

ARTS & CULTURE

ENTERTAINMENT

# Simon Helberg trades ‘Big Bang’ for George Bailey and a twist on ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’

By MARGARET GRAY DEC 15, 2018 | 10:00 AM



Simon Helberg, photographed at Pasadena Playhouse. The "Big Bang Theory" cast member and Golden Globe nominee for "Florence Foster Jenkins" is next channeling George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play." (Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)

It's a typical arc for a Hollywood actor: Land a part in the longest-running multicamera comedy in TV history, star in a movie opposite Meryl Streep and then, at the pinnacle of your glory, assume one of the most ubiquitous holiday stage roles anywhere: George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life."

Well, maybe not the last part.

Did something awful happen to Simon Helberg's agent?

Helberg and I have just met, so I don't feel comfortable asking. And his colorful, woolly, collared cardigan, which he calls "my picture sweater," doesn't evoke mourning. His large blue eyes give no hint of sadness. But how exactly has he found himself sitting in a room that's a bit like a closet at Pasadena Playhouse, trying to eat a very leafy salad with a plastic fork during a break in rehearsal for "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play"?

This is the actor who was nominated for a Golden Globe for his scene-stealing turn in Stephen Freear’s 2016 film “Florence Foster Jenkins.” Lego sells the Howard Wolowitz Minifigure, based on the character Helberg has played on CBS’ “The Big Bang Theory” since 2007. Helberg’s celebrity impressions — Nicolas Cage, Robin Williams, Al Pacino — are so uncanny they’ve been written into “Big Bang Theory” storylines and prompted Larry King to spend entire interviews repeating, “Now do another one.”

So there’s got to be a story behind why this guy is spending the holidays in a “live radio play,” whatever that is. He couldn’t actually enjoy hours of rehearsal and this interview while everybody else in the cast — less weighed down by celebrity — goes out to lunch.

“Theater is something I haven’t done in a long time,” Helberg says, “and never fully made a career out of in any way.” What would have happened if he had stayed in New York, he wonders, rather than move here to work in TV? The thought is “kind of like ‘It’s a Wonderful Life,’ actually,” he says.



Simon Helberg outside Pasadena Playhouse, where he will take on the role Jimmy Stewart made famous in the film “It’s a Wonderful Life.” (Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)

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— SIMON HELBERG, ABOUT PLAYING GEORGE BAILEY IN “IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY.”

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Raised in L.A. by parents in the business — his dad is an actor, his mom a casting director — Helberg studied acting at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, a conservatory-style program. “They really train you for the theater,” he recalls. “That’s all they talk about all the time. I saw, like, more than a play a week.”

He had arrived at NYU already quite comfortable in comic roles. He’d begun his stage career in 10th grade, playing a delivery boy in Lillian Hellman’s “The Children’s Hour.”

“I had like six lines,” he recalls. “And I hammed it up so immensely that I got, like, a round of applause, just because everybody needed a laugh at that point. It would be like if Jerry Lewis landed in the middle of a Hellman play. It took me years to calm down. It wasn’t until I was at NYU where a teacher literally said to me, ‘You’re not allowed to do comedy for a while.’ She made me do ‘Richard II.’ And I was terrified, but I think ultimately it led me to being a better actor.”

At the end of his second year at NYU, Helberg played Louis in a production of “Angels in America” — a transformative experience.

“I remember just sitting there and going, ‘OK, I can do this.’” Even his parents agreed, though they had been cautious with their encouragement, knowing the capriciousness of the trade. Hollywood agreed too. That summer, Helberg started getting work in TV and movies in L.A., so much that he never made it back to school.

A few months ago, the news broke that “The Big Bang Theory” would end after its current season, the 12th. Helberg says the cast and the writers know one another so well by now that they barely have to rehearse.

“It’s like singing the same song for 12 years, and you can’t even hear the song anymore,” he says. “It doesn’t even feel like exactly acting. It’s sort of surreal at this point. So when I get to come here and do this, it feels reminiscent of why I wanted to be an actor. Which was to play different characters and tell different stories.”

“Florence Foster Jenkins,” of course, was a chance to spread his wings.

“Meryl and I were both required to do things that are incredibly scary and out of our comfort zone. We really had to lean on each other. Which is pretty wild to have someone like Meryl Streep leaning on you.”

That camaraderie is also what draws Helberg to the theater. He and his wife, Jocelyn Towne, have taken acting classes together at the highly regarded Antaeus Theatre Company, where Towne has performed in plays, including the recent

That camaraderie is also what draws Helberg to the theater. He and his wife, Jocelyn Towne, have taken acting classes together at the highly regarded Antaeus Theatre Company, where Towne has performed in plays, including the recent blockbusters “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” and “The Little Foxes.” Her director for both was Cameron Watson, who happens to be directing “It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play.”

“Totally shameless nepotism and networking,” Helberg jokes. He and Towne hosted a party for the cast of “The Little Foxes.” Their two young children made the actor Rob Nagle stage-slap Towne, as he did in the play, about seven times. Watson was thinking about “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and at some point he asked Helberg if he’d play George Bailey.

Naturally Helberg quailed at the thought of taking on Jimmy Stewart’s iconic role?

“I’ve seen the movie probably twice,” Helberg replies with a shrug. “I know it, but I don’t feel the pressure to differentiate myself from Stewart, because I don’t have that music in my head the way many people do. I’m sure people will hold it up in their mind to the original. But it’s such a great piece of material, and the way we’re doing it is so different: a fast-paced, playful romp with people playing different parts and a foley artist onstage. It doesn’t feel like we’re remaking the movie.”

Which brings us to the question: What is a live radio play?

“The conceit is that we’re a troupe of actors in 1946 who are performing the radio play version of ‘It’s a Wonderful Life.’ And then as we get into it, we sort of get swept up in it,” he says.

Possibly the biggest challenge for Helberg, after a dozen years of sitcom snark, is to play a character who isn’t cynical.

“I think it was just naturally in Jimmy Stewart, that wide-eyed optimism,” he says. “That’s rare. Or maybe I’m just a cynic. But life has enough dark moments and challenges, so it’s nice to play a character who sees the bright side of everything. He’s the kind of guy you’d want as your dad.”



### **‘It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play’**

Where: Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Ave., Pasadena

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays;  
ends Dec. 23

Tickets: \$25 and up

Information: (626) 356-7529, [PasadenaPlayhouse.org](http://PasadenaPlayhouse.org)