

## » DON'T MISS

**Up to the challenge**

Young Elk Grove Village actor takes on role of Tiny Tim in "A Christmas Carol" » 34

# ONSTAGE

Jessie Fisher, left, George Keating and Anna Hammonds perform in Noble Fools Theatricals' "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play."

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# A wonderful 'Life'

Noble Fool stages cheery adaptation of holiday classic

By Leah A. Zeldes

Daily Herald Correspondent

Unless you've been living without American TV for the last 40 years or so, you almost certainly know the story of small-town do-gooder George Bailey as told in "It's a Wonderful Life," the beloved, 1946 Frank Capra film starring James Stewart and Donna Reed.

If you adore the original, you'll likely feel the same about "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play," currently in a sweet production at Noble Fool Theatricals in St. Charles. But if the movie gives you the bah humbugs, nothing about this live version — which, if anything, amps up the cuteness — will change your mind.

Except for his lapse into despair, George remains saintly and forbearing;

Mr. Potter remains money-grasping and evil-minded; and Angel Second Class Clarence still twinkles.

This idealistic tale of how one man can make a difference and goodwill can triumph over material wealth was not a great success when the movie premiered. "Practically all the actors involved behave as cutely as pixies," commented *The New Yorker*, describing the movie as "so mincing as to border on baby talk."

It brought in minimal box-office returns as well. Only after the film's copyright lapsed in the 1970s and it began to get regular showings on television did it become a popular holiday tradition.

Adapted by Joe Landry in 1996 from the screenplay of the classic film, "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play"

adds a frame of a 1940s radio show, complete with sound-effects man and piano accompaniment. That conceit doesn't enhance the familiar story much, but it makes it manageable onstage, replacing the movie's dozens of characters with a cast of five who portray radio actors performing a Christmas Eve broadcast of "It's a Wonderful Life" before a live audience, each taking multiple roles.

Noble Fool's production shifts Landry's adaptation from Manhattan to Chicago and heightens the sweetness factor with some youthful additions, including a Methodist-school

"It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play"

★★★★½

See LIFE on page 33

# THE 3

## Holiday fare

Steel Beam Theatre celebrates the season with Meredith Willson's "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas," a show inspired by the film "Miracle on 34th Street," in which a wary mother and her daughter learn to love and trust again with help from a department store Santa and a do-gooder attorney. Artistic Director Donna Steele directs. Show stars Amy Steele, with Geneva's Greg Zawada and Schaumburg's Jamey McDunn as Kriss Kringle.

Opens Saturday, Nov. 20, at 111 W. Main St., St. Charles. (630) 587-8521 or [steel-beamtheatre.com](http://steel-beamtheatre.com).

## Gershwin revue

The Prairie Center for the Arts presents the professional touring production of "S Wonderful," a revue that celebrates the music of George and Ira Gershwin while paralleling the lives of the brothers responsible for classics like "Shall We Dance?" and "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off."

8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 9, at 201 Schaumburg Court, Schaumburg. (847) 895-3600 or [prairiecenter.org](http://prairiecenter.org).

## A little levity

Remy Bumppo Theatre makes a nifty bit of counterprogramming this season with its revival of "The Importance of Being Earnest," Oscar Wilde's comedy of manners about a couple of bachelors who pretend to be men who they are not while pursuing a couple of country girls. David Darlow plays Lady Bracknell in the production, which features ensemble members Annabel Armour, Linda Gillum and Hoffman Estates native Gregory Matthew Anderson.

Greenups begin Wednesday, Nov. 24, at the Greenhouse Theater Center, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave., Chicago. The show opens Nov. 29. (773) 404-7336 or [remybumpo.org](http://remybumpo.org).

— Barbara Vitello

» SHOWS TO SEE

singing ensemble, with their teacher, played by Laura Eilers. Two alternating groups of extra-adorable local girls play the Methodist singers: Leikyn Bravo (12, South Elgin), Megan Graal (11, West Chicago), Amelia Kuhlman (8, St. Charles), Annamarie Schutt (12, South Elgin) and Madysen Simanonis (10, Winfield); and Emily Leahy (9, Elk Grove Village), Kelsey Pettrone (12, LaGrange), Rebecca Roy (13, Geneva), Marie Turner (10, Sleepy Hollow) and Melissa Wickland (12, Schaumburg), who

performed when I saw the show. The kids sing a holiday song and stand in as the Bailey children.

This production also gives the sound man a nephew. Young Stirling Joyner is appealing, but the role doesn't add a great deal to the plot. We're led at the beginning to think he'll be a comic element interrupting the action, yet he's largely extraneous. The local adaptation also adds some fairly straightforward commercials for Fox Valley businesses to Landry's comic, period-style advertisements for hair tonic and soap.

Of course, with such a well-

known story, there's no suspense left whatsoever. The fun stuff comes in the logistics of the radio performance on Kevin Depinet's convincing stage set and the versatility of the cast. Director Rachel Rockwell has assembled a talented group, who sing such songs as "Button Up Your Overcoat" and "Merry American Christmas" along with performing the play within the play.

Jack Sweeney doubles as sound-effects man and actor, rushing back and forth with earnest fervor. George Keating, as the lead actor portraying George Bailey, offers a

resemblance to Stewart with a less laconic style. Dev Kennedy plays the slightly irascible station manager and a variety of voice parts with verve. Anna Hammonds and Jessie Fisher give freshness to the female roles. Tom Clearably plays multiple roles, including Clarence, as well as accompanying beautifully on piano, a highlight of the show.

Like the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play" offers family-friendly, unambiguously upbeat Christmas entertainment, in which you can count on nice people receiving the merit they deserve.

Noble Fool Theatricals at Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 E. Main St., St. Charles, (630) 584-6342, noblefool.org

**Showtimes:** 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays through Dec. 26 with additional 2 p.m. shows Thursdays in December

**Running time:** About two hours with intermission

**Tickets:** \$29.50-\$39.50

**Parking:** Free lot adjoining the theater

**Rating:** All ages

## NEW from page 32

by Jon Steinhagen ("The Teapot Scandals"), opens Sunday, Nov. 21, at Stage 773, 1225 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago. (773) 327-5252 or porchlighttheatre.com.

• Pride Films & Plays showcases the finalists in its "**Great Gay Screen-play Contest**" with staged readings this weekend at the Center on Halsted. 3656 N. Halsted St., Chicago. "The Trouble With e," Louise Wadley's play about a DJ on the run

with a stash of cash and "Detaseling," Tom Hietter's drama about a gay teen's coming-of-age will be featured beginning at 5 p.m., Saturday, Nov. 20. Chris French's "Bethlehem" about gay expectant parents struggling to redefine "family;" Chris Mason Johnson and Kate Stayman-London's "Skirt," about a woman who agrees to pose as her boss's girlfriend to promote marriage equality; and Gary Polston's "The Queen of Hearts," about a famous drag queen who tries to adopt a more masculine

way of life, are featured beginning at 3 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 21. (800) 838-3006 or pridefilmsandplays.com.

• The Gift Theatre hosts a discussion that includes Irish music and whiskey following its Sunday, Nov. 21, performance of "**The Lonesome West**," about a pair of battling middle-aged brothers and the third in Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's darkly comic Leenane trilogy. The performance is at 4802 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago. (773) 283-

7071 or thegifttheatre.org.

• Actress/comedian Kate Duffy premieres her solo show "**Buckle: A One Woman Emotional Car Wreck**," inspired by her journey along the highway of bad judgment, Sunday, Nov. 21. The show runs through Sunday, Dec. 26, at the Annoyance Theatre, 4830 N. Broadway, Chicago. (773) 561-4556 or theannoyance.com.

• Octogenarian Chicago actor **Mike Nussbaum** ("Men in Black," "Gladi-

ator"), who originated roles in David Mamet's early plays, is the guest of honor at the Theatre of Western Springs' next installment of the Cattell Lecture Series, named for the theater's founder and first artistic director Mary Cattell. Nussbaum will talk about his career at 7:30 p.m. Monday, Nov. 22, at 4384 Hampton Ave., Western Springs. Admission is free. (708) 246-4043 or theatrewesternsprings.com.

—Barbara Vitello

## ON STAGE: NOVEMBER 5 – DECEMBER 26

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