'It's a Wonderful Life' brims with heart

By Neil Shurley
Contributing writer

THEATER REVIEW

It starts on the bridge.

George Bailey (Evan Harris) is at an impasse. Faced with financial ruin, he's contemplating suicide. But a stranger comes along, an odd, ethereal man named Clarence (Monty Tucker). In fact, Clarence is an angel — George's guardian angel — and he's hoping to finally earn his wings.

And so we are introduced to Bedford Falls, the little town where George Bailey finds himself trapped in a life he never wanted. But as Clarence guides him through a trip into his own past, George discovers that maybe it was exactly the life he needed.

Greenville Little Theatre's adaptation of "It's A Wonderful Life" marries elements of the beloved Frank Capra film with otherwise unused threads from the original short story, "The Greatest Gift," upon which the movie was based. Played upon a gorgeous set (designed by director Suzanne McCalla), this production doesn't exactly erase your memories of the film, but enhances and reflects on them.

Evan Harris does a good job trying to make the part of George Bailey his own, which is not easy considering the huge shadow of Jimmy Stewart that looms over the role. And it's a tricky part to play — George Bailey has to be likeable and good-natured, but at other times impudent and almost rude. It really is rather heavy stuff, and Harris manages to keep us rooting for George throughout.

Other characters have a little more breathing room to become fresh and separate from their movie counterparts. Monty Tucker makes a calm — and calmly humorous — Clarence, convincingly serving as George Bailey's heavenly guide. Shane Willimon is both charming and funny as forgetful Uncle Billy. And Robert Simms is just terrific as Mr. Potter, bringing with him all the deviousness and anger of the movie character without some of the cartoonish overtones.

Other favorites included Ian Hendrix and Jeffrey White as Ernie and Bert, Kevin Treu as Mr. Gower and Meg Foster as Mary.

But the real star of the show is the set, lighting and overall atmosphere. McCalla gives the large GLT playing space a moody, dreamlike quality. The large bridge stays center stage, becoming parts of a house, or a bank, or other setting, while always remaining The Bridge.

"It's A Wonderful Life" runs through Dec. 16. Call 864-233-6238.