

Entertainment

THEATER REVIEW: It's a laughably 'Wonderful Life'

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The holidays are a great time to take in some theater. There is a lot of Christmas fare out there, but none will tickle your funny bone like the hilarious antics of the Troubadour Theater Company in "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life."

For your entertainment dollar, you get incomparable Stevie Wonder songs played by a great live band, a retelling of "It's a Wonderful Life" with nonstop jokes, physical gags, funny costumes, ridiculous sound effects, exaggerated accents and a trippy black-light scene, plus the sheer joy of watching a bunch of talented comedian/actors work their tails off to make you laugh.

If you know of the Troubies, then you know they have a string of popular shows combining pop music with classic stories. Titles like "A Charlie James Brown Christmas," or "Little Drummer Bowie," or "Santa Claus is Comin' to Motown" give you a clue as to the kind of thing they do. They've performed "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life" before, but now it's back, better than ever, with current political jabs and jokes about the economy!

There's actually quite a bit from the 1946 Frank Capra film that's very timely, especially the closing of banks. The good folks at the Troubies keep the general thread of the original story intact, but they take a whole lot of liberties along the way.

For instance, Clarence, the angel who watches over George Bailey, is a zoot suit-wearing, Cheech Marin kind of guy. Rick Batalla's Clarence looks like he rides around heaven in a low rider and really enjoys messing with his terrestrial charge, "Jorge."

Then there's George himself, played by Troubie director and comic trailblazer Matt Walker. He's in pretty much every scene, keeping the story moving along, in both a heartwarming and hilarious way, dancing and singing (really well, I might add) and often mime-walking (don't ask, just see).

He breaks into a mean J-J-J-Jimmy Stewart impression whenever it might bring the most laughs. He also sports a stylish Afro wig that expands as he ages, turning white when he goes on his phantasmagorical "What-if-you'd-never-been born?" journey. Why an Afro wig? Who knows? It's funny. That's all that matters with the Troubies.

Morgan Rusler creates a memorable Mr. Potter (you remember, the opportunistic bank owner who wants to take over Bailey's Savings and Loan). He zips around the stage in a wacky wheelchair with a pair of sexy nurses (Breanna Pine and Kimberly Wood) close by who wake him up with a quick sadistic squeeze on his IV bag now and then.

Erin Matthews is a perfect Mary (Donna Reed's part) to Matt Walker's George. She looks and acts a lot like Priscilla Presley in the "Naked Gun" movies, innocent and sweet and funny as heck. In an inspired twist on the movie, George and Mary live not in a charming little house but in the control booth of the theater. They throw rocks at its windows and lasso down the moon above it. They even show us the interior, as well as other parts of Bedford Falls, via live video feed.

It's true experimental theater, and it completely works. The other troupe members definitely hold their own in the show, though they all play so many characters, it's hard to pinpoint outstanding performances. I feel I have



George (Matt Walker) and his cast of guardian angels in the Troubadour Theater Company's "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life" at the Falcon Theatre. Photo by Cheryl Games.

to say Violet (Jen Seifert) is great. Lisa Valenzula is adorable as George's Ma and pretty much carries the show vocally. Everyone has a decent voice, but Valenzula's really projects.

These folks are primarily comedians/clowns, secondly actors and finally singers/dancers. The dance numbers are well choreographed but a bit sloppily executed. That may be intentional though, as the whole production exudes lunacy, just barely contained.

That's what makes this such a wholly enjoyable experience. You're never sure if something that just happened was supposed to happen, but you can relax and laugh knowing that whatever happens on stage is in the capable hands of the professional entertainers inhabiting it.

And speaking of the stage, the Falcon Theatre is a really nice venue with no bad seat in the 130-seat house. Plus, it has the ability to handle some fancy theatrics, such as a black-light dance number with actors suspended by huge rubber bands. It's weird and wonderful.

So instead of seeing "The Nutcracker" for the umpteenth time this holiday, why not take a break from the shopping and the wrapping and the traffic and the crowds and enjoy a good belly laugh? Take someone you like to see "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life." People ages 8 to 80 will love this show. Maybe your good deed will help an angel somewhere get its wings.

LISA DUPUY enjoys plays, movies, Christmas and laughing. LISA DUPUY enjoys plays, movies, Christmas and laughing.

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