AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

BACKSTAGE GUIDE

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

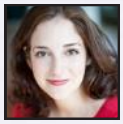
BACKSTAGE CALLBOARD

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


Matt Edmonds


Shawn Goudie*


James Joseph*


John


Camille Robinson*

For 17 years, the American Blues Ensemble has treated Chicago audiences to a live 1940s radio broadcast. The incredible cast recreates the entire town of Bedford Falls with Foley sound effects, an original score, and holiday carols. Critics call this "perfect Christmas theater" and "first-class holiday fare".

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

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Elyse Dolan
Associate Producer
American Blues Theater

with Gwendolyn Whiteside and Dara Cameron

NOTE FROM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE


Artistic Director
Gwendolyn Whiteside

Welcome to American Blues Theater's 33nd season "Home Sweet Home". We proudly celebrate the 17th anniversary of this holiday tradition. We've delighted over 50,000 patrons throughout the years and featured the work of 29 Ensemble members and Artistic Affiliates. One cast member, John Mohrlein *(Mr. Potter/Clarence),* has evolved with this production since the first curtain. In 17 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 nearly 450 military personnel, expanded scenes, and a quiz show for the live audience.

This story reminds us of the fragility of life. Frank Capra's lines – "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. •

Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside with the 2017 cast of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago*. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

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.

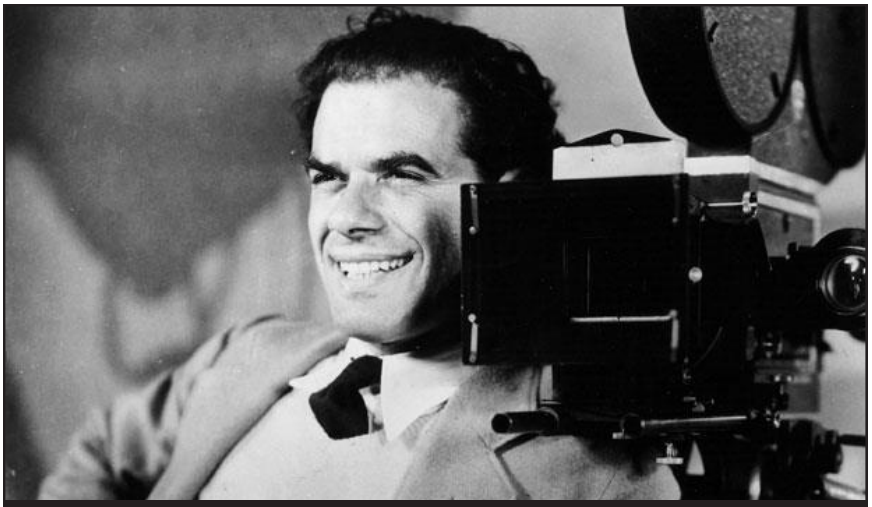
The 1930s saw Capra's first national success. He became one of the country's most influential directors with films such as “It Happened One Night” (1934), “Mr. Deeds Goes to Town” (1936), and “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939). Many of Capra's films told rags-to-riches stories, often with a moral 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. 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 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 on set

(edited from Biography.com and Wikipedia.org)

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: LIVE IN CHICAGO!
THROUGH THE YEARS

More than 50,000 patrons have enjoyed our holiday classic since 2002. As we celebrate 17 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!*

Members of the 2016 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); and Stage 773 (2017 - present).

6 FUN FACTS ABOUT ***IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: LIVE IN CHICAGO!***

- John Mohrlein ("Mr. Potter/Clarence") has never missed a performance since 2002.
- During one performance, the power went out. We moved the entire audience, cast, and foley items to a local bar to finish the story. The bartenders and waitstaff helped us serve milk and cookies.
- The cast has appeared in the Chicago's Thanksgiving Day parade.
- All commercial jingles are actual local businesses.
- People have used audiograms to celebrate momentous occasions in their lives, including a marriage proposal, announcing pregnancies, birthdays, and anniversaries.
- Anyone who has worked on our production since 2009 has a personal ornament on one of the decorated stage trees. (We also include sonogram pictures of little ones on the way.) •

THE BACKSTORY WITH **DARA CAMERON**

American Blues Theater Ensemble member Dara Cameron plays "Violet" in *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago*. We asked Dara to share some lesser-known facts about herself in "The BackStory".

Dara Cameron in the 2017 production of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* Photo by Michael Brosilow.

If I didn't work in theater: I would be a teacher— both of my parents are retired high school history teachers.

Childhood nickname: Deedee

Best career advice I've received: Always keep a pair of nice shoes and an extra headshot and resume in your car, just in case!

Favorite part of the job: I love the Chicago theatre community. Sharing a dressing room with pals is just the best.

Worst part of the job: Not being home for bedtime for my son, Ezra, is tough, but it's nice being home during the "normal" work day.

How I made my first dollar: Babysitting! And I scooped ice cream for five hours and quit after one shift...

Last meal you'd want: French fries and a fountain Diet Coke.

Favorite item of clothing: Comfy, stretchy yoga pants. All day, everyday. I'm a mom of a nine-month-old—it's my uniform!

If you could invent one thing: A device that would keep me at the perfect temperature at all times. I hate being too hot or too cold. Or, something to keep a baby distracted in his car seat so he doesn't constantly scream!

One of my hidden talents: I have very dexterous toes!

HOLIDAY **LIGHTENING ROUND**

"What do you think of when you hear…"

- **George & Mary Bailey:** Warmth
- **Holiday treats:** Necessary
- **Carols:** My job!
- **Traditions:** Important
- **Snow:** Oy
- **American Blues:** Family

Camille Robinson and Dara Cameron in the 2016 production of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*

ABOUT
RADIO DRAMA

When the radio was first developed, it brought entertainment into the home. Prior to radios for the home, families 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 musicals 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.

Camille Robinson and Brandon Dahlquist in the 2016 production of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*

Ed Kross in the 2009 production of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*

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 podcasts or rebroadcasts of programs from previous decades. However, radio drama remains popular in much of the world. •

(edited from Wikipedia.org)

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. 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 Donovan 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.

Shawn Goudie in the 2011 production of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*

- A heavy staple gun combined with other small metal sounds make good gun noises.
- 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 old chair makes a controllable creaking sound.
- A metal rake makes the rattle/squeak sound of chain-link fence.
- 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.
- 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. •

(edited from Wikipedia.org)

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 commanded the troops in Europe. General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz led them in the Pacific.

A woman operating a turret lathe (1942)

- 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.
- Radio is the lifeline for Americans in the 1940s providing news, music, and entertainment.
- 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.
- Television made its debut at the 1939 World Fair, but the war interrupted development. In 1947, commercial television with 13 stations becomes available to the public.
- 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 Eighty-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), and "The Maltese Falcon" (1941). Also in the 1940s, Disney released some of its most iconic animated feature films: "Pinocchio" (1940), "Dumbo" (1941), and "Bambi" (1941). •

Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in "Casablanca" (1942)

(edited from Wikipedia.org)

1946 VS 2018
IN AMERICA

1946

Population: 132,122,000

Unemployment 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.

2018

Population: 326,766,000

Unemployment rate: 3.9%

National Debt: $21.63 Trillion

Median Annual Income: $61,372

Federal minimum Wage: $7.25 per hour

New car costs: $35,742

Gasoline is $2.79 per gallon

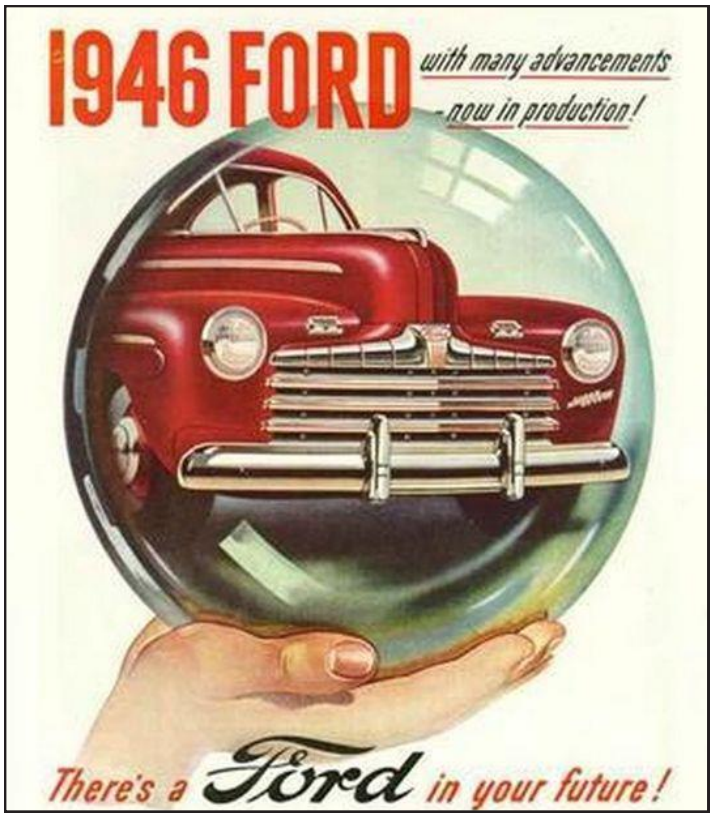
Gallon of milk costs $1.89

One-year tuition at Harvard: $67,580

77% of US adults have a smartphone

Life Expectancy: 81 female, 76 male

An African-American man has completed two terms as President.



"IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE"
16 WONDERFUL FACTS

The film started as a greeting card.
When author Philip Van Doren Stern failed to find a publisher for his book about a man named George Pratt who considers suicide until he gets a chance to see what the world would be like without him, he printed it as his Christmas card in 1943. One of the 200 cards he self-published eventually made its way to RKO Pictures producer David Hempstead, who purchased the rights. Capra bought the rights a year later, turning "The Greatest Gift" into "It's a Wonderful Life".

It didn't do well at the box office.
The film, although now considered a classic, was such a financial disappointment that it busted Capra's production company, Liberty Films. It was the first and last time Capra produced, financed, directed, and co-wrote a film.

Cary Grant almost starred in it.
When the rights were still held at RKO, Cary Grant was slated to play the lead role of George Bailey made iconic by Jimmy Stewart.

There could have been a different Mary Bailey.
Ginger Rogers allegedly turned down the role because she thought the character too bland. When Rogers penned her autobiography, she questioned that decision by asking the readers, "Foolish, you say?"

Cary Grant (left) and Ginger Rogers (right) — alleged contenders for the roles of George and Mary Bailey, respectively.

The bird was a staple of Capra films.
Capra first used Jimmy the raven, a wildly prolific avian actor, in his 1938 film "You Can't Take it With You" and cast him in every film he made subsequently. In "It's a Wonderful Life", Jimmy the raven played Uncle Billy's pet, kept at the Building & Loan. James Stewart, in particular, was a fan: "When they call Jimmy, we both answer," he remarked while filming, calling the bird "the smartest actor on set."

Jimmy Stewart with Jimmy the raven in "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946)

There were some significant rewrites to the screenplay.
According to Robert Matzen's book *Mission: Jimmy Stewart and the Fight for Europe*, the original screenplay began with a scene in Benjamin Franklin's workshop in heaven.

Beulah Bondi was a pro at playing Jimmy 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".

The gym scene features a "Rascal".
The disgruntled prankster who opens the gymnasium floor, revealing the pool during the school dance, is none other than Carl Switzer, who played Alfalfa in "The Little Rascals".

Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed in “It’s a Wonderful Life” (1946)

Donna Reed had excellent aim.

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,” Mary Owen—daughter of Donna Reed—says. “On the first try.”

The bartender would rather be at the ballpark.

Actor and producer Sheldon Leonard said that he only agreed to play Nick the bartender so he could buy baseball tickets with his paycheck.

Uncle Billy went unscripted.

In one scene, a drunk Uncle Billy yells "I'm all right, I'm all right!" after supposedly clambering into some garbage cans off-screen. But actually, a crew member had dropped a giant piece of equipment — and the actors just went with it.

Sam Wainwright was really on the other end of that phone call.

Capra strove to make scenes as real as he could for actors. Thus the first kiss between James Stewart and Donna Reed was shot at the same time as the other end of the phone conversation, with Sam Wainwright (Frank Albertson) on a different set (Wainwright's New York office) at RKO's Pathe studio.

A copyright lapse made it a holiday staple.

The film became infinitely more popular when its rights lapsed, creating a free-for-all for broadcasters to play it nonstop on television during the holidays. That ended when NBC acquired the exclusive rights in 1994.

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].”

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.“

It’s everyone favorite.

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.” •

Donna Reed and Jimmy Stewart in “It’s a Wonderful Life” (1946)

(edited from TheWrap.com, IMDB.com, Telegraph.co.uk, and MentalFloss.com)

IS OWNING A HOME STILL **ESSENTIAL TO THE AMERICAN DREAM?**

In *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*, the Bailey Building & Loan makes the dream of homeownership a reality for many residents of Bedford Falls, but is homeownership still essential to the American Dream today? The below *Chicago Tribune* article by Nicholas Padiak—edited here for length—addresses that very question.

Ah, the American Dream: You work hard, get a good job, start a family, buy a house and then, when you're done with that house, you buy a bigger one. You accumulate wealth in your home and then pass that wealth on to your children, who will be better off than you.

That's the American Dream, right? Right?

"I guess if your definition of the American Dream hasn't changed since, like, the '50s," said freelance camera operator Dan Niederkorn, 24, of the Chicago suburb of Montgomery.

Niederkorn, a member of the millennial generation, currently lives with his parents but said he plans to be a renter for life and never buy a home. He craves the ability to pack up and go, he said, and doesn't want to be saddled with a home loan, property taxes or homeowners associations fees. And though this may put him in the minority—an *Apartment List* survey of about 24,000 renters nationwide released in May found that 80% of millennial renters want to buy a house or condo sometime in the future—it does raise some interesting questions about the American Dream and the place of homeownership within it.

History of homeownership

To really examine what we know of as the American Dream, it helps to start by looking at the history of homeownership in the United States.

"The U.S. wasn't always a nation of homeowners," said Brian McCabe, assistant sociology professor at Georgetown University and author of the book *No Place Like Home: Wealth, Community, and the Politics of Homeownership*.

"The homeownership rate really starts to climb after the Second World War," McCabe said. "So it's in the 1950s and the 1960s that we go from being a country of 45% (homeownership) to a country of well over 60%."

There are many reasons for this shift, McCabe said, citing the rise of the suburbs, the postwar baby boom, low interest rates offered to soldiers returning from the war and the evolution of mortgages into the relatively low-down-payment, extended-loan-period products we commonly see today. "This is really the creation of the federal government," McCabe said. "We thought what it meant to be a good citizen was very caught up in what it meant to own property in the United States."

Of course, as with most things political, the government

didn't act entirely on its own, according to Eugene White, professor of economics at Rutgers University and co-editor of the book *Housing and Mortgage Markets in Historical Perspective.* "As we know, in taxes or anything else, there's a great deal of lobbying which goes on in Congress," White said. "And the housing industry has been very successful in getting breaks ... which induce people to buy houses."

The breaks White referred to are some of the biggest incentives toward homeownership today, according to Greg Nagel, managing broker of Ask Nagel Realty in Chicago's West Town community area. Homeownership, said Nagel, "represents probably the most risk-free investment opportunity to build wealth due to the tax advantages," such as the mortgage interest and property tax deductions. "It's very powerful," he said.

Effects of crisis deeply felt

But as was made painfully clear during the housing crisis of 2007-08, real estate investments aren't always a sure thing. And this knowledge may loom large for an entire generation of Americans.

"A lot of millennials' conceptions about homeownership are shaped by the experiences they went through during their formative years," said Phoenix-based attorney James Goodnow, shareholder and director at Fennemore Craig P.C. and co-author of the book *Motivating Millennials*.

"When the housing bubble burst in 2008, millennials saw

their parents, their grandparents, and their friends lose their homes, have them given back to the bank," Goodnow said. "And I think that caused millennials to have some skepticism of the benefits of homeownership in the way that previous generations just did not."

Of course, some young people didn't just watch their friends and families get overtaken by the housing crisis. Some experienced it firsthand.

"I bought a condo pretty close after college in 2008, which in hindsight, I realize, what a bad time," said sales engineer Julia Napolitano, 32, of Milwaukee. "I went into it, really, with this idea of, 'I want to establish myself. I want to build my career, I want to build a home,'" Napolitano said. "And in my mind, growing up in a single-family home my entire life with my parents, that was their marker. That was what they really instilled in me." But then, "The market changed and with it so did my opinion of homeownership," Napolitano said.

After buying her condo for $159,000 and living in it for a few years, Napolitano moved into a rental unit and leased her home to renters. Finally, in 2016, she sold her condo for $104,000.

"I needed to get away from it," she said, noting that even when the unit was rented, she was either barely breaking even or taking a financial loss every month. Plus, she said, life as a landlord just didn't suit her.

This experience isn't unique to just a few young people here and there, according to Richard Green, director and chair of University of Southern California's Lusk Center for Real Estate. "If you bought a house in 2003, 2004, 2005, OK, you probably at least have equity in your house now," Green said. "But you haven't substantially increased your equity. In generations past ... the equity was just there to buy the second house, and people don't have that now. And I think that's probably the most profound lingering impact of the crisis."

Dark cloud of debt

Another issue that can't be overlooked: "Millennials are dealing with crushing student debt," attorney and author Goodnow said.

Indeed, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York reported that by the end of 2016, the national student debt had reached $1.31 trillion, and that 2015 graduates with loans left school with an average of about $34,000 in student debt.

And even if young people do want to buy a home, said White, the Rutgers economics professor, "getting a mortgage is no longer as easy as it used to be. The terms are much more difficult. The banks are compensating for mistakes they made."

Add to this the tough market, with soaring home prices and housing inventory 9% lower than it was a year ago, according to the National Association of Realtors. Throw in the hassles of maintaining a property you own. Sprinkle in a dash of the freedom that comes with renting. And when it's all mixed together, you could be forgiven for wondering whether purchasing a home is even worth it — and whether that cornerstone of the American Dream is losing its luster.

Well ... not so fast.

Pathway to wealth

"There aren't a lot of opportunities to build wealth outside of homeownership," said McCabe, "and we rely on our wealth, this wealth that we've built, for retirement, for weathering health emergencies, maybe sending our kids to college. And homeownership still remains the best way to build wealth."

For the most part, according to McCabe, people recognize this, and many—even millennials—are not entirely put off by homeownership. Yes, some young people shun the suburbs with their dreaded white picket fences, but McCabe sees this as more of a delay than anything else. "For a lot of millennials, they'll spend some time in the city in their 20s before they move out to the suburbs," he said. "Maybe the draw of buying a home kicks in a little bit later. They might not be thinking about building wealth and starting families as young."

So is homeownership still a cornerstone of the American Dream? Depends on whom you ask.

Ask economics professor White, and he'll say: "The American Dream is not about homeownership, but it's about upward mobility. Some people may never buy a house, and yet their status and income will rise. So it's really a matter of choice. It's not the be-all and end-all."

Ask attorney Goodnow, and he'll say: "I think homeownership is part of the American Dream for millennials, but it's no longer the cornerstone of that dream."

Ask former homeowner Napolitano, and she'll say: "I think it's going to be more about fulfilling the needs of a lifestyle and a desire for a particular type of lifestyle than just a desire to have a house."

In the end, perhaps the most important person to ask is yourself. •

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 respon-sibilities—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.

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
WITH ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS

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?"

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 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?"

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 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 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.

AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

Winner of American Theatre Wing's prestigious 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.

Our diverse and multi-generational 36-member Ensemble has nearly 600 combined years of collaboration on stage. As of 2018, our theater and artists have 204 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 36 Black Theater Alliance Awards. Our 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 approximately 3,000 students annually. They hold "Pediatric Previews" which donates a portion of box office sales to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. 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 33 "Home Sweet Home"

by Pearl Cleage

Directed by
Chuck Smith*

Oct 5 - Nov 3, 2018

from Frank Capra's film

Directed by
Gwendolyn Whiteside*

Music direction by
Michael Mahler*

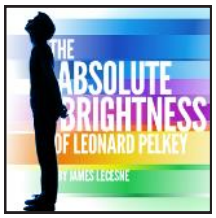
Nov 15, '18 - Jan 5, '19

by Steven Dietz

Chicago premiere

Directed by
Halena Kays

Feb 1 - Mar 16, 2019



by James Lecesne

Chicago premiere

Directed by
Kurt Johns

Mar 29 - Apr 27, 2019

by James Valeq &
Fred Alley

Directed by
Tammy Mader

Music direction by
Malcolm Ruhl

July 12 - Aug 17, 2019

*Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE THEATER

PERFORMANCE VENUE

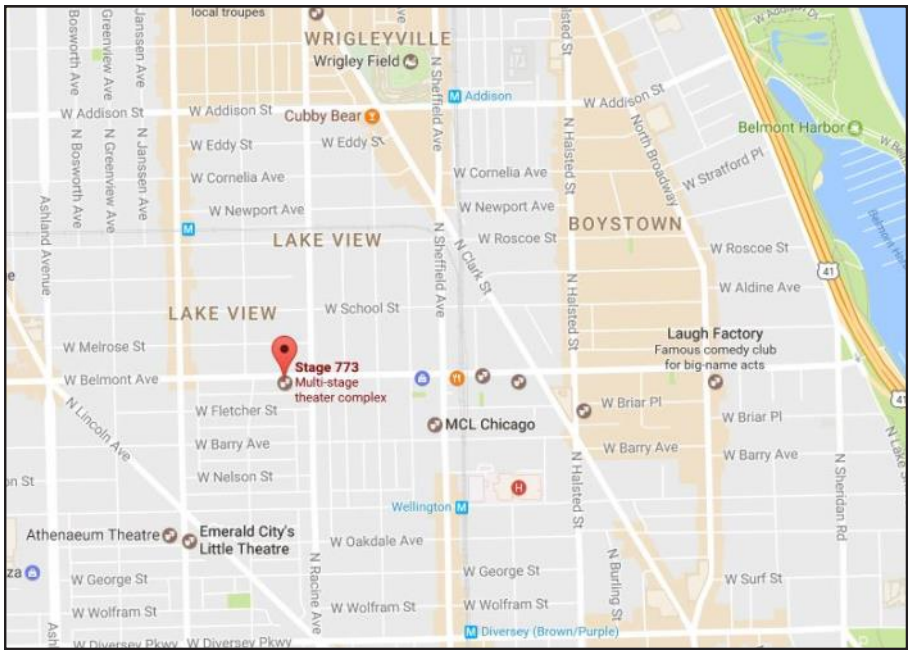
Stage 773
1225 W Belmont Ave
Chicago, IL 60657

BOX OFFICE

(773) 654-3103

FOR MORE INFORMATION

AmericanBluesTheater.com



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