

Life on stage 'Wonderful'

WILLIAMSBURG Ovation: Ann E. Metz
Virginia Gazette: Wednesday, November 24, 2010

The motion picture "It's a Wonderful Life," which starred Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed, is an iconic film that continues to gain popularity decades after it was made.

Each holiday season, people of all ages watch how quintessential nice guy George Bailey gets himself in and out of trouble thanks to the intercession of an affable guardian angel, Clarence.

The Williamsburg Players have produced a stage version of Frank Capra's classic, and it runs through Dec. 11. The play was adapted by James Rodgers, and for the most part, maintains most of the charm of the film.

Christopher Hull pulled yeoman's duty as director, producer, technical director, lighting and scenic designer. That's a handful, and one he met with skill on every level. His direction was very natural and allowed for the episodic nature of this adaptation to flow smoothly. The technical aspects added a nice ethereal dimension, appropriate given that the play deals with other-worldly elements.

I genuinely enjoyed Sam Miller's stellar work as George Bailey. Miller, who has performed for years at Colonial Williamsburg, brought professionalism to the role.

ON STAGE

The Williamsburg Players present, "It's a Wonderful Life," adapted for the stage by James W. Rodgers. Directed, produced and designed by Christopher Hull. Performances at the James-York Playhouse at 8 p.m., Wednesday-Saturdays through Dec. 11. Saturday matinees at 2 p.m. No performances Nov. 24 or 25.

I think he looks like a young Jimmy Stewart, and at times delivered lines we have heard countless times on film with the same inflection and intonation of the legendary actor.

Miller's performance was easy and unassuming, exactly like the character he portrayed. Watching Miller as Bailey was as comfortable as slipping on a favorite sweater. Good stuff.

The antagonist in the movie, Mr. Potter, was played by Lionel Barrymore. That character was so smarmy that you loved to hate him. In this version, Potter is a woman.

At the production I attended, the frosty Potter was played by Lee Ann Rose. She alternates in the role with veteran actor Antoinette Brennan.

Rose gave a great performance, playing the dispassionate Potter with a strong voice, commanding presence and unsettling cackle.

Players veteran Jim Waldron played Clarence Odbody, the angel looking to get his wings by doing a good deed on Earth. Waldron certainly looked the part and successfully embodied the easy-to-love angel.

Crystal Day made her Players debut as Mary Hatch, George's steady wife. She did a nice job opposite Miller, and the two seemed to find good chemistry.

Paul Schutte played the doddering and endearing Uncle Billy. Schutte is a smart actor, and knows what to do on stage. His performance reflected his understanding of the importance of this character. Fine work.

The inhabitants of Bedford Falls were played by more than a dozen performers, including Eddie Menzies as Harry Bailey, Kathy Dean as Mother Bailey and Jenny Taylor as Violet Peterson. These people are integral to the plot, illuminating the plight George finds himself in and the eventual heart-warming conclusion.

Christmas has arrived a bit early at the James-York Playhouse, but I don't think there is ever an inappropriate time of year to see a show that makes you feel good. So with "It's a Wonderful Life."