ARTISTIC DIRECTOR NOTE

Welcome to American Blues Theater’s 32nd Season “The Beat Goes On”. For over three decades, our Ensemble has told stories of the American identity. We are thrilled to present the Chicago premiere of This Wonderful Life starring Founding Ensemble member James Leaming.

Since 2002, our company has produced It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago! We’ve played four different theaters (a refurbished warehouse on Byron Ave, Biograph Theater, Greenhouse Theater, and currently Stage 773. Over 50,000 patrons have experienced our holiday favorite. From 2002-2007, James Leaming played the iconic role of “George Bailey” with charm, sincerity, and compassion.

In 2008, James Leaming left our production to star in the solo production, This Wonderful Life. From 2008-2017, James toured the United States with this warmhearted adaptation, playing Asolo Repertory Theatre (FL), Syracuse Stage (NY), Cleveland Playhouse (OH), Laguna Playhouse (CA), North Coast Repertory Theater (CA), and numerous locations in Colorado. His performance earned him many fans and accolades along the way - “Best Actor, Sarasota Magazine”, “Best Play, Sarasota Magazine”, and “Outstanding Solo Performance, Craig Noel Award” by the San Diego Theatre Critics Circle.

It’s been 10 years since Chicago experienced our original “George Bailey”. We’re excited to share this limited engagement with you.

Our annual production of “It’s a Wonderful Life“ as a 1940s radio play runs Nov. 16 – Jan. 6 at Stage 773. More information can be found in this program.

-Gwendolyn Whiteside
AGEcek at $27

American Blues Theater Begins at $27

American Blues Theater

Never Expires!

(773) 654-3103

AmericanBluesTheater.com
Presents
the Chicago Premiere of

 THIS WONDERFUL LIFE

a one-man stage adaptation of “It’s a Wonderful Life”

Written by **Steve Murray**
Directed by **Carmen Roman***
Starring **James Leaming***^*

Scenic Design ................................................................. **James Leaming***
Lighting Design ............................................................ **Jared Gooding***
Costume Design ............................................................ **Carmen Roman***
Sound Design ............................................................... **Kevin Kennedy**
Associate Sound Design ................................................ **Eric Backus**
Properties Design ........................................................... **Mary O’Dowd**
Projection Design ........................................................... **Joe Huppert**
Stage Management ........................................................ **Shannon Golden***

* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater

^ Member of Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers

**NOVEMBER 5 – NOVEMBER 26, 2017** (previews Nov 2-4)

A one-man stage adaptation of Frank Capra’s film “It’s a Wonderful Life”
Written by Steve Murray | Conceived by Mark Setlock
“This Wonderful Life” was originally commissioned and produced by Portland Center Stage, Portland, Oregon.

Peter Amster originally directed James Leaming’s award-winning performance at Asolo Repertory Theatre.

American Blues Theater
4809 N. Ravenswood Ave., Suite 221, Chicago, IL 60640
Phone: (773) 654-3103 AmericanBluesTheater.com

American Blues Theater is a constituent of the Theatre Communications Group, Inc – the national organization for nonprofit professional theaters, the League of Chicago Theaters, Arts Alliance Illinois, and Lakeview Chamber of Commerce.

American Blues Theater operates under agreements between Producers’ Association of Chicago Area Theatres, Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers, Stage Directors & Choreographers Society, and United Scenic Artists of America, Local 829 – AFL-CIO.
CAST

Solo performer ................................................................................................................. JAMES LEAMING*^  

* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater  
^ Member of Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers

As a courtesy to the actor and your fellow patrons, please turn off your phone before the performance. The taking of photographs and the use of any type of recording device are not allowed in the theater during the performance and is a violation of state and federal copyright laws. Digital media will be deleted and tape or film will be confiscated.

SETTING

Place – Bedford Falls, a snowy small town in the northeast.  
Time – Near the end of World War II, Christmas Eve.

The performance runs 80 minutes without an intermission.

PRODUCTION STAFF

Production Manager ........................................................................................................... Samantha R. Dzirko  
Projections Engineer .......................................................................................................... Chris Owens  
House Manager ................................................................................................................... Lindsay Rowley  
Assistant Stage Manager ................................................................................................. Cristina Vazquez  
Production Assistant ......................................................................................................... Kyle Whalens  
Production Assistant ........................................................................................................ Bronte DeShong  
Master Electrician ............................................................................................................. Rachel Lake

COMMUNITY SERVICE FOR THIS WONDERFUL LIFE

American Blues Theater believes it is an honor and duty to serve our community. We raise awareness of other non-profit organizations’ great causes through creative collaborations. We proudly support Chicago Public Schools. We continue our “Pink Previews” to donate proceeds to The Lynn Sage Foundation for breast cancer research. To enrich your experience, visit AmericanBluesTheater.com.

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It’s a Wonderful Life
Live in Chicago!

Joseph Jefferson Award nominated Production and Ensemble
Chicago’s holiday favorite returns

NOVEMBER 16 - JANUARY 6

Box office (773) 327 - 5252
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Performs at STAGE 773
SPECIAL THANKS

Peter Amster, the biggest Hoosier fans, Cathy Taylor Public Relations, Paula Conrad, The Saints, X-Man, and Edge Theater.

Video production services provided by The Stage Channel. Our ushers are provided by the Saints—Volunteers for the Performing Arts. For more information visit Saintschicago.org or call 773-529-5510.

BIOGRAPHIES

JAMES LEAMING (Solo Performer) is a proud Founding Ensemble member (1985) of American Blues Theater. On-going projects include Defamation and Botanic Garden - both written by Todd Logan and produced by Canamac Productions. This Wonderful Life was previously hosted by North Coast Rep, CA; Laguna Playhouse, CA; Cleveland Play House, OH; Syracuse Stage, NY; originated at Asolo Repertory Theatre, Sarasota, FL (directed by Peter Amster); and tonight… re-discovered/re-imagined with Jim’s heart, counsel, director, and wife Carmen Roman for American Blues Theater. “It’s nice to be home again!” Regional theater credits include Kitchen Theater, NY; Geva Theatre, NY; North Coast Repertory Theatre, CA; Alliance Theatre, GA; Peninsula Players, WI; Asolo Repertory, FL. Chicago credits include First Folio, Steppenwolf, Northlight, Next, Victory Gardens, Goodman, Drury Lane, Fox Theatricals, Body Politic. Training: American Conservatory Theatre (San Francisco), Second City (Chicago). Awards: After Dark Award, Chicago-Best Actor; Sarasota Magazine Awards-Best Actor and Best Show; Joseph Jefferson Award for the set design of Tobacco Road (American Blues Theater). Film/TV: Chicago Fire, Mind Games, Prison Break, Early Edition, Running Scared, and Code of Silence.

STEVE MURRAY (Playwright) is an award-winning arts journalist and playwright, and his plays, including Hungry to Bed, Rescue & Recovery, Mileage, and This Passion Thing, have been produced internationally. This Wonderful Life, his take on the Frank Capra film, has been one of the most frequently produced scripts in the country since its premiere at Portland Center Stage in 2005. He received a 2010 Tanne Foundation Arts Award. Murray is critic-in-residence for Art Matters, an arts journalism project organized by the Macon Arts Alliance and Mercer University’s Center for Collaborative Journalism.

CARMEN ROMAN (Director) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. She is thrilled to work on this beautiful show with James Leaming who was born to play this role. It is a lovely full circle to bring it home to American Blues Theater since he played the first George Bailey in our radio version of It’s a Wonderful Life 16 years ago. Though primarily an actress, Carmen has directed locally at Victory Gardens (Real Women Have Curves), Court Theatre (Miss Julie), Madison Rep (Lost in Yonkers), and at American Blues Theater (Monsters II with fellow company member Kate Buddeke).
She was Artistic Director of American Blues Theater from 1993 until 1997, during which time she oversaw the acquisition and renovation of the former home of American Blues Theater at 1909 W Byron (James Leaming was the designer and with a stalwart group from the Chicago theater community, the space was renovated in 37 days).

**JARED GOODING** *(Lighting Design)* is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. He is happy to be returning to design with American Blues. A native of Houston Texas, his design credits include the Associate Design of *Lookingglass Alice* (Lookingglass); serving as the Lighting Assistant for *The Wiz Live* on NBC; and designs for Strawdog Theater, Madison Children’s Theater, The Hypocrites, Timeline Theater, Sideshow Theatre, About Face Theatre, MPAACT, Pegasus Theatre, Next Theatre, Congo Square, Citadel Theatre, and Fleetwood Jourdain Theatre. His work is featured at goodingdesigns.com. He is also a company member with MPACCT and he holds a BFA in Lighting Design from The Theater School at DePaul. He spends his off time managing a DJ company for area bars.

**KEVIN KENNEDY** *(Sound Design)* Credits include Noah Racey’s *Pulse*, 1776, *Deathtrap*, and *Bonnie & Clyde* (pre-Broadway) at Asolo Repertory Theatre; *This Wonderful Life* at Asolo Rep, Cleveland Play House, Syracuse Stage, Laguna Playhouse, and North Coast Rep; *The Colored Museum* at Huntington Theater Company; Nilo Cruz’s *Hurricane* for the RIAH and Arca Images/MDCA; *Tales of the City*, 1776, and *A Little Night Music* at the American Conservatory Theater; *The Rocky Horror Show* at the Old Globe; *Mamma Mia!*; *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and *Flashdance* tours; and Production Engineer/Assistant Designer for *Sister Act*, *Bonnie & Clyde*, and *Kinky Boots* (2013 Sound Design Tony Award) on Broadway; Kennedy has also toured as the sound engineer with the Alan Parsons Live Project.

**ERIC BACKUS** *(Associate Sound Design)* is excited to work with American Blues Theater again! His original music and sound design was heard recently in *Beauty’s Daughter*, and he previously worked on Blues’ award winning productions of *Hank Williams: Lost Highway* and *Grounded*. Recent credits include *Becky Shaw* and *Apartment 3A* (Windy City Playhouse), *American Hero* (First Floor Theater), *Born Ready* (Factory Theater), *A Wrinkle in Time* (Lifeline Theatre, Non-Equity Jeff nomination), *The Wolf at the End of the Block* (Teatro Vista), *The Assembled Parties* and *Red Velvet* (Raven Theatre). Eric also designed the Off-Broadway and touring productions of SoloChicago Theatre’s *Churchill*, and the Chicago and LA productions of * Thrones! A Musical Parody*. To hear his music, please visit www.ericbackus.com.

**MARY O’DOWD** *(Properties Design)* is honored to return to American Blues Theater, having designed props for *Beauty’s Daughter*, starring Wandachristine. She has created props/set dressing for dozens of shows and received several Jeff nominations. Favorite project ever: *Bakersfield Mist* (TimeLine). Current projects include *Choir Boy* (Raven) and *Evening at the Talk House* (A Red Orchid).

**JOE HUPPERT** *(Projection Design)* is very happy for his first production with American Blues Theater. He has previously with Carmen Roman on *This Wonderful Life* at North Coast Rep. Other video designs include *The Dybbuk* and *The Oldest Boy* (Craig Noel Award) for San Diego Repertory Theater; *The Elephant Man* for Backyard Renaissance; and *Glengarry Glen Ross* for La Jolla
Playhouse. As sound designer, some shows include *Blueprints to Freedom* and *Peter and the Starcatcher* (La Jolla Playhouse); *Scott Joplin* and *Extraordinary Chambers* (Craig Noel Nomination); *Yellow Face* (Mo’olelo); *Urinetown, Over the Tavern,* and *King O’The Moon* (Mercury Theater); and *Mr. Burns* (UCSD). Joe also enjoyed several seasons with Peninsula Players in Fish Creek, Wisconsin, and at Theater at the Center in Munster, Indiana.

**CHRIS OWENS** (*Projections Engineer*) hails from the great state of Nebraska. He studied Theatre, Journalism, and Media at Doane College, which has led to many adventures including an internship at Actors Theater of Louisville, assistant directing a production at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, and touring internationally with Pilobolus Dance Theater as their video technician. Chris now lives in Chicago where he is a freelance director, video designer, and technical director of The Edge Theater.

**SHANNON GOLDEN** (*Production Stage Manager*) is very excited to be working with American Blues and the great *This Wonderful Life* team! Previous credits include: Production Assistant for *Hard Times* (Lookingglass Theatre), *The King of the Yees,* *Uncle Vanya,* *Soups Stews and Casseroles: 1976,* *Carllye,* and *Feathers and Teeth* (Goodman Theatre). Stage management credits include: *Betrayal* (Raven Theatre), *Chalk* (Sideshow Theatre Company), *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (The Other Theatre Company), and *Desperate Dolls* (Strawdog Theatre Company). Production management credits include: *The Mutilated,* *The Room,* *The Nether,* and 3C (A Red Orchid Theatre). Love and thanks to Amanda and Mack.

**SAMANTHA R. DZIRKO** (*Production Manager*) is a Chicago-based Production Manager who is excited to be working with American Blues Theater. Other Production Management credits include working with: The Hypocrites (Chicago, IL), Williamstown Theatre Festival (Massachusetts), and Actors Theatre of Louisville (Kentucky). Samantha graduated with a B.A. in Theatre from the University of Scranton (Pennsylvania).

**RACHEL LAKE** (*Master Electrician*) is excited to be returning to American Blues Theater! A Lighting Designer and Master Electrician, she is a company member of Eclectic Full Contact Theater and a graduate of West Virginia University. Other Mater Electrician credits include: *Beauty’s Daughter, It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*, and *Dutchman/TRANSit* (American Blues Theater); *Heavens are Hung in Black* and *True West* (Shattered Globe); and *Cabaret* (Theater at the Center – Asst. ME). Recent design works include: *Gideon’s Knot* (Eclectic Full Contact Theater), *Lady X: The Musical* (Hell in a Handbag), and *Deep in the Heart of Tuna* (New American Folk Theater).

**GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE** (*Artistic Director*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater and has served as Artistic Director since 2010. Under her leadership, American Blues has nearly doubled the size of its Ensemble, added 29 Artistic Affiliates, and diversified its base of artists. She created the nationally-recognized annual *Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint Development* for new work, implemented community service into the company’s mission, and created the free arts education program *The Lincoln Project* for Chicago Public Schools which serves 3,000 students annually. She led American Blues through its 2009 rebirth and built the operational budget from zero to $1 million+ in seven years. Whiteside served numerous panels for the National Endowment for the Arts and sat on the national Board of Directors for Network of Ensemble Theaters. Currently she sits on the Board of Directors for The League.
of Chicago Theaters. She’s a graduate of Northwestern University (cum laude), The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA), and a Kellogg Executive Scholar in Nonprofit management (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University). She was nominated for “Chicagoan of the Year” in Chicago Magazine and named in Newcity’s annual Players list numerous times. In seven years, eight American Blues’ productions won or were nominated for production by the Joseph Jefferson Award committee. She’s received 13 Joseph Jefferson Awards, Citations, and nominations as an actress and Artistic Director. Her favorite performances include Jeff Award for Solo Performance (Grounded), Jeff Award nomination for Solo Performance (the K of D), Mary’s Wedding (Top 5 performances in Indianapolis), Collected Stories (Best Actress Broadway World Chicago Award), and 7 years as “Mary Bailey” (It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!). She’s the recipient of two (2) After Dark Awards and numerous Broadway World Chicago Awards and nominations. She directs the Joseph Jefferson Award nominated annual holiday production, It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!

ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

Winner of American Theater Wing’s prestigious National Theatre Company Award, American Blues Theater is a premier arts organization with an intimate environment that patrons, artists, and all Chicagoans call home. American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves. American Blues Theater follows three guiding values both on and off its stages – to be accessible, responsible, and true.

Our diverse and multi-generational artists have established the second oldest professional Equity Ensemble theater in Chicago. Our 36-member Ensemble has nearly 600 combined years of collaboration on stage. As of today, our theater and artists received 197 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 35 Black Theater Alliance Awards. Our artists are honored with Pulitzer Prize nominations, Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards, and numerous other accolades.

American Blues Theater is committed to developing the classic plays and musicals of tomorrow. Our new work development consists of a variety of programs – including world and regional premieres, the Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint commissions, and Ripped: the Living Newspaper Festival of new short-plays. More than half of our mainstage productions are world and Chicago premieres.

DEFINITION OF “ENSEMBLE”

An Ensemble theater is a group of individuals dedicated to collaborative creation and committed to consistently working together over years to develop a distinctive body of work and practices. Ensemble members, both artists and administrators, are empowered to help shape their theater’s artistic direction and organizational structure.
HISTORY

BUILT BY THE AMERICAN BLUES FAMILY
American Blues Theater was founded in July 1985 by a director, playwright, designer, and actor. The company dedicated itself to new and classic American plays. Richard Christiansen of the Chicago Tribune cited American Blues in his editorial “Chicago Theater Forges New Standards of Glory.” In August of 1993, the company leased a warehouse on Byron and Lincoln. In 38 days, James Leaming led a community-based 90+ volunteer crew to transform the space into an intimate 134-seat theater. From 1994-1997, the Ensemble was lauded with numerous Joseph Jefferson Awards and After Dark Awards.

LEADERSHIP FROM OUTSIDE THE ENSEMBLE
From 1997-2009, the company was led by Artistic Directors from outside of the Ensemble. Under the leadership of Brian Russell and Damon Kiely (’97-’07), the theater’s name changed to American Theater Company (ATC), the mission statement was revised, and the business expanded greatly. In 2008, under new management, the Ensemble theater practice was dismantled. After 18 months of talks with the new management, all four Founders and every Ensemble member prior to 2008 chose to leave the ATC organization in March 2009 citing “major administrative and artistic differences”.

BLUE SKIES AHEAD
The Ensemble reformed under its original name American Blues Theater. Founding Board members reconstituted the Board, giving tremendous support and guidance. Ensemble member Gwendolyn Whiteside became the Artistic Director. Whiteside ushered in the annual Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint Development, implemented community service into the company’s mission, and adapted the arts education program The Lincoln Project for Chicago Public Schools that serves over 3,000 students annually.

“One of our favorites in Chicago!” – Dean Richards, WGN
“Ensemble founded one of Chicago’s most venerable off-loop theaters.” – Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune

ENSEMBLE - FOUNDED IN 1985

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Matthew Brumlow
Manny Buckley
Kate Buddeke
Sarah Burnham
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Casey Campbell
Darren Canady
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If you are interested in joining the Board of Directors at American Blues Theater, please call (773) 654-3103.

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Samantha R. Dzirko, Production Manager
Rachel Borgo, Administrative Apprentice

GENERAL INFORMATION

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Learn more at
We are honored to recognize the following contributors who enable American Blues Theater’s artistic programming and community service. This list includes donations from our True Blue Annual Fund, GutterBall, Blue Bash, production sponsors, and other contributions given from July 1, 2016 to June 30, 2017.

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American Blues Theater is grateful for every contribution. We regret that due to space limitations we are unable to list donations under $99. Please accept our deepest appreciation as your donation makes a difference!

We make every effort to keep this list as accurate and complete as possible. Please contact us at info@AmericanBluesTheater.com to correct any unintentional errors or omissions.

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