



A play made of a radio show performing the Frank Capra film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Photo by Joey Watkins Photography

The A.D. Players' *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* an Instant Holiday Classic

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What's that ringing? Did an angel get its wings? Well, it's almost as miraculous. It's a new addition to the holiday scene in Houston and it's really good. It's the A.D. Players' production of *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*.

Adapted by Joe Landry, who's taken the beloved Frank Capra film about a man in need of a reason to live on Christmas Eve and turned it into a radio drama straight from the 1940s, *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* is not only faithful to the story we know and love, it's a little salute to old-time radio broadcasts, and an ode to a bygone time – one that pokes a little fun, too, through amusing commercials, and silly program titles (including a chuckle-inducing "*I Thought I Told You...*" that won't be completely spoiled here). And the A.D. Players' production is gentle and romanticized; led with a caring hand by director Kevin Dean.

Dean's collected a genial cast to match the play's genial characters. The seven-member cast work as a team, both as radio talent and the characters they voice in the radio play. And though their radio personas are the least developed, little touches of character are still present, like someone being beaten to the punch in offering someone else a drink. The actors move fluidly around the stage, bringing a lot of energy to the production as well as being incredibly welcoming to the theater audience.

The cast is led by Joel Sandel who plays Jake Laurents, who in turn plays George Bailey. Jimmy Stewart is a hard act to follow, no doubt, but Sandel makes George Bailey his own. As a man with big dreams and the worst luck, Sandel is earnest and kind, and his more dramatic scenes – such as his impassioned speech to the board after his father dies – are the production's best. Also captivating is Sandel's chemistry with Christy Watkins, who voices Sally Applewhite and Mary Hatch. As Mary, Watkins is sweet and confident, as well as head over heels for George. Together, they deliver an iconic scene – one involving a moon and a lasso – with effortless romance.

Aside from Sandel and Watkins, everyone else is asked to voice multiple characters and they don't disappoint. Seán Patrick Judge helms the radio play as the clear, sonorous voice of announcer Freddie Filmore, but also appears as a dozen other characters, including well-intentioned Uncle Billy and the villainous Potter. Patty Tuel Bailey is voice actress Lana Sherwood, who has some standout moments as George's mother, Rose; Mary's nosy mother, Mrs. Hatch; and Horace the Teller. Christina Kelly is Trixie Devine, who's primary role is Violet, but plays an adorable Zuzu. And Craig Griffin is Harry "Jazzbo" Heywood, who takes on about ten roles, including the all-important Clarence Oddbody.

Behind them all is sound man Willy Kurtz, played by Orlando Arriaga. Arriaga is hard at work throughout the production ringing bells, opening and closing doors, and clip-clopping men and women's shoes as the play calls for them. His timing cannot be questioned, nor can the fun in glancing over to see just how each sound is made, whether it's serving ice cream or breaking a window. Of course, sound designer Michael Mullins deserves some recognition, too.

The skilled work of Kirk A. Domer (Scenic Designer), Michael Gault (Assistant Scenic Designer), Shelby Marie Blocker (Properties Master), and Danielle Hodgins (Costume Designer) beautifully bring yesteryear to life. The wonderfully detailed, teal-hued set emanates warmth, with bold, deeply red poinsettias placed around the stage and the WBFR sign towering above, not to mention the many timely touches, like James Montgomery Flagg's "Uncle Sam" and Dick Williams's "Of Course I Can!" posters on the walls. The sleek, mod cityscape behind further adds depth and, along with Hodgins's period-perfect costumes – with wide-legged trousers, suspenders, and A-lines all making appearances – there's no doubt that the world of WBRF is a classy one. Ian Berkman's lighting designs serve the set and the production well, especially the dramatic lighting cues that signal "on air."

If there are any quibbles about the production, it's in the intermission. Namely, it's a momentum killer. So, when the actors return to the stage to pick up on the conclusion of *It's A Wonderful Life*, it takes a while to get back up off the ground, a disappointing part of an otherwise great show.

Regardless, the A.D. Players have mounted a disarmingly charming production, full of heart and sentimental without being saccharine. Like a mug of hot cocoa warming your hands, the scent of peppermint and pine, or snowflakes that stay on your nose and eyelashes, *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* is everything you'd want from a holiday production.

Performances continue through December 23 at 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and December 1, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays at A.D. Players, The George Theater, 5420 Westheimer. For more information, call 713-526-2721 or visit adplayers.org. \$15 to \$70.

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