



Photo by Brick Patrick

### **Pasadena Playhouse**

Last year, Pasadena Playhouse brought us an experience both risky and highly festive, instilling a sagging holiday spirit in many in attendance—including yours truly. Directed by the inimitable Cameron Watson, the recreation of the classic 1946 film *Miracle on 34th Street* performed as a live period radio play, starring Alfred Molina in the Edmund Gwenn role, was a highlight of the season.

This year, the Playhouse tempts fate and repeats the successful formula, taking us back a year earlier, this time with Joe Landry's clever adaptation of 1946's *It's a Wonderful Life* featuring *The Big Bang Theory*'s Simon Helberg in the Jimmy Stewart role.

I'm happy to say the risk paid off, since this year's gooey 'n warm 'n fuzzy 'n cookies-for-Santa-y effort is even more charming this time out, so if you're in need of a boost in the Christmas cheer department, this could be a big help.

Perhaps the first smart thing the Playhouse did was ask Watson back again to helm this second annual holiday dose of visual eggnog. His staging is crisp and smoothly choreographed, utilizing nothing but a row of chairs at the rear and five stand-up vintage microphones in stands. At stage-right, sound guru extraordinaire Jeff Gardner is also once again on hand as WBFR in Manhattan's trusty foley artist, making noises reminiscent of all those original radio dramas even I am too young to remember firsthand.

Helberg puts his own unique—if slightly too contemporary—spin on the role of poor suicidal George Bailey, with Rebecca Mozo rock-solid as his sweetly patience love interest Mary. Both Haneefah Wood and Ryan Yu are major assets, each

playing a multiple of supporting roles. Wood is especially endearing as the Bailey's sniffly daughter, as is Yu as Clarence, the bumbling angel so anxious to get his you-know-what's.

Still, the most amazing turn of the evening is LA treasure Rob Nagle, narrating the tale and also playing the mean-assed Mr. Potter and every dang one of Bedford Falls wildly eclectic townspeople, switching with lightning speed from one persona to another in conversations that could be taped and studied as perfect examples of Dissociative Personality Disorder.

Nagle admitted after the show he's never done voiceover work professionally although he's tried to break into that field for years. Note to all LA voiceover casting directors: get your asses down to Pasadena Playhouse before the 23rd, 'cuzz Nagle makes an auspicious debut in your field that'll have you whipping out contracts on the spot.

Everything is charming in this delightful holiday fluff, from Jared A. Sayeg's creamy lighting to Kate Bergh's smartly festive costuming. It's odd that the simple but effective set recreating a 1940s radio studio is not credited, particularly since there is one spectacular moment late in the performance that, besides needing our willing suspension of belief, is indeed welcome.

Though a beloved holiday tradition in our country and throughout the world, I would suspect, I thought personally I'd seen my last viewing of *It's a Wonderful Life* long ago—no one gets tired of the sweetness of eggnog sooner than I do.

Au contraire.

When Gardner rings that tiny bell signaling Clarence's long-awaited promotion, the most world-weary old eyes in the Playhouse's audience, even the plethora of usually bored-looking husbands obviously being dragged to the Playhouse by their wives despite their protestations, are sure to well up just a little.

**THROUGH DEC. 23: Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Av., Pasadena. 626.365.7529 or [pasadenaplayhouse.org](http://pasadenaplayhouse.org).**