

THEATER

Theater Review: 'Wonderful Life' a wonderful holiday alternative

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WARWICK, R.I. — Tired of "A Christmas Carol?" Then check out Ocean State Theatre's musical staging of the Frank Capra classic "It's a Wonderful Life."

It's not Ocean State's best work. The singing has its ups and downs, and the score is less than inspired. And perhaps this theatrical setting tries too hard to stick to the famed 1946 film with Jimmy Stewart.

In fact, Kevin Cirone's George Bailey has a touch of the Stewart drawl about it.

On the other hand, there are some touching moments, especially from Jef Canter's kind-hearted Clarence, George's guardian angel. And Cirone and Melissa McKamie, as his devoted wife Mary, make a sweet couple.

But Amiee Turner's direction is pretty literal, and the choreography awfully thin.

In fact, this show is more a play with a few perfunctory songs thrown in, plus a couple of memorable choruses, like "Wonderful Life" and George's "My Life."

Interestingly, there is a moment when George gets his life back that closely parallels Scrooge's realization that he has survived his night with the spirits. There's that fundamental understanding of just how precious each person's life is. And that was one of the high points of the evening.

The show opens with Clarence being sent down to Earth to help George, and in the process be granted his wings, something he has been waiting 200 years for. Canter is perfect for the part, a sort of naive, childlike creature, who comes up with an ingenious way of showing suicidal George how much his life has mattered to the residents of Bedford Falls.

George is a dreamer who had big plans to travel the world and build great things. But when his father died and his brother went off to college and war, it was up to George to take over

the family savings and loan.

Then he fell in love with Mary, had a bunch of kids, and fixed up a tumbled-down house. And at that point, George seems to have accepted his fate and been pretty content — until bumbling Uncle Billy loses a stack of cash and jeopardizes the savings and loan.

All this throws George into a tailspin, which came on pretty suddenly. One minute he's helping his neighbors, the next he's perched on a bridge and thinking about ending it all.

"I wish I was never born," he tells Clarence, who shows George just how impoverished Bedford Falls would be without him.

The thing is, George and Mary are pretty bland. It takes someone like Tom Gleadow, as eccentric Billy, to add the spice to the show, along with Peter Tedeschi's mean Mr. Potter, who just can't stand good people like George and can't wait to run the savings and loan out of business.

The show was backed up by a keyboard-laden band, and Katryne Hecht's sets were made up of rolling props that changed often and made for some episodic moments.

The show is two hours and 45 minutes long, maybe too long for children. Otherwise, the show makes a wonderful alternative to the standard holiday fare.

"It's a Wonderful Life" runs through Dec. 27 at Ocean State Theatre Company, 1245 Jefferson Blvd., Warwick. Tickets are \$39-\$59. Call (401) 921-6800, or visit oceanstatetheatre.org.

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