

MERIT THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

It's a Wonderful Life

NOVEMBER 20-22, 2025

ANDERSON CENTER THEATER





INSPIRING STORIES. QUALITY PRODUCTIONS.



WHO WE ARE

Merit Theatre Company & Orchestra was founded in 2017 to provide family-friendly entertainment with a passion for powerful stories and a commitment to quality. Based in Northern Kentucky, we work with talent from across the Tri-State area.

We strive to provide a welcoming and uplifting environment for our participants and patrons alike; offer opportunities to all ages and develop talent in our community; and create art that is both entertaining and enriching.

We desire to make a positive difference in the lives of all those who play a part in a Merit production, from audience member to cast member.

Visit us online at www.merittheatre.org to learn more!

MERIT THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

It's a Wonderful Life

A PLAY IN TWO ACTS

There will be a 15-minute intermission

SETTING: Christmas Eve, Bedford Falls. 1945. Early evening.

PRODUCTION

Produced by **Benjamin & Kaitlyn Iocco**

Directed by **Rachel Cobbs**

Set Design by **Benjamin Iocco**

Lighting Design & Execution by **John Siedenbergh, Sr.**

Lighting Operator **Aaron Brueckman**

Costume Design by **Kaitlyn Iocco**

Hair Design by **Jerica Henline Richardson**

Makeup Design by **Heather Lacey**

Costume Manager **Gayle Spjut**

Costume Assistant **Rhonda Hanneken**

Production Assistant & Stage Manager **Emily Phillips**

House Manager **Sophia Manion**

FROM THE DIRECTOR



It's A Wonderful Life has been an American institution at Christmastime for over 50 years—although it was not well received at the time of its premiere. After a resurgence of popularity in the '70s, it locked in a spot as one of those movies families watch every year... and rightfully so!

But what about the story keeps audiences replaying the film year after year?

At first glance, it might seem a lot like other typical films from the era, such as *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Christmas in Connecticut*, or *White Christmas*. But look closer and you'll see that it truly stands out from the rest. Why? Because of its very vulnerable perspective on being alive, asking the difficult question, "Does your life matter?"

The easy answer is, of course, yes! But the longer you let that thought ring without giving it a response, the more lies and doubts can creep in.

As you watch this performance today, it is my hope and prayer that you will hear a resounding "YES!" should you wonder if anyone would notice if you were gone. The answer is always yes.

Each of our lives touches so many others... sometimes we just need a little perspective to see it.

SPECIAL THANKS

Arnie Forman and Fort Mitchell Baptist Church
Landmark Church

Scott Warner and Nelson Markesbery Moving & Storage
Cincinnati Christian School

Aaron & Lydia Brueckman, Mary Beth Escamilla, Greg Iocco, Jessie Pie, Rich Campbell
Our cast and their families, crew, production team, volunteers, sponsors,
and patrons like you



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CAST & CREW

GEORGE BAILEY	Benjamin Iocco
CLARENCE ODBODY	Hunter Muse
MR. GOWER.....	Dave Nell
YOUNG GEORGE.....	Isaac Adamson
HARRY BAILEY	Gregg Farrier
MOTHER BAILEY	Rhonda Hanneken
UNCLE BILLY	Matt Dentino
AUNT TILLY.....	Arlene Balczo
MARY HATCH.....	Kaitlyn Iocco
MRS. HATCH/MISS CARTER.....	Sandy Schlueter
HENRY F. POTTER	Jeff Carter
MR. POTTER'S SECRETARY	Noah Steffen
MR. POTTER'S GOON	Larry Fritz
PETE BAILEY	Emmett Heubach
JANIE BAILEY	Anna Manion
TOMMY BAILEY	Luke Buchanan
ZUZU BAILEY	Luana Muse
VIOLET PETERSON.....	Helen Mariah Murdoch
ERNIE.....	Beau Heubach
BERT.....	Phil Nelson
MR. MARTINI	Tony Escamilla
MRS. MARTINI	Stacey Messer
MRS. THOMPSON	Tiffany Adamson
MISS ANDREWS.....	Rebecca Wiesmann
MR. WELCH	Dan Schindler
NEWSPAPER BOY.....	Joseph Manion
SAM WAINWRIGHT.....	Levi Sherman
ENSEMBLE	Alex Fritz, Caleb Fritz, Evelyn Heubach, Clarissa Rhinehart, Kaitlyn Rhinehart
CREW	Jerry Armelli, Millie Baer, Elena Escamilla, Blake Heubach, Sadie Heubach, Sterling Steffen
SET CONSTRUCTION & PAINTING	Mia Armelli, Matt Dentino, Benjamin Iocco, Dave Nell, Phil Nelson
PROPS	Rachel Cobbs, Benjamin Iocco, Kaitlyn Iocco
PROGRAM ART/GRAPHIC DESIGN	Eric Dean

MEET THE CAST & CREW



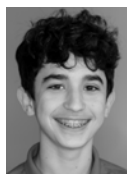
Jerry Armelli (Stage Crew) obtained his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. He has danced with both

Cleveland/San Jose' and Cincinnati/New Orleans City Ballet Companies. Together with his wife Mia they have owned and operated The Dance Center in Independence, KY for 30 years. Jerry was an adjunct Professor of Dance at Northern Kentucky University for 30 years. He (and Mia) have had the pleasure and privilege of working with Merit Theatre Company and Orchestra both off stage and on stage since its inception in 2016.



Tiffany Adamson (Mrs. Thompson) is honored to make her Merit Theatre debut after several years away from performing. She is doubly thrilled that her return to the

stage is beside her son Isaac (Young George). Tiffany last appeared on stage as Thelma in Centerstage Players' production of *It Doesn't Get Any Deeper Than This*. Some of her favorite past roles include Mandy Pemberton in *If the Good Lord's Willing and the Creek Don't Rise* and Veronica Craye in *The Hollow*. Tiffany currently serves as the Dean of Women and Elementary Chapel Leader at Cincinnati Christian Schools. Tiffany is wife to Cory and mom to Isaac and Avery. She would like to thank her husband Cory for his endless support and always encouraging her to pursue her passions.



Isaac Adamson (Young George) is excited to perform in his eighth production and his first with Merit Theatre Company. He is happy to be able to share this experience

with his mom, Tiffany. Isaac's last role was Gavroche in *Les Miserables* with the CCS Theatre Department. Isaac is in the eighth grade at Cincinnati Christian Schools, where he is active in basketball, theatre, and band. In his spare time Isaac enjoys making music, reading, and playing video games with his friends. He hopes that you enjoy the performance.



Arlene Balcz (Aunt Tilly) is excited to be a part of this Merit Theatre show. She's been involved in theater for over 3 decades as a director, choreographer, actor and

producer. Most recently she's been seen on Mariemont Players' stage in *Four Old Broads*. Arlene also does film and commercials with Heyman Talent Agency and Dan Talent Group. A few weeks ago, she was on the Oxygen Channel's True Crime Serious, *Killer Grannies* and she recently was filming a movie called *EX* which will premiere next spring. Christianity, her family and friends, long distance running and Cincinnati sports keeps her life filled and blessed.



Aaron Brueckman (Lighting Operator) is thrilled to join Merit Theatre Company once again! Earlier this year, Aaron served as Band Director, Conductor, and pianist for

Bright Star (August 2025), and last summer he was the sound engineer for *Oliver!* He has participated in various productions over the years with multiple groups as an actor or musician, including two years of *Smoke on the Mountain: Sanders Family Christmas*, which is how he was first introduced to Merit. Music has always been a central part of Aaron's life—starting with piano at age five, voice through high school, and guitar in college, with some dabbling in other instruments along the

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way. He is always glad to use his God-given talents to help put smiles on faces.



Luke Buchanan (Tommy Bailey) is 10 years old and thrilled to be part of Merit Theatre Company and Orchestra's production! This is his first show with Merit,

and he's had a blast learning and performing with the cast. Outside of theater, Luke enjoys playing soccer, knitting/crocheting, fishing, and spending time with his friends. He'd like to thank his family, friends, and the Merit team for their support. Enjoy the show!



Jeff Carter (Henry F. Potter) – In over 30 years of theatrical experience, Jeff has worked with theater companies across the southeast from Georgia to the northern Kentucky/

Cincinnati area and was last on stage with the Merit Theater Company in *Oliver* as Mr. Brownlow. Jeff enjoys playing villains and has really gotten into the dark character that is Mr. Potter. Jeff thanks his wonderful wife for her unwavering support and you, the audience, for coming out to enjoy this delightful classic work.



Matt Dentino (Uncle Billy) has been on stage since his debut at age 5 with *The Dancing Dentsinos*, and in the decades that have followed he has traveled the world with the

USO, performing for our troops in over a dozen countries. Closer to home his performance credits include professional as well as community theatre around the country, industrial shows and theme parks from Paramount to The Grand Ole Opry and Opryland as well as TV. He has sung lead roles in everything from *Operettas* to

Gospel Quartets and played dramatic and comedic roles alike. He's been in many Merit Theatre productions in the past including last year's production of *Oliver*, where he brought to life the role of Fagan and earlier this year he was Mayor Dobbs in *Bright Star*.



Elena Therese Escamilla (Stage Crew) is 16 years old and is eager to help in Merit Theatre Company and Orchestra's production of *It's a Wonderful Life*. She

performed with Merit in *Jane Eyre*, *Oliver!* and *Bright Star*. Elena has also played Marie in *Cinderella* for McNicholas High School. Elena would like to thank her parents and two best friends, Ellie and Grace, for always supporting her. She is excited to have the chance to do what she loves by participating in *It's a Wonderful Life* this year.



Tony Escamilla (Mr. Martini) after 47 years of developing character—mostly his own—is thrilled to return to the stage in *It's a Wonderful Life*, one of his favorite films and a holiday tradition he holds dear. His last appearance was a walk-on role in a high school production of *South Pacific*, and he now brings decades of life experience, sharp comic timing, and boundless enthusiasm to his performance. When not rehearsing (or memorizing his five lines), Tony enjoys attending live theatre with his family and reminding his daughter that “it's never too late for an encore.” Merry Christmas!



Gregg Farrier (Harry Bailey) is a man with so many interests in so many different fields. However, acting seems to always be a constant

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passion all his life. Starting at just four years old, he memorized monologues. All the way through recently, this past March he had his first professional role in a filming for AIG called *Emerald Crossing*. “It is always amazing and exciting what the Lord has in store for everyone. All the glory be to Him”



Larry Fritz (Mr. Potter’s Goon) is a veteran of many years in various aspects of theatre, primarily with the Mason Community Players. Among his myriad off-stage roles, he has been on numerous set construction, props, and stage crews, done lighting design and execution several times, and is once again serving on the MCP Board of Directors. On stage, he has been in the cast of multiple musicals and shows, including *Man of La Mancha*, *Damn Yankees*, *Anything Goes*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*; among his favorite roles are a disciple in *Godspell* and a brother in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, twice each, and in *Is There a Comic in the House?* as Zach Zaney. More recently, he also served as co-technical director and lighting and sound design and execution for both of the HFCHE Drama Club shows in which his younger sons, Alex & Caleb, performed. He is enjoying sharing the experience of theatre with them in this show, both under the lights and behind the scenes, and is most grateful to his wife, Cat, for putting up with the family theatre bug.



Alex Fritz (Ensemble) is in high school and was Rupert in *The Golden Goose* and a Wolf Leader in *The Jungle Book* with the Drama Club for Holy Family Catholic Home

Educators, as well as assisted with set

construction for both shows. He also helped with the renovation of the Playhouse for the Mason Community Players. Previously, he performed in select scenes, sketches, and as MC in the annual Improv and Scene show with the Drama Club of the Plano (Texas) Education Association of Christian Homeschoolers for two years. He enjoys playing and learning piano, singing in his church choir with his cad and two of his brothers, and playing video games with his brothers.



Caleb Fritz (Ensemble) is in junior high school and was a Page in *The Golden Goose* and a Monkey Leader in *The Jungle Book* with the Drama Club for Holy Family Catholic

Home Educators, as well as helped with set construction for both shows. He previously also helped with the renovation of the Playhouse for the Mason Community Players. He is something of a junior paleontologist and loves fossil hunting, enjoys playing and learning piano and soon organ, composing his own songs, singing in his church choir with his cad and 2 of his brothers, playing video games with his brothers, and reading.



Rhonda Hanneken (Mother Bailey/Assistant Costumer) is honored to be working with her Merit family once again! She has been involved both on stage and off with Merit and

enjoys every minute! This production brings new excitement as she shares the experience with her grandson, Luke (Tommy Bailey), who has been one of her cheerleaders. Rhonda has had the privilege of working alongside and learning from her dear friend, Gayle Spjut, in costumes for *The Sound of Music* and *Bright Star*.

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She returned to the stage as Mrs. Bedwin in *Oliver*, earning her first Orchid award nomination! Her past onstage experience includes *Horizons of Gold*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, *Three Men on a Horse*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and the role of Mary in *The Holiday Hoedown Nativity*. Rhonda lives in Southgate KY with her husband Jeff where they raised three incredible children: John, Sarah, and Allison! She has several hobbies including knitting and crocheting, but her favorite one is spending time with her eight amazing grandchildren! Rhonda believes you should live each day to the fullest and would like to thank her sweet family for their continued love and support. God is good! All the time!



Beau Huebach (Ernie) is making his acting debut with Merit Theatre and is especially excited to be performing alongside his daughter Evelyn and sons

Emmett and Blake. Beau is no stranger to the company; he previously played multiple instruments in the bluegrass band for *Bright Star* and has served as stage crew.



Evelyn Heubach (Ensemble) is thrilled to be working again with Merit Theatre. She played Marta von Trapp in Merit's production of *The Sound of Music*, Duffy in Stage Right's production of *Annie*, and in the ensemble for *Oliver!* and *Bright Star*. Evelyn is 13 years old and enjoys devoting her time to singing and playing the piano.



Emmett Heubach (Pete Bailey) is elated to be working with Merit Theatre for the second time. He previously played an Orphan in Merit's

production of *Oliver!* Emmett is 12 years old, and he enjoys karate and skateboarding in his spare time. He loves stories and has been writing his own comic books for years. He hopes to tell stories through film when he grows up



Jerica Henline Richardson (Hair Designer) is thrilled to be working with Merit Theatre and has been part of most of their shows for the last seven years since their conception.

Her most challenging shows to date were *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver!* both stretching in historical technicality and wiggery. While theater is a side hobby, it is certainly not her only venture into the arts, having written and produced the feature film *Polycarp* in 2013. She has worked in many other roles in various short films, commercials, TV shows, and feature films around the country from 2011–2018. Her newest role has been that of a wife to her loving husband Jacob, on 5/24/25. She continues to seek after other artistic outlets that the Lord guides her to.



Kaitlyn Iocco (Mary Bailey/Producer) is a graduate of Northern Kentucky University with a Bachelor of fine arts degree in acting. Now Vice President and Co-Artistic Director of Merit Theatre Company. She has done commercial, print, film, and voiceover work in the Cincinnati, Northern KY, and Pittsburgh areas and won multiple awards for performance, direction, and costume design. She is so grateful for the incredible team behind this production, and thanks you for being here. Psalm 52:8

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Benjamin Iocco (George Bailey/Producer/Set Designer) is a professional artist with extensive experience in painting, illustrating, sculpting, composing, and more. He has designed exhibits for attractions, worked on multiple film projects and theater productions, and won several awards for his work. He serves as President of Merit and is grateful for such an amazing team. To God be the glory.



Heather Lacey is a soon to be graduate of Paul Mitchell school of cosmetology and has always had a strong passion for makeup. She has been working with Merit since 2018 and is happy to be part of the team once again.



Joseph Manion (Newspaper Boy) is thrilled to be participating in another amazing Merit show! He has fond memories of his role in *Oliver!* as an orphan and member of Fagin's Gang and enjoyed returning to tell the story of *Bright Star* over the summer. Joseph lives in Mason with his dad, mom and sister Anna. He enjoys shooting basketball, working out at CrossFit, and playing Fortnite. He hopes you enjoy *It's a Wonderful Life!*



Anna Manion (Janie Bailey) is thrilled to be participating in another amazing Merit show! She has fond memories of her role in *Oliver!* as an orphan and member of Fagin's Gang and enjoyed returning to tell the story of *Bright Star* over the summer. Anna lives in Mason with her dad, mom and brother Joseph. She enjoys riding horses, working

out at CrossFit, and shopping for skin care. She hopes you enjoy *It's a Wonderful Life!*



Helen Mariah Murdoch (Violet Peterson) is thrilled to join Merit Theatre & Orchestra for their production of *It's a Wonderful Life*. Since moving to Cincinnati, she has also enjoyed performing with Inspiring Arts Productions (*Cinderella* and *A Christmas Carol*) and Bart's Bards (*Tuck Everlasting*, *Horizons of Gold*, and *The Sound of Music*). When she is not on stage, she is reading stories to her students or hoping for sunny days to go on jogs. She hopes that you enjoy the show and are inspired to see the blessing you are to others.



Stacey Messer (Mrs. Matini) is so excited to perform with Merit Theater and Orchestra. Stacey has experienced seasons of performing throughout her life with some of her favorite roles being The Bird Woman in *Mary Poppins*, Nanette in *Falstaff*, and Maria Rainer in *The Sound of Music*. Stacey's most important roles these days have been that of wife to Josh Messer, mom to Lydia, Nora, and Sarah, and teacher at Cincinnati Christian School. Stacey hopes to inspire others to pursue their passions at any season in life.



Hunter Muse (Clarence) returns to the stage for the first time since 2012, when he played Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew* with The Village Players. Since then, Hunter served a two-year service mission in Brazil, graduated from BYU (go Cougs!), married his sweetheart Jessie, and became the proud dad of three, one of whom is in this production! By day, Hunter

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runs Midwest Data Factory, a data and AI consultancy. By night, you can usually find him wrangling kids to bed or learning a new jazz piano tune. Hunter would like to thank his wife and best friend, Jessie, for her support and cheerleading during the late nights of rehearsal!



Luana Muse (Zuzu Bailey) is excited for her very first theatre performance! She is six years old and loves to play with her two younger brothers, do arts and crafts, and read books. Her favorite colors are pink and yellow.



David Nell (Mr. Gower) is excited to join the cast of Merit Theatre for this production of *It's a Wonderful Life*. David's background has largely been centered around set design, writing and directing, most notably the director/producer of the Easter passion play *Once For All*. David has designed sets for use in local theatre, schools and churches as well as designing the traveling set for Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. David studied illustration and design at the University of Cincinnati before computers were invented. He thanks his wife, Laurie, for always indulging his creative muse.



Phil Nelson (Bert) is honored to be able to perform again with Merit Theatre. His past Merit performances were *A Very Merit Christmas* as a soloist and *Oliver!* as Bill Sykes. Phil resides in Milford, OH with his beautiful wife of almost 22 years, Lauren, and their precious children Joseph & Emary. He just finished directing *Wizard of Oz* with Royal Theatre of

Mason. Thank you to Rachel, Ben, Kaitlyn and all of the Merit production team for this wonderful opportunity. Enjoy the show, and Merry Christmas!



Emily Phillips (Production Assistant/Stage Manager) is so thankful and excited to be a part of Merit Theatre. It will be her first full year working with Merit, after lending her help in *Oliver!* and *Bright Star*. Emily loves art of all kinds and has an associate's degree in graphic design. While theatre has always been a hobby, from backyard plays to road trip productions, she is excited to turn it into something more! She can't thank the cast and crew enough for making her time with Merit a fabulous experience.



Clarissa Rinehart (Ensemble) is excited to perform in her first local theatre play. She is a twin and has nine siblings. Clarissa enjoys spending time with family and friends. Some of her hobbies are reading, baking, cooking, and making crafts. She is currently working on the Admissions team at the Creation Museum. Clarissa enjoys acting.



Kaitlyn Rinehart (Ensemble) is a quiet girl who loves reading. Everyone in her family calls her a bookworm. She enjoys writing stories and letters to her friends. Running and knitting loom projects are two other activities she likes to do. You may have seen her act.



Dan Schindler (Mr. Welch) This is Dan's first show with Merit although he has been a chorus member in 3 of the Christmas concerts. He has

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performed with Fairfield Footlighters, GHCT and Hamilton Rotary. Some favorite roles include Ensemble in *Godspell* and Mayor Shinn in *The Music Man*. He would like to thank his family for their love and support. His favorite role is Grandpa to Brady. Enjoy the show!



Sandy Schlueter (Mrs. Hatch/Miss Carter) is delighted to appear in her first Merit show. She has also appeared in productions with Beechmont Players, Center Stage Players, The Drama Workshop, Fairfield Footlighters, Mariemont Players, Rivertown Players, Tri County Players and Village Players. She appreciates your attendance and hopes that you enjoy the show.

John Siedenber Sr. (Lighting Design & Execution) is thrilled to return to Merit Theatre Company. He has been designing lighting and scenery professionally for 30 years and his designs can be seen at several local schools and regional theatres. John is also the president of Stage Right Theatre Company in Williamstown, KY, where he lives with his wonderful wife Brigitte. John would like to give all the glory to God for this opportunity and for His amazing love!



Gayle Spjut (Costume Manager) has happily constructed and managed costumes for Merit Theatre since 2018. For decades she has been involved in creating, directing and choreographing many programs for children, as well as designing and constructing costumes and props. She earned a BA in Theater from NKU at age 52, proving you're never too old to learn more about what you love to do. She is an Orchid Award recipient for costuming.

Celebrating 50 years of marriage this month, she thanks her husband Ron for *It's a Wonderful Life!*



Levi Sherman (Sam Wainwright) is excited to return to the stage with Merit Theatre. Although only his second theatre role, he has a deep love of art and

storytelling. As a young boy, Levi was captivated by history and has spent his life studying and learning how to recreate the past. He works as a clothier and a research historian for Answers in Genesis, but his hobby is replicating historical clothing and equipment and teaching others through the medium of living history and reenactment. He is very pleased that Ben and Kaitlyn seem to favor stories set in the early 20th century as this is his favorite period of modern men's fashion. He is blessed with an incredibly supporting wife Faith, and two little warrior boys aged three and one.



Noah Steffen (Secretary) while still new to theatre, is passionate about local community theatre. He has lived his whole life in

Northern Kentucky along with his family of nine. From a young age he enjoyed singing and dancing, but he mostly just performed for his family members in the living room. With the help of his siblings, he starred in a few basement theatre productions of classic Bible stories; which were actually in their basement. But at the age of twelve Noah took to the stage for the first time. Performing in Merit Theatre's 2018 production of *Horizons of Gold*. Noah spent the past season performing with Merit Theatre in their production of *Oliver!* and *A Very Merit Christmas*. Over the summer he performed

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in *Bright Star*. He also worked with Academy of Arts to bring *The Venture of 1620* to life. Now he is excited to share with you *It's a Wonderful Life*.



Sterling Steffen (Crew) Merit is something she has enjoyed ever since her family/brother started getting involved. She has always enjoyed helping out and working wherever she can. Being a part of something that she's watched and enjoyed and helping, even if it's just behind the scenes, is such an exciting opportunity.



Rebecca Wiesman (Miss Andrews) is thrilled to be treading the boards again! Most recently, Becca was seen as Amanda McKinney in *Working: The Musical* and as a member of the chorale for Merit Theatre Company. She has loved getting to story tell alongside this wonderfully talented cast. By day, Becca works at Xavier University and resides in Anderson Township with her husband of 25 years, Andy, their 21-year-old daughter, Sophia, and their collection of tiny dogs. Enjoy the show!

Fiddler on the Roof

AUGUST 28-SEPTEMBER 5, 2026

ANDERSON CENTER THEATER

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