



# *It's a Wonderful Life*

Live in Chicago!



## **BACKSTAGE** GUIDE

A publication of **COMMUNITY SERVICE** at  
**AMERICAN BLUES THEATER**



## BACKSTAGE CALLBOARD

### IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: LIVE IN CHICAGO!

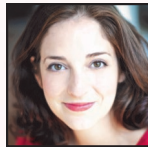
Based on the film by Frank Capra

Directed by Gwendolyn Whiteside\*

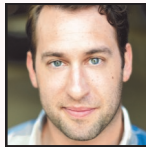
Music direction by Michael Mahler\*

Original Score by Austin Cook\*

### FEATURING



Dara Cameron\*



Ian Paul Custer\*



Brandon Dahlquist



Shawn J Goudie\*



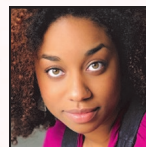
James Joseph\*



Michael Mahler\*



John Mohrlein\*



Camille Robinson\*

For 15 years, the American Blues Ensemble has treated Chicago audiences to a live 1940s radio broadcast of the Frank Capra classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The incredible cast recreates the entire town of Bedford Falls with Foley sound effects, an original score, and holiday carols. Critics call it "perfect Christmas theater" and "first-class holiday fare".

*\* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater*

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## BACKSTAGE Contributors

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Assistant Producer  
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with Gwendolyn Whiteside, Marty Higginbotham,  
John Mohrlein, and Camille Robinson



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## NOTE FROM PRODUCING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR **GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE**

Welcome to American Blues Theater's 31<sup>st</sup> season "Define Yourself". We proudly celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this holiday tradition. We've delighted nearly 50,000 patrons throughout the years and featured the work of 28 Ensemble members and Artistic Affiliates. One cast member, John Mohrlein (*Mr. Potter/Clarence*), has evolved with this production since the first curtain. In 15 years, he has never missed a performance. Please knock on wood immediately upon reading.

This story is a staple of our mission: American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves. 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" video, the "Soldier Spotlight" which has honored over 300 military personnel, expanded scenes, and a quiz show for the live audience.

This story reminds us of the fragility of life. Frank Capra's line - "Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" - resonates throughout the year. During the holidays, it becomes a poignant reminder as we gather with our loved ones.

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. •



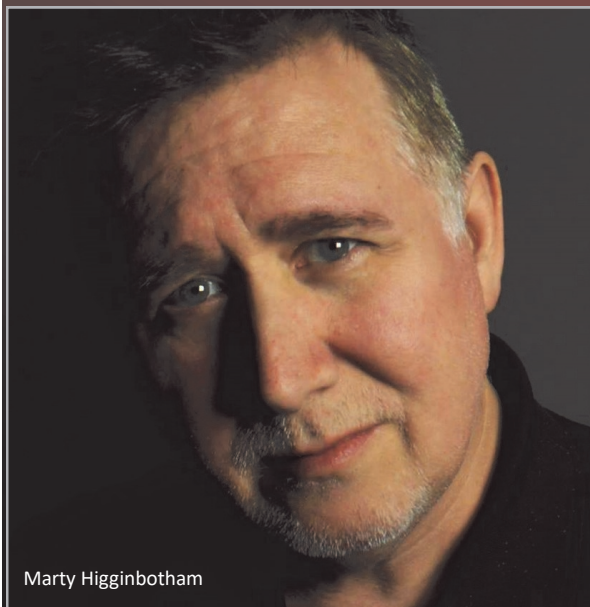
Producing Artistic Director  
Gwendolyn Whiteside

## NOTE FROM **MARTY HIGGINBOTHAM**

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. May we always recognize the blessings that stand before us every day. •



Marty Higginbotham

## ABOUT FRANK CAPRA



Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart on the set of *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

Francesco Rosario Capra was born on May 18, 1897, in Sicily, Italy. He moved to the United States with his family and six siblings in 1903. The family settled in an Italian community in Los Angeles. Capra worked his way through high school and college at the California Institute of Technology, where he studied chemical engineering.

Capra enlisted in the United States Army during World War I. His father died shortly thereafter. After contracting the Spanish flu, Capra returned home to California and attained his American citizenship under the name Frank Russell Capra. He spent the next few years without regular employment, before finding his way into the film industry. Capra, who had no directing experience, talked his way into directing several comedies put out by San Francisco studios. He got in on the ground floor of Columbia Pictures, helping to establish the studio and move it out of the silent film era.

The 1930s saw Capra's first national success. He became one of the country's most influential directors with films such as *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Many of Capra's films told rags-to-riches stories, often with a moral message and a patriotic bent. He continued his streak of hit films in the 1940s, directing movies like *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Capra also directed a series of informational films entitled *Why We Fight* for enlisted men during World War II.

Capra's career declined after World War II, as public tastes and the mechanics of the film industry changed. He retired from Hollywood filmmaking in 1952. Returning to the subject of science, he directed and produced educational films under the auspices of his alma mater, Caltech. Capra briefly returned to Hollywood in the late 1950s, directing his final three movies—*A Hole in the Head* (his first color film), *Pocketful of Miracles*, and *Rendezvous in Space*—between 1959 and 1964. He died in La Quinta, California on September 3, 1991.

Despite falling out of fashion during the director's lifetime, the films of Frank Capra have been deeply influential over the past several decades. Many are considered classics and are frequently screened in theaters and on television.

Capra was nominated for six Academy Awards and won three. His 1934 film, *It Happened One Night*, was the first to win all five of the highest Academy Award honors—Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Picture. His films collectively garnered 53 Academy Award nominations between 1933 and 1961, including 11 nominations for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 7 nominations for *You Can't Take It With You*, and 5 nominations for *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Frank Capra married twice and had four children. One of his sons, Frank Capra Jr., and grandson Frank Capra III have both made their careers in the film industry. •



Frank Capra

(edited from Biography.com and Wikipedia.org)



## LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE: ***IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: LIVE IN CHICAGO!***

More than 50,000 patrons have enjoyed our holiday classic since 2002. As we celebrate 15 years of *It's a Wonderful Life*, we remember our past and look toward the future.



Members of the 2011 cast of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live at the Biograph!*

In November 2017, *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* will move to Stage 773 in the Lakeview neighborhood, not far from its current home in Lincoln Park.



The 2015 cast of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*

The American Blues Theater Ensemble has staged *It's a Wonderful Life* as a radio play at various Chicago venues and events since 2002, including:

- ♦ American Theater Company, Theater on the Lake, Mrs. Murphy's Bistro, Logan Square (2002-2008)
- ♦ Victory Gardens Biograph Theater (2009-2012)
- ♦ Greenhouse Theater Center (2013-2016)
- ♦ Stage 773 (2017+) •



Stage 773, the future home of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*



## THE BACKSTORY: JOHN MORHLEIN & CAMILLE ROBINSON

*In celebration of 15 years of It's a Wonderful Life, we chatted with long-time "Clarence/Mr. Potter"—Ensemble member John Mohrlein—to learn some little known facts about the beloved Chicago actor. We also quizzed our new "Mary Bailey"—Artistic Affiliate Camille Robinson!*

### JOHN MOHRLEIN

*If I weren't an actor I would be:*

An aviator

*Childhood nickname:*

Bozo

*Best career advice I've received:*

"You don't have to be a lawyer."

*Favorite part of the job:*

The cast & team

*How I made my first dollar:*

Sitting out of sight

*Last meal I'd want:*

Not to be invited...

*Favorite item of clothing:*

Scarves

*If I could invent one thing:*

Cancer vaccine

*One of my hidden talents:*

Only one? •



John Mohrlein (center) with members of the 2015 cast of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*



Camille Robinson

### CAMILLE ROBINSON

*December:* CHRISTMAS!

*George & Mary Bailey:* #MarriageGoals

*Chicago theater:* The best around

*Holiday treats:* Cookies with frosting

*Christmas carols:* Best way to spread Christmas cheer

*Traditions:* Christmas brunch and a movie

*Family:* My reason for being

*Snow:* Fluffy

*Relaxing:* Comfy couch, fuzzy socks, and hot tea

*American Blues:* Greatest theater family in Chicago! •

## ABOUT 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.



Ed Kross in the 2009 production of *It's a Wonderful Life*



Dara Cameron and Michael Mahler in the 2014 production of *It's a Wonderful Life*

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. •



## ABOUT FOLEY EFFECTS

### History of Foley Effects

What is now called Foley is a range of live sound effects originally developed for live broadcasts of radio drama in the early 1920s in various radio studios around the world. Because no effective recording method existed in those days, all sounds for radio plays had to be created live at the time. Jack Donovan Foley started working with Universal Studios in 1914 during the silent movie era. When Warner studios released its first film to include sound, *The Jazz Singer*, Universal knew it needed to get on the bandwagon and called for any employees who had radio experience to come forward. Foley became part of the sound crew that turned Universal's then upcoming "silent" musical *Show Boat* into a musical. Because microphones of the time could not pick up more than dialogue, other sounds had to be added in after the film was shot. Foley and his small crew projected the film on a screen while recording a single track of audio that captured their live sound effects. Their timing had to be perfect, so that footsteps and closing doors synchronized with the actors' motions in the film. Jack Foley created sounds for films until his death in 1967. His basic methods are still used by Foley Artists today. Almost every motion picture and television show you have ever seen and heard contains a Foley track!



Jack Foley

### Common Foley Tricks

- ◆ Corn starch in a leather pouch makes the sound of snow crunching
- ◆ A water soaked rusty hinge when placed against different surfaces makes a creaking sound
- ◆ A heavy staple gun combined with other small metal sounds make good gun noises
- ◆ A heavy car door and fender can create most of the car sounds needed, but having a whole car in the studio is better
- ◆ Acorns, small apples, and walnuts on wooden parquet surface can be used for bones breaking
- ◆ A pair of gloves sounds like bird wings flapping
- ◆ An arrow or thin stick makes a whoosh
- ◆ An old chair makes a controllable creaking sound
- ◆ A metal rake makes the rattle/squeak sound of chain-link fence (it can also make a metallic screech when dragged across a piece of metal)
- ◆ Burning plastic garbage bags cut into strips makes a realistic sounding candle or soft non-crackling fire when the bag melts and drips to the ground
- ◆ Gelatin and hand soap make squishing noises
- ◆ Frozen romaine lettuce makes bone or head injury noises
- ◆ Coconut shells cut in half and stuffed with padding makes horse hoof noises (this is parodied in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*)
- ◆ Cellophane creates crackling fire effects
- ◆ A selection of wooden and metal doors are needed to create all sorts of door noises, but also can be used for creaking boat sounds
- ◆ A heavy phone book makes body-punching sounds
- ◆ Canned dog food can be used for alien pod embryo expulsions and monster vocalizations •

(from Wikipedia.org)



Shawn Goudie in the 2011 production of *It's a Wonderful Life*

## ABOUT LIFE IN THE 1940S

- ◆ The 1940s 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, General Dwight D. Eisenhower commands the troops in Europe. General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral 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.
- ◆ Major works of literature published in the 1940s include *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway (1940), *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand (1943), *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams (1944), *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank (1947), *Nineteen Eight-Four* by George Orwell (1949), and *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (1949).
- ◆ The most popular music style during the 1940s was swing, which prevailed during World War II. In the later periods of the 1940s, less swing was prominent and crooners like Frank Sinatra, along with genres such as bebop and the earliest traces of rock and roll, were the prevalent genre.
- ◆ Hollywood was instrumental in producing dozens of classic films during the 1940s, including *Casablanca* (1943), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). Also in the 1940s, Disney released some of its most iconic animated feature films: *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), and *Bambi* (1941).



Mrs. Virginia Davis at the Naval Air Base in Corpus Christi, Texas (August 1942)

- ◆ 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, and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (the GI Bill of Rights) entitles returning soldiers to a college education.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ 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.



(from Wikipedia.org)



## LIFE IN AMERICA 1946 VS. 2016

### 1946

Population: 132,122,000  
Unemployed rate: 3.9%  
National Debt: \$43 Billion  
Average Annual Salary: \$2,600  
Federal minimum Wage: \$0.40 per hour  
New car costs \$1,120  
Gasoline is \$0.21 per gallon  
Gallon of milk costs \$0.67  
One-year tuition at Harvard: \$420  
55% of US homes have indoor plumbing  
Life expectancy: 68.2 female, 60.8 male  
Supreme Court decides African-Americans  
have a right to vote.

### 2016

Population: 324,227,000  
Unemployment rate: 4.9%  
National Debt: \$19.5 Trillion  
Average Annual Salary: \$55,775  
Federal minimum Wage: \$7.25 per hour  
New car costs: \$33,560  
Gasoline is \$2.21 per gallon  
Gallon of milk costs \$3.50  
One-year tuition at Harvard: \$60,659  
68% of US adults have a smartphone  
Life Expectancy: 81 female, 76 male  
An African-American man is President.



# "20 WONDERFUL FACTS ABOUT *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*"

By Jennifer M. Wood

Mary Owen wasn't welcomed into the world until more than a decade after Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* made its premiere in 1946. But she grew up cherishing the film and getting the inside scoop on its making from its star, Donna Reed—who just so happens to be her mom. Though Reed sadly passed away in 1986, Owen has stood as one of the film's most dedicated historians, regularly introducing screenings of the ultimate holiday classic, including during its annual run at New York City's IFC Center. She shared some of her mom's memories with us to help reveal 20 things you might not know about *It's a Wonderful Life*.

## 1. IT ALL BEGAN WITH A CHRISTMAS CARD.

After years of unsuccessfully trying to shop his short story, "The Greatest Gift", to publishers, Philip Van Doren Stern decided to give the gift of words to his closest friends for the holidays when he printed up 200 copies of the story and sent them out as a 21-page Christmas card. David Hempstead, a producer at RKO Pictures, ended up getting a hold of it, and purchased the movie rights for \$10,000.

## 2. CARY GRANT WAS SET TO STAR IN IT.

When RKO purchased the rights, they did so with the plan of having Cary Grant in the lead. But, as happens so often in Hollywood, the project went through some ups and downs in the development process. In 1945, after a number of rewrites, RKO sold the movie rights to Frank Capra, who quickly recruited Jimmy Stewart to play George Bailey.

## 3. IT WAS DONNA REED'S FIRST STARRING ROLE.

Though Donna Reed was hardly a newcomer when *It's a Wonderful Life* rolled around, having appeared in nearly 20 projects previously, the film did mark her first starring role. Though it's difficult to imagine anyone else in the role today, she did have some competition from Jean Arthur. "[Frank Capra] had seen mom in *They Were Expendable* and liked her," Mary Owen says. "When Capra met my mother at MGM, he knew she'd be just right for Mary Bailey."



## 4. MARY OWEN IS NOT NAMED AFTER MARY BAILEY.

Before you ask whether Owen was named after her mom's much beloved *It's a Wonderful Life* character, "The answer is no," says Owen. "I was named after my great grandmother, Mary Mullenger."

## 5. BEULAH BONDI WAS A PRO AT PLAYING STEWART'S MOM.

Beulah Bondi, who plays Mrs. Bailey, didn't need a lot of rehearsal to play Jimmy Stewart's mom. She had done it three times previously—in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Of Human Hearts*, and *Vivacious Lady*—and once later on an episode of *The Jimmy Stewart Show*.

## 6. CAPRA, REED, AND STEWART HAVE ALL CALLED *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE* THEIR FAVORITE MOVIE.

Though their collective filmographies consist of a couple hundred movies, Capra, Reed, and Stewart have all cited *It's a Wonderful Life* as their favorite movie. In his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*, Capra took that praise even one step further, writing: "I thought it was the greatest film I ever made. Better yet, I thought it was the greatest film anybody ever made."

## 7. THE MOVIE BOMBED AT THE BOX OFFICE.

Though it has become a quintessential American classic, *It's a Wonderful Life* was not an immediate hit with audiences. In fact, it put Capra \$525,000 in the hole, which left him scrambling to finance his production company's next picture, *State of the Union*.

## 8. A COPYRIGHT LAPSE AIDED THE FILM'S POPULARITY.

Though it didn't make much of a dent at the box office, *It's a Wonderful Life* found a whole new life on television—particularly when its copyright lapsed in 1974, making it available royalty-free to anyone who wanted to show it for the next 20 years. (Which would explain why it was on television all the time during the holiday season.) The free-for-all ended in 1994.

## 9. THE ROCK THAT BROKE THE WINDOW OF THE GRANVILLE HOUSE WAS ALL REAL.

Though Capra had a stuntman at the ready in order to shoot out the window of the Granville House in a scene that required Donna Reed to throw a rock through it, it was all a waste of money. "Mom threw the rock herself that broke the window in the Granville House," Owen says. "On the first try."



## 10. IT TOOK TWO MONTHS TO BUILD BEDFORD FALLS.

Shot on a budget of \$3.7 million (which was a lot by mid-1940s standards), Bedford Falls—which covered a full four acres of RKO's Encino Ranch—was one of the most elaborate movie sets ever built up to that time, with 75 stores and buildings, 20 fully-grown oak trees, factories, residential areas, and a 300-yard-long Main Street.

## 11. SENECA FALLS, NEW YORK IS “THE REAL BEDFORD FALLS.”

Though Bedford Falls is a fictitious place, the town of Seneca Falls, New York swears that they're the real-life inspiration for George Bailey's charming hometown. And each year they program a full lineup of holiday-themed events to put locals and visitors into the holiday spirit.

## 12. THE GYM FLOOR-TURNED-SWIMMING POOL WAS REAL.

Though the bulk of the film was filmed on pre-built sets, the dance at the gym was filmed on location at Beverly Hills High School. And the retractable floor was no set piece. Better known as the Swim Gym, the school is in the process of restoring the landmark filming location.

## 13. ALFALFA IS THE TEENAGER BEHIND THAT SWIMMING POOL PRANK.

Though he's uncredited in the part, if Freddie Othello—the little prankster who pushes the button that opens the pool that swallows George and Mary up—looks familiar, that's because he is played by Carl Switzer, a.k.a. Alfalfa of the *Little Rascals*.

## 14. DONNA REED WON \$50 FROM LIONEL BARRYMORE ... FOR MILKING A COW.

Though she was a Hollywood icon, Donna Reed—born Donnabelle Mullenger—was a farm girl at heart who came to Los Angeles by way of Denison, Iowa. Lionel Barrymore (a.k.a. Mr. Potter) didn't believe it. “So he bet \$50 that she couldn't milk a cow,” recalls Owen. “She said it was the easiest \$50 she ever made.”

## 15. THE FILM WAS SHOT DURING A HEAT WAVE.

It may be an iconic Christmas movie, but *It's a Wonderful Life* was actually shot in the summer of 1946—in the midst of a heat wave, no less. At one point, Capra had to shut filming down for a day because of the sky-high temperatures—which also explains why Stewart is clearly sweating in key moments of the film.

## 16. CAPRA ENGINEERED A NEW KIND OF MOVIE SNOW.

Capra—who trained as an engineer—and special effects supervisor Russell Shearman engineered a new type of artificial snow for the film. At the time, painted cornflakes were the most common form of fake snow, but they posed a bit of an audio problem for Capra. So he and Shearman opted to mix foamite (the stuff you find in fire extinguishers) with sugar and water to create a less noisy option.

## 17. ZUZU DIDN'T SEE THE FILM UNTIL 1980.

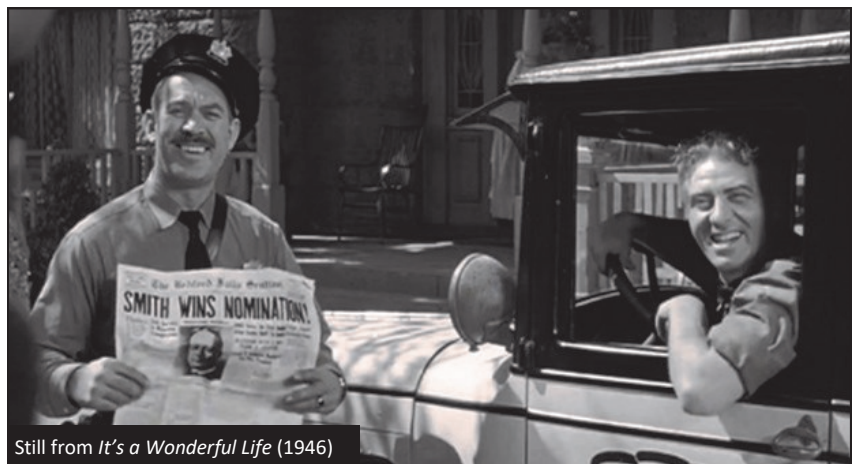
Karolyn Grimes, who played Zuzu in the film, didn't see the film until 1980. She told Detroit's WWJ : “I never just sat down and watched [it].”

## 18. THE FBI SAW THE FILM. THEY DIDN'T LIKE IT.

In 1947, the FBI issued a memo noting the film as a potential “Communist infiltration of the motion picture industry,” citing its “rather obvious attempts to discredit bankers by casting Lionel Barrymore as a ‘Scrooge-type’ so that he would be the most hated man in the picture.”

## 19. THE MOVIE'S BERT AND ERNIE HAVE NO RELATION TO SESAME STREET.

Yes, the cop and cab driver in *It's a Wonderful Life* are named Bert and Ernie, respectively. But Jim Henson's longtime writing partner, Jerry Juhl, insists that it's by coincidence only that they share their names with *Sesame Street*'s stripe-shirted buds. “I was not able to confirm this with Jim before he died, but shortly thereafter I spoke to Jon Stone, *Sesame Street*'s first producer and head writer and a man largely responsible for the show's format ... He assured me that Ernie and Bert were named one day when he and Jim were studying the prototype puppets. They decided that one of them looked like an Ernie, and the other one looked like a Bert. The movie character names are purely coincidental.”



Still from *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

## 20. THE FILM'S ENDURING LEGACY WAS SURPRISING TO CAPRA.

Of the film's classic status, Capra noted: “It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. The film has a life of its own now and I can look at it like I had nothing to do with it. I'm like a parent whose kid grows up to be president. I'm proud... but it's the kid who did the work. I didn't even think of it as a Christmas story when I first ran across it. I just liked the idea.” •

(from MentalFloss.com)

# "WILL THE AMERICAN DREAM STILL INCLUDE OWNING A HOME?"

By Diana Olick  
March 20, 2014

Most Americans want to own their own home. Some even call it a biological urge, based on our human desire to nest. Whatever the current economic condition of the country, whatever the latest programs offered, or atrocities committed by government and banking institutions, that desire doesn't seem to change, and is unlikely to change even 25 years from now.

Perhaps Thomas Jefferson put it best, "A right to property is founded in our natural wants."

Even after a devastating housing and mortgage crash that resulted in millions of foreclosed homes and trillions of dollars of home equity lost, the majority of Americans have not given up the idea that ownership is representative of their economic dream.

"Americans continue to want to be homeowners and they want to do it in a more careful and responsible way given the crisis that we've been through, but there is no evidence that we're going to abandon the home ownership society," Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan said in an interview.

Seventy percent of respondents to a monthly Fannie Mae survey in January 2014 said they would buy if they were going to move, an all-time survey high. "The aspiration to own a home is unchanged," said Doug Duncan, Fannie Mae's chief economist. "Changing the rules of funding makes it harder or easier, and that's a little bit of what's going on today, but the aspiration is unchanged. That has been consistent across the crisis."

Prior to the housing boom, presidents from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton to George W. Bush touted the "home ownership society." They have been accused of pushing mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac as well as the FHA, the government mortgage insurer, to loosen their underwriting standards. The result of that push, critics say, was the over-leveraging of the American public.

Today, underwriting is tighter than during the housing boom. Some claim the pendulum has swung too far the other way, keeping potential buyers out of home ownership. The mantra has in fact changed politically.

"A home is supposed to be our ultimate evidence that in America, hard work pays off, and responsibility is rewarded," President Barack Obama said in an August speech in Phoenix. He stopped short, however, of calling for a home ownership society, and in fact warned against a return to the past. "In the runup to the crisis, banks and the government too often made everyone feel like they had to own a home, even if they weren't ready. That's a mistake we



shouldn't repeat."

Home ownership rose to a high of just over 69 percent during the housing boom after averaging around 65 percent for much of the previous decade, according to the U.S. Census. It has been falling steadily since, now down to 65.2 percent.

As housing recovers and we look to the future of home ownership, the biggest question for the next 25 years is not do we want to own a home, but how in fact will we own a home?

"The most interesting question right now is will we build a housing finance system that supports that home ownership society or not?" asked HUD's Donovan.

There is now one leading bill in Congress that would dismantle mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which have been under government conservatorship since September 2008. It would leave a limited government backstop, much like the FDIC, but put the mortgage business largely into the hands of private investors, which is where it was during the housing boom.

Private investors have been extremely leery of dipping back into the mortgage business, and have only done so in limited, highly rated offerings.

Remarks by Michael Stegman, counselor to the Treasury secretary for housing finance policy, put the current situation in perspective: "Losses sustained on investments are still fresh in everyone's mind. The new market today for mortgage-backed securities is unnecessarily thin and unscalable because rather than rebuilding from the ground up, putting in place a solid, sustainable foundation for future growth, the bond issuers continue to structure their offerings using varied terms, requirements and documentation that have failed to instill investor confidence."

The housing finance system envisioned by the administration would require that the secondary market help provide liquidity to all segments of the primary market. Separately, it must also support affordable housing through its basic design, augmented by



an explicit and transparent affordable housing funding mechanism. Twenty-five years from now one would hope and expect that a new mortgage system would be in place. Some argue, however, that the housing crisis, combined with changes in social behavior, have altered for good the expectation and desire for home ownership. A new single-family rental market, 15 million homes strong, grew out of the crisis, and it is backed by large scale, institutional investors who claim they are in this new asset class permanently.

"As institutional ownership with its substantial equity capital and professional management provides increasingly attractive rental options in suburban America, we believe the demand for rental housing will grow—not as a transitional, substandard or second-class alternative to home ownership—but as a preferred option to the financial and often inflexible demands of home ownership," said Laurie Hawkes, president and chief operating officer of American Residential Properties, a single-family rental REIT based in Phoenix.

Donovan disagreed that rentership would remain as high as it is today. "There have been some institutional improvements in management and other things, but in terms of fundamental demand, I would be surprised if it really becomes, in the scope of our larger housing market, a major change 10, 15, 25 years from now."

Hawkes, who watched the single family rental market grow from 10 million to 15 million homes in a remarkably short period of time, argues that her renters are middle class families with kids and a dog, who are looking for the same thing that home buyers are, minus the stress. And they will be looking for the same thing 25 years from now. "There is also a growing group of Americans, such as the millennials—many of whom watched their parents lose their homes—who are choosing to rent for a variety of reasons—financial flexibility, job mobility, and a decided preference for "outsourced" property maintenance. Both of these groups are seeking well-located, well-maintained single-family housing with good school systems in safe neighborhoods," said Hawkes.

Fannie Mae's Duncan conducts monthly surveys on home ownership, and disagrees with Hawkes' premise. "The stigma

related to renting has gone away, but we don't see any change in their aspiration to own a home at some point," he said.

Duncan admits that home ownership among the youngest adults has been falling consistently over the last four decennial censuses. He said that's because the young population is staying in college longer, which delays marriage, which delays childbirth, which is the biggest trigger to home ownership. "They've been adding to their human capital but their life spans are expanding, so you're pushing home ownership out in time," he added.

Home ownership may end up being a shorter-term proposition, with Americans renting for longer periods of time in young adulthood and then again as they downsize into longer retirements. Or perhaps the housing market will rise to meet the new demands.

"The trends at the beginning of people's lives, of couples living longer, what I think that will lead to is new or expanded roles of home ownership that don't fit traditional views," said Donovan. "We are likely to see more smaller units and condominiums and co-ops. Units that have services, help for seniors, other forms of assistance, even if they're still homeowners."

As for a "nest egg," the housing crash taught everyone that home prices don't always go up, and so younger generations may look to other investments to create wealth.

Wealth, in fact, is what is making America increasingly urban. That is because 80 percent of wealth is created in cities, according to researchers at MIT. In an article in MIT newsletter Spectrum, its editor Liz Karagianis notes that younger generations are also less prone to ownership and more interested in sharing. "Thanks to the Internet and social media, climate change, and a strained economy, a trend has emerged towards sharing. Consider, they say, house shares, car shares, bike shares, office shares, or farm shares," Karagianis said.

The Internet, social media and new technologies have changed not just the world we live in, but how we live in it. Will it change our fundamental desire to own things, especially that most important personal item, our shelter? •

(from CNBC.com)



Still from *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

# 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

# THE GREATEST GIFT BY PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

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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.

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

# THE GREATEST GIFT BY PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

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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

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

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

"Change me back," George pleaded. "Change me back—please. Not just for



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?"

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

She stroked the sofa gently with the

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?"

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



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 waggled 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.*



# ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

## AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

Winner of American Theatre Wing's prestigious 2016 National Theatre Company Award, AMERICAN BLUES THEATER is a premier arts organization with an intimate environment that patrons, artists, and all Chicagoans call home. American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves. American Blues Theater follows three guiding values both on and off its stages—to be accessible, responsible, and true.

Their diverse and multi-generational 37-member Ensemble has over 532+ combined years of collaboration on stage. As of 2016, the theater and artists have 186 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and over 31 Black Theater Alliance Awards. Their artists are honored with Pulitzer Prize nominations, Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards, and numerous other accolades.

For over thirty years, American Blues has created essential productions and live theatrical experiences for Chicagoland. Their best known production is Chicago's holiday tradition *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* that has entertained over 50,000 patrons since 2002! Terry Teachout of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote American Blues is "exceptional" and the company "feels like home." Chris Jones of *Chicago Tribune* claimed Blues is "strikingly honest [with] deep emotional souls."

In addition to first-class theater, American Blues Theater believes it is an honor and duty to serve the community. They provide an integrated arts education program to Chicago Public Schools that serves over 2,000 students annually. They hold "Pink Previews" which donates a portion of box office sales to breast cancer research. They donate thousands of complimentary tickets to underserved communities. They provide community engagement events called "Town Halls" for patrons following Sunday matinee performance, including curated discussions with Northwestern University psychologists. As a Blue Star Theater, they honor military service and first-responders through various initiatives. Former President of Illinois Labor History Society, Larry Spivak wrote, "American Blues is a dynamic force in Chicago – connecting culture, art, history, and politics into a holistic, aesthetic experience." •

## SEASON 31 "Define Yourself"



*Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka  
*TRANSit* by Darren Canady\*

*Dutchman* Directed by  
Chuck Smith

*TRANSit* Directed by  
Lisa Portes

Aug 26—Sept 25, 2016

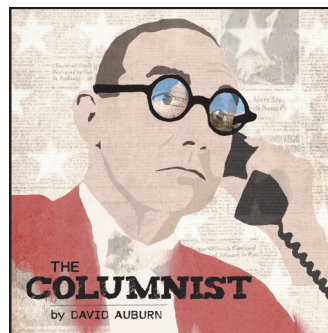


from Frank Capra's film

Directed by  
Gwendolyn Whiteside\*

Music direction by  
Michael Mahler\*

Nov 18—Dec 31, 2016

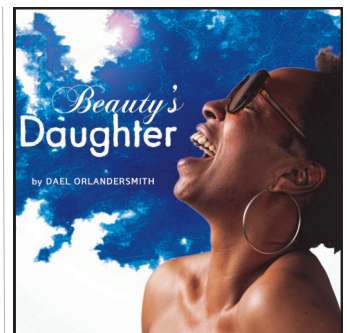


by David Auburn

*Chicago premiere*

Directed by  
Keira Fromm

Feb 17—April 9, 2017



by Dael Orlandersmith

*Chicago premiere*

Directed by  
Ron OJ Parson

June 2—July 2, 2017

\*Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater



## IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE THEATER