

# GAMM's Wonderful Life Is Simply Charming

Christmas plays can be a quick and easy way for a theater to grab some cash and provide an easy holiday junket for folks who want to revel in the season. Rarely, however, can these efforts stand alone as a piece of theater that is compelling enough in, say, April or October. Trinity's current take on *A Christmas Carol* may be one of their best yet, with just enough dark, brooding topicality and production value to launch it above and beyond the sea of Dickens currently washing over Rhode Island, but even it would be hard-pressed to sell well beyond early January. An oddity is currently enjoying a short run at The Gamm, however, and that oddity is not only a Christmas play, but one that could easily be staged in any other month and still be a thoroughly charming event. *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* is not a new show, by any means, but The Gamm has made it theirs with local touches and an effortless ensemble-driven performance that provides good cheer without belaboring the point.



R: Richard Noble (Joseph/Billy Bailey/Others), Tony Estrella (George Bailey), Madeleine Lambert (Mary Hatch, Rose Bailey), Lynsey Ford (Violet Bick/Janie Bailey/Others), Jeff Church (Harry Bailey, Ernie Bishop/Others), Emily Turtle (Announcer/Zuzu Bailey); Photo credit: Peter Goldberg

Directed by Damon Kiely (making his Gamm debut), this Joe Landry-adapted version of the classic screenplay follows the redemptive arc of George Bailey as a light-hearted, but ambitious scoundrel who charms everyone in Bedford Falls while single-handedly keeping the town's Building and Loan business afloat and out of the clutches of the evil Mr. Potter - until he doesn't, causing him to flame out in a fit of assholery and seek his own demise. Clarence, the loveable schlub of an angel who is simply trying to

earn his wings after 200 years of heavenly internship, takes on the task of showing George what life would have been like without him ever being born, and tears flow like wine (and that's just in the audience) when all is revealed that Bedford Falls would have been a far less joyful place without George.

It's a classic tale, despite Bailey's rakishness, because the simple power of the story is about "decency and selflessness...and that a community is only as strong as its most vulnerable members," according to artistic director Tony Estrella (who also voices the part of George). The period touches, the warmth of the set design with just a touch of oversized Christmas bulbs and a lone tree off to the side of a lived-in radio studio (WGAM, in this case) welcome the "studio audience" as they enter. Cast members (all using their actual names) greet showcomers and solicit them to write down personal messages to be read "on air" during the "broadcast." Aside from Michael McGarty's smart scenic touches (the stage manager is visible behind the studio glass for the duration, while practical microphones are dressed in period casings), it is Jessie Darrell Jarbadan's costumes and hairstyling for the ensemble that complete the picture. Even the assistant stage manager (Jessica Winward) is done up to match the ensemble, leaving no detail untouched. These production elements, alongside such tight ensemble work, lend verisimilitude to the entire engagement, allowing us to be drawn into this familiar story with fresh ears.

The beauty of Kiely's direction here is that he does not attempt to create a backstory behind the characters at the microphone. Too often in staged radio plays there is a play-behind-the-play, a *Noises Off*, where the story is often an afterthought to some intrigue among the cast. In this case, we get a simple, but honest involvement as actors who are not at the mic (and no one gets to rest for long, often switching characters mid-sentence with a verbal acuity that is not only difficult to pull off with precision but can often result in a pained look of concentration) are listening with a relaxed joy. The cast is just as immersed as we are, sympathetic as young George saves Richard Noble's pharmacist from accidentally poisoning a customer, or rooting for Madeleine Lambert's Mary Hatch to finally convince George to drop his walls and confess his attraction. It's a nimble and well-rehearsed cast (who, admittedly have scripts in their hands for the duration, allowing for an ease of mind that may not otherwise be as forthcoming in a memorized performance) whose charm and wit is infectious.

While everyone has several chances to shine here, the vocal standouts (aside from Noble's rich-as-molasses baritone) tend to be the women; Lambert's shifts from pouty schoolgirl to world-weary mother prompt one to see the show again and listen with eyes closed.

Announcer/Accompanist Emily Turtle juggles several tasks, but her vocal renditions of the youngest Bailey child are adorable enough to give Baby Yoda a run for the cutest thing we've seen in December 2019. Lynsey Ford's Violet is a treat and her energy makes her a joy to watch as well as hear.

Jeff Church looks as if he were born in this era and slots in so perfectly that it's easy to overlook his vocal gymnastics. Church also shines during the customized radio jingles, performed live in between acts of the story. Aside from Greenwood Credit Union, the highlight commercial is for Rhode Island College, where Church affably flubs the name of the institution several times to great effect. Fred Sullivan, Jr. shows off his considerable experience, bouncing between Clarence the angel, Henry Potter, and a hard-bitten policeman at the turn of a dime. And while Estrella gets the star turn here as George, eliciting our sympathies even when he's at his worst, one cannot give enough credit to Foley artist DJ Potter, whose octopus-like performance of the sound effects from "The Twelve Days of Christmas" sets the pace for the entire production. Without these homemade, jerry-rigged sounds, radio would have no life beyond the recitation of words, and seeing this craft played out live is always a wonderful treat.

It's a most difficult task to make hard work look not only easy, but joyful, and this production welcomes us in with open arms and a cup of good cheer without coming across as smarmy or ingratiating. It's a simple show with a simple message - be a good neighbor, be a good person - but the afterglow is as powerful as any Dickens or Messiah can deliver this season. It's a wonderful show.

*The Gamm Theatre presents It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play, through Dec 22. 1245 Jefferson Blvd, Warwick. For tickets and more information, call 401-723-4266 or visit [gammtheatre.org](http://gammtheatre.org).*