



Artwork by
Scott McKowen

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's
production of

It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play

Adapted by Joe Landry
Directed by Doug West

Know-the-Show
Audience Guide
researched and written by
the Education Department of

The
SHAKESPEARE
Theatre of
New Jersey





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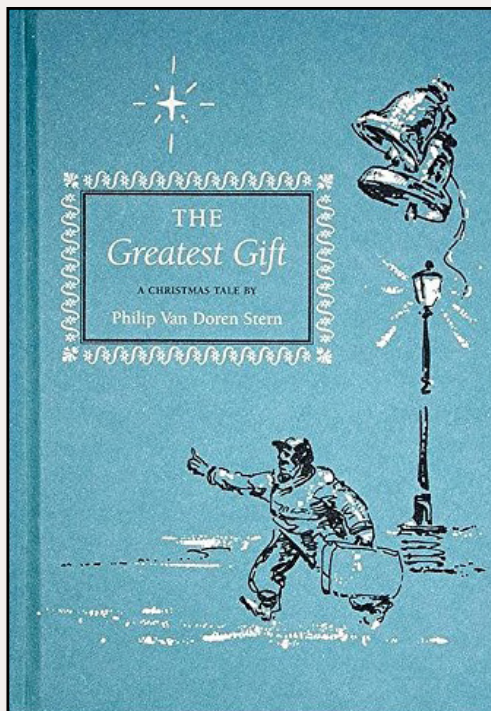


From Christmas Card to Holiday Classic An Introduction to *It's A Wonderful Life*

In 1938, Philip Van Doren Stern, a writer primarily known for his books on the American Civil War, was struck with the idea for a short story. It had come to him in a dream; complete and fully formed. Between 1938 and 1943, he

took a handful of passes at a rough draft but was never quite satisfied. It wasn't until the spring of 1943 that he felt comfortable enough with a draft to show it to his agent. According to his notes, the agent shopped the short manuscript from "The Saturday Evening Post to farm journals," and not a single soul was interested in publishing his unique fantasy story. By this time, Stern had fallen in love with this short story. It centered around a bank teller named George who is given a

A reproduction of the original printing of Philip Van Doren Stern's *The Greatest Gift*.



strange gift by a mysterious man as he stands on a lonely bridge, contemplating suicide one Christmas Eve. Resigned to the fact the story would never be published, but determined to share it, Philip Van Doren Stern had approximately 200 copies printed as small pamphlets, and *The Greatest Gift* was sent out to his friends and family as a sort of Christmas card that December.

In March of 1944, Mr. Stern received a telegram from his agent, saying that a well-known Hollywood studio was interested in acquiring the rights to *The Greatest Gift*. The studio paid \$10,000 for Mr. Stern's "Christmas Card" and the production process for what would become *It's a Wonderful Life* had begun.

It was Frank Capra who came across the story and saw its potential. Capra had just been honorably discharged from the military in 1943, and a friend had forwarded him one of the pamphlets that Stern had printed. Capra reached out to fellow WWII vet and Hollywood notable, Jimmy Stewart, with the idea of Stewart starring in the picture. Stewart read the short story and by the spring of 1945, Capra had his George Bailey.

The Greatest Gift is a succinct and moving short story, but Capra knew it would require serious fleshing out and expansion to be a major motion picture. He brought in well-known screenwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett (*The Thin Man*, *Father of the Bride*, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*) to write the screenplay. Filming began on April 15, 1946 and on December 20, 1946 *It's a Wonderful Life*, starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed, premiered

Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich, screenwriters for *It's a Wonderful Life*.





at The Globe Theatre in New York City. The movie was well received critically and was nominated for five Academy Awards that year, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor. Though it did not receive any of these awards, it did receive a special Technical Achievement Award for the process by which it created the snow effects on camera. Capra also received a Golden Globe for Best Direction for the film. When reflecting back on his career, Jimmy Stewart admitted that of all the films he had worked on, *It's a Wonderful Life* was his favorite. Despite being considered one of the most critically acclaimed films of all time and being ranked in the top 20 best films of all-time, RKO Studios, who produced the film, recorded a box office loss of over \$500,000 on the original release of the picture. Though not the complete failure that some may state, it was a great disappointment for the studio.



In the late 1940s and early 1950s there were three "Radio Play" versions of the movie that were produced, each featuring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed reprising their roles as George and Mary, but after a time it faded from the public consciousness. In 1974, due to a clerical error,



the company holding the film rights neglected to renew them. Mr. Stern had renewed his story rights on *The Greatest Gift* in 1971, but the movie and its images had entered the public domain. It was during this time that it became the ubiquitous "Christmas movie" that many consider it today. Television stations were free to show the movie without having to secure the rights, which meant they could show it whenever they wished without paying a licensing fee to the studio. It also meant that companies involved in the burgeoning home video market of the late 1970s and 1980s could all release their own versions of the classic film in an attempt to cash in on its newfound popularity. After a court case in 1993 the rights were reacquired by Paramount and the movie was removed from the public domain.

This particular adaptation (there are at least three other stage adaptations of the film) was adapted and written by Joe Landry and first produced at TheatreWorks in New Milford, Connecticut in 1996.



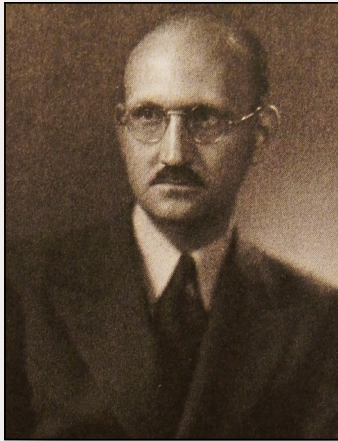
FAR LEFT: Original marketing poster for *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946.

LOWER LEFT: Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed in the Frank Capra film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

ABOVE RIGHT: John Keabler and Susan Maris in the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's Main Stage production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. Photo: Jerry Dalia, 2017.



About the Creators



Philip Van Doren Stern.

PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

Philip Van Doren Stern was born in 1900 in Wyalusing, Pennsylvania and grew up in Brooklyn New York City. After graduating from Rutgers in 1924, he began to work as a designer and editor in the publishing industry compiling anthologies and short stories of famous authors such as Abraham Lincoln and Edgar Allen Poe. He was best known, however, as the writer of over 40 books on the Civil War and later as the author of a short story entitled *The Greatest Gift*.

"The Greatest Gift is as compelling today as it was nearly seventy years ago because, in this story lies a powerful message about the significance of the lives of all of us. As for its author Philip Van Doren Stern, I borrow a line from George Bailey's brother Harry: 'He was the richest man in town.'"

- Marguerite Stern Robinson

FRANK CAPRA

Frank Capra was born in Sicily, Italy in 1897 and moved to Los Angeles at five years old. After high school, Capra joined the army and his first experience with film was a short documentary film entitled *La Visita Dell'Incrociatore Italiano Libya a San Francisco* that he filmed at 24 years old. When he heard



Frank Capra.

that a new movie studio was opening in San Francisco, he lied about his filmmaking experience in order to get a job. He directed his first motion picture in 1927 called *For the Love of Mike* starring then unknown actress Claudette Colbert. Capra went on to become one of the most famous directors of the 1930s and 1940s winning three Oscars for Best Director for *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, and *You Can't*

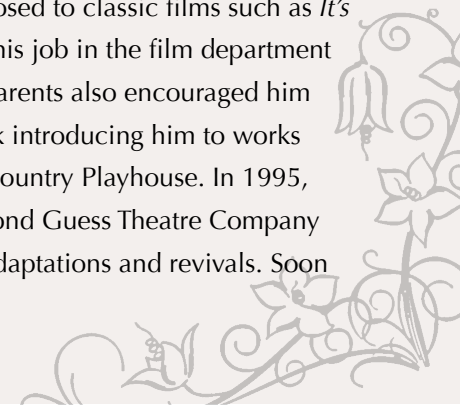
Take It With You. In 1944 a friend gave Capra a copy of *The Greatest Gift* by Philip Van Doren Stern and he immediately set about acquiring the rights. Two years later in December 1946, the film premiered at the Globe Theatre in New York. Unfortunately the film did not do well at the box office. However, this did not alter Capra's view of the film or the story he had set out to illustrate:

"It was the story I had been looking for all my life! What an idea. The kind of an idea that when I get old and sick and scared and ready to die, they'd still say, 'He made The Greatest Gift.'"

- Frank Capra

JOE LANDRY

From a young age playwright Joe Landry was exposed to classic films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Lady Vanishes*, through his job in the film department at his local library in Fairfield, Connecticut. His parents also encouraged him to go to the theatre both at home and in New York introducing him to works by Roundabout Theatre Company and Westport Country Playhouse. In 1995, Joe founded his own theatre company called Second Guess Theatre Company which produced over two dozen original plays, adaptations and revivals. Soon





afterwards, a friend asked him to adapt *It's a Wonderful Life* for her high school theatre class and from there it was produced by TheatreWorks in New Milford, Connecticut and had its first professional production at the Westport Country Playhouse. Landry has since written other radio plays such as *Vintage Hitchcock: A Live Radio Play*, an adaptation of *Reefer Madness*, and *War of the Worlds: A Live Radio Play* an adaptation of the novel of the same name by H.G. Wells.

Joe Landry

"Bringing Frank Capra's classic film to the stage began almost twenty years ago when longtime friend and teacher Frances Kondziela asked me to pen an adaptation for her high school ensemble. After the premiere of this original incarnation, the piece was produced by TheatreWorks in New Milford, Connecticut, and was then chosen for its first professional production at the legendary Westport Country Playhouse. When the budget of this (still full-scale, literally putting the film on stage) production skyrocketed and was dropped from the slate, the concept of staging the piece as a live radio play of the period was born. This radio play adaptation was originally mounted at Stamford Center for the Arts in 1996, and has been performed there since with great success. It was at Stamford that the play was fine tuned and took shape as the piece published here. Through word of mouth alone, productions have since taken place around the country, including the noted Chicago premiere at American Theatre Company. My thanks to all those who have been involved since the beginning of the this journey."

*- Joe Landry, August, 2006
from the introduction to the script*



ABOVE: John Keabler (George) and Andy Patterson (Clarence).



LEFT: Tina Stafford (Ma Hatch), Susan Maris (Mary), John Keabler (George).

RIGHT: Leevell Javon Johnson (Freddy Fillmore, the announcer).

All production photos from the 2017 Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. Photos: Jerry Dalia.





It's a Wonderful Life

A Short Synopsis

Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil the plot, consider skipping this section.

Set in the fictional live broadcast studio of WBFR in New York City, *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* presents the story of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* in the form of a 1940s radio play. At the top of the show, each actor is introduced to the audience and the radio play begins:

George Bailey is in trouble. It's Christmas Eve in Bedford Falls, New York and he is standing on the edge of a bridge, wondering what his life is worth and contemplating ending it all.



Clarence Oddbody, Angel Second Class is called to speak with his supervisor, Joseph, about a man named George Bailey. Clarence, eager to please Joseph and hopeful that he might finally earn his coveted wings, agrees to take the case. Joseph offers Clarence some

background on George's life in an attempt to help with the case, and through Clarence and Joseph we jump through George's life, seeing the high and low points that have lead him to this fateful moment on the bridge.

We see George as a boy, saving his younger brother from drowning, dreaming of adventure, and preventing his heartbroken boss, Mr. Gower, from accidentally poisoning one of his pharmacy patients. We see him meet, court and fall in love with his future wife, Mary Hatch. We're with him through the death of his father, the depression inspired "run" on his family's Building and Loan business, and his run-ins with Mr. Potter, the meanest man in Bedford Falls.

All of this leads George to the edge of the bridge, and his contemplation of the icy water below. He believes he's worth more dead than alive, and in a moment of desperation, wishes out loud that he had never been born. Clarence uses his powers as George's guardian angel to grant that particular wish, and George is given the rare gift of seeing just how much of an impact one good man can have on the people and the world around him. Seeing what would happen to the people and the town he loves if he hadn't been born, George experiences a profound change of heart and begs Clarence to undo his wish. His guardian angel complies, and George is returned to the reality he had previously turned his back on, armed with a renewed sense of his self-worth and a determination to make the most of the life and the opportunities he's been gifted with.

FUN FILM FACTS

-The film was originally scheduled to be released in January of 1947, but the date was pushed to December of 1946 so it would be eligible for the 1946 Academy Awards.

-In May of 1947, the FBI issued a memo insinuating that the film may be Communist propaganda, due to its depiction of wealthy banker, Henry Potter, as the villain.

-It was Frank Capra's first film after spending time in the US Army making documentaries and propaganda films during WWII.



Who's Who in the Radio Play

GEORGE BAILEY - The hero of the story, George is a man with big dreams of travel and adventure. When circumstances conspire against his plans, George remains in his small hometown, where he runs his father's business and starts a family. Unfortunate events eventually lead him to question the value of his very existence, believing he's worth more dead than alive.

"I want to do something big, something important."

MARY HATCH - Mary is a young woman who has been smitten with George ever since she was a girl. Her faith in George never wavers and she eventually marries him.

*"Remember the night we broke the windows in this old house?
This is what I wished for."*

UNCLE BILLY - Uncle Billy is George's uncle and partner at the Building & Loan. A gentle but forgetful man, Billy misplaces an \$8,000 deposit which could prove to be the end of the Baileys and the Building & Loan.

"George, what's the combination to the safe?"

HARRY BAILEY - George's kid brother, Harry seems to live the life George dreams of. It is Harry who goes off to college, who becomes a war hero, who marries and moves out of town despite promises to come home to take over the family business.

"George... You've been holding the bag here for four years, and... well, I won't let you down."

HENRY POTTER - The richest and meanest man in town, Potter has his hands in virtually every business, bank, and institution, except the Bailey Building & Loan. Despite several attempts to crush George's business, Potter has always failed, until Uncle Billy mistakenly gives Potter an \$8,000 deposit

wrapped in a newspaper. Knowing the damage Billy's mistake would have on the Building & Loan and George, Potter keeps the money, certain of his triumph over the Baileys.

"I'm on a very tight schedule - a family to evict at three."

CLARENCE ODDBODY - Clarence is an Angel Second Class looking to get his wings. He is sent to stop George from taking his life.

"Remember, no man is a failure who has friends."

JOSEPH - "The Superintendent of Angels," Joseph assigns Clarence to George's case, and leads him through the moments of George's life that have led him to the bridge on that fateful Christmas Eve.

"Well, you do a good job with George Bailey, and we'll see about your wings."

OTHER MEMBERS OF THE BEDFORD FALLS COMMUNITY:

Peter and Rose Bailey - George's parents; Peter started the Building & Loan.

Peter, Tommy, Janie, and ZuZu Bailey - George and Mary's children.

Sam Wainright - A local kid who got out of town and made his fortune. As a teenager, he dated Mary.

Violet Bick - A childhood friend of George's who has big dreams of leaving Bedford Falls for a more glamorous life.

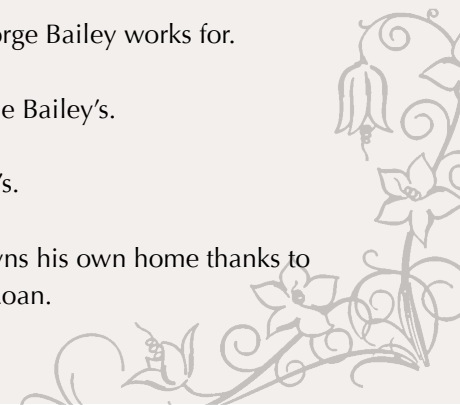
Edwina "Ma" Hatch - Mary's nosey mother.

Mr. Gower - The local pharmacist that young George Bailey works for.

Ernie - The local cab driver and family friend of the Bailey's.

Bert - A police officer in town; friend of the Bailey's.

Giuseppe Martini - Owner of the local bar; he owns his own home thanks to help from George Bailey and the Building & Loan.





The Radio Play

The first radio drama broadcast in the USA was in 1921 when agricultural professors from West Virginia University performed "A Rural Line on Education" on KDKA in Pittsburgh. One year later in 1922, when WGY Schenectady, New York successfully broadcast a full length radio play for the first time (including a cast of actors and live sound effects), radio plays and dramas became a regular feature on the radio. Soon, they were broadcast every week with plays from Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov, and as a result playwrights and dramatists began to write for this new medium too. Perhaps the most famous example is Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds* (an adaptation of H.G. Wells' novel of the same name) which was performed on the radio on October 30, 1938. The performance was so convincing that many people believed that an invasion from Mars was truly happening!

By the 1940s, the radio was an essential item in every household and the radio play and drama continued to thrive. Writers such as Rod Serling, Samuel Beckett, and later Harold Pinter wrote specifically for this medium to great success as well as writing for stage and television. Famous films and novels were also adapted into radio plays such as *It's a Wonderful Life* in 1947 and 1951 with Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed reprising their roles as George and Mary Bailey. Unfortunately, with the invention of the television and its subsequent rise in popularity, the radio became a secondary form of entertainment, as did the radio play.





Foley

The Art of Aural Illusions

Foley Artist is a title given to one who creates specialized sound effects for radio, television, or film. Named after the late Jack Foley who was one of the first to sound artists to augment sound in the film industry (and later radio) when he worked on *Showboat* in 1929, one of the first films to include sound. The use of sound in film was revolutionary at the time but the technology was quite new. Initially, the sounds in a film would rarely sound the same way they do to us in real life. Foley, through continual creation and innovation, had to master new ways to make realistic sound effects and sync them up with the films; everything from slamming doors, car horns, bird songs, train whistles, and even footsteps. It's rumored that he walked 5,000 miles doing "footsteps" alone.

While this may seem like an old fashioned way to produce a desired sound effect in the 21st century, many of Foley's techniques are still used today by artists in the film and recording industries. Once a film is completed, the Foley Artist watches it through and rehearses the sound effects that are needed. Then they go into a studio with props and sound equipment to record the effects. Ultimately, the aim of the Foley Artist is to create an effect so seamless that the audience does not notice that it has been added in post production.

There are three primary categories of Foley effects: footsteps, moves, and specifics.

FOOTSTEPS: Foley studios carry a number of different shoes and surfaces on which to create realistic and unique sounds of footfalls. Surfaces may include wood floors, gravel, marble hallways, etc., all to create the desired sound for that moment.

MOVES: These are more subtle sounds such as clothes swishing or brushing against one another used to elevate the auditory experience of the film.

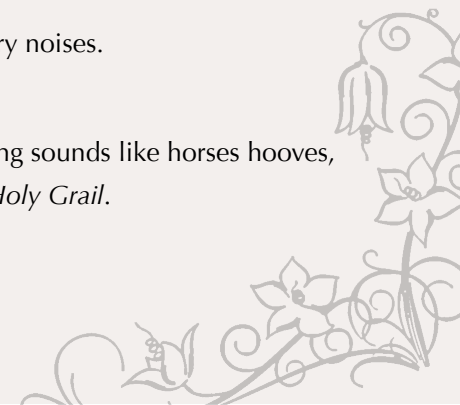
SPECIFICS: These are effects such as doorbells, slamming doors, train whistles, and car engines. Many of these can be achieved digitally today.

Here are some of the effects used in *It's a Wonderful Life*:

1. Shoes in a tray of Corn Flakes to simulate walking on snow.
2. Twisting/cracking a thin piece of wood to simulate the cracking of ice
3. Dropping broken light bulbs into a box with a heavy weight in it to sound like someone throwing a rock through a window.
4. Dropping uncooked lima beans and breaking one open to simulate dropping a pill bottle and then breaking open the capsule to test the medicine inside.
5. Using a rotating wooden drum rubbing against sailcloth (canvas) to sound like the wind. The speed of the rotation can change the pitch and ferocity of the wind.
6. Running a thumb down a small comb to sound like crickets.
7. Constructing small doors (one wooden and one metal), with all the appropriate hardware, handles, etc., to sound like house or car doors.

Famous Foley Effects:

- Frozen romaine lettuce makes bone or head injury noises.
- A pair of gloves sounds like birds wings flapping.
- Coconut shells cut in half and stuffed with padding sounds like horses hooves, which is parodied in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.





Commentary & Criticism

ABOUT THE RADIO PLAY:

"Critic's choice! Preserves the heart of darkness in Capra's fable, making its faux radio version a compelling Christmas show piece." – *Time Out Magazine*

"Terrific! The best holiday choice around! The classic movie retold through this clever faux period broadcast, a genre it seems to fit with remarkable ease. If you cry every time you see the movie, you'll be blubbering away right on cue. Guaranteed. You might well be blubbering more. The kind of old-fashioned, personalized holiday environment that we all crave but usually fail to find. Exceptional! Works beautifully." – *Chicago Tribune*

"In this *Wonderful Life*, the actors begin standing in front of microphones, scripts in hand, but they are soon moving about and interacting in lively, realistic ways, with the help of only the radio-age equivalent of sound design. And it's easy for the audience to get caught up in the fun of creating reality from obvious artifice." – Anita Gates, *The New York Times*

FROM AFTERWORD TO *THE GREATEST GIFT*:

"My father would be very happy to know that *The Greatest Gift* and *It's a Wonderful Life* live on—even in our day. People today still think of, cite, write, argue, and perhaps learn from those living in the fictional Bedford Falls so many decades ago. The film and the story on which it is based have reached and influenced millions of people. I am one of them... George Bailey, Mr. Potter, Mary, Clarence, Frank Capra, and of course my father have had a major effect on my life in microbanking—which continues still."

– Marguerite Stern Robinson

ABOUT THE FILM:

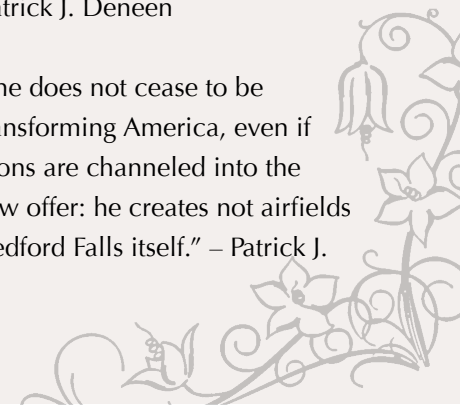
"Bedford Falls is a middle-class town, but there are working-class people—such as Ernie and Martini—who can barely afford a house. Without George Bailey, the two would wind up living in run-down rental shacks with nothing to show for their blue-collar work. But Potter thinks that the working class should be 'thrifty.' He questions why people can't just be more disciplined and save money, the same way people with means today wonder why anyone would take out something as awful as a payday loan." – Bouree Lam

"*It's a Wonderful Life* is a terrifying, asphyxiating story about growing up and relinquishing your dreams, of seeing your father driven to the grave before his time, of living among bitter, small-minded people. It is a story of being trapped, of compromising, of watching others move ahead and away, of becoming so filled with rage that you verbally abuse your children, their teacher and your oppressively perfect wife. It is also a nightmare account of an endless home renovation." – Wendell Jamieson

"Heroically putting others first, George has both accomplished and gained much of lasting value, from his loving wife and family to the thriving community of homeowners in Bailey Park who no longer rent in the slums of Potter's Field." – Steven D. Greydanus

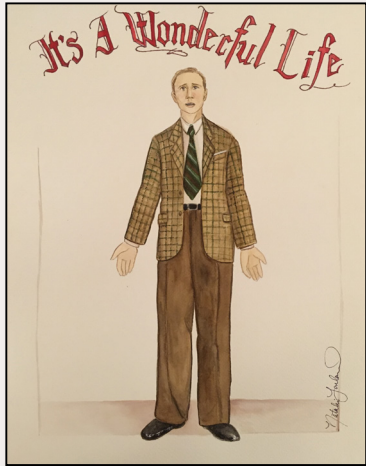
"George represents the vision of post-war America: the ambition to alter the landscape so as to accommodate modern life, to uproot nature and replace it with monuments of human accomplishment, to re-engineer life for mobility and swiftness, one unencumbered by permanence, one no longer limited to a moderate and comprehensible human scale." – Patrick J. Deneen

"While George's grandiose designs are thwarted, he does not cease to be ambitious, and does not abandon the dream of transforming America, even if his field of dreams is narrowed. Rather, his ambitions are channeled into the only available avenue that life and his position now offer: he creates not airfields nor skyscrapers nor modern cities, but remakes Bedford Falls itself." – Patrick J. Deneen

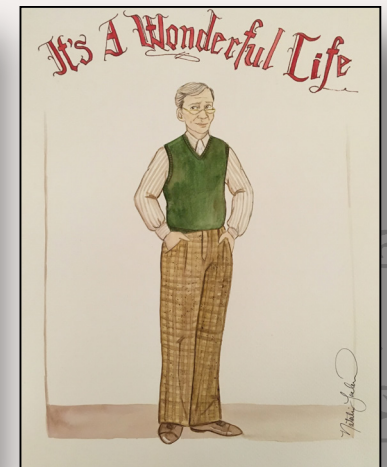
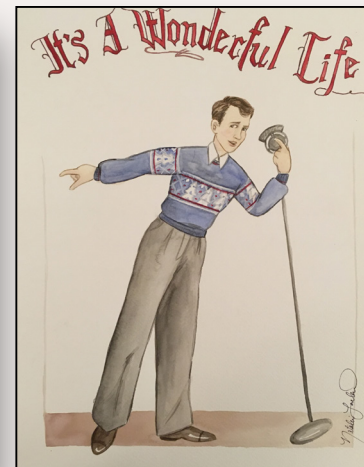
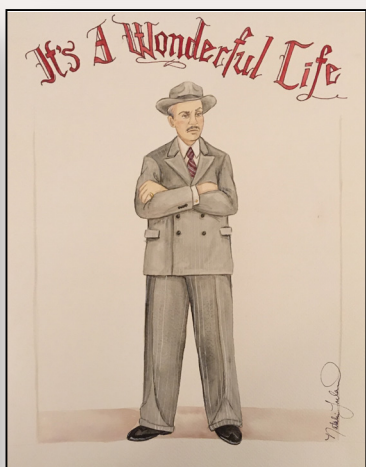
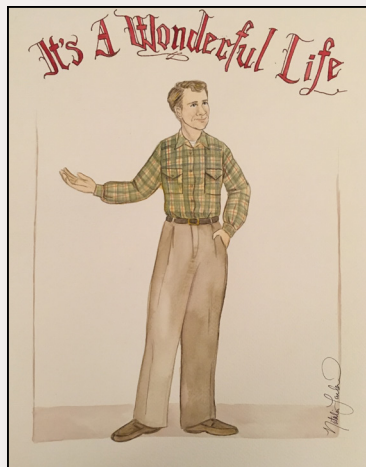




In this Production



Color Set rendering by scenic designer, Charlie Calvert and Costume renderings by Natalie Loveland for the 2017 Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*.





Explore Online

Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart discuss the making of *It's a Wonderful Life* hosted by Frank Capra, Jr.:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhaKfDyRoH4>



"Back on the Old Mic" – a 1938 video illustrating what a radio play looks like in the studio versus what a child hears and imagines as a result:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75tZRA8jdds&t=420s>



An excerpt from *The Dean Martin Show* where Orson Welles narrates a story while Dean Martin attempts to perform the correct Foley sound effects using a variety of props:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypQP7Uf-fc4&t=430s>

