



Cheryl Games Brain Capers: It's a Stevie Wonderful

Life

George Bailey Boogie

Three holiday offerings revamp the classics

By [Don Shirley](#)

December holiday shows are often considered bland and predictable cash cows for theater companies. But maybe that image will change, in the wake of the economic crisis. When potential theatergoers are pinching pennies, even cash cows might falter. Yet the sagging economy has also endowed some of these holiday shows with startling topicality and urgency.

I'm thinking not only of the most popular source for holiday shows – A Christmas Carol, with its images of the poor Cratchits and the avaricious Scrooge. Consider Troubadour Theater's *It's a Stevie Wonderful Life*, which retells the story from the 1946 Frank Capra movie, flavored by Wonder hits with freshened lyrics. It's the most up-to-date holiday show I've seen this year, as well as the best.

The original Hollywood movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, isn't just a sentimental feel-good film. Its characters see their options diminished and their bank accounts threatened because of an economic panic – and the greed of their small town's richest man.

Troubies mastermind Matt Walker and his troops launched their own version of the same story five years ago in the first *It's a Stevie Wonderful Life*. But the 2008 edition is rewritten, with references to events as recent as the Black Friday Walmart stampede and Plaxico Burrese's self-inflicted wound – as well as a slew of jokes about Ben Bernanke, collateralized debt obligations, the recent election campaign, Obama's victory, even Proposition 8.

Are all of these wisecracks organic to the material? Not according to the standards of "well-made plays," but those aren't the Troubie standards. The Troubies' goal is to simultaneously spoof and honor the source material while nonetheless dragging it – by any jokes necessary – into December 2008. They're successful, on all counts.

They don't expect every spectator, of whatever age, to get all the gags. Besides the current one-liners, the show offers doses of more old-fashioned verbal humor. You've got to see Morgan Rusler as mean Mr. Potter

in what looks like a circa-1920 vaudeville routine, based on rhyming words, with his mini-skirted nurse.

Sight gags abound – note the steadily inflating Afros worn by Walker as the Wonderful George Bailey. Besides the usual song and dance numbers, the physical business includes a second-act black light extravaganza, with actors swinging over the first few rows, and a burst of activity with a video camera that takes the action into the theater’s control booth (which plays the role of the Bailey home). At the performance I saw, a ringing cell phone in the audience resulted in what looked like an impromptu conversation between the caller and Walker, snagging some of the show’s biggest laughs.

It’s a bulging Christmas stocking – one of the longest Troubie shows ever, with two or three apparent “endings.” But the comedy is so resourceful that you wish it wouldn’t end.

That’s more than you can say for many of this year’s latest variations on A Christmas Carol. I review some of these in the Currently Playing listings, but none of them is as interesting as another version that’s back after a one-year hiatus, Theatre of NOTE’s A Mulholland Christmas Carol. Bill Robens’ script turns Scrooge into William Mulholland, the water czar of early L.A. I haven’t yet seen this year’s version, at Sacred Fools Theater, but anyone who wants a different take on the Dickens tale should probably start there.

Furious Theater’s non-Dickensian, non-Capraesque one-act, The Night Before Christmas is this holiday season’s most original offering. Anthony Neilson’s adults-only fantasy, with a grimy realistic surface, is about a Christmas elf caught in a London warehouse. Even though it dates from 1995, its lower-class characters betray the same bottom-line desperation that’s occurring right now, worldwide. See more about it and many other shows in Currently Playing at lacitybeat.com.

It’s a Stevie Wonderful Christmas, Falcon Theatre, Burbank. (818) 955-8101. FalconTheatre.com. Closes Jan. 4.

A Mulholland Christmas Carol, Sacred Fools Theater, Heliotrope near LACC. (310) 281-8337. sacredfools.org. Closes Dec. 21.

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