

Radio play production of 'It's a Wonderful Life' at Pasadena Playhouse enhances core joys of Frank Capra's iconic Christmas story

Posted by Bliss Bowen | Dec 13, 2018 | 0 🗨️ |



In the 1930s and '40s, when the Golden Age of radio reached its apex, television was not yet a mainstream entity, and Americans struggling through the Depression and World War II congregated around radios to listen to favorite programs, entertainers like Jack Benny and Bing Crosby, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's legendary fireside chats. By the end of the 1930s, over 28 million American households had bought a home radio console, and live radio shows were so popular that audiences also attended live broadcasts at radio stations and spacious venues like Nashville's Ryman Auditorium.

That once hugely popular form of mass entertainment was revived by the Pasadena Playhouse with last year's "Miracle On 34th Street" and returns this week with "It's a Wonderful Life," both radio play productions of iconic Christmas stories. Cameron Watson, director of both plays, says each is "heartfelt and all about hope and belief," but "It's a Wonderful Life" is darker.

"At the heart it's a very dark tale about a man, George Bailey, who doesn't want to live anymore after all he's been through. It requires a different set of tools to tell it properly," he observes, speaking shortly after he and the cast finished their first table read. "It's all within the spirit of the holiday and family friendly, but it's just a deeper tale."

It's surprisingly resonant with events roiling current headlines, adds Watson, who also directed the current staging of Lillian Hellman's biting "The Little Foxes" at Antaeus Theatre in Glendale. "Even at the table read, we weren't expecting such thunderous relevance to Mr. Potter and greed and unfairness."

The five-person cast of "It's a Wonderful Life" is headed by Simon Helberg as George Bailey, whose wish to have never been born is granted with enlightening consequences; the beloved Everyman role was memorably brought to life by Jimmy Stewart in Frank Capra's 1946 film. Helberg is best known for starring in the hit CBS comedy "The Big Bang Theory" about a couple of physicists working at Caltech — coincidentally the alma mater of Capra, who graduated from the school in 1918.

Helberg will be joined onstage by Rebecca Mozo, as George's wife Mary; Haneefah Wood, as all the other female characters; and Rob Nagoe, as the scheming Mr. Potter as well daffy Uncle Billy. Ryun Yu, who inhabited more than 30 characters in last year's stirring one-man show "Hold These Truths" at the Playhouse, will take on the other male

characters here, including Clarence, the angel without wings.

Joe Landry's script adaptation places the actors in a 1940s radio station, at their microphones with scripts in hand. Inches away will be Foley artist Jeff Gardner, creating the sound of every footstep, punch, doorknob turn, champagne cork pop, and water splash. ("He's got the hardest job of them all," Watson notes.) The cast will also perform "silly soap commercials" as they would have been done on live telecasts, and Gardner promises "plenty of preshow Christmas music" from the 1940s and a period-appropriate dramatic underscore.

"We're really recreating an old entertainment format that's rarely done these days," Watson says. "There are wonderful interactions between the actors and the Foley artist at the radio station."

Gardner, an actor and Glassell Park resident, entered the sound world "kind of sideways" from acting. Falling in love with music and sound effects, he started working on sound with Antaeus, and then with LA Theatre Works, where he estimates he has done about 50 recordings over the past six years. Unlike many Foley artists, most of what he does is "live for ears at home" rather than for film or TV, where the term "Foley" traditionally connoted matching sound to images onscreen. (The term has gradually been appropriated to mean matching sound to any media.) Gardner says he finds film work exciting, but nothing matches the thrill of knowing you only have one chance to get things right onstage, and whether or not you screw up you just "move on to the next cue and have fun."

Clocking in around an hour and 15 minutes, the play is "a succinct piece," Watson says. The lickety split speed of rehearsal — from initial table read to performance for an audience in 10 days — is challenging for actors diving into committed, whole-hearted performances. Gardner's challenges center around the magnitude and logistics of

generating effects. He likens it to being a stage manager.

“You’re having to mark your script with warning cues and actual cues, just giving yourself that preparation without having somebody tell you, ‘Stand by, cue snow is coming up.’ The challenge is making sure I’m prepared before the show, and then during the show that we’re all on the same page, that the actors and me are all working together. It’s very much like a dance. We all kind of understand each other’s rhythm.”

Both Gardner and Watson indicate the cast is responding to the spirit of joy at the core of “It’s a Wonderful Life” that has inspired audiences for decades.

“There’s tremendous hope in ‘It’s a Wonderful Life,’” Watson says. “We all got teary at the table today, just reading it. It’s so hopeful. It makes you realize how important all our lives are.”

“It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play” runs Dec. 12-Dec. 23 at the Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Ave., Pasadena; \$29-\$73 (evening performances) and \$36-\$78 (matinees). Info: (626) 356-7529. Pasadenaplayhouse.org