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HOLIDAY 2010



It's a Wonderful
A Live Radio Play **Life**

It's a Wonderful *Holiday Season*

A second Christmas show!

This season, for the first time in 35 years, Trinity Rep will offer two holiday productions. In the upstairs Chace Theater, the perennial A Christmas Carol is reinvented from top to bottom every season: new director, casting, concept, design. This year, we add a new, yet familiar tale: It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play. Artistic director Curt Columbus and associate artistic director Tyler Dobrowsky will direct Joe Landry's theatrical adaptation together. They talked with Emily Atkinson about their plans.

Emily Atkinson: How did you decide to add *It's a Wonderful Life* to our holiday roster?

Curt Columbus: I saw it in Chicago — its first professional production. A friend was in it and invited me. I was skeptical, but I found myself moved to both tears and laughter in a whirlwind way. It was one of those Chicago nights where the snow was whipping sideways — yet I remember leaving the theater in such a bright holiday mood.

EA: Do you like the movie?

CC: Yes!

Tyler Dobrowsky: Though thanks to cable TV, it's everywhere, all the time —

CC: — so we've become almost over-saturated with it. Yet I found that this theatrical adaptation actually re-introduced me to the story. I thought I knew it well, but seeing it in this new way, outside of the film, I was surprised to find it had so much power. It's the same way *A Christmas Carol* affects us, when we see it in a completely new way every year. (laughter) We see it again and again and again and it still gives us those feelings that come at the darkest time of the year, loving all of humanity and wanting to be part of the great chain of life, holding hands... (laughter) This kind of story, at this time of year — it really earns our high spirits. The play gave me such a fresh experience with the story that I wanted to direct it someday. Last season, we scaled back our performances of *A Christmas Carol*, using only one cast instead of two as we'd done for at least ten years. Now, rather than add the second cast back to *A Christmas Carol*, we have the chance to add something new. I thought of *It's a*

Wonderful Life right away. Some folks in our audience have asked us for a holiday alternative. Some will see both shows.

EA: Some folks think *It's a Wonderful Life* is sentimental, almost too sweet.

TD: Sure, people remember little Zuzu saying "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings!" (laughs) No, no — the whole premise of the story is that George Bailey wants to kill himself —

CC: — he's looking at his life insurance policy. He thinks he's worth more to his family dead than alive —

People can see this story on TV every night from Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve — but not like this! Not with this theatricality and magic. It's a different kind of experience. More powerful, more human, with more heart, more darkness, more celebration.

TD: — he wishes he'd never been born. His guardian angel seizes on it. "You've been offered a great gift, George, the chance to see what the world would be like without you..."

EA: This darkness was always part of the story. Philip Van Doren Stern wrote the original short story "The Greatest Gift" during the Depression. He couldn't find a publisher, so he had 200 copies printed as pamphlets for Christmas cards in 1943. One of those made its way to a producer and eventually to Frank Capra, who bought it and developed it. "The Greatest Gift" opens the same way, with George on the bridge looking down at the water. It's dark!

CC: That darkness is what earns the reward at the end. Our midwinter celebrations bring joy and light to the darkness — the best holiday stories make the most of that tension. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George

ILLUSTRATION BY
MICHAEL GUY

learns that not everything in his life is good, but that everything in his life is his. Which is a much more celebratory message! It's your life, you'll figure it out! Awful things do happen, but you'll be ok.

TD: George thinks his contributions to the community don't add up to much, but he learns otherwise. Another message is that the accumulation of wealth is not the answer. *A Christmas Carol* tells us this too; it's as important to consider now, as in Dickens' time.

CC: *Wonderful Life* was written in a period of economic upheaval.

TD: — but the happy ending isn't that George gets rich. The neighbors have collected just enough cash to keep him out of jail — enough to replace the money Uncle Billy "lost."

EA: And George's brother Harry arrives to put it into words. "To my brother George, the richest man in town!" Clarence has shown George that without him, Harry wouldn't have lived to grow up to save his ship and comrades in the war... George saved Harry when he fell through the ice when they were kids. Saving Harry's life is another element in the original short story, and it's one of my favorite moments in the movie.

CC: My favorite is when George and Mary are kids, having ice cream sodas. He turns his head for a moment and Mary leans over and whispers in his ear: "George Bailey, I'll love you till the day I die." He says "What?" and she just smiles. She knows it's his bad ear — he lost hearing in it when he saved Harry from drowning. It's just so wonderfully sappy, that they're meant to be together.

EA: I love the moment when George figures out he loves Mary, in spite of himself. Mary's talking on the phone with Sam Wainwright, and Sam asks her to have George listen too, so they stand so close together... it's so sexy... they can smell each other's hair, they're overwhelmed, and then they drop the phone and kiss!

TD: That's another good scene. They're not all in the play, though. We won't be staging the school dance scene where the gymnasium floor opens and everyone falls — jumps — into the pool! (laughter)

CC: No, the playwright wisely chose not to feature that scene. It's a radio play, after all.

TD: Six actors play six radio actors, and each of them plays multiple characters.

CC: Michael McGarty is designing the 1946 radio studio. Our sound board operator will be a character, with the Foley table, and our stage manager will be visible too.

EA: Will the actors stay put behind the radio microphones?

TD: The radio show frame is there — but we'll break that frame now and then, with moments of theatricality and magic. There will be some surprises.

CC: (laughter) You'll have to wait to find out. This is what we do at Trinity Rep, isn't it? It's certainly

been our way with *Camelot*. We're a troupe of actors telling a story, and we celebrate that and the audience understands that well, but then they're immersed in the story and the magic happens and they see beyond actors-telling-a-story and forget where they are. And then they remember, and it adds a wonderful layer to

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the story.

EA: So people can see this story on TV every night from Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve —

TD: — no they can't, not like this! Not with this theatricality and magic. It's not the movie — it's a different kind of experience. More powerful, more human, with more heart, more darkness, more celebration.

CC: Like *A Christmas Carol*, this play's a fast-moving 90-minute treat... another new Trinity tradition.

TD: Jimmy Stewart, Lionel Barrymore, Donna Reed — their performances are iconic, they've become a part of the culture. But our company — I can't wait! Fred Sullivan, Jr. as George Bailey. Tim Crowe as Mr. Potter. Stephen Berenson as Clarence, Angel Second Class... perfect.

It's a Wonderful Life

A LIVE RADIO PLAY

Adapted by **Joe Landry**

Directed by **Curt Columbus and Tyler Dobrowsky**

*Michael McGarty, set designer
Alison Carrier, costume designer
John Ambrosone, lighting designer
Peter Sasha Hurowitz, sound designer*

With resident acting company members Stephen Berenson, Angela Brazil, Timothy Crowe, Anne Scurria, and Fred Sullivan, Jr.

December 3, 2010 – January 2, 2011 in the Dowling Theater

To adapt a film like *It's a Wonderful Life*

— a real 20th-century cultural icon — for the stage, a writer needs affection, courage, and a big idea. Joe Landry has them all. He talked with Emily Atkinson about his play.

Emily Atkinson: For most people, *It's a Wonderful Life* is a movie. Do you remember the first time you saw it? Do you watch it every year?

Joe Landry: I first saw *It's a Wonderful Life* when I was 12 years old. I was working in the film department at Fairfield Public Library in my Connecticut hometown and *Wonderful Life* was part of their permanent collection. The first time I saw it was during the summer — since I knew next to nothing about the film, I had no idea it was considered a Christmas movie. From the first time I saw it, I really connected with the story of a small-town man trying to live the American Dream and the lengths he went to help those all around him.

Putting *It's a Wonderful Life* on Stage

Growing up, I'd catch the movie at least once a year during the PBS pledge-drives, and we'd usually have friends over around the holidays to watch the 16mm print from the film department. It was one of the first films I purchased for my VHS collection, which has grown over the years and now includes the film on Laserdisc, DVD and Blu-Ray. Lately, when they run the film on NBC, I'll still find myself wanting to watch it (even with commercials), as I find something special about sharing the moment with so many people out there who are seeing the film for the first time.

EA: How did you get decide to adapt the film as a radio play, rather than a full-scale play?

JL: I first adapted *Wonderful Life* as a full-scale play. My longtime friend, local high school drama teacher Frances Kondziela, was looking for a stage adaptation of the material and found none existed. When she asked me if I'd like to write one for her, I was honored. This initial adaptation was along the lines of *Our Town*, a favorite play of Fran's and mine, and focused primarily on the final third of the film, starting on Christmas Eve morning with flashbacks throughout, so the whole play took place over the course of a day in Bedford Falls. This adaptation was produced successfully at a handful of venues, but I was warned of the limitations of a 25-character play by my mentor, producer James B. McKenzie. This was about the same time that Woody Allen's film *Radio Days* had become an obsession of

RIGHT: Playwright Joe Landry



mine, and the combination of setting *Wonderful Life* in the world of live radio was born.

EA: It used to be a given that plays were remade as movies, not the in reverse. Are there wider opportunities for adaptors, now?

JL: Adapting plays for the screen has been happening since the dawn of screen, with silent versions of Shakespeare's plays as well as screen adaptations of the play versions of *Peter Pan* and *Ben-Hur*, among others. While adapting films for the stage seems a recent trend, John Waters' *Hairspray* has had the same screen-to-stage-to-screen triple adaptation as Mel Brooks' *The Producers* — it seems like most of the "new" musicals these days are based on screen properties: *Legally Blonde*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Grey Gardens* to name just a few.

I love film and I love theater. A number of my stage adaptations are based on specific films — *Reefer Madness* and *Vintage Hitchcock*, which is based on *The Lodger*, *Sabotage* and *The 39 Steps* — while others (*Hollywood Babylon*, a sordid take on *The Wizard of Oz*) draw their influence from classic films. I've always loved the idea of adapting from screen to stage and embraced

be happier with that opportunity.

As for whether our generation will embrace this lost art or create their own stories in this medium, I'm not really so sure. Although we seem so plugged in these days, I'm not sure we listen the same way our parents and their parents did. What I can say is that I'm glad I found it, and I'm glad my work is bringing this form of storytelling to audiences of all ages.

EA: What's the secret of the appeal to audiences?

JL: I find that the appeal of my radio play adaptation of *Wonderful Life* is that the audience experiences the story in a way they never have before. The radio adaptation doesn't attempt to put the film on stage, but rather puts it in the minds of the audience as they listen to the story unfold and connect the visual dots in their head the same way one does when reading a book. This engages the audience to become part of the story, while letting them into the potentially new world of the live radio broadcast.

EA: Tell us about your favorite moment(s) or scene(s) of the story.

JL: My favorite moments and scenes have changed over time. Of course, the final scene is legendary and never fails to move me. But there are other little moments that have become more special based on where I am in my own life. For example, the simple scene where Mary welcomes George home after the run on the bank was always sweet, but it means much more to me now that I'm married myself. I find the same thing with *Our Town*, and how each act has an effect on you depending on where you are in your own life.

EA: Some think it's a too-sweet story, but really, it's darker than most people think. By comparison, in *Christmas Carol*, Bob Cratchit never yells at his kids or considers suicide!

JL: I think that *Wonderful Life* is a lot darker than most people remember. When people think of the film, I think they see Jimmy Stewart as all "aw, shucks" and that kind of thing. But there are moments in the film that wouldn't be out of place in a horror movie — take the extreme close-up of Stewart's face after he leaves Ma Bailey's boarding house — total goosebumps. This is a story about a man about to end his life, and everything we're told up to this point in the story is there because it has a payoff. I'm a fan of Norman Rockwell, and there's a similarity between Rockwell and Capra — both are dismissed as over-sentimental by some people. But if you really look at their work, there's a lot more drama of life going on under the surface.

EA: With holiday fare, it's often a fine line between inviting audiences to enjoy their favorites, or to try something new. Does *Wonderful Life* do both?

JL: I think the play surprises the audience because even if they're familiar with the film, they've never experienced the story in this fashion. What might seem a simple story at first glance is made rich through the additional layers of the raw drama in the story itself infused with the wonders unique to live radio.

The audience experiences the story in a way they never have before. We don't attempt to put the film on stage, but rather put it in the minds of the audience...

the challenges that come with this road, generally downsizing characterwise, scenewise, etc.

It was along the journey of *Wonderful Life* that I discovered something between stage and screen — the radio. It wasn't until after adapting *Wonderful Life* as a radio play that I learned hundreds of Hollywood films were given the radio treatment. I learned that studios would make deals with various radio programs to adapt the screenplays into radio plays, and that the studios would use the radio versions as extended trailers for their films, both in initial and re-releases.

EA: Did you revisit the source material, Stern's story "The Greatest Gift"?

JL: I read "The Greatest Gift" early on, as it was part of Jeanine Basinger's *The It's a Wonderful Life Book*, which became my Bible during the adaptation and is still one of my favorite books. The short story is somewhat different than the screenplay, but it was fascinating to see the origin of this beloved story.

EA: Is radio drama one of those forgotten pleasures our generation is trying to recover?

JL: Radio drama certainly is a forgotten pleasure. Advances since I initially adapted this play (including the archive.org project and Sirius/XM Radio Classics) have certainly made this wealth of material more readily available than ever before. Our generation now has the ability to relive this form of storytelling, and I couldn't

Hungry for More?

If *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* spark your interest, sample these related films, book, and plays...

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

More holiday stories from Charles Dickens:

The Chimes

Cricket on the Hearth

The Haunted Man

A Christmas Tree

The "Christmas chapter" of

The Pickwick Papers

A *Christmas Carol* on film:

Reginald Owen as Scrooge, 1938

Alastair Sim as Scrooge, 1951

George C. Scott as Scrooge, 1984

Patrick Stewart as Scrooge, 1999

Kelsey Grammer as Scrooge, 2004,
musical TV film

... and looking farther afield...

Scrooged, Bill Murray 1988 American
contemporary

The Muppet Christmas Carol, 1992, musical

Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol, 1962
animated musical

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY

Plays by Joe Landry

It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play

Vintage Hitchcock: A Live Radio Play

Reefer Madness

Mothers and Sons, a musical co-written with
Kevin Connors

Back to the original...

It's A Wonderful Life, 1946, directed by Frank
Capra, with James Stewart, Donna Reed,
Lionel Barrymore, Henry Travers

The Greatest Gift by Philip Van Doren Stern,
1936-1943

The It's a Wonderful Life Book by Jeanine Basinger
and Leonard Maltin, 1987

RIGHT: Lurking in dark, dusty rooms under the scene shop behind the Dowling Theater — the original dressing rooms for the Majestic Theatre, under the actual floorboards of the original stage — rubber chickens and papier maché pastries wait to be cleaned and repainted and turned into a feast for *A Christmas Carol*! PHOTO BY MICHAEL GUY

