

THEATER REVIEW

Sweet, not sappy: 'It's a Wonderful Life' inspires, delights

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Life rarely turns out the way you think it will.

Even if we live in our desired locale, marry the one we love and work at our dream job, life has a sadistic way of pitching curve balls when we least expect it.

Friends die, people betray us, illness robs us of our vitality and mobility, sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently. Accidents happen. Businesses falter or move overseas. Banks foreclose.

We lose jobs, homes, spouses.

Sometimes we lose faith.

George Bailey, like all young men, nurses big dreams. He's going to go to college, travel and make his mark on the world.

He's bubbling over with excitement about his future and all the myriad possibilities.

"I want to do something big!" he exclaims.

And whatever that "something big" turns out to be, it certainly doesn't include Bedford Falls, N.Y., the small, predictable town in which he's grown up.

But various circumstances conspire to trap him there, even after he falls in love and marries.

His father suddenly dies, forcing George to take over the family's savings and loan and remain in that snooze of a town, his dreams unrealized.

Years later, his uncle's absent-minded mistake and an evil man's plotting drive him to contemplate suicide one Christmas Eve.

But in answer to his desperate prayer, and the prayers of those who love him, heaven sends down Clarence, George's guardian angel. Clarence might be 293 years old, but he's still trying to earn his wings.

Because George wishes he'd never been born, Clarence shows him what the world would be like if he'd never existed.

"Strange, isn't it?" Clarence asks him. "Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"

The story, of course, is "It's a Wonderful Life."

Through Dec. 18, Florida Repertory Theatre is staging a version of Frank Capra's classic holiday movie. You should catch it while you can. It's the perfect production for the season.

Director Robert Cacioppo has achieved the right balance of tone: The show is sweet, not sappy or overly cloying — not an easy thing to accomplish with a show such as this, one that could dangerously teeter in the wrong direction if directed or performed with too heavy a hand.

Playwright Joe Landry adapted the tale for the stage, cleverly transforming it into a show-within-a-show. In this version, a group of actors gather together on Christmas Eve 1946 to perform a live radio play, "It's a Wonderful Life." So the Florida Rep actors are playing actors who in turn portray various characters.

As was the norm for old-time radio dramas, it takes only a handful of actors to populate an entire town; they play multiple roles, sometimes with one actor portraying two or three people conversing together, changing accents and voices for a line or two, then switching back again. It takes pretty deft acting to do this credibly.

A step back in time

The action begins a half hour before curtain time, as singers rehearse, messengers deliver telegrams, a crusty soundman tests his props (creating a lot of noise during Christmas carols) and the actors arrive, walking down the aisle as if they're strutting on a red carpet, squealing fans at their heels.

Florida Rep provides a complete experience: walking into the Arcade Theatre in downtown Fort Myers feels like stepping back in time.

Designer Richard Crowell's art deco set is painted in shades of blue, just like the actual Arcade Theatre's interior. And thanks to Roberta Malcolm's costumes, the men sport argyle sweaters or double-breasted suits, and most wear bowties.

Peter Thomasson plays Freddie Filmore, the radio host, with great finesse. His elegant, smooth voice introduces the WFRT "Playhouse of the Air" and narrates the tale. Displaying his range, he also portrays the evil Mr. Potter and several others.

Chris Kipiniak does a stand-up job as George Bailey, and he's careful — and smart — not to attempt a Jimmy Stewart impersonation. He presents George

as a young guy with a strong sense of fairness, trying to do right in this world. He has a couple of speeches throughout the play, and to his credit, none sound like lectures; they're all heartfelt.

It's scary how relevant this play is even now: Mr. Potter has a vested interest in keeping

people poor and in debt to him. A slum landlord, he has them living in shacks. He also has a monopoly on pretty much everything in town: the banks, the department stores, the bus line. He's rich beyond measure, but still greedy for more — more money, and more power.

At one point George challenges him, saying: "Just remember this, Mr. Potter. That this rabble that you're talking about... they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community." In other words, George is standing up for the 1946 version of the 99 percent. Unfortunately, their own hard work is what's made Mr. Potter rich; they're laboring, but he's the one who profits.

George's wife, Mary, is played with sweet charm by Claire Guy. She portrays Mary as a woman with a gentle spirit and plenty of common sense. We can see why George falls for her. The two have great chemistry together. One of their best scenes occurs when they're listening and talking on the same phone, their heads touching. Mary knows they're meant for each other, but it takes George a little while to catch on.

Brad DePlanche, previously seen in Florida Rep's "Rumors" and "The 39 Steps," once again displays his considerable comedic talent as he plays a flirty, swaggering actor who's quite believable as a fumbling Uncle Billy and also as Clarence, the angel, in addition to numerous other characters.

Playing the rest of the female characters is Carrie Lund, who takes this role and runs with it. Her range is quite impressive, as she plays a bitter older woman

who's lost her only son, a flirtatious young beauty, a maid and a burlesque dancer, to name just a few.

And while he doesn't have a speaking part, Mark Chambers is an essential part of the play as Melvin Swabbington. Melvin provides the sound effects that create a realistic ambience to the scenes — slamming doors, beeping horns, ringing bells, crunching snow. Due to his character's hard work, we can imagine a boy falling through the ice on a lake, a train pull into a station, a family seated around the table at mealtime.

Part of the appeal of Mr. Chambers' role is seeing the unusual way some sounds are created; the other part is his curmudgeonly attitude as he dispassionately goes about his work. It's great fun to watch him, though he's careful not to upstage the others.

A grand finale on opening night

"It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play" gives us a behind-the-scenes look at how radio dramas were performed in front of a live audience (including commercials) and also feeds our need for a holiday show of genuine sweetness.

This production is magical and authentic from start to finish, avoiding cheap sentimentality and faked cheer.

It just might restore your faith in the goodness of others and spur you to reconsider your blessings, despite these difficult times.

And because this is live theater, opening night attendees were treated to an unexpected moment after the curtain calls. Chris Simpson, the company's technical director, came out on stage, dropped to one knee and proposed to Ms. Guy, the actress.

Referencing George Bailey's promise to Mary that he'd "lasso the moon" for her, he said, "Claire, I might not be able to lasso the moon for you, but I can design one to scale. Will you marry me?" Ms. Guy, so overcome she was unable to speak, nodded her reply.

And the audience gave their second standing ovation of the evening. ■



in the know

"It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play"

>> **When:** through Dec. 18

>> **Where:** Florida Repertory Theatre

>> **Tickets:** \$45, \$40

>> **Info:** 332-4488 or www.floridarep.org

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