

'Radio play' a perfect way to enjoy holiday classic

By KATHLEEN PALMER
Staff Writer

LOWELL, Mass. – If your jaded Grinch heart needs to grow three times its size this season (as mine did), and you wince at the thought of yet another Christmas chestnut being trotted out on your television again ... I cordially invite you to join me in the 1940s for a beautiful diversion into yesteryear.

Merrimack Repertory Theatre has created a valentine in December, with its lovely presentation of "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play." The charming adaptation by Joe Landry presents the story of the classic film as a 1940s radio drama. The warm-tone set has a player piano (that the actors also plink on), vintage microphones on stands, and a barrage of sound effects props that will grab your attention as the actors go seamlessly from delivering their lines to delivering the next sound cue.

George Bailey's timeless tale of renewal comes to life on the evocative set that includes an "ON AIR/ APPLAUSE" sign that lights up as necessary, so you'll be sure to know your cue when the actors-playing-actors-in-a-radio-play take a commercial break to tout "energy drink" Moxie, or break into a rousing five-part harmony singing the praises of a certain local grocery store chain.

(The audience roared with delight at that one the day I was in attendance.)

The MRT show has an all-local cast, including Joel Colodner as Freddie Filmore, the announcer at "WMRT in Lowell, Massachusetts," Nael Nacer as Jake Laurents, the actor voicing George Bailey, along with Jason Bowen, Veronika Duerr and Celeste Oliva, most of whom do multiple characters –

more than 40 – throughout the tight, 90-minute show, which runs sans intermis-

sion. The family-friendly show with its uplifting story is MRT's first holiday-themed production since 2011, and is already breaking their box-office pre-sale records.

Director Megan Sandberg Zakian should be lauded for a clearly hands-off style, as the performers present themselves as calm, smooth radio pros without any mugging or side stories. Set design by Amanda Williams is warm and inviting, and hair and costumes (the latter by A. Lee Viliesis) are period-perfect.

I'm glad that this was the first experience of this story my 10-year-old daughter had. The movie will always be a timeless classic, of course. But a live, 90-minute charmer instead of a three-hour black and white film (with the ugly interruptions of modern commercials) is no contest, for me. You get all the salient details,

From left, Jason Bowen, Veronika Duerr, Celeste Oliva, Joel Colodner and Nael Nacer push the Moxie, in Merrimack Repertory Theatre's production of "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play," through Dec. 20 in Lowell, Mass.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MEGHAN MOORE

all the drama, all the joy, in one tidy package that's smoothly executed.

Being part of the live audience also adds a measure of sparkle to the experience.

Dec. 19, MRT has partnered with Cafe UTEC on a new dinner and a show package. Attend the 4 p.m. show and then go over to the Cafe for a full buffet dinner. \$80 covers the performance and dinner (but does not include the price of alcoholic beverages) and can be purchased directly through the MRT Box Office at 1-978-654-4678.

"It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play" runs through Dec. 20, with performances Wednesdays-Sundays, at the Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St.

Tickets range from \$60-\$23 and are on sale by calling 1-978-654-4678 or at www.mrt.org. Discounts for seniors, students, groups. More information is available at www.mrt.org/parties.

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