

REVIEW

Tennessee Rep's 'Wonderful Life' makes holidays a little brighter

By CATHERINE COKE
For *The Tennessean*

With so much entertainment to choose from this holiday season, make sure to add *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* to your to-do list.

The Tennessee Repertory Theatre's charming production, playing through Dec. 22, will make you leave the theater looking forward to holiday shopping.

Playwright Joe Landry (*Beautiful*, *Hollywood Babylon*, *Reefer Madness* and *Death in Venice*) adapted the 1947 film, *It's A Wonderful Life* starring Jimmy Stewart, to the stage in 1996, and since then, it has become a staple in December in theaters throughout the country. Set in Studio A of a New York radio station on Christmas Eve 1946, the film's story plays out through five actors playing radio actors playing multiple parts, "broadcasting live." Combining both a narrative of the film and the complications of a live radio show make this a script that truly entertains.

Tennessee Rep employs Matthew Carlton, Jenny Littleton, Marin Miller and Todd Truley, with David Alford both acting and directing, and everything is in sync. This cast as a repertoire works very well together, deftly handling the material, the humor, the singing of "sponsor advertisements" and the "funny voices." They each enliven the experience of having to act so many roles. Carlton is perfectly suited; Miller is delightful; and Truley plays his own "George Bailey." Alford, playing dual roles of the actual director and an actor in the show, has handled each with aplomb. And Littleton exemplifies an actor with true depth, playing an actor who's playing an actor who's playing multiple roles; every moment of her time on stage is genuine.

The cast has been supplied with all the right tools to ply this play.

Trish Clark's costuming brightly exhibits the period. The Gary Hoff set, a lovely aquamarine and silver Art Deco set, is nostalgically enchanting. And, kudos to both Hoff and Kate Foreman for manufacturing all the properties needed to make the "sounds" for a "live radio show."

One quibble, and one only, about those wonderful props that make the sounds, like a "glass box" (used to make the sound of glass shattering) or a really small door used to "show someone has left the room": One wishes that within the set design, these "sound-makers" had been more front and center. They are, on the whole, off to the sides of the stage, so we cannot really see (and hear) how they work. That would've added to the audience experience in a big way.

Nonetheless, to make your holidays a little brighter, this show by our regional theater needs to be on your Christmas list.