



# *It's a Wonderful Life*

**Live in Chicago!**



## **PLAYGUIDE**

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# PLAYGUIDE

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# Our History with *It's a Wonderful Life*

## Producing Artistic Director's Note

Welcome to American Blues Theater's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary season "Seeing is Believing". In 2002, we never imagined our production of *It's a Wonderful Life* would become a holiday tradition. We've delighted more than 35,000 patrons and made 2,917 dozen cookies. Throughout the years, we featured the great work of 26 Ensemble members and Artistic Affiliates. Two Ensemble members have been involved since the beginning – Marty Higginbotham and John Mohrlein. In nearly 300 performances, Mr. Mohrlein (*Mr. Potter/Clarence*) has never missed a curtain. Please knock on wood immediately upon reading.



This story is a staple of our mission: American Blues Theater illuminates the American ideas of freedom, equality, and opportunity in the plays we produce and communities we serve. During 2002 and 2003, our Ensemble and former Artistic Director, Damon Kiely, presented staged-readings of *It's a Wonderful Life*. In 2004, we expanded the event to a fully-staged production of Joe Landry's adaptation, directed by Ensemble member Marty Higginbotham. In the years that followed, Higginbotham created a live-radio experience for audience members and adapted a new version with our Ensemble. Dramaturgical research and attention to detail were paramount to our adaptations. Higginbotham's directorial elements included adding audio grams, lobby refreshments of cookies and milk, dramatized scenes from Capra's film, a pre-show, and singing holiday carols. In our present iteration, you can also enjoy vintage projections, the "Soldier Spotlight" which has honored nearly 200 military personnel, and a quiz show for the live audience.

Your gracious spirits and open hearts are equally important to this Chicago tradition. Your presence is a gift to the Blues family. We welcome you—our home is yours.

-Gwendolyn Whiteside

## Original Director's Note

On Veteran's Day in 1972, at the age of nine, I stood in a church in Birmingham, Alabama and shook hands with Jimmy Stewart. It was the nation's oldest and largest Veteran's Day celebration, and Mr. Stewart was there, not as a movie star, but as that year's recipient of the National Veterans Award. Mr. Stewart enlisted in 1941, eight months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and *It's a Wonderful Life* was his first film after returning home from combat in World War II. By the time he officially retired from the military in 1966, he had risen to the rank of Brigadier General and was one of the few men to go from private to colonel in four years. He was the recipient of the Croix de Guerre award, Presidential Medal of Freedom, Distinguished Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, as well as receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross twice and the Air Medal four times. He flew combat missions during both World War II and the Vietnam War, and sadly lost his son Ronald to the latter conflict. Jimmy Stewart was more than a film star and Hollywood icon. He was also a man who served our country with courage and pride – a man who didn't wait to be called upon.



I think that's one of the reasons I love *It's a Wonderful Life* so much – because it too is the story of a man who lived his life in service to his community. Unlike his brother Harry and the real-life Stewart, George Bailey never donned a uniform. But as the man left behind to organize rubber drives, scrap drives and keep the family business alive, George's service, like countless other Americans, still made a difference. So this year, as we once again share this classic holiday story with you, we'd like to take a moment to honor and remember all those who have served and sacrificed.

Thank you. And may we always recognize the blessings that stand before us everyday.

-Marty Higginbotham

# Three Generations of George



Producing Artistic Director Gwendolyn (Wendy) Whiteside interviewed the three actors who have played "George Bailey" in American Blues Theater's *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*

[L to R – Ensemble members Jim Leaming, Kevin Kelly, & Artistic Affiliate Zach Kenney; photo by Johnny Knight.]

**WENDY:** What was your biggest fear playing the iconic *George Bailey*?

**JIM:** Capra serves a parable of hope for the good person; it's scary to be honored with the telling. Being true to the spirit of the character and serving the story and not allowing myself to be overwhelmed or distracted by a desire to "be worthy" of the icon. This is a love story. We change the world where we touch it.

**KEVIN:** Living up to everyone's expectations. For years and generations, people have an image and a voice associated with that character. How do I make it my own with a flavor of what they also expect?

**ZACH:** I didn't grow up with *It's a Wonderful Life*. It wasn't a part of my personal holiday ritual. Being a part of the show, however, has given me a chance to enjoy this story and be a part of a favorite Christmas tradition to so many. It is an iconic piece of Americana, and there is no more worthy Christmas message than the one at the heart of this story. American Blues' production invites a sense of community, gratitude, faith, and hope in the face of life's struggles.

Jim and Kevin have left quite a legacy in sharing this story with so many Chicago families. More than fear of "getting it wrong", I am simply hoping upon hope that I'll be able to fit into audiences' well-formed holiday tradition. It's certainly become a favorite aspect of my own.

**WENDY:** What is your favorite moment or line from the production?

**JIM:** The line - "That's a Christmas present from a very dear friend of mine."

**KEVIN:** There are so many - Zuzu's petals scene stands out for me. The innocence of Zuzu's world combined with the catastrophic world that George is living at that moment - it's wonderful and complex. I also like the line "Well you look like the kind of angel I'd get..." Poor George.

**ZACH:** My favorite moment in the production is the "Soldier Spotlight". While most of these folks probably prefer to stay out of the limelight, I think it's incredibly important that we celebrate their service to our country. Military service is woven into the fabric of the story. So it's only fitting that we hold a moment to pause and reflect on what that means--in a personal way. When we recall the stories and honor their service, we recommit ourselves to doing everything we can to thank them for everything they have done for us. At the holidays, I think this is an especially important time to thank the men and women who have served out country.

**WENDY:** Between Jim and Kevin, you've both played "George Bailey" for 12 years on our stage. What advice do you have for Zach?

**JIM:** Have fun. Open your heart and jump in.

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**KEVIN:** Make it your own while honoring the George Bailey that the audience expects. Keep it pure, innocent, and real every moment every night because there is a little bit of “George” in all of us and many who need this story that night. Don't let them down.

**WENDY:** Both Kevin and Zach followed another actor in our holiday tradition. What did you admire about those performances?

**KEVIN:** I thought I could never fill the great shoes that Jim created. His strength and talent abounded, and he was a tough act to follow.

**ZACH:** Kevin is just brilliant as “George Bailey”. First, he is an incredibly gifted actor. He puts the story to the forefront and lets the message of the play shine. His incredible vocal variety and ability to shape the text allows us to see the town of Bedford Falls right along with him, and ride the highs and lows of the show. Kevin's ability to paint a portrait of George's entire life leaves us breathless. His inherent generosity of spirit and sense of family serves the play so much, and imbues the show with so much heart.

**WENDY:** Nearly 50,000 patrons have experienced our *It's a Wonderful Life* since 2002, what's your favorite audience tradition?

**JIM:** The pre-show! We casually get to know each other and generate the feeling that we are going to share this ride. And then cookies and milk (and nog-like beverages) after to celebrate the sharing. No other show I've done has such an immediate and living connection with the audience.

**ZACH:** From the holiday jingles, to singing carols, to sending fellow audience members special messages...and of course, milk and cookies, this show is packed with one-of-a-kind treats to surprise our friends "in the studio" and allow them to continue making memories year after year.

**KEVIN:** I'm always blown away when patrons say they loved our show more than the movie. I'm so honored they feel that way. We work hard every night to create this wonderful world and their appreciation means more than words!



[L to R — Amanda Tanguay and Artistic Affiliate Zach Kenney; photo by Ensemble member Jaclyn Holsey.]

# Neighborhood Savings & Loan is Pinched by the Times

by Leslie Wayne

George Bailey lives.

Bailey, as movie fans know, was the main character in the 1946 classic "It's a Wonderful Life". Portrayed by James Stewart, he heads a savings and loan that invests in the good folks of Bedford Falls while resisting the temptation of greed.

That fable is being played, for real, in this picturesque New England town where 36-year-old Robert E. Schrull heads the Brattleboro Savings and Loan Association, doing battle as an old-time home mortgage lender. In the movie, Mr. Bailey's faith and honesty were rewarded at Christmas-time when the townspeople rescued his little savings institution with cash - an early savings and loan bailout. Mr. Schrull's institution is in better shape. But it remains to be seen whether his story will have an ending as happy as George Bailey's.

As Mr. Schrull is finding, it is not easy running a savings and loan that stayed honest and stuck to its original purpose when many others did neither. Depositors are pulling out their money - nearly \$4 million by last tally - in part, Mr. Schrull thinks, because of the bad image of the industry. Federal regulators are inundating Mr. Schrull with red tape and stiff new assessments. A downturn in the New England economy means fewer people want mortgages. And bankers and Washington politicians are saying that community institutions like this one are a dying breed—too small and specialized to compete.



Vermont has only four savings and loans and none got into trouble, unlike those in Texas and Points West [Bank]. Yet Mr. Schrull, who drives a Jeep with the license plate "THRIFT," feels the heat. He recalls telling a California couple visiting a nearby country inn that he ran a savings and loan, and the wife replied, "Oh, you're a crook." Then there was the evening he dined at the bar at the Lobster Pot, a politicians' hangout in Montpelier, the state capital, and overheard patrons lambasting the savings and loan industry. He never told them what he did.

Mr. Schrull is fighting back with a combination of clever marketing and rock-solid adherence to the principles of community banking befitting George Bailey.

"It may be surprising," Mr. Schrull said in his office on Main Street, "but there are a few small honest

community institutions left."

Just recently, Mr. Schrull opened a branch at the local high school using students as tellers. He gives a \$5 savings account to every baby born in town so that "no one is born broke in Brattleboro." And, like George Bailey, he relishes making "heart" loans to local borrowers who may have a blemish or two on their credit rating but are otherwise solid citizens. He said only one of these had gone bad in 10 years.

"I know it sounds corny, but there needs to be a segment that focuses strictly on housing loans," he said. "I'm content to do that, even if we don't make as much money as we could. If we pool our money here in Brattleboro, we can help Jane or Joe buy a house, and I haven't taken my eye off that focus."

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"It's local people investing local money in his bank," said Mr. Dix, who had an account at Brattleboro Savings and Loan, founded in 1912, when he was a child and now accepts deposits for the institution at his store. "It's not a commercial enterprise. It's like it's ours."

Mr. Schrull's notion is to cement his ties to the community and make money on the difference between what he pays local depositors and what he lends to others to buy their homes. A native of Stamford, Conn., and a graduate of the University of Massachusetts, he came to Brattleboro Savings more than a decade ago, having decided to live in Vermont and make a career in banking. He started as marketing director and was picked by the institution's elderly president as heir apparent.

Throughout the 1980's, when savings and loans were freed to invest in all kinds of high-flying businesses, Mr. Schrull resisted temptation. He chose to build up the savings and loan's cash reserves rather than grow quickly through risky investments. He never bought "junk bonds," did not make loans on commercial real estate and shunned taking deposits from outside the Brattleboro area. "It just didn't seem like things we should do," Mr. Schrull said. "I just said no."

Instead, he opened branches in country stores, vowed never to get rid of the passbook and real, live tellers, and made mortgages with a personal touch. "If it makes sense, I'll make a loan," Mr. Schrull said. "A lot of other banks forget about the average Joe Six-Pack."

He held his own by offering depositors a slightly higher rate than did rival banks. As a mutual savings and loan, Mr. Schrull's institution gives its profits back to depositors in



[L to R — Ensemble members Kevin Kelly & John Mohrlein; photo by Johnny Knight.]

the form of higher rates and retains what is left as earnings.

He also competed through his "heart" loans that other banks might not touch. Unlike many other savings and loans and banks, he never bunched his mortgages into packages and sold them to outside investors. This, too, limited his growth because when loans are packaged and sold, an institution can make more loans without encroaching on regulatory limits. However, it enabled him to offer specialized loans - on offbeat properties or to trustworthy people with a spotty credit history.

As a result, 90 percent of Mr. Schrull's assets are invested in first mortgages on homes in the Brattleboro area, far more than the 70 percent requirement in the Federal bailout legislation.

To a large extent, his down-home strategy has paid off. Brattleboro Savings and Loan has grown to \$35 million in assets from \$8 million 10 years ago. Its cash reserve is strong and the association's return on equity - the amount earned on the bank's capital - is 15.02 percent, about twice the national average. Now, with his cash base secure, Mr. Schrull wants his institution to grow but finds it cannot.

Given the softness in the New England economy, fewer people are buying homes. And depositors are slowly but steadily withdrawing their money.

Mr. Schrull is not sure why, although he knows that many New England banks are seeing the same trend as the economy weakens and depositors dip into their savings. But he wonders whether the stigma of being a savings and loan is contributing. Profits, around \$170,000 a year in the mid-1980's, fell to about \$160,000 in 1989, but are expected to rise to more than \$200,000 this year because overhead was reduced.

Mr. Schrull feels that forces in Washington are against him. Many politicians and banking experts are saying the days for small-town commercial banks can do the job just as well. "There is no rationale, five or ten years from now, to having a separate thrift industry," said Charles E. Schumer, a Brooklyn Democrat who is an influential member of the House Banking Committee.

The 1989 bailout legislation also brought in a platoon of fresh regulators from the newly created Office of Thrift Supervision—

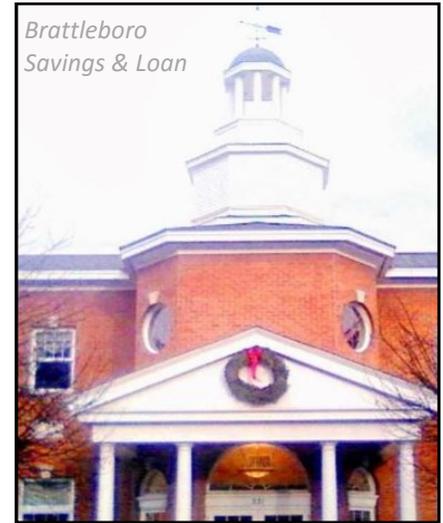
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along with a new annual assessment - \$16,300 for Brattleboro Savings and Loan - to cover the cost of this new regulation. This comes on top of an insurance premium -- \$47,000 in Brattleboro's case -- that must be paid to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, which also examines Mr. Schrull's institution. Mr. Schrull thinks the Office of Thrift Supervision regulators only duplicate the F.D.I.C., but less efficiently. He recalls once spending three weeks writing a computer program they wanted only to have them change their minds.

Ralph Gridley, the agency's director in Boston, said Mr. Schrull's comments were "not surprising."

To get out from under the Office of Thrift Supervision, Mr. Schrull is trying to convert his institution into a state savings bank, but his application is still pending. Even if it is approved, he plans no changes.

"I want to have the same mission of making money the old-fashioned way," said Mr. Schrull, who lives with his wife and two small children in a modest Cape Cod house in nearby Putney.



Source: *The New York Times*  
Nov 11, 1990

## About Frank Capra

Frank Capra began as a prop man in silent films. His films in the 1930s enjoyed success at the Academy Awards. *It Happened One Night* was the first film to win all five top Oscars (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay). In 1936, Capra won Best Director for *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*; in 1938 he won his third Director Oscar for *You Can't Take It with You*, which also won Best Picture.

During World War II, Frank Capra was commissioned as a major in the United States Army Signal Corps. He produced and directed eight documentary propaganda films between 1943 and 1948. His film *Why We Fight* is widely considered a masterpiece of propaganda and won an Academy Award. *Prelude to War* won 1942 Academy Award for Documentary Feature. Capra regarded these films as his most important works. He was decorated with a Distinguished Service Medal for his work on these films in 1945.

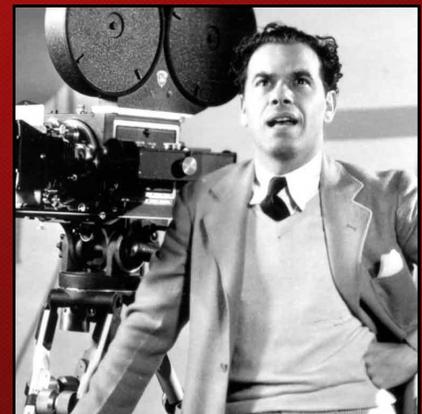
Near the end of World War II with his career as a military documentary filmmaker about to be over, Capra met with a lack of enthusiasm for his services at the major studios in Hollywood. In response, Capra and the former second-in-command at Columbia, Samuel Briskin discussed forming an independent production company, and in April 1945, they announced Liberty Films. At this same time, a relatively unknown author got his story, "The Greatest Gift" published in *Good Housekeeping*.

Capra was Hollywood's arch-populist, a supporter of "the common people of America" rather than "the elite of America." His films championed the average American whom he believed was good and kind, and had the right to seek happiness.

Capra made a clear stand for films with a recognizable base in the world the audience lived in, or more accurately, the world they wanted to live in. These were films that - along with the romantic clichés, chases and slapstick -

provided idealism. As an Italian immigrant who was granted access to the "Land of Opportunity", Capra writes that he thought of his films as one way of saying thanks to America, its history and people.

*"I would sing the songs of the working stiffs, of the short changed Joes, the born poor, the afflicted. I would gamble with the long shot players who light candles in the wind, and resent with the pushed-around because of race or birth. Above all, I would fight for their causes on the screens of the world."*



# Radio Drama

When the radio was first developed, it brought entertainment into the home. Prior to radios for the home, families and couples went out for entertainment to the theatre, movies, and museums. But with the new radio, families spent time gathered around the radio, listening to the news, music, and radio dramas broadcast daily.

Radio drama is a form of audio storytelling broadcast on radio. With no visual component, radio drama depends on dialogue, music and sound effects to help the listener imagine the story.

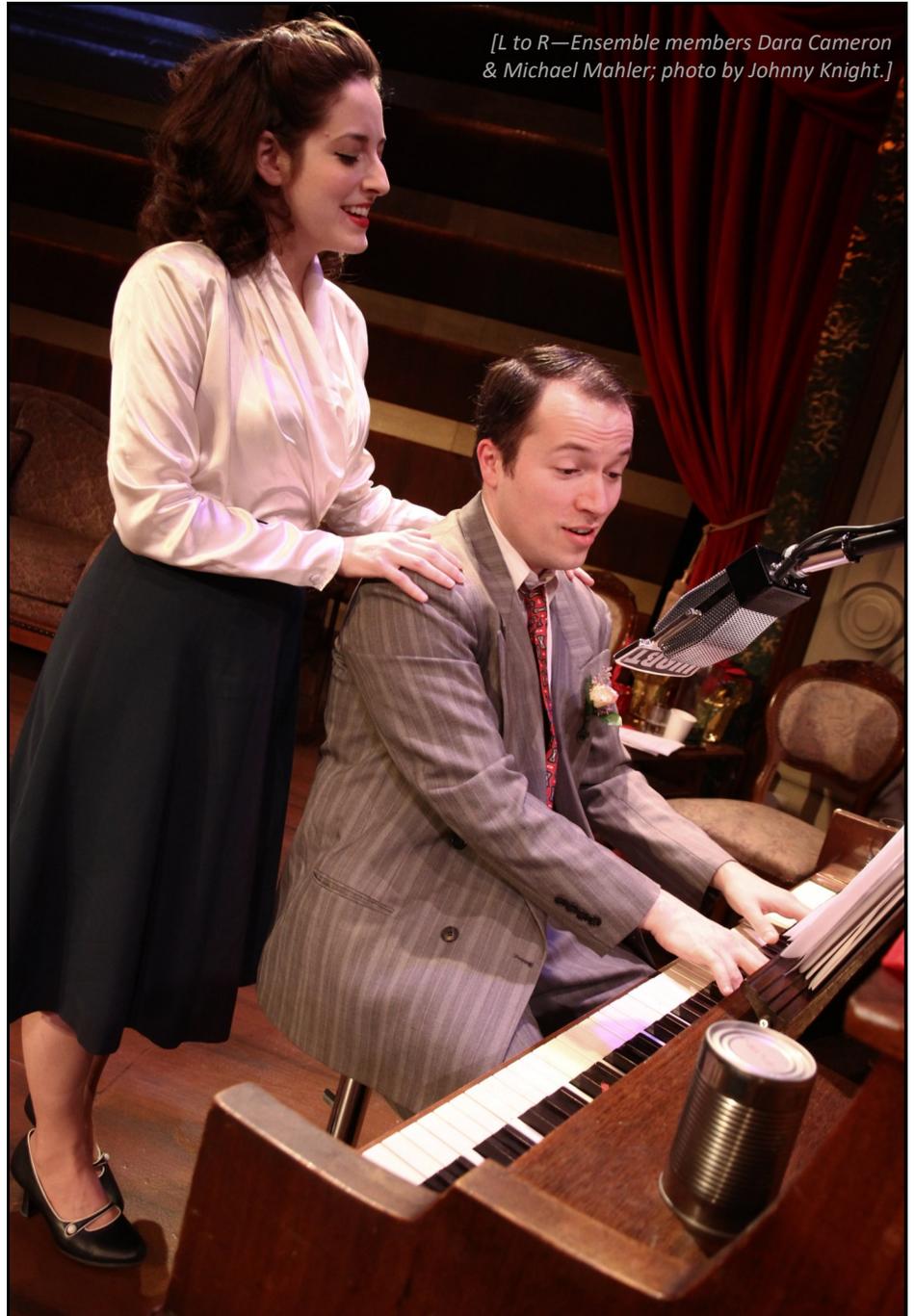
Radio drama achieved widespread popularity within a decade of its initial development in the 1920s. Newspaper accounts of the era report on a number of other drama experiments by America's commercial radio stations: KYW broadcast a season of complete operas from Chicago starting in November 1921. In February 1922, entire Broadway musical comedies with the original casts aired from WJZ's Newark studios. Actors Grace George and Herbert Hayes performed an entire play from a San Francisco station in the summer of 1922.

An important turning point in radio drama came when Schenectady, New York's WGY, after a successful tryout on August 3, 1922, began weekly studio broadcasts of full-length stage plays in September 1922, using music, sound effects and a regular troupe of actors, The WGY Players.

The single best-known episode of radio drama is probably the Orson Welles-directed adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* (1938), which some listeners believed to be real news broadcast about an invasion from Mars.

By the 1940s, it was a leading form of popular entertainment. With the advent of television in the 1950s, however, radio drama lost some of its popularity.

Radio drama has a minimal presence in the United States today. Much of American radio drama is restricted to rebroadcasts of podcasts or programs from previous decades. However, radio drama remains popular in much of the world.



[L to R—Ensemble members Dara Cameron & Michael Mahler; photo by Johnny Knight.]

# Life in the 1940s

- The forties are defined by World War II. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor shattered US isolationism. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt guided the country at home, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower commands the troops in Europe. Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Adm. Chester Nimitz led them in the Pacific.
- Unemployment almost disappears when men are drafted and sent off to war. The government reclassifies 55% of jobs, allowing women and African-Americans to fill them.
- Automobile production ceases in 1942, and rationing of food supplies begins in 1943.
- Japan surrenders after two atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States emerges from World War II as a world super power, challenged only by the USSR.
- Returning GI's create the baby boom.
- When the war and its restrictions end, Christian Dior introduced the "New Look" feminine dresses with long, full skirts, and tight waists. High heels become trendy. Hair was worn to the shoulders.
- The Servicemen's Readjustment Act (the GI Bill of Rights) entitles returning soldiers to a college education.
- Radio is the lifeline for Americans in the 1940s providing news, music and entertainment.
- Television makes its debut at the 1939 World Fair. The war interrupted development. In 1947, commercial television with 13 stations becomes available to the public.

## 1946 vs 2015 in America

### 1946

Population: 132,122,000  
Unemployed rate: 3.9%  
National Debt: \$43 Billion  
Average Annual Salary: \$1,299  
Minimum Wage: \$.43 per hour  
Life expectancy: 68.2 female, 60.8 male  
Supreme Court decides African-Americans have a right to vote.

### 2015

Population: 322,583,000  
Unemployment rate: 5.5%  
National Debt: \$18 Trillion  
Average Annual Salary: \$50,500  
Minimum Wage: \$7.25 per hour  
Life Expectancy: 81 female, 76 male  
An African-American man is President.

## Foley Effects



[Artistic Affiliate Shawn Goudie;  
photo by Johnny Knight.]

Named for Jack Foley, a sound editor at Universal Studios. Foley began his career in the film industry as a stand-in and screenwriters during the silent era, and later helped Universal make the transition from silent movies to "talkies". Foley Effects are manual techniques for synchronous effects or live effects added to the film during postproduction.

### What is a Foley artist?

A Foley Artist recreates sound effects for film, television, and radio productions on a Foley Stage in a post production sound studio. Using lots of props—car fenders, plates, glasses, chairs, different kinds of shoes, and just about anything found at the side of the road—the Foley Artist can replace original sound completely or augment existing sounds to create a richer smoother track.

Almost every motion picture and television show you have ever seen and heard contains a Foley track!

# The Greatest Gift

by Philip Van Doren Stern

*with original illustrations*

The little town straggling up the hill was bright with colored Christmas lights. But George Pratt did not see them. He was leaning over the railing of the iron bridge, staring down moodily at the black water. The current eddied and swirled like liquid glass, and occasionally a bit of ice, detached from the shore, would go gliding downstream to be swallowed up in the shadows under the bridge.

The water looked paralyzingly cold. George wondered how long a man could stay alive in it. The glassy blackness had a strange, hypnotic effect on him. He leaned still farther over the railing...

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a quiet voice beside him said.

George turned resentfully to a little man he had never seen before. He was stout, well past middle age, and his round cheeks were pink in the winter air as though they had just been shaved.

"Wouldn't do what?" George asked sullenly.

"What you were thinking of doing."

"How do you know what I was thinking?"

"Oh, we make it our business to know a lot of things," the stranger said easily.

George wondered what the man's business was. He was a most unremarkable little person, the sort you would pass in a crowd and never



notice. Unless you saw his bright blue eyes, that is. You couldn't forget them, for they were the kindest, sharpest eyes you ever saw. Nothing else about him was noteworthy. He wore a moth-eaten old fur cap and a shabby overcoat that was stretched tightly across his paunchy belly. He was carrying a small black satchel. It wasn't a doctor's bag—it was too large for that and not the right shape. It was a salesman's sample kit, George decided distastefully. The fellow was probably some sort of peddler, the kind who would go around poking his sharp little nose into other people's affairs.

"Looks like snow, doesn't it?" the stranger said, glancing up appraisingly at the overcast sky. "It'll be nice to have a white Christmas. They're getting scarce these days—but so are a lot of things." He turned to face George squarely. "You all right now?"

"Of course I'm all right. What made you think I wasn't? I—," George fell silent before the stranger's quiet gaze.

The little man shook his head. "You

know you shouldn't think of such things—and on Christmas Eve of all times! You've got to consider Mary—and your mother too."

George opened his mouth to ask how this stranger could know his wife's name, but the fellow anticipated him. "Don't ask me how I know such things. It's my business to know 'em. That's why I came along this way tonight. Lucky I did too." He glanced down at the dark water and shuddered.

"Well, if you know so much about me," George said, "give me just one good reason why I should be alive."

The little man made a queer chuckling sound. "Come, come, it can't be that bad. You've got your job at the bank. And Mary and the kids. You're healthy, young, and—"

"And sick of everything!" George cried. "I'm stuck here in this mudhole for life, doing the same dull work day after day. Other men are leading exciting lives, but I—well, I'm just a small-town bank clerk that even the

army didn't want. I never did anything really useful or interesting, and it looks as if I never will. I might just as well be dead. I might better be dead. Sometimes I wish I were. In fact, I wish I'd never been born!"

The little man stood looking at him in the growing darkness. "What was that you said?" he asked softly.

"I said I wish I'd never been born," George repeated firmly. "And I mean it too."



The stranger's pink cheeks glowed with excitement. "Why that's wonderful! You've solved everything. I was afraid you were going to give me some trouble. But now you've got the solution yourself. You wish you'd never been born. All right! OK! You haven't!"

"What do you mean?" George growled.

"You haven't been born. Just that. You haven't been born. No one here knows you. You have no responsibilities—no job—no wife—no children. Why, you haven't even a mother. You couldn't have, of course. All your troubles are over. Your wish, I am happy to say, has been granted—officially."

"Nuts!" George snorted and turned away.

The stranger ran after him and caught him by the arm. "You'd better take this with you," he said, holding out his

satchel. "It'll open a lot of doors that might otherwise be slammed in your face."

"What doors in whose face?" George scoffed. "I know everybody in this town. And besides, I'd like to see anybody slam a door in my face."

"Yes, I know," the little man said patiently. "But take this anyway. It can't do any harm and it may help." He opened the satchel and displayed a number of brushes. "You'd be

surprised how useful these brushes can be as introduction—especially the free ones. These, I mean." He hauled out a plain little hairbrush. "I'll show you how to use it." He thrust the satchel into George's reluctant hands and began: "When the lady of the house comes to the door you give her this and then talk fast. You say: 'Good evening, Madam. I'm from the World Cleaning Company, and I want to present you with this handsome and useful brush absolutely free—no obligation to purchase anything at all.' After that, of course, it's a cinch. Now you try it." He forced the brush into George's hand.

George promptly dropped the brush into the satchel and fumbled with the catch, finally closing it with an angry snap. "Here," he said, and then stopped abruptly, for there was no one in sight.

The little stranger must have slipped away into the bushes growing along the river bank, George thought. He

certainly wasn't going to play hide-and-seek with him. It was nearly dark and getting colder every minute. He shivered and turned up his coat collar.

The street lights had been turned on, and Christmas candles in the windows glowed softly. The little town looked remarkably cheerful. After all, the place you grew up in was the one spot on earth where you could really feel at home. George felt a sudden burst of affection even for crotchety old Hank Biddle, whose house he was passing. He remembered the quarrel he had had when his car had scraped a piece of bark out of Hank's big maple tree. George looked up at the vast spread of leafless branches towering over him in the darkness. The tree must have been growing there since Indian times. He felt a sudden twinge of guilt for the damage he had done. He had never stopped to inspect the wound, for he was ordinarily afraid to have Hank catch him even looking at the tree. Now he stepped out boldly into the roadway to examine the huge trunk.

Hank must have repaired the scar or painted it over, for there was no sign of it. George struck a match and bent down to look more closely. He straightened up with an odd, sinking feeling in his stomach. There wasn't any scar. The bark was smooth and undamaged.

He remembered what the little man at the bridge had said. It was all nonsense, of course, but the nonexistent scar bothered him.

When he reached the bank, he saw that something was wrong. The building was dark, and he knew he had turned the vault light on. He noticed, too, that someone had left the window shades up. He ran around to the front. There was a battered old

sign fastened on the door. George could just make out the words:

FOR RENT OR SALE  
Apply  
JAMES SILVA  
Real Estate

Perhaps it was some boys' trick, he thought wildly. Then he saw a pile of ancient leaves and tattered newspapers in the bank's ordinarily immaculate doorway. And the windows looked as though they hadn't been washed in years. A light was still burning across the street in Jim Silva's office. George dashed over and tore the door open.

Jim looked up from his ledgerbook in surprise. "What can I do for you, young man?" he said in the polite voice he reserved for potential customers.

"The bank," George said breathlessly. "What's the matter with it?"

"The old bank building?" Jim Silva turned around and looked out of the window. "Nothing that I can see. Wouldn't like to rent or buy it, would you?"

"You mean—it's out of business?"

"For a good ten years. Went bust. Stranger 'round these parts, ain't you?"

George sagged against the wall. "I was here some time ago," he said weakly. "The bank was all right then. I even knew some of the people who worked there."

"Didn't you know a feller named Marty Jenkins, did you?"

"Marty Jenkins! Why, he—" George was about to say that Marty had never worked at the bank—couldn't have, in fact, for when they had both left school they had applied for a job there and George had gotten it. But now, of course, things were different. He would have to be careful. "No, I didn't know him," he said slowly. "Not really, that is. I'd heard of him."

"Then maybe you heard how he skipped out with fifty thousand dollars. That's why the bank went broke.

Pretty near ruined everybody around here." Silva was looking at him sharply. "I was hoping for a minute

maybe you'd know where he is. I lost plenty in that crash myself. We'd like to get our hands on Marty Jenkins."

"Didn't he have a brother? Seems to me he had a brother named Arthur."

"Art? Oh, sure. But he's all right. He don't know where his brother went. It's had a terrible effect on him, too. Took to drink, he did. It's too bad—and hard on his wife. He married a nice girl."

George felt the sinking feeling in his stomach again. "Who did he marry?" he demanded hoarsely. Both he and Art had courted Mary.

"Girl named Mary Thatcher," Silva said cheerfully. "She lives up on the hill just this side of the church— Hey! Where are you going?"

But George had bolted out of the office. He ran past the empty bank building and turned up the hill. For a moment he thought of going straight to Mary. The house next to the church had been given them by her father as a wedding present.

Naturally Art Jenkins would have gotten it if he had married Mary. George wondered whether they had any children. Then he knew he couldn't face Mary—not yet anyway. He decided to visit his parents and find out more about her.

There were candles burning in the windows of the little weather-beaten house on the side street, and a Christmas wreath was hanging on the glass panel of the front door. George raised the gate latch with a loud click. A dark shape on the porch jumped up and began to growl. Then it hurled itself down the steps, barking ferociously.

"Brownie!" George shouted.



“Brownie, you old fool, stop that! Don’t you know me?” But the dog advanced menacingly and drove him back behind the gate. The porch light snapped on, and George’s father stepped outside to call the dog off. The barking subsided to a low, angry growl.

His father held the dog by the collar while George cautiously walked past. He could see that his father did not know him.

“Is the lady of the house in?” he asked.

His father waved toward the door. “Go on in,” he said cordially. “I’ll chain this dog up. She can be mean with strangers.”

His mother, who was waiting in the hallway, obviously did not recognize him. George opened his sample kit and grabbed the first brush that came to hand. “Good evening, ma’am,” he said politely. “I’m from the World Cleaning Company. We’re giving out a free sample brush. I thought you might like to have one. No obligation. No obligation at all...” His voice faltered.

His mother smiled at his awkwardness. “I suppose you’ll want to sell me something. I’m not really sure I need any brushes.”

“No’m. I’m not selling anything,” he assured her. “The regular salesman will be around in a few days. This is just—well, just a Christmas present from the company.”

“How nice,” she said. “You people never gave away such good brushes before.”

“This is a special offer,” he said. His father entered the hall and closed the door.

“Won’t you come in for a while and sit down?” his mother said. “You must be tired walking so much.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I don’t mind if I do.” He entered the little parlor and put his bag down on the floor. The room looked different somehow, although he could not figure out why.

“I used to know this town pretty well,” he said to make conversation. “Knew some of the townspeople. I remember a girl named Mary Thatcher. She married Art Jenkins, I heard. You must know them.”

“Of course,” his mother said. “We know Mary well.”

“Any children?” he asked casually.

“Two—a boy and a girl.”

George sighed audibly.

“My, you must be tired,” his mother said. “Perhaps I can get you a cup of tea.”

“No’m, don’t bother,” he said. “I’ll be having supper soon.” He looked around the little parlor, trying to find out why it looked different. Over the mantelpiece hung a framed photograph which had been taken on his kid brother Harry’s sixteenth birthday. He remembered how they had gone to Potter’s studio to be photographed together.

There was something queer about the picture. It showed only one figure—Harry’s.

“That your son?” he asked. His mother’s face clouded. She nodded but said nothing.

“I think I met him, too,” George said hesitantly. “His name’s Harry, isn’t it?”

His mother turned away, making a strange choking noise in her throat. Her husband put his arm clumsily around her shoulder. His voice, which was always mild and gentle, suddenly became harsh. “You couldn’t have met him,” he said. “He’s been dead a long while. He was drowned the day that picture was taken.”

George’s mind flew back to the long-ago August afternoon when he and Harry had visited Potter’s studio. On their way home they had gone swimming. Harry had been seized with a cramp, he remembered. He had pulled him out of the water and had thought nothing of it. But suppose he hadn’t been there!

“I’m sorry,” he said miserably. “I guess I’d better go. I hope you like the brush. And I wish you both a very Merry Christmas.” There, he had put his foot in it again, wishing them a Merry Christmas when they were thinking about their dead son.

Brownie tugged fiercely at her chain as George went down the porch steps and accompanied his departure with a hostile, rolling growl.

He wanted desperately now to see Mary. He wasn’t sure he could stand not being recognized by her, but he had to see her.

The lights were on in the church, and the choir was making last-minute preparations for Christmas vespers.

The organ had been practicing “Holy Night” evening after evening until George had become thoroughly sick of it. But now the music almost tore his heart out. He stumbled blindly up the path to his own house. The lawn was untidy, and the flower bushes he had kept carefully trimmed were neglected and badly sprouted. Art Jenkins could hardly be expected to care for such things.

When he knocked at the door there was a long silence, followed by the shout of a child. Then Mary came to the door.

He nodded solemnly. "Special introductory offer. It's one way for the company to keep excess profits down—share them with its friends."

There was a heavy step on the porch. The boy looked frightened and backed away. George saw Mary glance apprehensively at the door.



Art Jenkins came in. He stood for a moment in the doorway, clinging to the knob for support. His eyes were glazed, and his face was very red. "Who's this?" he demanded thickly.

"He's a brush salesman," Mary tried to explain. "He gave me this brush." "Brush salesman!" Art sneered. "Well, tell him to get outa here. We don't want no brushes." Art hiccupped violently and lurched across the room to the sofa, where he sat down suddenly. "An' we don't want no brush salesmen neither."

George looked despairingly at Mary. Her eyes were begging him to go. Art had lifted his feet up on the sofa and was sprawling out on it, muttering unkind things about brush salesmen. George went to the door, followed by Art's son, who kept snapping the pistol at him and saying: "You're dead—dead—dead!"

Perhaps the boy was right, George thought when he reached the porch. Maybe he was dead, or maybe this was all a bad dream from which he might eventually awake. He wanted to find the little man on the bridge again and try to persuade him to cancel the whole deal.

He hurried down the hill and broke into a run when he neared the river. George was relieved to see the little stranger standing on the bridge. "I've had enough," he gasped. "Get me out of this—you got me into it."

The stranger raised his eyebrows. "I got you into it! I like that! You were granted your wish. You got everything you asked for. You're the freest man on earth now. You have no ties. You

At the sight of her, George's voice almost failed him. "Merry Christmas, ma'am," he managed to say at last. His hand shook as he tried to open the satchel. When George entered the living room, unhappy as he was, he could not help noticing with a secret grin that the too-high-priced blue sofa they often had quarreled over was there. Evidently Mary had gone through the same thing with Art Jenkins and had won the argument with him too.

George got his satchel open. One of the brushes had a bright blue handle and varicolored bristles. It was obviously a brush not intended to be given away, but George didn't care. He handed it to Mary. "This would be fine for your sofa," he said.

"My, that's a pretty brush," she exclaimed. "You're giving it away free?"

She stroked the sofa gently with the brush, smoothing out the velvety nap. "It is a nice brush. Thank you. I—"

There was a sudden scream from the kitchen, and two small children rushed in. A little, homely-faced girl flung herself into her mother's arms, sobbing loudly as a boy of seven came running after her, snapping a toy pistol at her head. "Mommy, she won't die," he yelled. "I shot her a hunert times, but she won't die."

He looks just like Art Jenkins, George thought. Acts like him too.

The boy suddenly turned his attention to him. "Who're you?" he demanded belligerently. He pointed his pistol at George and pulled the trigger. "You're dead!" he cried. "You're dead. Why don't you fall down and die?"

can go anywhere—do anything. What more can you possibly want?”

“Change me back,” George pleaded. “Change me back—please. Not just for my sake but for others too. You don’t know what a mess this town is in. You don’t understand. I’ve got to get back. They need me here.”

“I understand right enough,” the stranger said slowly. “I just wanted to make sure you did. You had the greatest gift of all conferred upon you—the gift of life, of being a part of this world and taking a part in it. Yet you denied that gift.”

As the stranger spoke, the church bell high up on the hill sounded, calling the townspeople to Christmas vespers. Then the downtown church bell started ringing.

“I’ve got to get back,” George said desperately. “You can’t cut me off like this. Why, it’s murder!”

“Suicide rather, wouldn’t you say?” the stranger murmured. “You brought it on yourself. However, since it’s Christmas Eve—well, anyway, close your eyes and keep listening to the bells.” His voice sank lower. “Keep listening to the bells...”

George did as he was told. He felt a cold, wet snowdrop touch his cheek—and then another and another. When he opened his eyes, the snow was falling fast, so fast that it obscured everything around him. The little stranger could not be seen, but then neither could anything else. The snow was so thick that George had to grope for the bridge railing.

As he started toward the village, he thought he heard someone saying “Merry Christmas,” but the bells were drowning out all rival sounds, so he could not be sure.

When he reached Hank Biddle’s house he stopped and walked out into the roadway, peering down anxiously at the base of the big maple tree. The scar was there, thank heaven! He touched the tree affectionately. He’d have to do something about the wound—get a tree surgeon or something. Anyway, he’d evidently been changed back. He was himself again. Maybe it was all a dream, or perhaps he had been hypnotized by the smooth-flowing black water. He had heard of such things.

At the corner of Main and Bridge Streets he almost collided with a hurrying figure. It was Jim Silva, the real estate agent. “Hello, George,” Jim said cheerfully. “Late tonight, ain’t you? I should think you’d want to be home early on Christmas Eve.”

George drew a long breath. “I just wanted to see if the bank is all right. I’ve got to make sure the vault light is on.”

“Sure it’s on. I saw it as I went past.”

“Let’s look, huh?” George said, pulling at Silva’s sleeve. He wanted the assurance of a witness. He dragged the surprised real estate dealer around to the front of the bank where the light was gleaming through the falling snow.

“I told you it was on,” Silva said with some irritation.

“I had to make sure,” George mumbled. “Thanks—and Merry Christmas!” Then he was off like a streak, running up the hill.

He was in a hurry to get home, but not in such a hurry that he couldn’t stop for a moment at his parents’ house, where he wrestled with Brownie until the friendly old bulldog wagged all over with delight. He grasped his startled brother’s hand and wrung it

frantically, wishing him an almost hysterical Merry Christmas. Then he dashed across the parlor to examine a certain photograph. He kissed his mother, joked with his father, and was out of the house a few seconds later, stumbling and slipping on the newly fallen snow as he ran on up the hill.

The church was bright with light, and the choir and the organ were going full tilt. George flung the door to his home open and called out at the top of his voice: “Mary! Where are you? Mary! Kids!”

His wife came toward him, dressed for going to church, and making gestures to silence him.

“I’ve just put the children to bed,” she protested. “Now they’ll—” But not another word could she get out of her mouth, for he smothered it with kisses, and then dragged her up to the children’s room, where he violated every tenet of parental behavior by madly embracing his son and his daughter and waking them up thoroughly.

It was not until Mary got him downstairs that he began to be coherent. “I thought I’d lost you. Oh, Mary, I thought I’d lost you!”

“What’s the matter, darling?” she asked in bewilderment.

He pulled her down on the sofa and kissed her again. And then, just as he was about to tell her about his queer dream, his fingers came in contact with something lying on the seat of the sofa. His voice froze.

He did not even have to pick the thing up, for he knew what it was. And he knew that it would have a blue handle and varicolored bristles.

*The End.*

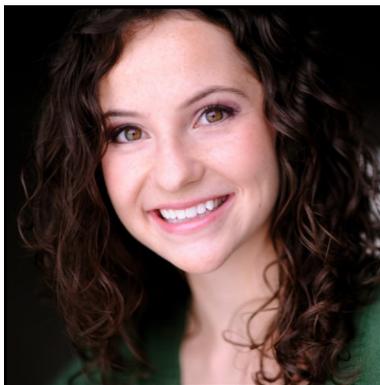




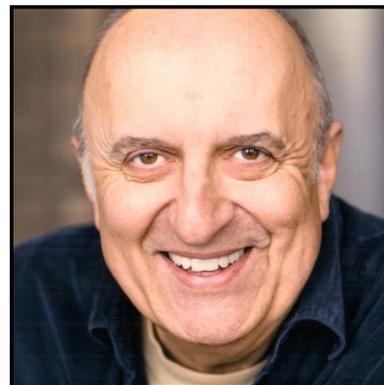
*Happy holidays  
from our family to yours!*



Zach Kenney  
as George Bailey



Amanda Tanguay  
as Mary Bailey



John Mohrlein  
as Clarence/Mr. Potter



Camille Robinson  
as Violet



James Joseph  
as Uncle Billy



Jarrod Zimmerman  
as Harry



Michael Mahler  
as Announcer/Pianist



Shawn Goudie  
on Foley