

Society : Shinfield Players  
Production : It's a Wonderful Life  
Date : 20<sup>th</sup> November 2025  
Venue : SPT  
District : 14

© NODA CIO. All rights reserved

[Show Report](#)

### Show Report

Before even stepping into the auditorium, it was wonderful to see the transformation of the front of house and bar area, which has clearly undergone a significant and well-considered renovation. Credit must go to Cate Naylor, Pete Ashton and the team for revitalising the venue and creating such a welcoming, modern space. It's great to see this building receiving the care and energy it deserves, and the Shinfield Players should be commended for their continued commitment to keeping it thriving.

*It's a Wonderful Life* was directed by Derek Lockwood and produced by Maggie Smith, who together opted for a stripped-back approach to staging, supported primarily by back projection for scene-setting. While this minimalist style can often create pace and flexibility, on this occasion it sometimes worked against the emotional needs of the piece — leaving certain moments, particularly those requiring intimacy or dramatic weight, feeling a little sparse. The concept itself was imaginative, but could have benefited from a stronger layer of visual or physical grounding to help anchor the actors' storytelling more fully.

That said, Derek and Maggie's overall vision demonstrated care, understanding of the text, and a clear desire to deliver a faithful version of this much-loved Christmas classic. With a small company tackling many multi-role tracks, they faced notable casting and logistical challenges, and although the first half would have benefited from tighter pacing, the story gathered warmth, charm and emotional depth as it moved towards its conclusion. The bridge sequence in particular was atmospheric, well-staged and genuinely resonant.

Despite some creative limitations, this was a heartfelt production performed with sincerity, affection and evident hard work from everyone involved. The dedication of the team shone through, and their commitment to keeping this story alive on stage was both clear and commendable.

### Principal Characters

#### **Oliver Alexander – George Bailey**

A standout performance and the emotional core of the evening. Oliver's diction, accent control and physicality were consistently excellent. He captured George's moral strength and emotional vulnerability beautifully, and his journey from youthful optimism to despair was believable and deeply felt. His chemistry with his fellow actors, particularly Lucy Douglas, was strong and natural. A truly outstanding performance.

#### **Shely Ganguly – Gloria / Dilly Bailey (and others)**

Shely faced the difficult task of playing multiple characters, each requiring distinct accent and personality changes — a demanding challenge which she met with energy and clarity. Her excitable portrayal of Dilly Bailey was warm and engaging, and she moved between roles with commendable precision. A solid and versatile performance.

#### **Lucy Douglas – Clarissa Oddbody (and others)**

Lucy was a delight. Her portrayal of the angel was sweet-natured, funny and full of charm. Her soft tone, kindness and "niceness" of spirit captured Clarissa's heavenly patience beautifully. Her final scenes with Oliver were especially moving and genuinely heartfelt. A touching and well-realised performance that was one of the highlights of the evening.

**Gareth Doust – Joseph / Mr Gower / Mr Potter / Harry Bailey / Mr Randall**

Gareth had one of the most complex tasks in the production, portraying several very different characters. At times the accent work shifted slightly, which made some transitions harder to follow, but the characterisation of Mr Potter was exceptional. He embodied the villainous banker with gravitas, menace and a commanding stage presence. His Joseph the Angel was also well-shaped and brought gentle humour. I'd recommend tightening vocal consistency between roles, but Gareth's ability to hold the stage never faltered.

**Sara Shuttleworth – Sam Wainwright / Ernie / Ruth Bailey / Mr Martini / Mrs Davies**

Sara deserves credit for tackling multiple, varied roles — including both male and female characters — with clear enthusiasm and commitment. Her portrayal of Sam Wainwright was particularly enjoyable, warm and engaging. Her vocal work was commendable, and she navigated the many quick transitions with confidence.

**Elisabeth Richardson – Mary Hatch**

Elisabeth brought warmth and sincerity to Mary Hatch, a role traditionally youthful and idealistic. The wardrobe team helped bridge this age gap with well-chosen costumes and wig styling, and Elisabeth handled the character with grace and emotional intelligence. Her onstage partnership with Oliver was believable, though at times her accent slowed the pace of exchanges. A touch less emphasis on accent and more on rhythm would help sustain pace in future performances.

**Dan Walford – Bert / Charlie**

Stepping into multiple roles at short notice, Dan's achievement deserves special recognition. To learn and deliver lines within two weeks is no small feat, and he did so with warmth, humour and great stage presence. His friendly portrayal of Bert was full of charm and sincerity — a lovely addition to the cast.

**Junior Cast**

The young cast were a joy to watch. As they grow it would be good to develop projection, and a slower pace.

**Coral Chaubey** as Young Harry Bailey was utterly adorable and engaging.

**Jessica Shuttleworth** as Young Sam Wainwright was full of enthusiasm and confidence.

**George Turney** as Young George Bailey delivered a powerful, emotionally truthful performance — his scenes with Gareth Doust's Mr Gower were tense, heartfelt and compelling.

**Darcey Nash-Worthan and Hazel Dalchow** as Young Violet Beck and Young Mary Hatch both displayed good accents, confident stage presence and strong awareness for their age.

It's clear that a great deal of rehearsal and nurturing went into supporting these young performers — well done to all involved.

**Creative Team****Direction & Production – Derek Lockwood and Maggie Smith**

Derek Lockwood and producer Maggie Smith approached *It's a Wonderful Life* with a stripped-back, concept-driven vision, relying heavily on projection and minimal set to tell the story. This offered a fresh, modern perspective and kept the focus firmly on the actors, though at times it did leave the stage feeling a little sparse and emotionally distant. Introducing more visual layering, or even small pieces of physical set dressing, would help anchor scenes and provide the actors with stronger interaction points, enhancing depth and atmosphere.

The use of accents across the production was ambitious. In certain roles it added texture and period flavour, but in others it challenged pace and consistency, which occasionally affected clarity. A more selective or simplified accent approach in future could support overall rhythm and help performers maintain focus.

Pacing in the first half was sometimes slow — a common challenge with this script — but could have been tightened with sharper cueing and reduced transition pauses, particularly where larger pieces of set were moved. However, Derek and Maggie created several moments of real atmosphere, including a particularly well-handled bridge scene, which carried emotional weight and dramatic clarity.

The final scene, where multiple actors donned hats to deliver lines from various townspeople, was clear in intention but felt unintentionally comic in execution, which softened the emotional punch of George Bailey's revelations. Future productions might consider using pre-recorded voices, spotlighting, or isolated lighting states to give those characters' contributions weight without compromising poignancy.

Given the casting challenges of the piece — especially the extensive multi-role tracks — it may also be worth considering careful script trims or minor edits in future, ensuring character transitions feel smooth and supporting the strengths and ages of your performers.

Overall, Derek and Maggie delivered a thoughtful and sincere production, full of heart and respect for this beloved Christmas classic. Their commitment to the piece, and to guiding their company through a technically tricky show, was evident throughout.

#### **Set Design & Build – Tim Howling, Sam Turner, Di Capel & Natalie Clark**

The Set design was extremely simple, the bridge scene considered and well executed along with the office scene. However, the chemist store set felt cumbersome and slowed pacing, and might have benefited from more compact design or simplified staging. Future productions could explore modular units or lighting-based transitions to quicken scene flow.

#### **Lighting/Sound/Projection design – Pete Ashton & Derek Lockwood**

Competently designed and effectively operated by **Graeme Rhodes**. The bridge sequence was particularly atmospheric. To deepen emotional impact, consider using stronger contrasts between the real-world and celestial scenes — perhaps warmer tones for Bedford Falls and cooler isolation for George's moments of despair.

Projections were central to the production's design and generally worked well. However, there was over-reliance on this tool, which sometimes replaced rather than supported the physical storytelling. A reduction in projection use, balanced with lighting and prop transitions, could give future productions greater depth.

#### **Wardrobe – Debbie Wheeler & Cate Naylor**

Period-appropriate, neat and consistent. Wardrobe supported the transitions between multiple characters very effectively, with careful styling and accessories used to suggest different identities. The wigs and dress choices for Mary Hatch worked well and supported the narrative setting.

#### **Props – Graham Smith & Debbie Wheeler**

Props were suitable and appropriate to the era, though not heavily featured. I particularly enjoyed the attention to detail in the office scenes — small touches that enhanced realism.

#### **Stage Management – Sarah Pearce (Stage Manager) and Crew: Matthew Chishick, Yvonne Mitchell and members of Shinfield Players**

An efficient crew working under challenging circumstances. Scene changes, particularly for the chemist store, could be refined for speed and rhythm, but the team handled transitions with care. Simplifying the movement of large set pieces could improve the pacing considerably.

#### **Front of House**

It would be remiss not to mention the wonderful welcome offered by Pete Ashton and the front-of-house team. The renovations and the professionalism of the volunteers created a fantastic first impression and a warm community atmosphere.

#### **Programme**

The programme was smartly designed and genuinely useful — clear credits, tidy bios and an attractive layout that felt both professional and welcoming. Overall, a well-produced keepsake that supports the production beautifully and, in my view, eligible for NODA Programme Award entry.

### Final Thoughts

It's a Wonderful Life is an ambitious and technically complex production, and Shinfield Players approached it with heart, determination and clear affection for the piece. While some pacing and staging choices limited the emotional scope at times, the commitment of the cast — particularly Oliver Alexander, Lucy Douglas— made for an engaging and heartfelt evening.

With greater variation in visual design, tighter transitions and more deliberate pacing, this production could easily reach the emotional richness that the story deserves.

Congratulations to Derek and the entire team for presenting a thoughtful and sincere interpretation of this festive classic, and to everyone involved in breathing such life into the theatre itself.

Bravo to all at Shinfield Players.

Charlotte Gouldsmith-Leigh NODA Representative - London Region - District 14