

OSTC Proves It's a Wonderful Life



'Tis the season when many turn to theater for a little Christmas cheer. Locally, we are fortunate to have several wonderful options; Trinity's *A Christmas Carol*, Festival Ballet's *The Nutcracker*, and, this year, add Ocean State Theatre's *It's a Wonderful Life* to your Christmas "must see" list.

Based on the beloved 1946 film starring Jimmy Stewart, this holiday musical tells the familiar story of George Bailey looking back over his life with a growing sense of regret. It seems all his good deeds, while enriching the lives of many, have left him and his family in a very precarious position. Wishing he had never been born and contemplating a Christmas Eve suicide, his guardian angel Clarence suddenly appears and shows him what life in his hometown of Bedford Falls would have been like without him.

Like the movie, the musical does not really indulge in all that Christmassy cheer until the very end, with George's selfless generosity representing the true spirit of Christmas. And, while OSTC's production starts slowly, it does grow on you. Act I runs long, over an hour, and seems to be missing something — energy, color? But things do pick-up in Act II, especially during the final scenes with several extremely powerful and wonderfully sang musical numbers.

Much of Act I occurs in the streets of Bedford Falls and the Bailey Building and Loan offices. The set is very minimal and stark, opting for darker color schemes with painted scrims and silhouettes of houses. During a park scene, only a bench and two street lamps sit in the middle of the stage (perhaps I have become spoiled by OSTC's usually elaborate sets?). Though the set designers do rise to the occasion cleverly converting a bridge into a riverside shack.

In addition to lacking color, Act I feels slow at times. The scenes with Clarence speaking to Joseph, the head of guardian angels, bring things to a halt. Though Joseph serves as a narrator of sorts, his exchanges with Clarence and the subplot of Clarence attempting to get his angel wings seem to compete against George's story, though Clarence works much better when interacting with George in Act II.

There is a nice burst of energy during the Bedford Falls High School reunion dance featuring a wonderful Charleston highlighted by Taylor Elise Rector as Violet displaying a nice voice along with some nifty dance moves. "Bless You, George Bailey" is also a hoot, hilariously spoofing the famous

Italian opera song "O Sole Mio," performed nicely by Stefani Wood and Rudy Sanda as the Italian couple, the Martinis.

Act II opens several years later with George married to early love interest Mary; the two also have four children. Things appear to be going well. The Bailey Building and Loan is prospering; Bailey park is sprawling with development; and, George's brother Harry is returning from war as a hero, just recently being awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. But things are not what they seem, as Potter, George's nemesis, reminds him, "Being kind hasn't gotten you very far." Thus setting the stage for George's prophetic meeting with Clarence.

Act II also features another impressive dance sequence "Pottersville," a fictionalized representation of Bedford Fall's underbelly. The choreography, while understated, effectively depicts the seediness of a red light district without being overly gratuitous (this is a family show!)

Peter Tedeschi is deliciously evil as Potter, out-Scrooging even Scrooge, rubbing his hands in a chilling manner while teasingly singing "Tell Me What You Want" and later in "Go Ahead and Run." These are two of the show's finer musical numbers, both accompanied by the same ominous sounding score.

Jeff Canter (Clarence) comes off initially as being a bit too animated. But, his character is described as having the "IQ of a rabbit and the faith of a child," in which case he performs admirably. He is also able to show-off some pretty good pipes late in the show during "Second Class Angel" and the reprise of "It's a Wonderful Life," one of the musical's moving closing scenes.

As George Bailey, Kevin Cirone does a fine job. His manner throughout is even and tempered, until he eventually loses it, doing so in a very convincing manner. He too has a very pleasant singing voice, on full display during "My Life," another of the musical's powerful final scenes. It is off-putting, though, at times when he seems to be struggling with either trying to sound like Jimmy Stewart or not to sound like him.

Melissa McKamie is illuminating as Mary. In addition to having a terrific singing voice, she projects a natural charm and ease. She shows wonderful range in "My George Bailey" and delivers a heartfelt "My Future." She also shines in "It's a Wonderful Life," a touching duet with Cirone, capping off a truly wonderful performance.

OSTC's production of It's a Wonderful Life runs through December 27 at their Jefferson Street theater. For tickets or more information visit oceanstatetheatre.org.