

Theater review: SJ Rep's 'This Wonderful Life' a delectable treat Sweet, solo retelling captures movie's spirit

[By Karen D'Souza, Mercury News](#)

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The idyllic small-town of Bedford Falls stirs to life with sparkling clarity in "This Wonderful Life."

An enchanting one-man retelling of the classic 1946 Frank Capra picture, this San Jose Repertory Theatre production is sweeter than any gingerbread. Grounded by the virtuosic Dan Hiatt, one of the most stalwart character actors the Bay Area has to offer, lit by nostalgia and jeweled with moments of teary euphoria, this artful bit of yuletide stagecraft puts the wonder back in "It's a Wonderful Life." It's an old movie homage bound to lasso your heart as well as the moon.

Hiatt's performance is more than mere technical mastery, although it is certainly that as he changes his skin through 35 characters, from George Bailey (the Jimmy Stewart part) to his dutiful wife Mary (Donna Reed) to the dotty angel Clarence (Henry Travers). But it is also clearly a labor of love. Hiatt's every word, every gesture seems suffused with the sheer joy of storytelling, the simple pleasure of sharing a warmly treasured memory on a cold winter's eve.

The parable of George Bailey is one we all know and love, but Hiatt brings a freshness to the tale that's hard to resist. The actor nails not just the big parts here, although his Stewart impersonation has the uncanny ring of truth, but he also etches the bit parts with equal parts dexterity and respect. Hiatt radiates such genuineness on stage that he gilds even the most gimmicky bit of shtick with truthfulness.

Director Kirsten Brandt wisely frames the actor with only skeletal set pieces, such as the flight of stairs at the drafty old Granville house or the snow-encrusted bridge George almost throws himself off. The art of the actor is the real spectacle here. With minimal props and no costume changes, Hiatt inhabits the town of Bedford Falls one person at a time. But fear not, short-attention spansters, this fast and furious Cliff Note's version of the black and white film takes a mere 75 minutes.

The population remains just as you remember it. George is the everyman, the boy next door touched by wanderlust but anchored by a moral compass he can't shake loose. Spidery businessman Mr. Potter weaves webs of greed and deceit from his wheelchair. Druggist Mr. Gower sinks into alcoholism and grief. Tipsy uncle Billy chugs from his ever-ready flask. Throughout it all, George yearns to break free and see the world, but the needs of hearth and home keep him from ever living his dream.

Playwright Steve Murray respects the sentimentality of the tale, but he also punctures the atmosphere with acerbic sides on everything from the token ethnic characters to the blatant critique of the economic status quo: "Have you noticed how much of the story is about money? Discuss."

While the play largely sticks to the bones of the movie, there are moments when Murray's voice comes through loud and clear. His insistence that we see "Wonderful" as more than a Christmas story, that we see it as metaphor for the nobility of the average hardworking American, packs a punch as heady as any egg nog.

To cut to the chase, this one-man show draws its wit and grit from the same source as the movie, from its recognition of life's injustices. George's redemption at the hands of that ditzzy angel Clarence wouldn't be nearly as moving if his moment of despair weren't as bleak as a Christmas Eve suicide.

Of course, a happy ending demands that the evil Potter gets foiled and George emerges triumphant and daughter Zuzu's petals miraculously appear just when they are supposed to. And, let's face it, this life just wouldn't be "Wonderful" if it didn't leave you with tears streaming down your face. Attaboy, Hiatt.

"This Wonderful Life"

By Steve Murray

Mercury News

The upshot: Just in time to kick off the holidays, here comes an enchanting solo version of the über-Christmas movie. It's a one-man homage to the Capra classic that's guaranteed to lasso your heart as well as the moon.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose.

When: 12 p.m. Wednesdays, 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays (plus some additional shows 7 p.m. Sundays). Through Dec. 23.

Running time: 75 minutes. No intermission.

Tickets: \$15-\$59; (408) 367-7255 or go to www.sjrep.org.

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