so much with the characters in “Our Town,” they live with many luxuries that people nowadays have lost. ... The ability to live without the worry of school shootings, for instance,” he said. “I thought about how this very terrible chapter we are living in American history might corrupt the idyllic Grover’s Corners, and ‘Our New Town’ came to life.”

The Deans also wrote this piece as parents of a four-year-old, with another baby on the way (their son is appropriately named Wilder). They worried about raising their children in a world that may not be interested in protecting them from these random acts of violence.

“The scariest part of this process is the themes of this play are very much still relevant and that the circumstances of mass shootings keep morphing in new and unexpected ways,” said Jessie Dean. “But witnessing the dedication, vision, and sensitivity that Theresa and the students at Wagner brought to the process was overwhelmingly moving.”

“Our New Town” is about students creating impactful, rag-tag theatre. It was important for students to be a part of the process of crafting the piece — from the words, to the music, to the production.

“We all agreed that we didn’t want the music to appear too polished, but we also wanted to keep a high level of craft in the writing,” said composer David Dabbon. “Getting to work with the students and hear their perspective was very helpful. It felt really vital for them to connect to the music.”

The music propels the piece forward — the songs are moments of order and clarity in the spontaneous, meta-theatrical evening of big thoughts and feelings. At the end of the play, audience members participate in a moment of fellowship — they are asked to give a flower to any stranger in the room.

“As the cast [of the Wagner production] was about to launch into the next sequence, an elderly woman on the front row stepped onstage and presented one of the actors with her flower and hugged him. It moved him to tears,” said Gabriel Jason Dean.

“It was so simple, but it meant that we had completely taken down the fourth wall, that she wanted to look into his eyes and share a moment of loveliness amidst the chaos,” he said.

“Our New Town” is about that moment of finding loveliness amidst the chaos. It does not offer a solution for systemic gun violence — rather, it acknowledges and validates a whole generation’s perpetual fear and heartache while reminding them of the power and strength in community. It should play many more college houses — it is the catharsis we look for when we buy a ticket and sit down in a theater.