

It's A Wonderful Life (A live Radio Play)

Noble Fool Theatricals

By Dan Zeff

St. Charles - "A Christmas Carol" and "The Nutcracker" can move over. There is a new holiday theater tradition in metropolitan Chicago, a stage version of the iconic 1946 motion picture "It's a Wonderful Life."

At least three theaters will be presenting their versions of the movie classic over the holiday season. They all have the same format, a radio version of the movie set in 1946 with the action located inside a Chicago radio station of the mid 1940's. We get the sound effects man, the radio commercials, the audience warm-up, the post World War II clothing, and, of course, the story of *George Bailey* and how an angel named *Clarence* showed *George* how much he's meant to the people around him.

Noble Fool Theatricals gets a jump on the other theaters, opening its production in early November. The show will be the last under the name of Noble Fool. After six years at the Pheasant Run Resort, the company changes its name, and its identity, to the Fox Valley Repertory in January.

The Noble Fool presentation of "It's a Wonderful Life" departs from the other stage versions in *Joe Landry's* adaptation. There is music in this one and the story is presented as a play within a play, starting with the interaction of the radio actors who soon segway into the characters in the story.

So much for the background. I've waited too long to state that the Noble Fool staging is an absolute charmer, beautifully performed, a perfect balance of nostalgia, comedy, and sentiment. The production even includes a child chorus of five little girls who completely overcame my distaste for children on the stage.

The audience are alerted that this show may be something special by recognizing the name of *Rachel Rockwell* as the director, the same *Rachel Rockwell* who directed "Ragtime" at the *Drury Lane Theatre*, possibly the finest revival of a

musical in Chicagoland theater history. Rockwell presumably had a hand in the flawless casting and the perky flow of a show (that still runs possibly a few minutes too long). Considering that all the actors, young and old, work within the confining space of the radio studio, the performance is agreeably animated and never stagebound, a tribute to Rockwell's sure pacing.

Noble Fool has brought in two of the top actors in the area to head the ensemble. George Keating channels the Jimmy Stewart performance in the movie and even closely resembles Stewart physically. Yet Keating still makes the character his own, avoiding caricature while still preserving the Stewart "ah shucks" drawl. Kennedy plays the station manager as well as the villainous Mr. Potter and other characters. One of the pleasures of the production is watching the performers shift from character to character with the alteration of a vocal inflection. Most members of the audience were born after the golden age of radio, but this is the way it was done two generations ago and it's fun to enjoy how the actors create the world of Bedford Falls, New York, and its inhabitants largely by harnessing the imagination of the listener.

Keating and Kennedy are superbly supported by Tom Clear, Jessie Fisher, and Anna Hammonds as the other actors in the radio play, plus Stirling Joyner as the nimble sound effects man and sometime actor in the story and his teen-aged nephew, played by Jack Sweeney. Special props go to Clear, who is either a fine pianist who also acts well or a fine actor who also is a skilled pianist. Either way he does marvelous double duty.

The novelty of the radio station concept has its pleasures, but the success of the show comes down to the enduring power of the motion picture story. The audience may be diverted by the radio commercials and sound effects and backchat among the actors, but it's the tale of *George Bailey* that grabs the spectator. Once the narrative takes over, the audience gets lost in *George's* life and the radio ambience fades into the background.

Artistic director John Gawlik has done wonders in upgrading the Noble Fool product, as a glance at the behind the scenes artists verifies. The designer team consists of Kevin Depinet (scenery), Josh Horvath (sound), Jesse Klug (lighting),

and Brenda Winstead (costumes). Patrons familiar with the area theater scene will recognize those names as an A list of designers in the entire region.

Hopefully, as Noble Fool moves on to its incarnation as the Fox Valley Repertory, it will keep "It's a Wonderful Life" as an annual tradition. It's a slice of Americana and a slice of holiday spirit audiences will want to enjoy every year.

"It's a Wonderful Life" runs through December 26 at the Noble Fool Theatricals at the Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 East Main Street. Most performances are Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. with several Wednesday matinees added. Tickets are \$29.50 and \$39.50 with dinner packages available. Once again, I recommend the Jambalaya Restaurant for its convenient location to the theater, its casual atmosphere, its reasonable prices, and its delectable spicy chicken wings. Call 630 584 6342 or visit www.ticketmaster.com .

The show gets a rating of four stars. November 2010

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