

REVIEW

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Live radio version of 'Wonderful Life' Entertaining

By Huxley King
for *Nashville Edge*

IN A NUTSHELL: Damn good, highly entertaining; but might not be everyone's cup of tea.

The idea of putting "It's a Wonderful Life" on stage is pretty ballsy. The idea of staging it as a live radio play in 1946 is even ballsier. People cling tightly to their cherished holiday traditions, and — as the tepid production of "White Christmas" that is currently visiting town can attest — not every Christmas classic should make the jump into live theatre.

Fortunately, the immensely talented crew at the Tennessee Rep has managed to give the gang from Bedford Falls the translation to the stage that they deserve.

Though its format might be challenging to "those unaware of the significance (or even existence) of live radio dramas, it is a tight production and deserves a huge round of applause, a buttload of kudos, and almost four of those little gold star stickers your first grade teacher used to attach to your homework.

The gimmick, if it may be so called, of "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play" is that the entire epic tale of disappointment, love, hardship, victory against oppression, and the value of friendship is scheduled to be broadcast, live, as a radio play by five actors (each of whom, with the Rep's admirable thoroughness, has been given a backstory and a professional resume).

As a point of added interest, one of the actors passes out on the very verge of going on the air, throwing the entire cast into a frenzy and forcing the piano player to make his theatrical debut. While they act out the dialogue, utilizing every voice within their repertoire, the cast also scrambles to provide the appropriate musical cues and sound effects; pausing for commercial interruptions in the form of jingles for products like hair tonic and toilet cakes.

The Rep gets mad props for thoroughly saturating the audience in the atmosphere; when I walked in to take my seat, the stage was already abuzz. The actors were in character and making preparations to go on the air. David Alford (as Freddie "Fingers" Filmore) was playing Christmas music on the piano, while Matthew Carlton (as Harry "Jazzbo" Heywood) roamed the aisles playing a ukelele. Marin Miller (as Sally Applewhite) and Jenny Littleton (as Lana Sherwood) hung daintily over the piano, chatting and studying the script, while Todd Truly (as Jake Laurents) made himself a cup of coffee. An underling in period garb walked around nervously with a clipboard and managed to infect the audience with a growing sense of anticipation.

The set, I might add, is an absolute jewel of blue-and-silver Art Deco goodness. Gary Hoff and his team have built something so complete and detailed that it looks like a permanent fixture; from the architectural "APLAUSE" and "ON THE AIR" signs flanking the stage to the custom steel work on the furniture, the entire thing is elegantly stylized, but entirely believable. And the furniture is not the only thing to strike an authentic period note. Kate Foreman, the props assistant, has supplied the flustered actors with a fascinating array of real, old-fashioned, noise-making devices from radio's Golden Age.

Shoes on planks of wood, wind machines, bags of cornstarch, and all sorts of mysterious doo-dads and gadgets give the production a nice touch of genuine 40s charm. The costuming also reflects the extensive research the Rep always puts behind its efforts. From the lovely custom-made hats on the actresses to the cut of the men's brightly-colored suits, Trish Clark and her squad have given the cast clothing suitable to the era and their own characters' back-stories. Sally Applewhite (Miss Ohio 1943, to be exact) possesses a pink suit, trimmed with white fur and rhinestone detailing, that is especially dreamy; Betty Grable herself would have cut a bitch to get her little manicured paws on something this glamorous. Everybody onstage looks great from the tip of their elaborate coiffures to the toes of their shoes. The cast did a tremendous job with the 20-plus characters in the script, though each actor had a "voice" or two that were definite crowd favorites. David Alford was especially notable for his drunk Uncle Billy and enthusiastically accented Martini.

Matthew Carlton deserves particular praise for his crabby-old-man-who-pronounces-his-Bs-very-strangely Mr. Potter and his gentle Angel Second Class, Clarence. Jenny Littleton wins a special place in my heart for being able to switch from baby-breathed Violet to lug-headed taxi driver Ernie and back again in the course of a few seconds. Marin Miller gave Mary Bailey believable girl-next-door sex appeal and did a Zsu Zsu guaranteed to make your heart melt. And Todd Truly lived up to the unenviable task of playing George Bailey, a character that will always, until the end of fucking time, be considered the rightful property of one Mr. Jimmy Stewart.

All in all, it's hard to pick a fault with any aspect of the production, unless it is the fact that nobody thought to slip a printout of the words to "Auld Lang Syne" into the program, which might have avoided a somewhat awkward moment in the final scene. Audience participation was encouraged, and the blank looks and silent tongues of my fellow theatre-goers and myself just goes to prove that nobody actually knows the lyrics to that damn song. But, obscure song lyrics aside, the important details of costume and set were immaculately attended to, the acting was sharp, and the technical aspects of the production went smoothly.

However, the experience itself, while entertaining, did not feel, to me, quite as emotionally engrossing as the film. While the actors truly did a wonderful job and managed to convey the villainy of Potter and George's quiet heroism with only their voices, the audience's reaction to certain poignant scenes seemed dulled slightly by the slapstick mayhem created by the setup. Don't get me wrong: It's entertaining to laugh when an actor uses an incongruous voice, but the laugh perhaps inevitably saps a bit of the emotional vitality from the lines. And while I enjoyed myself thoroughly, I did wonder how the children of the multimedia age will connect with this production. Will a generation that has been bombarded with fast cuts and snappy soundbites since birth find jingles for Lux toilet cakes ("The Toilet Cake that Brought our Boys Home!!") mystifying rather than amusing?

Thanks to the usual suspects of video games and graphic special effects, do they lack the imagination required to make the leap from hearing the story to actually feeling something about it?

As I've said, it takes balls to reinvent a classic and do it well, and risks of that sort should be amply rewarded. And, despite minor distractions and slight challenges, theatre-goers of all generations can find something to love in this story that has stood the test of time so well and remains, to this day, a compelling look at the scope of a single human life and the triumph of decency. George Bailey remains a hero for the ages, and the Rep gives him the affectionate tribute he deserves.

Directed by: David Alford

Adapted by: Joe Landry from the film directed by Frank Capra

Original music and musical arrangements by" Kevin Connors