



HECETA HEAD BY TIM GIRAUDIER

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# IMAGINE

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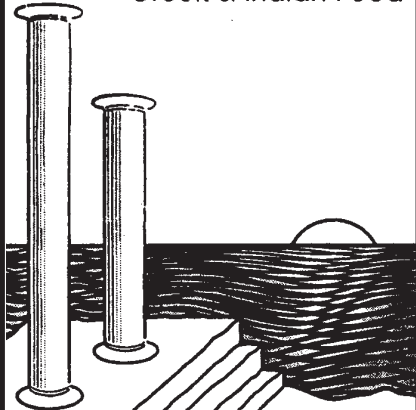
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Anatolia

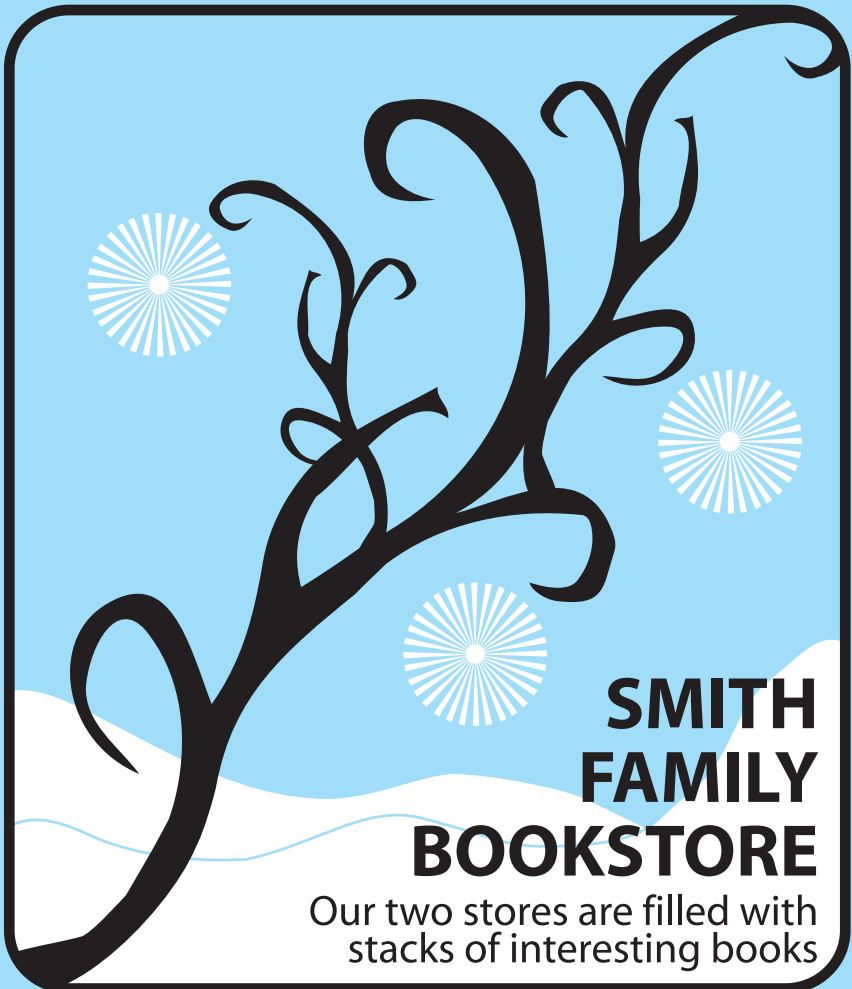
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## THEATER BY SHARLEEN NELSON

Sally Applewhite (Connie Hymer), Jake Laurents (Jeff Pierce) and Lana Sherwood (Sharon Sless)



COURTESY LORD LEEBRICK THEATRE

## The Golden Age

*It's Wonderful* at the Leebrick (and the Wildish)

Lord Leebrick's production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* opened to a full house for a two-day run at the stylish Wildish Theater in downtown Springfield. Based on Philip Van Doren Stern's 1939 short story "The Greatest Gift" and Frank Capra's 1946 classic film noir-esque *It's a Wonderful Life*, playwright Joe Landry's adaptation is presented in the style of a live 1940s radio show that hearkens back to the golden age of radio when families came together to hear inspirational broadcasts and wholesome entertainment.

his dreams of travel and college to keep his father's unstable savings and loan company afloat and to protect the town of Bedford Falls from being taken over by the avarice of rich banker Mr. Potter. But on Christmas Eve Uncle Billy misplaces the company's bank deposit. Facing jail and financial ruin, and thinking that his wife and young children will be better off with him dead, George contemplates suicide. With the promise of earning his wings, an angel named Clarence comes down to earth to give George a supernatural look at what things would have been like if he had never been born.

## In 1947, some viewed *Wonderful Life* as subversive.

Facing a set that includes an On the Air/Stand By marquee and blinking "Applause" signs to prompt audience response, playgoers participate as part of the show's live studio audience. The show takes place on Christmas Eve 1946 at radio station WBFR's Studio "A" in Manhattan, where the cast of Playhouse Theatre presents *It's a Wonderful Life*. Prior to the show, host Freddie Filmore (Bary Shaw) warms up the audience while five actors take their places in front of several old timey microphones. At a station in the rear is sound effects technician Dale Jestice, who has an odd assortment of clever sound-making devices at his disposal: a wheel that turns to simulate wind, horns, a door for opening, closing and slamming, bells and music that incorporates the theremin, an instrument often used to project an eerie atmosphere.

The story, as was the case in real radio plays, is interspersed by comical yuletide radio jingles that give a nod to sponsoring organizations: "Dux Toilet Cake: The soap of 100 uses" and "Bremel: The swank hair tonic for men." The group of actors recounts the story of George Bailey, a man who gave up

Under the direction of Carol Horne, the versatile cast performs multiple roles of nearly 50 characters. As Harry "Jazzbo" Heywood, Bill Reid skillfully plays the roles of Clarence, Uncle Billy and Mr. Gower. Bary Shaw is great as smooth-talking show host Freddie Filmore but also puts in a terrific performance as smarmy Mr. Potter. As Lana Sherwood, Sharon Sless captures the spirit of the flirtatious Violet and the elder Mrs. Bailey, as well as George's youngest child Zuzu; Connie Hymer does an excellent job as former Miss Ohio Sally Applewhite playing Mary Bailey. As Jake Laurents, Jeff Pierce gives Jimmy Stewart a run for his money playing the venerable George Bailey. Finally, Dale Jestice has his work cut out for him making many, many sound effects and playing Mr. Welch.

It's interesting to note that although God, angels and prayer played a prominent role in the film, in 1947 a memo to the director of the FBI reported that some sources viewed the film as subversive and pro-Communist because of its negative depiction of the capitalist Potter and the triumph of the common man Bailey. With today's holiday pressures to buy an HD plasma TV, toxic toys, the latest techie gadget or a Wii and to decorate our yards with blow-up Santas and snow globes, *It's A Wonderful Life* is as relevant today as it was then, maybe more. Perhaps we should recapture the inexpensive joys — like Zuzu's petals and angel's wings — and the simple act of getting together with family and friends.

EW

The play continues at Lord Leebrick Dec. 6-9 and 13-16. For tix, visit [www.lordleebrick.com](http://www.lordleebrick.com) or call 465-1506.