



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

It's a Wonderful Life

It's a Wonderful Life

Directed by: Frank Capra

©/Presented by: Liberty Films

Produced by: Frank Capra

Assistant Director: Arthur S. Black

Screen Play by: Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, Frank Capra

Additional Scenes by: Jo Swerling

Based on the story 'The Greatest Gift' by:

Philip Van Doren Stern

Directors of Photography: Joseph Walker,

Joseph Biroc

Special Photographic Effects: Russell A. Cully

Film Editor: William Hornbeck

Art Director: Jack Okey

Set Decorations: Emile Kuri

Costumes by: Edward Stevenson

Make-up Supervision: Gordon Bau

Musical Score Written and Directed by:

Dimitri Tiomkin

Sound by: Richard Van Hessen, Clem Portman

uncredited

Contributor to Screenplay: Michael Wilson

Director of Photography: Victor Milner

Cast:

James Stewart (*George Bailey*)

Donna Reed (*Mary Hatch*)

Lionel Barrymore (*Henry F. Potter*)

Thomas Mitchell (*Uncle Billy*)

Henry Travers (*Clarence*)

Beulah Bondi (*Mrs Bailey*)

Frank Faylen (*Ernie Bishop*)

Ward Bond (*Bert*)

Gloria Grahame (*Violet Bick*)

H.B. Warner (*Mr Gower*)

Frank Albertson (*Sam Wainwright*)

Todd Karns (*Harry Bailey*)

Samuel S. Hinds (*Pa Peter Bailey*)

Mary Treen (*Cousin Tilly*)

USA 1946

130 mins

Digital 4K

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SIGHT AND SOUND

Frank Capra cleared his throat, and began. The war was over and he was anxious to make another movie. In early October 1945, he approached Lew Wasserman, James Stewart's agent at MCA, telling him that he wanted to sketch out for Jimmy the idea for a film he had just bought. Capra recalled that 'Wasserman said Stewart would gladly play the part without hearing the story. But I insisted. If Jimmy was as scared as I was about making another film I'd like to know it.' Out of practice, demobbed, uncertain, Capra fretted over whether he could still make a great fiction film. He invited Stewart and Wasserman to his business colleague Samuel Briskin's apartment. There he blundered through what now seemed the sappy tale of a desperate small-town man, redeemed by an angel granting his wish that he had never been born. Capra lost faith in the plot even as he laid it out, and it abruptly struck him as 'the lousiest piece of shit I've ever heard'. According to Capra, the pitch bombed: Wasserman was 'dying', and 'Jimmy doesn't want to hear [the] story'. And yet, Stewart did want to hear the story. Rather than letting the project give up the ghost, the actor phoned the next morning and persuaded Capra to make the film.

Or so the tale goes. As with much else about *It's a Wonderful Life*, it's hard to disentangle fact from legend. A contemporary interview provides another origin myth, with Capra pitching the film to Stewart, and Stewart being the one who was baffled, declaring, 'I can't make head or tail of the damn thing'. The gossip columnist Hedda Hopper had Stewart nevertheless telling Capra that same night, 'It's for me', even as he feared that he could no longer act.

In retrospect, Capra's hesitancy seems absurd, hanging back on the cusp of making one of the greatest American films. He would encapsulate in this one piece those obsessions that characterised the quintessential Capra movie: the run on the bank (*American Madness*), the self-help cooperative scheme (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*), friends rallying round with financial help in a crisis (*You Can't Take It with You*), contemplated suicide and a Christmas Eve dénouement (*Meet John Doe*). *It's a Wonderful Life* offers the culmination of the Capraesque; he had become his own richest source.

And yet, that loss of faith in the story proves a significant collapse. For Capra was going to challenge himself and his audience in ways that outstripped anything he had done before or would attempt again. He was going to sell a conundrum to the public, a dazzlingly strange movie at once uncanny and homely, which reaches down to despair and yet still touches joy.

The Christmas card

One February morning in 1938, while he was shaving, a story came to Philip Van Doren Stern, a historian, biographer and novelist: a man would be saved by his guardian angel, having glimpsed how life would have been had he never been born. Stern quickly washed and promptly sketched out a two-page outline of the idea. He then shelved it for a year, before endeavouring to make something of it. In the spring of 1943 he tried again, only now adding the Christmas background and titling it 'The Greatest Gift'. He had 200 copies printed up as a brief pamphlet, posting these to friends as Christmas cards.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

Fri 1 Dec 14:40; Wed 13 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Sun 17 Dec 18:45; Wed 20 Dec 20:55

The Passenger

Sat 2 Dec 20:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sun 10 Dec 15:45;
Wed 27 Dec 17:50

After Life (Wandafuru Ralfu)

Sun 3 Dec 12:45; Tue 12 Dec 17:15;
Wed 27 Dec 14:40; Sat 30 Dec 20:20

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Mon 4 Dec 18:15; Thu 14 Dec 20:50;
Thu 28 Dec 18:15

Five Easy Pieces

Tue 5 Dec 14:30; Sat 9 Dec 20:55;
Tue 19 Dec 18:15; Fri 29 Dec 18:20

White Material

Wed 6 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by film curator Abiba Coulibaly); Fri 29 Dec 20:45

Boyz n the Hood

Thu 7 Dec 20:35; Sat 16 Dec 18:15;
Sat 23 Dec 20:40

Meet Me in St Louis

Fri 8 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by writer Richard Dyer);
Wed 20 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 18:10;
Sat 23 Dec 11:50

It's a Wonderful Life

Wed 13 Dec 18:10; Sat 16 Dec 20:25; Mon 18 Dec 20:25;
Wed 20 Dec 18:10; Fri 22 Dec 14:30, 20:25;
Sat 23 Dec 18:10

The Shop around the Corner

Fri 15 Dec 18:20; Mon 18 Dec 14:30;
Thu 21 Dec 20:45; Sat 30 Dec 12:20

Remember the Night

Sun 17 Dec 12:15; Tue 19 Dec 20:40

Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)

Sat 23 Dec 14:20; Fri 29 Dec 13:30;
Sat 30 Dec 13:00

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The tale that Stern dreamt up was a simple one. One Christmas, George Pratt, a small-town banker, stands on a bridge, contemplating suicide. A stranger's 'queer voice' interrupts him, and he finds himself confronted by an unremarkable angel. The angel begs him to consider his wife, Mary Thatcher, and his mother. However, George has lost himself in ennui, dragged down by being merely ordinary, and so he wishes that he had never been born; immediately, the angel grants him that wish. The angel presents him with a bag of brushes to sell. Walking into town, George discovers that Marty Jenkins, the man who now has George's job, has absconded with \$40,000 and broken the bank. Another man, Marty's hard-drinking brother, Art Jenkins, has married Mary; they have two children together. Years ago, without George there to save him, George's brother, Harry, drowned. The nightmare of not being recognised lies at the tale's heart. George sees Mary's other children, and the young boy shoots him with a toy gun, crying out, 'You're dead!' The unnamed angel tells him, 'You're the freest man on earth now. You have no ties. You can go anywhere – do anything. What more can you possibly want?' George begs to be given back his life as it was, and as it's Christmas Eve, the angel grants this second wish. George runs back to his family, and, immeasurably relieved, finds they are still there for him: 'I thought I'd lost you,' he says. 'Oh, Mary, I'd thought I'd lost you.'

Stern posted one of his 'Christmas cards' to his Hollywood agent, Shirley Collier. She passed it on to the studios, and Stern found himself selling the tale for \$10,000 to RKO, a deal apparently struck at Cary Grant's insistence. Stern also sold it to *Good Housekeeping*, under the title, 'The Man Who Never Was'; in 1945, under its original title, it was published as a short book.

That Christmas of 1943, the Story Department at Paramount Pictures put a copy of Van Doren Stern's story into circulation. Above the title, 'The Greatest Gift', at some point, in brackets, someone scrawled 'It's a Wonderful Life'. On 26 February 1944, Ray Spencer at Paramount wrote out a synopsis of Stern's story, designating it as 'Drama; Fantasy', and the period it was set in as the 'Present'. Spencer judged it to be a 'very charming short story', but one that would work best in an 'episodic picture like the *Tales of Manhattan*. But whether it should be made the basis of a full-length screenplay is a moot question.'

Extracted from *It's a Wonderful Life* by Michael Newton (BFI Film Classics, 2023).

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