

"It's a Wonderful Life" at Playcrafters, but Not a Wonderful Script

Written by Mike Schulz

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Your enjoyment of the stage version of *It's a Wonderful Life* – at least the James W. Rogers adaptation currently playing at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre – will likely depend on your familiarity with the classic film. I'm guessing that those who don't already know the story will get more out of the experience than those who do, but how many of us, exactly, does that leave?

If, like me, you're so well acquainted with Frank Capra's 1946 work that you can recite entire passages of it verbatim, the Barn Theatre production might strike you as sincere but clunky. Yet that has very little to do with Playcrafters' presentation. Rogers' script works so mightily to replicate the experience of the movie that it's practically nonexistent as a *play*. You wind up feeling sympathy for the actors, because they can't hope to compete with our memories of James Stewart, Donna Reed, and company – who could? – yet Rogers doesn't let us *forget* the Capra film for a second. Not only that, but it's pretty clear that he doesn't *want* us to.

Rogers is shameless about exploiting our fond feelings toward the movie. Since there's no way a stage version can show, for instance, Harry falling through the ice and George coming to his rescue, or the students at the high-school dance leaping into the gymnasium pool, we are instead *told* of these events, which mires the work in incessant exposition, much of which falls on the angel Clarence's shoulders. Clarence's recounting of that gym scene is particularly irksome, because it really doesn't affect the *story* at all; in Capra's movie, the falling-in-the-pool sequence was merely a visual gag – a great one – and its retelling here only serves to explain why, in George's and Mary's subsequent "Buffalo Gals" scene, Mary's wearing a towel. (And *that's* only in the script to cater to the audience's memories of Donna Reed wearing a towel.)

The script replicates Capra's scenes, and even his staging, to a frighteningly faithful degree, even when you think there's no possible way it *can*. When, in this production, you realize that the first romantic embrace between George and Mary (played by Kevin Brake and Ashley Hoskins) will take place on Mary's front porch rather than in her living room, it's rather jarring –

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you mean they're not going to get all mushy with their ears pressed against the same phone? Ah, but Rogers is two steps ahead of us. He has Mary drag the phone, with what would have to be the time period's longest cord, out on the porch, so the lovers' union can happen just as we remember it. As imagined by the playwright, the

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material hasn't been re-thought for the stage in the slightest, and that makes this adaptation seem not only deeply unnecessary but cheap, and even cynical. "You liked the movie?" the work seems to shout. "Good, because the play is the

exact same thing

!"

Except, of course, it isn't. Without the lightning-quick, rat-a-tat delivery of Capra's ensemble, we begin to notice how *wordy* the work is – whole reams of the original's dialogue have been left intact – and how static so many of its scenes are; here, when George and Mr. Potter discuss their potential business agreement, you realize it was only speed and editing that kept the same sequence in Capra's movie from feeling inert. Rogers' play is like a funhouse-mirror version of

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. It's familiar, but it's stretched out, and it's disorienting, and it doesn't really resemble what it's supposed to.

Among Playcrafters' earnest cast members, several manage to make impressions that aren't directly linked with their cinematic counterparts. Portraying cops Bert and Ernie, Pat MacKenna and Jim Fuller give their brief scenes some snap – you wish there was more for them to do – and Greg Bouljon, as Mr. Welch, and Spiro Bruskas, who plays Mr. Martini, perform with hammy relish. (Earlier this year, Bruskas did this same routine, just as enjoyably, in the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's *You Can't Take It with You*.) As everyone's favorite rat bastard, Mr. Potter, Howard Johnson elongates his vowels and hisses his lines with comedic contempt, but his performance isn't merely a Lionel Barrymore imitation – Johnson gives the role his own desiccated spin. And the casting of Reggie Jarrell as Clarence is more inspired than anything to be found in Rogers' script. With Jarrell – who makes Clarence a smooth-talking hipster with stand-up-comic rhythms – in the role, the lines now have

surprise

, and his opening scenes portend a frisky, imaginative

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. Too bad he's eventually turned into a run-of-the-mill narrator figure, a Stage Manager with no *Our Town* to refer to.

Directorially, Tom Morrow pulls off some lovely scene transitions – he even makes Clarence's awkward conversations with George visually interesting – and the impressive costumes and lighting help give the show an elegant design. And the production certainly has the requisite sweetness of spirit. Its heart is in the right place, and that makes it all the more heart*breaking* to discover how unsatisfying this

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actually is. The lazy script overshadows the work that was put into its presentation; Playcrafters'

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features everything you love about the Capra classic and, sadly, a whole lot less.

It's a Wonderful Life runs through November 20 at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre; tickets are available at (309)762-0330