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**American Blues Theater  
Inaugurates New Home with  
22nd Annual Production of  
*It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*  
From Frank Capra's film  
Directed by Exec. Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside  
Music Direction by Ensemble Member Michael Mahler**

**December 8 – 31, 2023  
at American Blues Theater's new building, 5627 N. Lincoln Ave.**

CHICAGO, IL – **American Blues Theater** announces its 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Production of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* from **Frank Capra's** film and directed by Executive Artistic Director **Gwendolyn Whiteside** with musical direction by Ensemble Member **Michael Mahler**. The production will serve as the inaugural show in American Blues Theater's new permanent home, located at 5627 N Lincoln Ave in Chicago. *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* will run **December 8 – 31, 2023**. **The press opening is Sunday, December 10 at 2:00pm.** Tickets go on sale November 1, 2023 at [www.americanbluestheater.com](http://www.americanbluestheater.com) or by calling **(773) 654-3103**.

American Blues is proud to bring this holiday classic home to its new theater. The new venue will include two theaters (137-seat proscenium and 40-seat flexible studio); an inviting lobby with box office, bar, and concessions; gendered and all-gendered restrooms; dressing rooms and greenroom; administrative offices; production spaces for scenery, props, and costumes; a small on-site parking lot with ample street parking. Details on the new building, including information about the ribbon ceremony, will be sent to media in the coming weeks.

George Bailey, the Everyman from small town Bedford Falls whose dreams of escape and adventure were stopped by family obligation and civic duty, has fallen onto desperate times. Only a miracle can save him from despair. Filled with original music and classic holiday carols, this critically acclaimed, warm "holiday favorite makes the bell ring every time." (*Chicago Tribune*) For more than 20 years, American Blues has treated audiences to a live retelling of the Frank Capra classic in a 1940s radio broadcast tradition, making *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* the second longest-running holiday play in Chicago!

Executive Artistic Director **Gwendolyn Whiteside** comments, "After performing this show in seven venues across Chicago, we are thrilled to present this iteration from our permanent home. Our theater's narrative feels similar to the Baileys journey in that family and community are the protagonist. We most certainly wouldn't be here without our supporters."

The cast of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* includes **Audrey Billings\*** (Mary Bailey), **Manny Buckley\*** (Joseph), **Dara Cameron\*** (Violet), **Ian Paul Custer\*** (Harry), **Brandon Dahlquist** (George Bailey), **Joe Dempsey\*** (Clarence/Mr. Potter), **Michael Mahler\*** (Announcer / Pianist), and **J.G. Smith\***. The understudies and **Mackenzie Jones** and **Zack Shultz**.

The creative team includes **Gwendolyn Whiteside\*** (director), **Michael Mahler\*** (music direction & jingle composer), **Austin Cook\*** (original score), **Grant Sabin\*** (scenic), **Katy Peterson Viccellio** (lights), **Christopher J. Neville\*** (costumes), **Joe Court** (audio engineer), **Elyse Dolan\*** (set dressing & props), **Michael Trudeau\*** (asst lighting design & technical director), and **Rachel West\*** (master electrician).

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

About the artists

**FRANK CAPRA** (May 18, 1897 – September 3, 1991) was an Italian-born American film director, producer and writer who became the creative force behind some of the major award-winning films of the 1930s and 1940s. Among his leading films are *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). During World War II, Capra served in the U.S. Army Signal Corps and produced propaganda films. After World War II, Capra's career declined as his later films, such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), performed poorly when they were first released. In ensuing decades, however, *It's a Wonderful Life* and other Capra films were revisited favorably by critics. Capra was nominated for six Academy Awards and won three. His films collectively garnered 53 Academy Award nominations between 1933 and 1961. He served as President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, worked alongside the Writers Guild of America, and was head of the Directors Guild of America. 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.

**GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE** (*Executive Artistic Director/Director*) is an Ensemble member of American Blues Theater and has served as Executive Artistic Director since 2010. In her tenure, she created the nationally-recognized *Blue Ink Playwriting Award* and new work development program, implemented community service into the company's mission, and adapted the arts education program for Chicago Public Schools serving nearly 4,000 students annually during a traditional school year. She led American Blues through its reorganization in 2009, building the operational budget from zero to \$1 million. She secured the company's first-ever operating reserve, endowment, and permanent home. Whiteside served on numerous panels for the National Endowment for the Arts and Board of Directors for Network of Ensemble Theaters and League of Chicago Theatres. She's a graduate of Northwestern University (BS), The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA), and a Kellogg Executive Scholar in Nonprofit management (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University). As a producer, she's received 15 Joseph Jefferson nominations or awards. As an actress, she's received 5 Joseph Jefferson Awards, Citations, and nominations; 2 After Dark Awards; and 1 Broadway World Chicago Award.

**AUDREY BILLINGS** (*Mary Bailey*) is an Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. Audrey was most recently seen as Emilie in the Jeff Award winning production of *The Moors* at A Red Orchid Theatre and Samantha in the American Blues' reading of *17 Minutes*. Previous credits include: Christmas Eve in the long-running production of *Avenue Q* at the Mercury Theater, Mary Magdalene in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Antonia in *Man of la Mancha*, and Hodel in *Fiddler on the Roof*. She has worked at the Paramount Theatre, Marriott Theatre Lincolnshire, Drury Lane Oakbrook, Theatre at the Center, Lookingglass Theatre Company and is a proud member of Actor's Equity.

**MANNY BUCKLEY** (*Joseph*) is an Ensemble member of American Blues Theater, making his return to this season's *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* He is a Chicago based actor, director, and writer. Directing credits include *The Bad Seed* (Jedlicka Performing Arts), *Kingdom*, an audio play (Broken Nose Theatre), *Origin Story*, *Mother of Pearl* and *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* (Blue Ink Festival), multiple short plays in the *Ripped: The Living Newspaper*, *#ENOUGH: Plays to End Gun Violence*, and *The One Minute Play Festival*. Acting credits include work with Chicago Shakespeare, Steppenwolf, Goodman, Court, Victory Gardens, Chicago Dramatists, Next Theater, House Theatre, Shattered Globe Theater, Cincinnati Children's Theatre and Studio Theatre. Manny has numerous credits with American Blues Theater, where he is an Ensemble member and turned in his critically-acclaimed, award-winning solo performance in *Looking Over the President's Shoulder*. Film credits: *Proven Innocent*, *Chicago Fire*, *Chicago PD*, *The US Navy*, *Northwestern University*, and *The Onion*. He has received

nominations for the Joseph Jefferson Award, the Helen Hayes Award and the 3Arts Award; he is the recipient of both a Black Theater Alliance Award and Black Excellence Award. Mr. Buckley was last seen this summer in American Blues Theater's sold-out production of *Fences*.

**DARA CAMERON** (*Violet*) is an Ensemble member of American Blues Theater and is grateful to be performing back onstage at her artistic home. Favorite credits include *The Spitfire Grill* (Jeff nomination) and *Little Shop of Horrors* (American Blues Theater); *Old Jews Telling Jokes* (Royal George and Off-Broadway); *The Secret of My Success* (Paramount Theatre); *Elf, Hero* (Jeff nomination), *South Pacific*, *October Sky*, *Sister Act*, *City of Angels*, *Cinderella*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Fiddler on the Roof* (Marriott Theatre); *Addams Family* (Mercury Theater); *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (Theatre at the Center), and *Sunset Boulevard*, *Seussical*, and *Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story* (Drury Lane Theatre). She is a graduate of Northwestern University and a member of Actors' Equity. She is married to actor Michael Mahler, and when they aren't singing in Bedford Falls together, they are busy chasing after their silly four-year-old son, Ezra!

**IAN PAUL CUSTER** (*Harry*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater and Chicago actor and musician. American Blues credits include: *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story* (Jeff Award, Best Ensemble, Best Musical – Midsize), *The Columnist*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, and *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* (Jeff Nominations for Best Play/Musical of the Year). Chicago credits: *Bad Jews* (Theatre Wit/Royal George), *33 Variations* (Jeff Award– Best Production, Midsize), and *To Master the Art* (TimeLine Theatre), *Annie Bosh is Missing* (Steppenwolf Theatre), *High Holidays* (Goodman Theatre), *Fiddler on the Roof* (Lyric Opera). Ian has also had the pleasure of working with Porchlight Music Theatre, Marriott Theatre, A Red Orchid Theatre, MPAACT, Paramount and Court Theatre. Regional credits: *Hero: The Musical* (Asolo Rep Theatre), *Cymbeline* (Notre Dame Shakespeare), *Romeo and Juliet* (Cardinal Stage), *Peter Pan* (360 Entertainment - London, England). Television credits: *Somebody Somewhere*, *APB*, *Empire*, *Chicago Fire*, and *Chicago PD*. Ian received his BFA from The Theatre School at DePaul University.

**BRANDON DAHLQUIST** (*George Bailey*) is happy to return to Bedford Falls for his 7th season. Chicago theatre credits include: *Sound of Music* (Marriott Theatre), *Secret of My Success* (Paramount Theatre), *Miracle the Musical* (Royal George), *A Little Night Music*, *Arcadia*, *Oh Coward* (Writers Theatre), *Cabaret*, *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Drury Lane), *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Assassins* (Porchlight). Broadway and Regional credits include: *Bronx Bombers* (Circle in the Square), *As You Like It* (Guthrie Theatre), *The Glass Menagerie* (Milwaukee Repertory), *A Little Night Music*, *1776* (A.C.T.), *Shakespeare in Love*, *Rhinoceros*, *1776* (Asolo Repertory), *Dogfight*, *City of Angels* (S.F. Playhouse), *12 Angry Men* (Maltz Jupiter Theater), *Sunday...George*, *Murder on the Nile*, *Lombardi* (Peninsula Players). TV credits include: *A League of Their Own* (Amazon), *The Chi* (Showtime), *Difficult People* (Hulu), *Chicago PD* (NBC). Dahlquist is also a busy photographer and full-time dad.

**JOE DEMPSEY** (Clarence/Mr. Potter) is an Affiliate of American Blues Theater where he has appeared in *Scapin* and *Pledge of Allegiance*. He also has acted at Lookingglass, Goodman, Steppenwolf, Northlight, Court, Chicago Shakespeare, Drury Lane Oak Brook, and Paramount and many other Chicago theatres as well as regionally at Milwaukee Rep, St Louis Rep, Centerstage (Baltimore), and City Theatre (Pittsburgh). TV work includes *Somebody Somewhere*, *Chicago Fire*, *ER*, and *Early Edition* and film work includes several indies you've never seen.

**MICHAEL MAHLER** (*Music Director, Announcer/Pianist*) is an Ensemble member of American Blues. Past Blues productions: *Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story* (Jeff Award – Best Music Direction), *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Hank Williams: Lost Highway*, and *Side Man*. Other recent roles include The Baker in *Into the Woods* (Writers); Jim Hardy in *Holiday Inn*, and Jack Singer in *Honeymoon in Vegas* (Marriott Theatre). Michael co-wrote the songs for the Netflix movie *My Little Pony: A New Generation* and contributed additional lyrics to Cameron Mackintosh's most recent Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*. Other works as a composer/lyricist include *The Secret of My Success*, *Miracle* (Jeff Award – Best New Work), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *October Sky*, *The Man Who Murdered Sherlock Holmes* (Jeff Award – Best New Work), and *Hero* (Jeff Award – Best New Work). Michael is married to fellow Ensemble Member Dara Cameron and proud father to their son Ezra.

**J.G. SMITH** (*Foley*) is an Ensemble member of American Blues. She has performed with Blues in *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*, *On Clover Road*, *Ripped*, and virtual readings of *The Thanksgiving Play*,

*On the Greenbelt*, and *The Cratchits (in America)*. Theatre: *I And You* (Peninsula Players); *Mother of the Maid* (Northlight); *Plantation!* (Lookingglass); *The Art of Sisters* (Vision Productions); *MARYSHELLEYSHOW* (National Tour, Chicago Fringe, TheTankNYC); *Peter and the Starcatcher* (City Equity Theatre); *Alice in Wonderland*, *As You Like It*, *King Lear*, *A Christmas Carol* (Alabama Shakespeare); and *Censored on Final Approach* (The GYM at Judson). Film/TV credits include Jennifer Reeder's *Knives and Skin*, MTV's *Short Comings*, *The Dancing Monkey*, *Dreaming Grand Avenue*, *Pry Me Open*, and *Dorm Therapy*. Her original films and performance art have shown at New Orleans' Hell Yes Film Festival, Williamsburg Circus, Salonathon!, Undiscovered Countries: The Infinite Fest, and TransVisions' virtual SOFT PALETTE festival.

### **Fact Sheet *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!***

Title: ***It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!***  
Adapted From: **Frank Capra's Film**  
Director: **Gwendolyn Whiteside\***  
Music Director  
and jingle composer: **Michael Mahler\***  
Score composer: **Austin Cook\***

Featuring: **Audrey Billings\*** (Mary Bailey), **Manny Buckley\*** (Joseph), **Dara Cameron\*** (Violet), **Ian Paul Custer\*** (Harry), **Brandon Dahlquist** (George Bailey), **Joe Dempsey\*** (Clarence/Potter), **Michael Mahler\*** (Announcer / Pianist), and **J.G. Smith\*** (Foley).

Creative Team: **Grant Sabin\*** (scenic), **Katy Peterson Viccellio** (lights), **Christopher J. Neville\*** (costumes), **Joe Court** (audio engineer), **Elyse Dolan\*** (set dressing & props), **Michael Trudeau\*** (asst lighting design & technical director), and **Rachel West\*** (master electrician).

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Dates: **December 8–31, 2023**

Schedule: **Fridays:** 7:30pm  
**Saturdays:** 4:30pm & 7:30pm  
**Sundays:** 2:00pm & 5:00pm

The runtime is 90 minutes. Arrive 15 minutes before curtain for a fun interactive pre-show.

Location: **American Blues Theater, 5627 N Lincoln Ave, Chicago**

Ticket prices: **\$25-\$65**, plus a \$4.50 ticket fee

Box office: Buy online at [www.americanbluestheater.com](http://www.americanbluestheater.com)  
or by calling (773) 654-3103.

- In the long tradition of honoring heroes during the run of *It's a Wonderful Life*, American Blues will honor a teacher at each performance with a "**Teacher Tribute.**" Nominations are accepted at [www.americanbluestheater.com](http://www.americanbluestheater.com). Selected recipients will receive complimentary tickets to a performance of *It's a Wonderful Life* and a live tribute during the show.
- American Blues proudly partners with NAMI Chicago, USO, and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Complimentary tickets are offered to CPS teachers, the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (IL chapter).

### **About American Blues Theater**

Winner of the prestigious National Theatre Company Award from American Theatre Wing (Tony Awards). American Blues Theater is an Ensemble of artists committed to producing new and classic American stories that ask the question: "What does it mean to be American?"

The diverse and multi-generational artists have established the second-oldest professional Ensemble theater in Chicago. As of 2023, the theater and artists received 232 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 44 Black Theatre Alliance Awards. The artists are honored with Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize nominations, Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards and numerous other accolades.

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