

MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

2015-16 SEASON

# PLAYGUIDE



**ON AIR**

NOV 25 - DEC 20, 2015

## IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY

### ADAPTING A CLASSIC:

Joe Landry on the joys and challenges of getting a beloved film to the stage

### OUTFITTING THE 40'S:

How costumes set the scene for 1946

### RADIO'S GOLDEN AGE:

The airwaves that defined a generation

adapted by  
JOE LANDRY

directed by  
MEGAN SANDBERG-ZAKIAN

SEAN DANIELS  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



ELIZABETH KEGLEY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PRESENTS

# IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY

ADAPTED BY  
JOE LANDRY

FEATURING

JASON BOWEN

JOEL COLODNER

VERONIKA DUERR†

NAEL NACER

CELESTE OLIVA

SCENIC DESIGNER  
AMANDA WILLIAMS

COSTUME DESIGNER  
A. LEE VILIESIS

LIGHTING DESIGNER  
CARTER MILLER

SOUND DESIGNER  
JONATHAN MASTRO

DIALECT COACH  
LIZ HAYES

STAGE MANAGER  
CASEY L. HAGWOOD

DIRECTED BY

MEGAN SANDBERG-ZAKIAN†

NOVEMBER 25 – DECEMBER 20, 2015

*Produced by special arrangement with Playscripts, Inc.  
(www.playscripts.com)*

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# PLAYGUIDE

## THE CAST OF *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE:* *A LIVE RADIO PLAY*



### JASON BOWEN

(Harry Heywood)

**MRT:** Debut. **Off-Broadway and**

**Regional:** *My Mañana Comes*, Playwrights Realm; *As You Like It*, *Black Odyssey*, Denver Center Theatre Co.; *The Lake Effect*, TheatreWorks Palo Alto; *June Moon*, Williamstown Theatre Festival; *Ruined*, La Jolla Playhouse; *A*

*Raisin In The Sun*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (IRNE Award), *Prelude To A Kiss*, *A Civil War Christmas*, Huntington Theatre Co.; *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Tempest*, Actors' Shakespeare Project; *Groundswell*, Lyric Stage Co.; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Commonwealth Shakespeare Co.

**TV/Film:** *Law & Order: SVU*, *What's Your Number*.

**Special Awards:** Best Actor - Boston Magazine, 2012.



### JOEL COLODNER

(Freddie Filmore)

**MRT:** *Glengarry Glen Ross*

(Baylen), *Mrs. Whitney* (Francis). **Broadway:** *They Knew What They Wanted*, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, *The Beggar's Opera*, *Measure for Measure*.

**Off-Broadway:** *How I Learned to Drive* (Uncle Peck), *Golden Boy*, *Do I Hear a Waltz?*

**Regional:** *Our Town* (Stage Manager), Huntington Theatre Company; *Threepenny Opera* (Macheath), Repertory Theatre of St. Louis; *Streamers* (Richie), *Comedians*, *Hamlet* (Horatio), Arena Stage; *The American Clock*, *Measure for Measure*, *Wild Oats*, *Mark Taper Forum*; *The Rainmaker* (Starbuck), Guthrie Theatre; *Da'arlin Juno*, Long Wharf; *A Christmas Carol* (Scrooge), Alliance Theatre; *The Seagull* (Kon-



Jason Bowen, Celeste Oliva, Nael Nacer, Veronika Duerr, and Joel Colodner, Photo by Megan Moore

stantin), Pittsburgh Public Theatre; *Is There Life After High School?*, Hartford Stage; *Henry IV parts 1 and 2* (Henry), *The Duchess of Malfi*, Actors Shakespeare Project; *My Name is Asher Lev*, *The Chosen* (Rev Saunders), Lyric Stage Company. **TV:** *L.A. Law*, *Moonlighting*, *Remington Steele*, *Cagney and Lacey*, *St. Elsewhere*, *21 Jump Street*, *Law & Order*, *Perry Mason – Case of the Avenging Ace*, *Mrs. Columbo*, *Eight is Enough*, *Highway to Heaven*, *Another World/Texas*. **Film:** *The Kirlian Witness*, *Arthur – On the Rocks*, *Who is Julia?*, *Betrayed by Innocence*, *Not My Kid*, *Malice in Wonderland*. **Education:** BA, Cornell University. MFA, Southern Methodist University.



**VERONIKA DUERR**  
(Lana Sherwood)

**MRT:** Debut. **Regional:** *Tall Girls* (World Premiere), *Spoon Lake Blues* (World Premiere), Alliance Theatre; *Bob: A Life in Five Acts*, Geva Theatre; *Romeo and Juliet* (Juliet), *As You Like It* (Rosalind), *Twelfth Night* (Viola), Atlanta Shakespeare Company. **Education:** BFA, Savannah College of Art and Design. **Other:** 2015 Alliance Theatre Artistic Fellow; Co-founder of The Weird Sisters Theatre Project, a collective of female artists in Atlanta.



**NAEL NACER**  
(Jake Laurents)

**MRT:** Debut. **Off Broadway:** *The Hiding Place*, 59E59; *Lemonade*, NYC Fringe. **Regional:** *The Flick*, Gloucester Stage Company; *Come Back*, *Little Sheba*, *Awake and Sing!*, *The Seagull*, *Our Town*, Huntington Theatre Company; *A Number*, *Pattern of Life*, *Lungs*,

*The Kite Runner*, New Repertory Theatre; *Intimate Apparel*, *The Temperamentals*, *Animal Crackers*, Lyric Stage Company; *A Future Perfect*, *Tribes*, Speak-Easy Stage Company; *Windowmen*, *The Farm*, Gary,

Boston Playwrights' Theatre; *Sila*, *Distracted*, Underground Railway Theater; *Shear Madness*, Charles Playhouse; *Love Person*, *1001*, *The Aliens*, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, Company One. **Education:** BA in Theatre, Suffolk University. **Other:** 2015 Elliot Norton Award, Best Actor in *Intimate Apparel*; 2013 IRNE Award, Best Supporting Actor in *Our Town*.



**CELESTE OLIVA**  
(Sally Applewhite)

**MRT:** Debut. **Regional:** *Grounded*, *The Pilot*, Nora Theatre; *Rich-Girl*, *Becky's New Car*, *Ch'inglish*, Lyric Stage; *Reconsidering Hanna(h)*, Boston Playwrights Theatre; *Shear Madness*, Charles Playhouse.

**Film/T.V.:** *November Criminals*, *Bleed for This*, *Olive Kitteridge*,

*Sex Tape*, *The Sins of the Preacher*, *The Company Men*, *Brotherhood*, *The Waterfront*, *Sexting in Suburbia*, *The Edge of Darkness*, *The Invention of Lying*, *The Woman*, *21*, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Mystic River*. **Education:** Boston College. **Other:** 2013 IRNE Award Best Actress in *Ch'inglish*, 2013 Best of Boston Best Actress.



Scenic model for *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*, by Amanda Williams

# DIRECTOR'S NOTE



## MEGAN SANDBERG-ZAKIAN

I grew up celebrating both Christmas and Hanukkah—and people on both sides of my family loved *It's a Wonderful Life*. Maybe because it reminds us that everyone matters, that each life touches so many others. Or maybe because it's not all mistletoe and sugarplums—it is honest about the challenges and disappointments of building a career, a family, and a community.

In an early scene, young George Bailey tells his father Peter that he doesn't want to work for the family business, The Building and Loan, which provides small loans and home equity to working class people in Bedford Falls. Instead, George wants to travel the world and “do something big and something important.” Peter Bailey responds, “You know, George, I feel that in a small way we are doing something important. Satisfying a fundamental urge.” After Peter's death, the unscrupulous Mr. Potter tries repeatedly to sink the Building and Loan, declaring, “I claim this institution is not necessary to this town!” George fights for the Building and Loan to honor his late father; eventually, he finds that he too believes in the power of this little business to make Bedford Falls a healthier, more connected, more generous place to live. In the end, it turns out that the Building and Loan is very necessary to the town—without it, Bedford Falls wouldn't be Bedford Falls at all.

In the rehearsal room, in addition to talking in funny voices and making noise with ridiculous objects, we've taken some time to think about the businesses and organizations that make our lives and communities great. We researched corporate responsibility and learned about the “B-Corp” movement, which provides a framework and certification for companies wishing to benefit society as well as their shareholders. We talked about our local banks and credit unions. And of course, we talked about the theaters we love—places where our community can come together, share stories, laugh and cry together. Thank you for being here with us tonight, and thanks for all the things you do that touch the lives of others... which, as George Bailey would tell you, are probably much more numerous, and important, than you can imagine.

# Q&A: JOE LANDRY

*Joe Landry is a playwright and adapter of works for the stage. He lives in his hometown of Fairfield, Connecticut.*

## In a nutshell: Where did the idea for this play come from?

The idea of adapting *It's a Wonderful Life* for the stage came from a good friend of mine, Fran Kondziela, who runs the drama department at Ludlowe High School in Fairfield, Connecticut, where I grew up and still live. I took my first acting class with her when I was a kid, and have remained friends ever since. She was looking for a stage adaptation of *It's a Wonderful Life* to perform with her students, she knew that I was a fan of the film and that I'd been writing plays, so she asked if I'd be interested in writing an adaptation for her. I immediately said yes.

## So the first adaptation was for a high school?

That's right; and it had a lot of roles, there were probably more than 30 students in that first production.

After the high school premiere, the play was produced at a community theatre in Connecticut, which is where my friend and mentor, Westport Country Playhouse producer Jim McKenzie first saw the play. And he decided to give the play its professional debut off season at the (then summer stock) Westport Playhouse. Unfortunately, that production wasn't meant to be, and I think part of that was due to the large size of the cast.

It was around the same time that I'd become obsessed with Woody Allen's *Radio Days*, which remains one of my favorite films. I've always been fascinated with the period, and the idea of turning *It's a Wonderful Life* into a radio play was born. The first production had a dozen actors, and that number eventually became five. I realized that the smaller cast made it a character actor's dream, and the piece took on a greater energy and visual layer, too.

## How many theatres have done This play?

Since the play was published in 2006, there have been over a thousand productions.

## That's incredible—what's the appeal?

Frank Capra's film has become an annual holiday tradition – an American *Christmas Carol*, if you will. So many families, mine included, watched it on TV every year. I think a lot of the appeal is the timelessness of the message that each of our lives touch so many others, and that we're all in it—this life—together. That's something to be reminded of at least once a year.



George Bailey is an everyman, and we can all, unfortunately, relate to being at the end of our rope. But then he's given the opportunity to stop and realize that he's not alone. It's only through the experience of facing the greatest challenge of his life that he's able to realize what he has—and, what's more, that it's been there all along. You could say that *Wonderful Life* shares the message of *The Wizard of Oz*, that "there's no place like home."

The emotional roller-coaster at the end of the story never fails to move us. Even after countless screenings of the film and seeing dozens of productions of the play, it still gets to me.

## Why does this story work so well as a radio play?

I think the beauty of the radio play concept is that it engages the individual imagination of each person in the audience. Radio has been called "the theatre of the mind," and this form of storytelling invites us to explore a story in a way that I find refreshing.

Plus there's the nostalgia. Before television, radio was the main source of home entertainment. The story of *It's a Wonderful Life* takes place in the 1940's—the golden age of radio—which makes a perfect fit for telling this story in this format.

~~~~~  
"...we can all,  
unfortunately, relate  
to being at the end  
of our rope."  
~~~~~

What's more, every year there are people who have never seen the film who are first hearing the story in this format. It's such an honor to be introducing a new audience to this story—and potentially to the world of Frank Capra and classic film.

## Did you make changes in adapting the film into a radio play?

There are certain elements which are inherently visual and I chose not to incorporate, like the scene in the film where the gym floor opens up and there's a pool underneath. Sure, that could be done with sound effects, but that scene always seemed kind of absurd, even in the film.

Some scenes and characters were combined, and a couple of scenes shift their place from the film. But I've kept most



The swimming pool/gymnasium scene: one of several cut from the radio play.

all of the scenes from the film. The film clocks in at over two hours, but the play generally runs a brisk ninety minutes or less.

### Did you do any experimenting on how to make the sound effects?

Over the years there have been various ways to explore creating the play's soundscape. It's been great fun finding more visual ways to make various sounds. One awesome find was a 1938 industrial film called "Back of the Mike" which shows the nth degree these sound effect creators would go to in their art.

I've had the great fortune to work with some of the top sound designers in the field, including John Gromada at Long Wharf Theatre, who discovered some of the coolest ways to perform the sound effects that I'd ever seen.

### You've talked in your other interviews about your days watching the film while working at your hometown library...

Ah, yes. My lifelong love of film has its roots in my first job at my hometown library's film department. This was the dawn of home video, when 16mm film was starting to be replaced with VHS. *It's a Wonderful Life* was part of their 16mm collection, which is when I first saw the film. Then VHS opened a whole new world of film and made for some very eclectic double features – the silent version of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* and John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, for instance. I watched everything I could get my hands on.

My love of both classic and underground film is part of what's led to having two different voices in my writing. One of them is nostalgic, with my adaptations of *Wonderful Life*, *Vintage Hitchcock* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and the other voice is much edgier. I ran my own underground theatre company when I was in my twenties, and a lot

of those plays really pushed the envelope with their content. Although I'm known for my nostalgic plays, I focus equally on both voices.

### What else have you been working on?

My adaptation of *A Christmas Carol: A Live Radio Play* was just published. I know there are a million Christmas Carols out there, so I wanted to find a way to put a stamp on mine. So, I decided to write it as a companion piece to *Wonderful Life*, using the same five radio actor characters (Jake Laurents, etc.), so that the two plays could be performed in rep. And I started noticing the parallels between the two pieces: Scrooge is like Potter, and Bob Cratchit is like George Bailey, and both pieces are about looking at the world in a way you've never seen it before.

~~~~~  
~~~~~  
***"I watched everything I  
could get my hands on."***  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

This year I've been working on two different plays – both involving Orson Welles, and both set in 1938. One is about the infamous radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, and the other, called *The Wicked Stage*, is inspired by Welles and William Castle set at a summer theatre in Connecticut. I'm also writing a contemporary, edgier play called *The Checklist*, which I'm hoping to workshop in the near future.

Learn more about Joe:  
[joelandry.com](http://joelandry.com)



# PRICING IT OUT

A \$20,000 salary. An \$8,000 deposit. A \$17.50 loan.

**What do the dollars and cents all mean in the late 1940's?**

(As a general rule, **one dollar** in 1946 had the purchasing power of **twelve dollars** in 2015.)

## WHAT PEOPLE GOT PAID

Annual Income (average): **\$2,600**

Federal Minimum Wage: **40 cents/hour**

Wages, Sewing Machine Operator (Boston):  
**\$2 hour (men), \$1.58 hour (women)**

| EMPLOYEE'S NAME |     | No 684517 |       | WEEK ENDING |      |
|-----------------|-----|-----------|-------|-------------|------|
| R. SAMONA       |     | WEEK      | DAY   | WEEK        | DAY  |
| 24              | 1   | 7997      | 52:00 | 6           | 1144 |
| TOTAL EARNINGS  |     | 62.40     |       |             |      |
| DEDUCTIONS      |     | NET PAY   |       |             |      |
| 950             | 062 | 1008      | 50    | 4170        |      |

DETACH THIS STUB  
IT IS REQUIRED BY LAW AND SHOULD BE RETAINED AS A PERMANENT RECORD OF YOUR EARNINGS, DEDUCTIONS AND NET PAY  
DELTA SHIPBUILDING COMPANY, INC.  
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

A 1944 Paystub from Delta Shipbuilding Co.



1940's stove

## APPLIANCES

Record Player & Radio unit: **\$59.00**

Stove: **\$179.95**

Washing Machine: **\$249.00**

## FOOD

Loaf of bread: **\$0.13**

A dozen eggs: **\$0.64**

A dozen doughnuts: **\$0.15**

Pound of apples: **\$0.13**

Pound of chuck roast beef: **\$0.43**



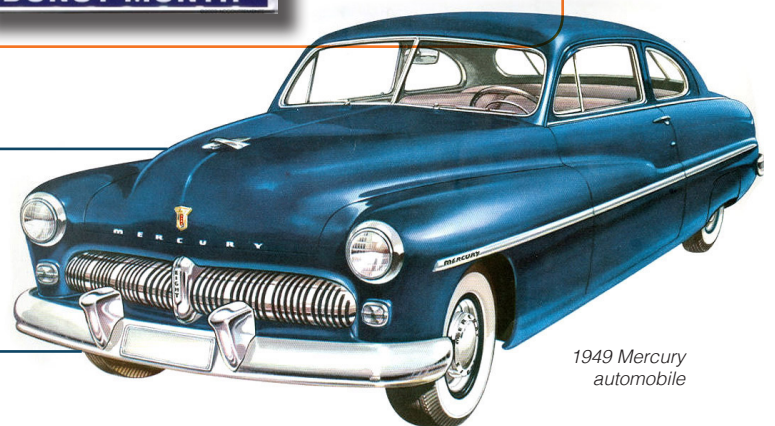
A 1940's advertisement for National Donut Month

## CLOTHING

Men's shirt: **\$3.70**

Girl's Blouse: **\$2.70**

Raincoat: **\$7.99**



1949 Mercury automobile

## HOUSES, CARS, AND COLLEGE

Average House: **\$5,150**

Car (Ford 4-door sedan): **\$1,255**

Four years' tuition at Harvard University: **\$1,680**

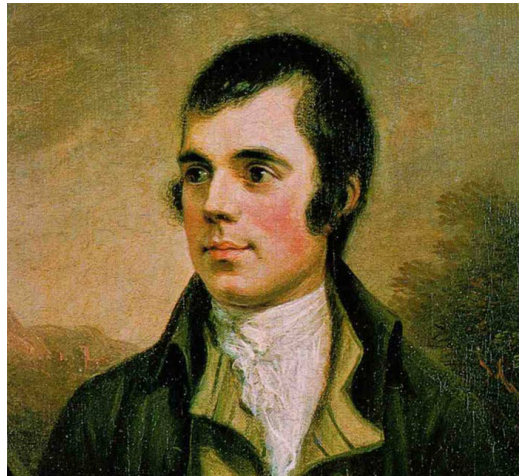
Source: [thepeoplehistory.com](http://thepeoplehistory.com)

# AULD LANG SYNE

It's probably the best-known song that no one actually knows. Even if you can get the lyrics out, chances are you spent many years before enthusiastically mumbling some approximation of them. And chances are even greater you still don't know what they *mean*.

We sing it at New Year's, we hear it in movies, it's ubiquitous across the globe from Paris to Beijing to New York—but it started in Scotland, probably as early as the 1500's.

**Scottish poet Robert Burns** (1759-1796) is usually credited as having written the plaintive song; but in truth, he just wrote it *down*. He sent it to a friend who was putting together a book of old Scottish songs, with the note, "An old song, of the olden times, and which had never been in print or even in manuscript, until I took it down from an old man." Set to an old Scottish folk tune (originally different from the one we sing today), it celebrates the *endurance of old friendships*. Its first line is a rhetorical question: "Should old acquaintance be forgot?" (No, it shouldn't!)

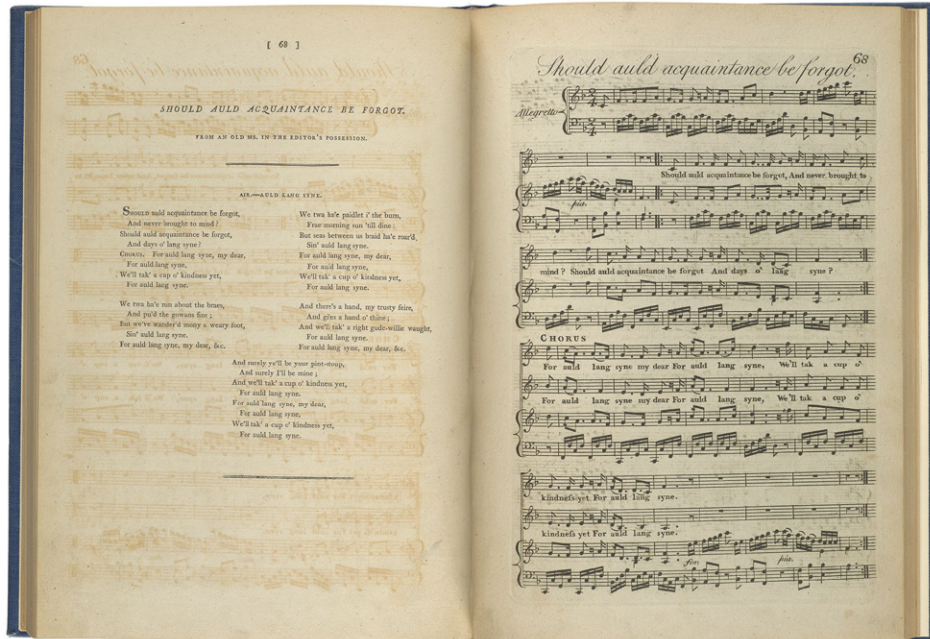


*Robert Burns, the poet who brought "Auld Lang Syne" to the world.*

**"For auld lang syne" translates literally as "For old long since," but in common language we'd word it "For the sake of old times."**



*The iconic final scene of It's a Wonderful Life.*



Sheet music for "Auld Lang Syne."

The lyrics appear below—both in the original Scots language, and in common English

**Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
and never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
and auld lang syne\*?**

CHORUS:

**For auld lang syne, my jo,  
for auld lang syne,  
we'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.**

And surely ye'll be your pint-stowp!  
and surely I'll be mine!  
And we'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.

CHORUS

We twa hae run about the braes,  
and pou'd the gowans fine;  
But we've wander'd mony a weary fit,  
sin' auld lang syne.

CHORUS

We twa hae paidl'd in the burn,  
frae morning sun till dine;  
But seas between us braid hae roar'd  
sin' auld lang syne.

CHORUS

And there's a hand, my trusty fiere!  
and gie's a hand o' thine!  
And we'll tak' a right gude-willie waught,  
for auld lang syne.

CHORUS

**Should *old* acquaintance be forgot,  
and never brought to mind?  
Should *old* acquaintance be forgot,  
and *old* lang syne?**

CHORUS:

**For auld lang syne, my dear,  
for auld lang syne,  
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.**

And surely you'll *buy* your pint *cup*!  
and surely I'll *buy* mine!  
And we'll take a cup o' kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.

CHORUS

We *two* have run about the *slopes*,  
and *picked* the *daisies* fine;  
But we've wandered *many* a weary *foot*,  
*since* auld lang syne.

CHORUS

We *two* have *paddled* in the *stream*,  
*from* morning sun till *dine*';  
But seas between us *broad* have *roared*  
*since* auld lang syne.

CHORUS

And there's a hand my trusty *friend*!  
And *give* me a hand o' thine!  
And we'll *take* a right *good-will* draught,  
for auld lang syne.

CHORUS

# RADIO PLAYS IN THE GOLDEN AGE



## THE AIRWAVES OF A NEW ERA

In 1945, at the end of World War II, television had just been born. **But radio was in its golden age.**

Television would, of course, fundamentally change the way America consumed art and information—but radio had already done the same thing decades before. Sure, in the days before radio you could read a book, browse the newspaper, go to a play, listen to a record; but with radio, you were sharing those things with millions of Americans over thousands of miles, at the same moment in time, as one mass of humanity. Commercial radio stations had been around since 1920, but their popularity really exploded through the 1930's and 40's. America forged, for the first time, a **unified cultural identity around electronic mass media.**

Families would gather in their homes to listen to music, news, sports, comedy, variety—or a radio play.

## OLD CRAFT, NEW TRICKS

A play, of course, needs actors. And although acting was a millennia-old craft, acting for broadcast through the voice alone—with no movement or visuals—created a host of new challenges.

What emerged was a generation of actors who were masters of the “cold read.” Unlike stage acting (where actors memorize an entire script, rehearse to fine-tune the performance, then give the same performance night after night), or film acting (where actors have the luxury of repeated takes), radio acting **demand[ed] getting it right on the first and only take**, with a bare minimum of rehearsal.

An actor might not see the script until the day of the broadcast, and script changes came in minutes before air. Performers had to be ready to go all in at a

moment's notice, the first and only time it counted, with a full range of expression (and sometimes voicing multiple characters), the voice their only tool.

Actors had to be mindful of the microphone, often dropping pages to the ground once read, so they wouldn't rustle.

The pressure was high, but so was the payoff, and radio acting forged a kind of camaraderie. “We supported each other,” remembers veteran radio actor Jackson Beck:

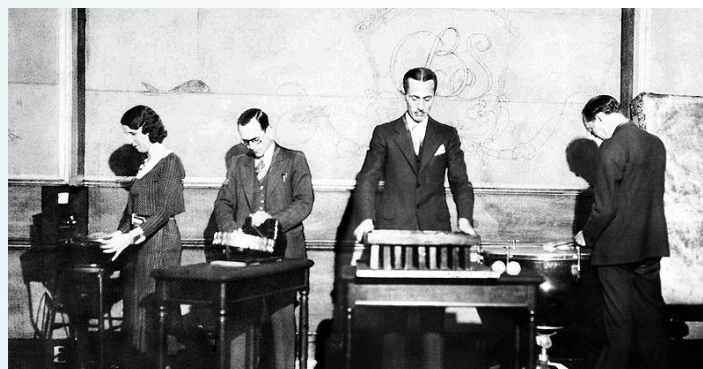


In rehearsal for the World War II era *You Can't Do Business With Hitler*, starring John Flynn and Virginia Moore

“not only for the sake of the show, but on a personal level, because we all had our weak moments and we all knew one of these days we're gonna bomb, and we wouldn't let each other bomb. There was a sort of support; you might hate the guy, he might hate you, but it was there.”\*

## MAKING NOISE

Sound effects artists brought a thrilling color and realism to radio broadcasts.



Recording sound effects for CBS' *The March of Time*, 1931

A sound effects artist (or several, if there was a lot of noise going on) would **create the word of the play** through realistic sounds, usually performed live with physical objects, or sometimes played on a record. Each auditory detail mattered; there were no visuals to

## DID YOU KNOW

“Sound Effects Artist” and “Foley Artists” are often used interchangeably, but they’re actually different things.

A **Foley Artist** creates sounds during post-production of a film or television show. They’re not performing live, so they can edit, fine-tune, and perfect the sounds “after the fact.”

A **Sound Effects Artist** creates sounds live during a radio broadcast. They bear the vulnerability that comes with the possibility of mistakes, just like any live performer.

Organists, pianists, and other musicians were also a common part of the radio drama soundscape.



Truth be told, the earliest days of live audiences were a bit uneasy. The industry held a **common sentiment that a broadcast should foster an intimate connection** between the performer in the studio, and the listener at home. Early on, audiences were often instructed not to applaud. Some were even put behind a glass wall so their sound wouldn’t be picked up by the microphones.

help the listener suspend their disbelief. You couldn’t just make footsteps: you had to illustrate specifics. Were they man’s or a woman’s? Leisurely or rushed? In what shoes, and on what surface? When creating train sounds, the technique would be different if the train is going uphill or down, slow or fast, diesel or steam. For a home listener, sound took on the role of the set, the lighting, the props and the costumes all together.

Sound effects artists were a hardworking bunch: they often built their own apparatus, needed a certain ingenuity for problem solving, and did a lot of equipment schlepping from the studio to a theatre and back again.

But radio eventually came to embrace audience responses. An announcer, director, or performer would come out ahead of time to “warm up” the crowd and create a more comfortable feel during the broadcast. (Orson Welles, an amateur magician, was fond of performing pre-broadcast illusions.) And **live broadcasts took on a theatrical feel**: performers would dance, jump, and move about—just to connect with the live audience, even though their home listeners obviously couldn’t see them. Stage lighting helped both actors and audience stay in the moment. With these live broadcasts—much like the one onstage to-night—radio found a hallmark of its golden age.

## ON STAGE, ON THE AIR

Not all broadcasts were done with a live audience. But plenty were, and the audience brought a special flavor to the broadcast.



Lux Radio Theatre performing live.



A girl listens to the radio in 1937.  
Franklin D. Roosevelt Library  
Public Domain Photograph

# THE FALL AND RISE OF *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*

It's a staple of the holiday season, and one of the best-loved films of all time. But how did it get to be the American icon it is? **The answer might surprise you.**



Poster for *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946.

## DID YOU KNOW?

**It wasn't supposed to be a Christmas movie.** It was originally slated for a January 1947 release. But the premiere got bumped up to December 1946—not to get closer to Christmas, but to get it in contention for that year's Oscar season.

**It didn't do well when it came out.** Though it wasn't a total flop, *It's a Wonderful Life* was no smash either. It didn't make enough at the box office to recoup production costs, and despite five Oscar nominations, it had no wins.



**No one bothered to renew the copyright.** At the time, a copyright term was 28 years. By 1974 (28 years after its release), *It's a Wonderful Life* had fallen into relative obscurity; on top of that, the rights to the film were getting shuffled around in a convoluted set of Hollywood studio mergers, and the film went into the public domain.



**And that's how it became famous.** The television networks soon realized they were sitting on a gold mine: a movie centered around Christmas, made by Frank Capra, starring Jimmy Stewart, which was *completely free* to broadcast. By the 1980's it was everywhere. America fell in love with it, and watching *It's a Wonderful Life* became a treasured family tradition for millions.

**It's now regularly ranked among the best films ever made.**

Sources: *The Essential It's a Wonderful Life: A Scene-by-Scene Guide to the Classic Film*, by Michael William  
"The Curious Copyright Case of *It's a Wonderful Life*" by John P. Hess. Filmmaker IQ (Youtube), 18 Dec. 2014  
"FBI Considered *It's a Wonderful Life* Communist Propaganda" by Will Chen, wisebread.com, 24 Dec. 2006

# TEN THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT THE MOVIE

1. The film was shot on a California ranch in summer. So when Jimmy Stewart breaks out in a nervous sweat, it's probably because he's wearing a wool coat in 85 degree temperatures.

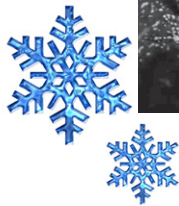


RKO's Encino Ranch, Courtesy of Bison Archives/Marc Wanamaker

2. Frank Capra went to great lengths to give the set a small-town feel, shipping in full-grown oak trees and live pigeons.



3. The film revolutionized the way Hollywood did snow: it used soap bubbles shot out of a fire hose, instead of the traditional method of using bleached corn-flakes.



4. Contrary to popular myth, the Sesame Street characters Bert and Ernie are *not* named after the film's cop and taxi driver.

5. Jimmy Stewart served in the Air Force during World War II, flying in 20 combat missions and twice earning the Distinguished Flying Cross. Donna Reed also aided the war effort, performing in stateside USO shows and selling war bonds.
6. The FBI in the late 40's accused the film of Communist propaganda, saying that it maligned the upper class and bankers like Potter.
7. Lionel Barrymore, who plays Mr. Potter, was actually wheelchair-bound due to severe arthritis.
8. In one scene, Potter disparagingly calls the Italian Martini family "a bunch of garlic eaters." The studio's legal department flagged the line as offensive dialogue, but Capra, an Italian immigrant, insisted it be left in.
9. Later in his career, Capra conceded that he would like to change the way Mary is portrayed in the alternate-world scene: not as a meek, stereotypical old maid, but as strong and independent.
10. In the final scene, during the rousing chorus of "Auld Lang Syne," George looks at his daughter Zuzu, who he's holding, and laughs—probably because the young actress (Karolyn Grimes) had no idea what the words were and was making them up.



Young actress Karolyn Grimes had no idea what the words were.

# TIMELINE OF RADIO HISTORY

For decades, radio was the world's way in to information and entertainment. Here are a couple of landmarks in the history of the medium:

## 1896

**Guglielmo Marconi** gets the patent for radio telegraphy in Italy—the first wireless telegraph. *Until the 1920's, radio will be used almost exclusively for nautical communications and international security, plus for the fun and experimentation of a few scattered hobbyists.*



Guglielmo Marconi operates wireless apparatus, 1901.

## 1920's

**1920:** KDKA Pittsburgh becomes the **first commercial radio station**.

**1921:** First radio broadcast of a **boxing match** (Jack Dempsey vs. Georges Carpentier; Dempsey wins with a knockout) and **baseball game** (Pittsburgh Pirates vs. Philadelphia Phillies; Pittsburgh wins 8-0).



Jack Dempsey, victor of the first ever broadcast boxing match

**1923:** *Radio Digest* magazine foretells the rise of the "Radio Play."

**1926:** The **National Broadcasting Company (NBC)** goes on the air, making history by using telephone lines to connect local radio stations across the entire country.

## 1912

The **sinking of the RMS Titanic** spurs rapid improvements in radio technology, as well as a lot more government oversight of radio communications.



Titanic sinking. Engraving by Willy Stöwer.

## 1900

The first radio transmission of **human speech** by American scientist R.A. Fessenden

## 1930's

**FM Radio** is born, using Frequency Modulation to minimize static and interference.

The **Federal Communications (FCC)** is established to regulate broadcasting activities.

Radio reaches its "**Golden Age,**" with an explosion of programming spanning music, news, comedy, drama, talk, and variety.



## 1940's:

**World War II** spawns a new era of patriotic programming and news coverage of overseas battles, including the invasion of Normandy in 1944.

Number of households with radios **pushes past 90%**

Lux Radio Theater airs radio adaptation of ***It's a Wonderful Life*** starring Jimmy Stewart in 1947

**Television** is born in 1945



Lux Radio Theatre produced radio adaptations of stage plays and films, often with the original casts. They broadcast *It's a Wonderful Life* in 1947.

## 1960

*Suspense*, the last remaining show of Radio's golden age, **goes off the air.**

## 1990

Satellite CD Radio, Inc. becomes the first company to petition the FCC to assign unused frequencies to **satellite radio broadcast**. The company will eventually become Sirius Satellite Radio.

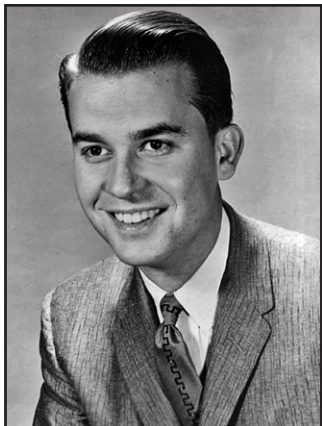


Satellite radio is among the medium's more recent innovations.

## 1950's

Formal programming starts to fall out of vogue

The "**Top 40**" format for popular music takes over the airwaves, with DJ's like Dick Clark, Wolfman Jack, Alan Freed, and Don Imus spinning the soundtrack to a new national identity.



Dick Clark, one of the DJ's who emerged with the "Top 40" format.

Lowell's WCAP began regular broadcasts from MRT's home at Liberty Hall in 2012.



## 2012

Lowell's WCAP begins its remote broadcasts from Merrimack Repertory Theatre.

## 2014

The podcast *Serial* sparks a **revival of interest** in audio drama.



Interest in audio drama seems to have returned with the podcast *Serial*.

## 1970

National Public Radio (NPR) is incorporated.

Sources: The Great American Radio Broadcast by Leonard Maltin "Radio: The Internet of the 1930's." [www.americanradioworks.org](http://www.americanradioworks.org)

# OUTFITTING THE 1940'S

**Welcome to Christmas Eve, 1946.** World War II is over, and America is on the brink of a new, prosperous era.

**So what are people wearing?**

The women's outfits onstage tonight are emblematic of their era in fashion: right between the early and late 1940's.



Costume renderings by A. Lee Villiesis for *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* at MRT.

## Early 40's: Slimming Down

It's hard to overstate the impact World War II had on American culture. Not only were millions of Americans fighting overseas, but America also had to find the resources to equip every one of them with food, clothing, and weapons.

Resources were scarce, materials were rationed, and it showed in the clothes people wore. **Textile rations led to strict rules on how clothing could be made:** Skirt and jacket lengths were limited. So were trouser widths. A garment couldn't have too many buttons or zippers, and shoe heels couldn't extend beyond an inch and a half.

The result? A trimmer, sleeker look in women's wear.



Early 40s fashions were trim and sleek, in part because of textile rationing

## Late 40's: Dior's "New Look"

While American fashion was slimming down, something else was cooking in France.

During the War, a Frenchman named Lucien Lelong managed to convince Third Reich officials that France could better serve Germany if its garment workforce was allowed to stay active, with workers in compulsory service for German factories. Thus thousands of garment workers (who would have otherwise been disbanded) were able to practice their craft during the War. **Twenty French fashion houses stayed open right through the German occupation.**



Christian Dior's "New Look," which exploded in the late 40s

So by the time the War ended, French fashion was looking quite different than what had developed in America. In 1947, a designer named Christian Dior took the world by storm with his "New Look," characterized by **curvaceous lines, blossoming skirts, and extravagant use of fabric.**

## Somewhere In Between

The women's outfits in this WMRT radio broadcast fit right between these two eras: they don't quite reflect the austerity of World War II America; but they're also a long way from the New Look extravagance soon to sweep the globe.

What's more, they represent a shift not just of fashion, but of the pace of fashion: before the War, styles changed slowly. Beginning with the 1940's, bold fashion changes cropped up once a decade, or even more frequently. It was a time of enormous change—not just in what people wore, but in how they thought about what they wore.



Looking fabulous at WMRT: Nael Nacer, Celeste Oliva, Joel Colodner, Veronika Duerr, and Jason Bowen. Photo by Megan Moore

# SOUND EFFECTS

*It's a Wonderful Life* uses a colorful palette of effects to create its sound world. Here's just a few of them:

**RIBBON CANDY SMASHED WITH A HAMMER:** Glass breaking



**JELLY BEANS:** Pills dropped on the floor



**VINYL HOSE IN BASEBALL GLOVE:** Punch in the face



**SHOES CRUNCHING CORNFLAKES:** Walking on snow



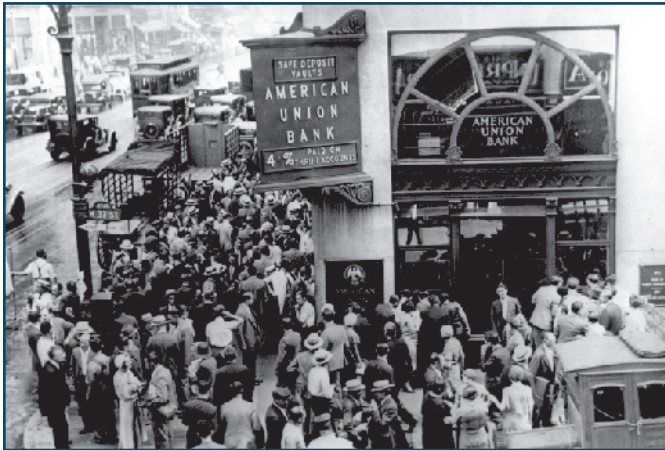
**BALSA WOOD RIPPED APART:** Ice cracking



# GLOSSARY OF TERMS IN *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: A LIVE RADIO PLAY*

**4-F:** A classification that exempts citizens from the military draft due to physical ailments, mental illness, or moral unfitness.

**BANK RUN:** The phenomenon of a large number of bank customers withdrawing cash at the same time, in fear that the bank will become insolvent. A run can destabilize a bank and lead to sudden bankruptcy.



**BUILDING AND LOAN:** A state-chartered financial institution, specializing in investments in residential mortgage loans. Building and Loans are typically “mutually held,” meaning that clients have the ability to direct the organization’s financial goals.

**CARRIAGE TRADE:** Wealthy patrons or customers of a business.

**CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR:** The highest honor awarded to members of the US Military, for valor and bravery in combat, at the risk of one’s life, above and beyond the call of duty.



**DIPHTHERIA:** Serious bacterial infection affecting the mucous membranes of the nose and throat, resulting in fever, weakness, and a struggle to breathe.

**DRUGSTORE:** Dispensary for medicines and other goods. In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, drugstores were often social hubs as well, doubling as soda fountains where people could gather to talk over a sweet beverage.



**GARLIC EATER:** Derogatory slur referring to several immigrant ethnic groups in the early-to-mid 20th century, including Italians.

**MERCENARY:** Primarily concerned with making money, at the expense of ethics.

**MULLED WINE:** Red wine served hot with spices.



**NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY:** Nonprofit scientific and educational institution promoting the study of archeology, geography, natural science, and world culture. Started in 1888 by a group of 33 explorers and scientists, its magazine was the first to make heavy use of photographs in storytelling. “Membership” in the society simply meant a subscription to the magazine.

**SCURVY:** Worthless or contemptible.



**USO:** United Service Organizations, established in 1941 to lift morale in the military and nourish support on the home front. The USO is still in operation today.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you admire the selflessness George shows throughout the story? Would you react to circumstances the same way he does? What motivates him to make the sacrifices he does?
2. Do you think hearing the story through sound alone enhances it, or detracts from it? In what ways?
3. Do you agree with the show's tagline that "No man is alone who has friends?"

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING, WATCHING, AND LISTENING

### For more on the film:

- *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946 film), *directed by Frank Capra*
- *The Essential It's a Wonderful Life: A Scene-By-Scene Guide to the Classic Film* by Michael Willian
- *It's a Wonderful Life: A Memory Book* by Stephen Cox and Bob Anderson

### The short story that inspired the film:

- "The Greatest Gift" by Phillip Van Doren Stern

### Golden age radio:

- *The Great American Broadcast: A Celebration of Radio's Golden Age* by Leonard Maltin
- "Back of the Mike" (1938), 10-minute short film showing how sound effects were actually made in radio's golden age (YouTube: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com))
- Screen Guild Theater archive, featuring radio versions of many classic movies with their original casts: [archive.org/details/ScreenGuildTheater](http://archive.org/details/ScreenGuildTheater).
- [www.mediaheritage.com](http://www.mediaheritage.com), devoted to the preservation of radio and television history; a nonprofit website and archives

## THANK YOU

Thank you to those who contributed their time,  
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Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives

A. Lee Viliesis