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REVIEWS



Jeff Gardner, Rob Nagle, Ryun Yu, Haneefah Wood, Rebecca Mozo and Simon Helberg in Joe Landry's *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* at the Pasadena Playhouse. (Photo by Brick Patrick)

It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play

Reviewed by Terry Morgan

Pasadena Playhouse

Through December 23

It's sort of remarkable that the film *It's a Wonderful Life* has remained a beloved holiday perennial. I mean, it's the story of a man so beaten down by his existence that he requires a literal *deus ex machina* to prevent him from committing suicide. Holiday flicks don't get much cheerier than that! And yet, it's a brilliant movie on every level, more cathartic and moving because of the hero's struggle. The new production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* retains many of the original film's quirky delights but speeds through the drama so quickly that its power is somewhat diminished.

On Christmas Eve 1946, five actors gather at the studios of WBFR, to perform the "Playhouse of the Air" production of *It's a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey (Simon Helberg) always wanted to leave his small town of Bedford Falls, travel the world and do big things, but kindness and duty compelled him to stay put for the benefit of others. He runs his deceased father's building and loan company, keeping the people of the town solvent and out of the clutches of the rich, grasping Mr. Potter (Rob Nagle). But when disaster strikes and George thinks he can no longer provide for his wife Mary (Rebecca Mozo) and his kids, let alone save the town, he's not sure he's worth anything anymore, until the supernatural intervenes.

As George, Helberg doesn't really connect to the deeper emotions of his character. He gets better in the play's final third, when things get more dramatic — but essentially this is an unconvincing performance. As Mary, Mozo channels Donna Reed's cool charm, though this adaptation doesn't give her character enough to do.

Ryun Yu is amusing as both rich friend Sam Wainwright and the wannabe angel Clarence. Haneefah Wood, utilizing sharp, specific vocal characterizations, proves expert as the flirty school friend Violet and the tiny child Zuzu. But it is Nagle as both the main narrator and the tyrannical Potter who runs away with the show; this actor uses his sonorous voice to excellent effect, whether he's simply recounting the story or, as the mean banker, growling at underlings with ill-tempered panache. Foley artist Jeff Gardner supplies live sound effects that seem professional enough but come off as less striking or vital than one would expect.

Director Cameron Watson gets solid work from most of his ensemble and provides some pleasing visuals. One such moment is a sudden reveal of a backdrop of stars; another equally striking one comes when George, alone in the dark under a single spotlight, has an important revelation. Joe Landry's adaptation of the screenplay has plenty of humor — for example, when the host congratulates the L.A. audience for "braving the weather," or our viewing of a couple of funny commercials, one for an anti-dandruff product and the other for "toilet cake."

Watson has stripped the story down, though, from a two-hour-plus film to an eighty-minute play, and some of the material's resonance is lost. Also, the gimmick of "radio actors" doing the show, each one with their own 1940s persona, is quickly abandoned, which makes one wonder why it was necessary in the first place.

There is plenty to like in this production, and Helberg's fans from *The Big Bang Theory* will certainly enjoy the opportunity to see the popular actor onstage.

Pasadena Playhouse, 39 South El Molino Ave., Pasadena; Tues.-Fri., 8:30 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m. & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. & 7 p.m.; through Dec. 23. www.PasadenaPlayhouse.org. Running time: approximately one hour and 20 minutes, with no intermission.