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YOU ARE AT: [Home](#) » [THEATRE](#) » [THEATRE: IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY](#)



## THEATRE: IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY

BY KAREN SALKIN ON DECEMBER 18, 2018

THEATRE

### IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY

In this busy end-of-year season, Mr. X and I really hassled to see this very limited-run show at the Pasadena Playhouse. And we're so glad we did!

Before I spin my little personal yarn about this holiday tale, I'm telling you right up front—go see *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*! It's a stage version of an old-timey radio broadcast of the classic movie, and it's here for only a week, so if you have to give-up reading the rest of my review to rush to order your tickets, I will understand.

Now, before my actual review, here's why this time-honored story means so much to me: Before Mr. X and I had our beloved toy poodle Clarence, the Singing Dog, we had another



(L-R) Jeff Gardner, Rob Nagle, Ryun Yu, Haneefah Wood, Rebecca Mozo, and Simon Helberg. Photo by Brick Patrick, as is the one at the top of this page.

absolutely adorable, precious companion, Bud. Viewers of *Karen's Restaurant Revue* loved that little ball of white fluff. Bud shockingly passed away at only four years old, and I knew right away that if we ever got another dog, we would name him after Bud.

So, of course, since Bud was now an angel, and our favorite angel is Clarence from Frank Capra's film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, that would be his name. So, we had the name before we had the actual dog. *Three years* before we got the dog, actually!

There's so much more to that story, which is too long to write. But it's a good one! So hopefully I'll tell it on my YouTube Channel soon. I'm so sorry, but I ran out of time to shoot a video to accompany this review. (But, if you sat near me in the show the other day, and heard me crying hysterically towards the end, when Clarence gets his wings, I apologize. I tried hard to hold it in, but it gets me every time. Maybe the lovely theatre usherettes should hand-out tissue packets for sensitive audience members such as myself.)

The Pasadena Playhouse had done a similar production to this one last year, of *Miracle On 34th Street*, and I loved it so much that I was wondering if *It's a Wonderful Life* could live up to *that* high standard. And...it totally does! It even throws in a surprise gorgeous visual in the last twenty minutes or so. (The whole show is only eighty minutes long, really exactly, with no intermission.) And they did *this* one with just *five* actors!!!

Only one of them is a "name," (Simon Helberg from *Big Bang Theory*), but the entire quintet lives up to the challenge of doing multiple character voices, (in most cases,) and making them charming and entertaining. And *different* from each other! (I can actually do multiple voices myself—a *girl* from Brooklyn and a *truck driver*...from Brooklyn.)

I give Simon a lot of credit for tackling this iconic Jimmy Stewart role. It can not be fun knowing that your performance will be compared to that of the master, but I advise everyone to take *his* "George Bailey" on its own merits because, let's face it, folks, *no one* is the beloved Jimmy



(L-R) Jeff Gardner, Rob Nagle, Haneefah Wood, Ryun Yu, Rebecca Mozo, and Simon Helberg. Photo by Brick Patrick.



Simon Helberg. Photo by Brick Patrick.

Stewart. But Simon makes it work. And his entrance is adorable, and so him. (And, on a shallow note, his stardom gives this presentation some extra panache. And after watching *Big Bang Theory* for all eleven years, it was interesting to see him work in person. I'm sure you'll all appreciate him, as well.)

Rob Nagle and Ryun Yu voice *all* the male roles—I repeat *all*—(outside of Simon's "George,") with gusto and definition. And in addition, Rob masterfully plays the host of the fictional radio program that's presenting this production. Rebecca Mozo is a perfect concerned wife, and Haneefah Wood is not only rocking one of the most gorgeous bracelets I've ever coveted, but she plays the little girl, Zuzu, so well that there's no need for a child actor this year. I actually had to look twice to see if that voice was indeed

coming from her!

Speaking of looking, this is the one show in town during which you can even close your eyes for a bit, to feel what it would be like to hear it on the radio back then.

But don't do it for long or you will miss the most fascinating aspect of this production—the before-our-eyes foley (sound effects) work. Jeff Gardner is great at creating all kinds of realistic sounds out of everyday items. What he does is truly an art. Most people aren't even aware of it, but I helped-out on a movie back in the day, (don't ask!), so my love of all that ingenuity started early. I think many of you will be amazed by Jeff's maneuvers on this stage.

I loved the simple-yet-clever set, which started-off the warm feelings as soon as we entered the theatre. (I'm surprised that there's no set design credit in the program, so I don't know to



(L-R) Jeff Gardner, Simon Helberg, Rebecca Mozo, Rob Nagle, and Ryun Yu. Photo by Brick Patrick.



Photo by Karen Salkin.

whom to give the kudos.)

And I really adored the real-time clock high on the set wall, a bit under the “Applause” sign, especially since time-obsessed moi did not wear a watch that day. (It didn’t go with my holiday jewelry ensemble. Come on, don’t you all know by now that I’m shallow?) And, I don’t know if this is on purpose or not, but I so appreciate that the clock disappears in the part where George Bailey hasn’t existed. Such a clever touch if they meant it.

Adding to the fun is the old-time commercials that the cast does as breaks in the radio program, complete with jingles-singing. I had to look-up “Duck’s Toilet Cake” to see if it was a





(L-R) Jeff Gardner, Rob Nagle, Haneefah Wood, Rebecca Mozo, Simon Helberg, and Ryun Yu. Photo by Brick Patrick.

real product back then, but had no luck. So, if they made that one up just for this show, they got me.



The courtyard festiveness. Photo by Karen Salkin.

The good feelings and holiday spirit continued for many of the guests even after the show. We noticed a lot of them milling around the patio last Sunday afternoon, when we saw *It's a Wonderful Life*. I don't think I've ever been to the Pasadena Playhouse on a regular show day, (I had to miss this

opening night because I was, once again, overbooked,) and it was fascinating to see just how happy and upbeat everyone was. Snacks and holiday souvenirs were being sold out there, and there were tables and chairs to enjoy it all on, which I've never seen out there before. And the courtyard featured a gigantic and beautiful Christmas tree, with colorful statues of presents all around it. It's all so festive! (But how did they get it up in that fountain location?! Did they take down the sculpture in the center of it for the tree? I have *got* to know!)

But I *do* already know which show they should do *next* year; I can't believe that I have to wait another eleven months to see if I am correct. (And, if they want to hire me as a consultant, I can guarantee you that it will be a fun one. Just sayin'.)

In the meantime, do not miss *this* show this week—it's a wonderful addition to your holiday activities!

***It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* running through December 23, 2018**

**Pasadena Playhouse 39 South El Molino Avenue Pasadena 626-356-**

**7529 [www.PasadenaPlayhouse.org](http://www.PasadenaPlayhouse.org)**

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