

Grimes still inspires others with famous “Teacher says, every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings”

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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SEE VIDEO BELOW from visit at Wildey Theatre with Karolyn Grimes, ZuZu Bailey in "It's A Wonderful Life."

“Look daddy, teacher says, every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings,” ZuZu Bailey’s famous quote from “It’s A Wonderful Life.”

“That’s right. That’s right. That a boy Clarence...,” says George Bailey.



Karolyn Grimes played many movie roles in her early years, but her part today is to be the **unofficial ambassador** for **“It’s A Wonderful Life,”** a 1946 film with a genuine taste of Americana.

Grimes kicked off the Christmas season in the region Thursday with two appearances at Wildey Theatre’s showing of “It’s A Wonderful Life.”

“It is my privilege to share my stories about making the movie with an audience that loved the movie,” Grimes said. “It is a great movie that has touched a lot of people’s lives. I love sharing the stage with these people. I had fun at the Wildey Theatre and I had fun in Edwardsville.”

Grimes said it is a privilege to be associated with a movie that touches people all over the world.

“Director Frank Capra has many subtle messages in the film,” she said. “One message is that each one of us matters and we all make a difference. There are a lot of men and women whose dreams never come true, just like George. When you watch the movie, you realize how lucky you really are, with your family and friends.”

Grimes was an orphan at 15, losing both her mother and father within a year. Her mother died of early onset Alzheimer’s complications and her father was killed in a car accident.

She then lived with relatives, who weren’t big on movies and television and didn’t see the movie herself until she was 40 years old, ironically on Christmas Day.

After she viewed the movie, she said all of a sudden this whole new world opened up to her and the stories were so poignant and meaningful. She has traveled the country and all over the world sharing stories about the movie and in return people tell her what the movie has meant to them.

“I feel privileged to be the little girl who played ZuZu and to be a part of people’s Christmas every year,” Grimes said. “It was just a job back then when I did this movie. I can memorize anything and back then I did everything I was told to do. Frank Capra was a wonderful director.”

Grimes was 6 years old at the time of filming “It’s A Wonderful Life.”

She said she loved working with director Capra.

“He got down on his knees and would talk to us at eye level,” she said. “That is how he got us to do what he wanted.”

The “It’s A Wonderful Life” cast member said there is a lot of talk about her being “a star,” but she said she doesn’t figure it like that.

“I am a piece of movie history, that is all,” she said.

Grimes worked with some of the best actors ever in **Jimmy Stewart** and John Wayne. She said Stewart was “very kind and gentle and he was patient.”

“Jimmy helped his fellow man in so many ways,” she said. “He talked to a lot of fans over the years that he actually helped. He served in the military. He did so many things in his life. He did kind gestures all the time for people. One woman in particular comes to mind was with a fan for many years and she had met him once in New York. She was from a blue-collar town and she had a wonderful scrapbook of his life and personal pictures and was his No. 1 fan.

“The woman’s husband had Parkinson’s and was on the downhill slide and trying to get him in a V.A. Hospital. They were going to lose their house and she wrote to Jimmy and told him what was happening. Within a week, he was in a V.A. Hospital and we all knew who got the man there. Jimmy did kind things all the time.”

Next year will mark the 70th anniversary of the historic movie and there will be a big celebration in Seneca Falls, N.Y., which Grimes considers “home.” “It’s A Wonderful Life” was first released in 1946. Capra visited Seneca Falls, N.Y., in 1945, and it brought him inspiration for Bedford Falls, portrayed in his famous Christmas movie.

“We have a fabulous festival in Seneca Falls each year that I go to each year and I kind of started the festival the second weekend in December.”



“I got chills the first time I went back to Seneca Falls and now I just get a warmth in my heart. It is a kind of coming-home.”

On Thursday, Grimes appeared right at home at the Wildey Theatre, and the crowd loved and appreciated her as much as she did them.

"For me, doing this is like living out Christmas twelve months a year," she said.

SEE MORE ON RIVERBENDER.COM on Christmas Day with the interview about Grimes, the holiday and meaning.