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THEATER REVIEW

A Wonder-full 'Life'

By blending Capra's classic with Stevie's sound, Troubadour's parody is signed, sealed, delivered with style.

By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY
Special to The Times

The Pied Piper of goofballs, Matt Walker leads a wacky, willing cast through another anarchic parody in "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life," now in a limited engagement at the Falcon Theatre.

As head of the Troubadour Theater Company, Walker has been the driving force behind a series of inspired lampoons set to contemporary rock music. Mostly, the "Troubies," as they are familiarly known, are re-nowned for Shakespearean sendups such as "A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream" and "Twelfth Dog Night." Last season, they expanded their repertoire with "A Christmas Carole King," Dickens' classic melded with Carole King's music.

This year, they've taken on their most contemporary source material to date — Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life" — then grafted in the music of Stevie Wonder for a typically hilarious hybrid.

A rousing four-piece orchestra warms up the audience beforehand and provides live accompaniment throughout. Many in the cast are Troubadour regulars, most recently seen in the riotous "Fleetwood Macbeth," which will play the Falcon early next year.

Morgan Rusler, Macbeth in that production, gives a spot-on Lionel Barrymore impersonation as Mr. Potter, the Scrooge-like villain of the piece.

The lanky Walker plays George Bailey, the beleaguered hero of the film, with a Jimmy Stewart drawl and an unlikely sky-high Afro.

Erin Matthews is appropriately perky as Mary, George's small-town sweetheart, while Lisa Valenzuela gives a melodious turn as George's mother, augmented here to give Valenzuela a chance to show off her singing voice.

In an invigorating twist, Michelle Anne Johnson is cast as Clarence, the angel who is trying to save George and earn his (make that her) wings.

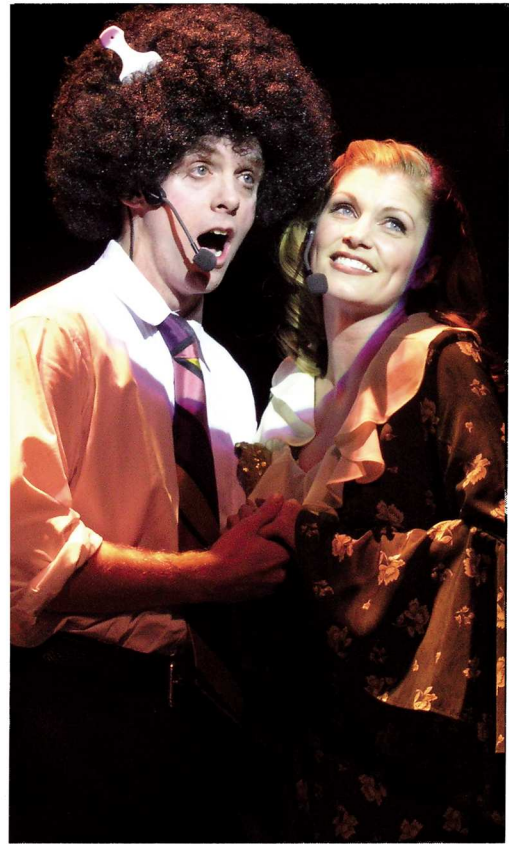
Of course, in a parody this broad, reality gets skimmed over in the pell-mell pursuit of laughs. However, in Walker's staging, the lunatic interactions remain bracingly truthful, especially Walker's sweetly romantic chemistry with Matthews.

Many in the cast are not professional dancers, but they are sufficiently athletic to compensate for their limited skills, which choreographer Faith Ernest-Rapoport has parlayed into some impressively polished dance sequences.

The quality of the singing may be sketchy, but music director Andre P. Holmes, who also plays bass in the band, keeps the musical numbers tightly rhythmic.

Lighting designer Jeremy Pivnick keeps the chaotic action in sharp focus with the liberal use of follow spots.

Past Troubadour shows have been refreshingly low-budget



Photographs by I.C. RAPOPORT
MY HAIRY AMOUR: Matt Walker and Erin Matthews as George Bailey and his girlfriend, Mary, have a sweet chemistry.



PARODY HILARITY: Tina Groff, left, Guilford Adams, Morgan Rusler and Jennifer Seifert in "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life."

and low-tech, but surprisingly sophisticated multimedia elements are incorporated in this outing. In the play's latter scenes, a comical chase through the upper corridors of the theater is transmitted on a live video feed.

As is typical with Troubadour productions, high jinks and low puns predominate, along with mime, clowning, stilt-walking and, of course, lots of rock 'n' roll. The few scraps of naughty humor notwithstanding, this wonderful "Life" will provide welcome seasonal escapism for the entire family.

'It's a Stevie Wonderful Life'

Where: Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank

When: Tuesdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 4 p.m. (No performances Dec. 24 or 25.)

Ends: Dec. 28

Price: \$25-\$37.50

Contact: (818) 955-8101

Running time: 2 hours