



INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE



106th & North Meridian • 86th Street

presents

This Wonderful Life

written by Steve Murray, conceived by Mark Setlock

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ENRICHMENT GUIDE

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What Makes a Classic?

by Janet Allen, IRT Artistic Director

In this season that features many theatrical adaptations from familiar non-theatre sources, *This Wonderful Life* holds a revered position. It allows us to draw on the love affair that Americans have with the movies, and particularly movies that have burrowed their way, over time, into the American psyche to become classics. Of course there are reasons why a work of art becomes a classic, and many ways to define a classic, but somewhere in that definition is the fact that it's a story, image, or tune that simply can't be easily forgotten. In anybody's definition, Capra's movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, is an American classic. It would certainly make my list of "must experience" in an American cultural literacy list. (On the way home, or over dinner, you might ask your gathered group what else they consider quintessentially American works of art or entertainment.)

The fact that, for many people, Capra's movie is a classic, is what invites a writer like Steve Murray to create a theatrical riff on the film—that is, to create another work of art that is derived from, and comments on, the original art work. It's a fascinating task of both reverence and objectification: how does an actor and a design team both firmly reference the movie while making a piece that has its own flourish and integrity? We are joyfully looking forward to seeing the results of that investigation into what artists do best: interpret art, interpret story, interpret life.

My guess is that if you are one of the few people who has never seen this film, after your experience in the theatre you will want to rent/download/Netflix/Tivo it immediately! Of course, during the holiday season you can catch it virtually any time of the day or night on good old-fashioned broadcast TV! And for those of us who have seen the movie, love the movie, and consider the movie not only a classic but a staple of the holiday season, sharing this story with an actor on stage—in glorious celebration of this completely American story—is a delight worth sharing with family and friends.

Happy Entertainment-Filled Holidays!

The Story of *It's a Wonderful Life*

Although *It's a Wonderful Life* is now known as an American film classic and can be viewed almost continuously on television during the Christmas season, the film did not start out as the great success it is today. The film began its journey as a holiday greeting. Phillip Van Doren Stern wrote a short story, *The Greatest Gift*, but could not get it published. The story was about a man who decides the world would be better without him and tries to commit suicide on Christmas, but is stopped by an angel who shows him what the world would be like if he had never been born. The man realizes the good he has done and decides he wants to live again. Stern believed the story was worth sharing, so he sent it out as a Christmas card. One of those cards eventually got into the hands of a film producer who bought the film rights. It seems like a simple story, but it was a hard one to get right. Three different screenwriters tried to write the script, but failed.

After World War II, Frank Capra, a respected director, was introduced to the story and bought the rights to the story and all three original scripts. Working with screenwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett (who would later write the stage and film adaptations of *The Diary of Anne Frank*), Capra began work on a fourth version of the story. The result was *It's a Wonderful Life*. This script created an intriguing balance between reality and fantasy, humor and seriousness, dark and light, giving the story life and keeping an audience interested for two hours. Capra found his George Bailey in Jimmy Stewart, another World War II veteran who was looking to restart his career in Hollywood. The other actors came together as a mixture of old and new faces.

The movie was filmed on a set built in the middle of the desert. Depicting changing season in the film took a lot of work; since the movie was filmed during the summer, the snowstorm in particular represented a big challenge. Capra disliked the usual method of creating fake snow using Epsom salts and cornflakes, which were so loud that dialogue had to be dubbed later. Special effects supervisor Russell Shearman developed a new technique for making fake snow using foamite (a fire-fighting chemical), soap, and water. This mixture was pumped at high pressure through a wind machine to create silent falling snow. Six thousand gallons of the new snow were used in the film. The RKO Effects Department received a special award from the Motion Picture Academy for the development of the new film snow. Shooting the movie was a long and difficult process, but filming was completed on time. Frank Capra was pleased with how it had turned out and believed Stewart's performance was Oscar-worthy.

The climax of the movie is set during Christmas, but the film was not intended as a Christmas release until a few weeks before the holiday season. A whirlwind of press activities and promotions supported the film. It was advertised as a lighthearted romantic comedy, but moviegoers found something a little different. The film seemed out of place for the time; after a massive depression and a world war, people didn't seem to want to be reminded of life's difficulties. It was a particularly cold Christmas, and reviews of the movie were mostly negative. Although not the flop that legend might have it, the film was not the success Capra hoped it would be. It had been expensive to produce, and it lost over half a million dollars at the box office. Although nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, it did not win any. It would be television,

which barely existed in 1946, that would prove to be the life preserver for *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The film was sold and resold to various companies after its release. When the film's copyright expired in 1974, through an oversight it was not renewed. Television stations could now show the film at no cost, and soon it became a constant presence during the Christmas season. (In 1993 a Supreme Court ruling somewhat restored the film's copyright status because of some copyrighted material used to make the film.) Today it is hard to find someone who is not familiar with *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the film appears on multiple top film lists. For some people, it has become a tradition to watch the film every year; some even throw *It's a Wonderful Life* parties to celebrate Christmas and watch the movie on television. Frank Capra said of the film's success, "It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. This film has a life of its own now, and I can look at it like I had nothing to do with it.... I didn't even think of it as a Christmas story when I first ran across it. I just liked the idea." Although the film is more than a just heartwarming Christmas story, to some people it just isn't Christmas without *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The Real Bedford Falls?

Bedford Falls is fictional; the town seen in *It's a Wonderful Life* is just a set built for the film. Frank Capra never named any specific place he had in mind when he made the movie. The people of Seneca Falls in upstate New York, however, believe their town is the real life inspiration for the fictional Bedford Falls. Besides its Victorian architecture, steel truss bridge, and New England mill town atmosphere, Seneca Falls (population 9,347) also claims a downtown that looks like that seen in the film and a residential neighborhood similar to the movie's Bailey Park. There is actually some evidence that Frank Capra drove through Seneca Falls in 1945 while working on the early stages of *It's a Wonderful Life*. Seneca Falls holds a festival each year to commemorate the film. To learn more about the town and its annual celebration, check out this website: www.therealbedfordfalls.com.

A Light in the Darkness

by David Bradley, Director

*"We can get through this thing alright. We've just got to stick together.
We've got to have faith in each other."*

—George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*

I'm writing this in the week just after the big bailout, with the Dow tumbling, credit shrinking and uncertainty mounting. I have no idea what the next month holds: how the markets will fair, who will win the election, how we'll all be feeling. But I know that by the time you're reading this, we'll be celebrating the holiday season in a moment of unpredictable, even scary change. And here you are, in a theatre, looking for ... escape? Release? Maybe even a glimmer of that light in darkness that many traditions hail at this time of year?

And onstage, there's a story that many of you know. It's fitting in fact that this tale is the upstairs neighbor of *A Christmas Carol* here at the IRT. In some ways, *It's A Wonderful Life* is the American *Carol*: a story treasured by many, reaffirming what we value both about this season and about our relationships with family, friends, and community.

But it seems this tale's not just for Christmas anymore. What's been a favorite reference point in the news for conveying the anxiety of the financial crisis? Black Friday at the old Bailey Building and Loan! What a perfect time to enjoy what theatre does so well: offer a familiar tale in a new way.

So tonight you'll see no Jimmy Stewart, or Donna Reed or Lionel Barrymore. Just one man ... and you and your neighbors there, surrounding him. That's perfect, because it allows us to see anew what is so powerful about this story. One man, vital all by himself, but enlarged by the community around him. We can marvel at the life and passion of Jerry Richardson up there on stage, and he can feel the energy and engagement of all of you. We are strong alone, and made even stronger when we join together. For me, that's the lifeblood that courses through this tale. And that's what makes this *Wonderful Life* exciting.

And perhaps that's why, in times both delightful and dire, we keep coming back to the theatre. Because here, sitting in darkness and looking towards the light, we do stick together. Our faith in our own humanity draws us to hear the story of another's. Somehow stories fortify us in the face of whatever Mr. Potter is looming out there. And by sharing those stories we affirm that we, unlike selfish menaces like Potter, are not alone. Here, hundreds of individual imaginations and hearts come alive as one community.

A spirit like that just might help us get through whatever comes.

And wouldn't that be wonderful?

Designer Notes

Jack McGaw

Scenic Designer

It would be easy just to copy the movie, but we couldn't do that in this space, and besides, we didn't want all that scenery. Nonetheless, I had to work through some "realistic" elements in my initial design process before we began to distill things down to just a few visual cues along the journey: a street lamp, a newel post, and a suitcase. Lighting will take care of the rest. I want the scenery to be simple, yet magical.

Wendy Meaden

Costume Designer

For many of us, this story is an old friend whom we look forward to visiting each winter holiday. Our Narrator loves it so much, he will do the whole thing for us! His excitement is tangible! As our ambassador, he connects with us as audience, and also blends into the story itself: primarily as George Bailey, but also as all the other characters in Bedford Falls. While we are not trying to recreate the film in (lack of) color or numbers of costumes, I have included some details to punctuate the storytelling. Visually, the actor is our link from the present moment into past story. We acknowledge this by using contemporary clothes with a period feel: fuller trousers, a fitted coat, and a lively vest inspired by fashions of the thirties and the cut of the film costumes. The actor is just an average guy in a casual suit who shares his wonderful enthusiasm. Rich fall colors bring warmth to the stage picture, and help him stand out against the heavenly midnight blue of the set. I've selected softer textures and patterns that I hope are inviting and fun. We all love to share stories. I hope you enjoy this one.

Michael Lincoln

Lighting Designer

The lighting design for this production evolved out of the idea that we needed to create a fluid, quickly changing, and highly hyper-theatrical environment. The set was distilled into a field of stars, which connects George to the greater power in his life. George's journey is marked by a series of iconic objects and signposts and we wanted to use these images from the movie, but theatricalize them. What better way than with light? The intention is to keep the audience rooted in familiar images, but twist them in a way that is refreshing and theatrically honest.

Frank Capra • Filmmaker

Born in 1897 in Sicily, Frank Capra immigrated to the United States with his family when he was six years old. After landing in New York City, the family soon moved to California, where Frank's older brother lived. In high school Frank discovered theatre and did backstage work. His family urged him to quit school and go to work, but Capra wanted to live the American Dream, and he needed an education to do that. While studying chemical engineering in college, Capra became interested in literature and poetry and decided to become a writer.

After serving briefly in the army at the end of World War I, Capra was hired as an extra on a John Ford film. He helped start an unsuccessful film company in Nevada, then moved to Hollywood and began to write shorts for the "Our Gang" series and for other silent film comedians. Capra got his chance as a director with comedian Harry Langdon and in 1927 began directing for Columbia Pictures.

Capra's method of filmmaking sometimes raised eyebrows. Rather than constantly moving cameras and resetting lights, Capra saved time by shooting all of his long shots one day, the middle shots the next, and then his close ups the next. Capra's way of working was efficient, but required a lot of preparation. He also worked well with actors and often helped them do their best work. Among his early films was 1932's *American Madness*, an important precursor to his later work. The film dealt with social conditions and centered around a bank run similar to the one that occurs in *It's a Wonderful Life*. In this film, Capra also developed a new technique to create a more natural pace; he had actors overlap lines and cut out shots of stagey entrances and exits. *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) dealt with issues of interracial relationships and suicide; these darker themes would become important in Capra's later films. Capra was an optimist who worked hard and believed in promoting the individual; although his work dealt with serious issues, there would always be a happy ending. This attitude was seen as sentimental by some, and his films were sometimes derided as "Capracorn."

Capra directed more than 50 films during his career. Among the most memorable are *Lady for a Day* (1933), *It Happened One Night* (1934; Oscars: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor [Clark Gable], Best Actress [Claudette Colbert], Best Screenplay [Robert Riskin]), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936, Oscar: Best Director), *You Can't Take It with You* (1938; Oscars: Best Picture, Best Director), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), and *State of the Union* (1948).

During World War II, Capra joined the military and made propaganda films, including the "Why We Fight" series. His optimism and salient representation of contemporary social issues helped make these films successful. Capra's first film after the war was *It's a Wonderful Life*. The film was nominated for five Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor (James Stewart) but did not win any. Despite fairly positive reviews, it was not a financial success. Repeated holiday television showings, however, led to the film's rise in popularity; by the late 1970s, it had become a cultural classic. In

1998, the American Film Institute chose it as number 11 in its list of the top 100 American films.

Frank Capra died in 1991, but he lives on through his films. His work stands out because of its humor, as well as his protagonists who, like David against Goliath, fight corrupt political bosses and evil-minded industrialists. Capra's films are criticized by some as too sentimental, but his work aptly represents the conflict between cynicism and idealism. Capra and his most important protagonists, like George Bailey of *It's a Wonderful Life*, didn't always experience the life they expected, but they worked hard and demonstrated the value of the individual and his ability to make a difference and live the American Dream.

America in the Thirties and Forties

The 1920s were a time of prosperity in the United States of America, but they ended with a downturn. In 1929, Wall Street crashed, marking the beginning of a worldwide financial crisis known as the Great Depression. The causes of the depression were complex, although many people blamed high consumer and business debt, poorly regulated markets, wrongdoing by bankers and investors, and especially a loss of confidence in the economic future. The causes of the Great Depression may be uncertain, but the poverty, unemployment, low profits, and lost opportunities for growth and advancement caused by the Depression are well documented. In the four years following the stock market crash, unemployment went from 3 percent to 25 percent. Many businesses and banks closed. When the banks failed, many people lost their life savings. These financial problems were aggravated by natural calamities. In America's heartland, there was a drought. Crops died and the once rich soil turned to dust. Violent winds created dust storms that destroyed the land even further. This catastrophe was known as the Dust Bowl. Many people quit farming and moved west to find a better life. John Steinbeck wrote about their suffering and hardships in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Herbert Hoover was President at the start of the Great Depression. He believed that relief should come from the private sector, not government programs. Relief often didn't come, and many shanty towns came to be known as Hoovervilles in "honor" of the President's policies. In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated as President of the United States. FDR began the New Deal, a series of government programs meant to increase employment and help relieve the burden of the American public. Social Security, the National Recovery Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and the Civil Conservation Corps are examples of the programs that came out of the New Deal. Many people were opposed to the government's increased presence in business, but there were also many grateful people who had been frustrated by the government's lack of help early on in the Depression. FDR's New Deal helped to lower unemployment, but these measures still did not end the Depression.

These times of hardship led to an increase in lawlessness. Outlaws such as Bonnie and Clyde, Pretty Boy Floyd, Machine Gun Kelly, and John Dillinger became folk heroes. Along with those outlaws, mystery novels, movies, and radio provided an escape. Every week on the radio a fireside chat with FDR was broadcast, helping people to feel that their President was connected to them. Although as much as 40 percent of the population was not significantly affected by the Depression, the economic crisis came to define a generation. The Great Depression was a worldwide problem. In some countries such as Germany and Italy, the government was taken over by dictatorships, but in the United States democracy survived. With the start of World War II and an increased demand for war products, the country finally emerged from the Depression.

World War II was the defining event of the 1940s. It began in Europe in September 1939 with Germany's invasion of Poland after years of military build-up and aggression. The United States did not become officially involved until December 8, 1941, the day after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Although Americans did not suffer the hardships experienced in Europe, Africa, and Asia, where the battles were being fought, American

life did change during the war. After the United States joined the fighting, women were needed in the workplace to replace the men who were shipped off to foreign shores. To support the war effort, food, clothes, even children's toys were rationed, and communities held scrap drives to collect materials that could help. Many American soldiers died or were injured while fighting. In many neighborhoods one could see yellow stars hung in front windows representing family members who had lost their lives in the war. Internment camps were established in the United States to confine American citizens of German, Italian, and Japanese descent. Nearly 150,000 Japanese Americans and 11,000 German and Italian Americans were interned during the war.

The war ended in Europe in May 1945, when Allied forces (The United States, Great Britain, USSR, France, and other nations united against Germany, Italy, and Japan) stopped the last pockets of German resistance. Fighting stopped on the Pacific front soon after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The time following World War II was a time of prosperity and change in the United States. The country emerged from World War II as a superpower only rivaled by the USSR; conflict between the two nations soon led to the Cold War. The Marshall Plan (devised by Secretary of State George Marshall) was created to help European countries recover from the devastation of the war and thus diminish the appeal of Communism. At home many men returned to their jobs, forcing women out of the work place. The G.I. Bill offered a college education to a wide range of veterans beyond the privileged ranks of society. After experiencing less prejudiced attitudes in other countries, African American veterans found it more difficult to accept discriminatory treatment when they returned home. Men who had seen the world would not be satisfied with the old ideal of the family farm. Women who had tasted independence wanted a more powerful place in society. Following World War II, human beings had to come to terms with the realization of the horrors of the Holocaust, the devastation of the war, and the power of nuclear weapons. After years of hardship, many people expected more in their lives and were willing to fight for it. Frank Capra deals with some of the issues that affected the American people during the thirties and forties in *It's a Wonderful Life*. In George Bailey he shows a man who stands up to the challenges presented by the times and does his best to make the world a better place.

How Does a Bank Work?

At the center of *It's a Wonderful Life* is a bank, the Bailey Building and Loan. To better understand the story and the position George Bailey finds himself in when he contemplates suicide, it is helpful to understand how a bank functions.

Originally banks were focused on lending money to trading companies so they could purchase goods, rather than helping individuals manage their money. Over time the activities of banks have expanded. Now the main activities of a bank are to act as a payment agent and to borrow and lend money. To act as a payment agent means that a bank sometimes acts as the middleman for someone paying other people or businesses and for people and businesses paying someone. Checks are often used to make these payments, but with new technology, banks have begun to transfer money in new ways, such as through debit or credit cards or on-line transfers. The other important function of a bank is to borrow and lend money. Banks use the money deposited into their bank and from other sources, such as bonds, to give people and businesses loans. Usually banks will charge interest on these loans to make money. Interest is a payment that is calculated as a percentage of the amount that was borrowed.

Bailey Building and Loan is a savings and loan, a type of bank that focuses on serving individuals. Its main services include savings accounts and loans. A savings account is used as a safe way to save money; the account will earn interest since the money is usually left in the bank for a long time. The loans from a savings and loan bank are like any bank loan, but they are often used for purchasing or building houses. This type of bank is mostly found in the United States. They are often small, local businesses that are individually owned. Many of these small banks had to close during the Great Depression because people failed to repay their loans and the banks lost all of their money and the money of their customers. Panic can lead to what is known as a bank run, when all of the customers demand their life savings be repaid to them, but the bank does not have enough money to pay everyone at once. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey is able to avoid going out of business by convincing his customers to be patient and take only what they need. He explains how his business functions and why he doesn't have the money to pay them all: "You're thinking of this all wrong. The money's not here. Your money's in Joe's house—right next to yours. And in the Kennedy house and Mrs. Macklin's house, and a hundred others." With this inspiring speech, he instills confidence in the people and saves his business.

After the Great Depression, the government imposed greater regulations on commercial banks and began to insure individual accounts for up to \$100,000. If a bank failed, the government took it over until the company could be bought or other arrangements made. There were still risks with investment banks and other financial institutions, but commercial banks where most people kept their money were not allowed to fail, and the government insurance meant people will not lose all of their money.

Despite these safeguards the American economy and economies around the world are currently going through a severe crisis, though not yet at the level of the Great Depression. The U.S. stock market is at its lowest since September 2001. The value of the U.S. dollar has fallen in comparison to other currencies around the world. Unemployment is increasing. There is global inflation, which means the price of goods

is going up. Food and oil prices in particular have increased dramatically. The price increases on these necessities have put a strain on many households around the world. A credit crisis has caused multiple banks and other financial institutions to fail. The housing market has crashed; the value of houses has dropped and too many people cannot pay their mortgages. Many people are also worried about the security of their pensions and savings for retirement, which are invested in the stock market. All of these issues are serious concerns, but the crisis is made worse by panic. Many economists believe that the economy will get worse before it significantly improves, but governments worldwide have taken action to lessen the severity by loaning money to troubled businesses and buying troubled mortgages. One lesson we can take from the Great Depression is that the economy can recover with everyone's effort and sacrifice.

Eight Thousand Dollars

One of the major turning points in George Bailey's life occurs when his Uncle Billy loses \$8,000. This may not seem like a lot of money by today's standards, but \$8,000 could buy a lot more in 1946 than it does today. One dollar in 1946 would be the same as \$11.60 today. This means that \$8,000 in 1946 would be worth \$92,800 today.

This Wonderful Journey *an interview with playwright Steve Murray*

How was the project conceived? Who came up with the idea for this one-man version of *It's a Wonderful Life*?

The original idea came from Mark Setlock, a New York-based actor who's best known for co-creating (and starring in) the one-man show *Fully Committed*. In that comedy, he played the guy who takes all the calls for dinner reservations at a very "hot" Manhattan restaurant—and the dozens of people phoning nonstop, wheedling to get a table. He'd already shown how gifted he is at playing multiple characters and making split-second changes.

He performed that show at Portland Center Stage (PCS) in Portland, Oregon, a few years ago. Backstage, he was constantly doing little riffs from *It's a Wonderful Life*. He told the stage manager that it was one of his favorite movies, and he wished he could perform the whole thing all by himself. And a little light bulb clicked on....

Where did your collaboration begin with the project? Did you have a relationship with Portland Center Stage before this project? How much work had been done on the play before you came into the process?

Chris Coleman, the artistic director of PCS, previously ran Actor's Express in Atlanta. While there in the 1990s, he directed two of my original scripts, *Hungry to Bed* and *Rescue & Recovery*. In 2002, I was invited to PCS for its annual new play festival, where we workshopped my script *Manna*. For whatever reason— maybe because I've also been a film critic for a big chunk of my life, in addition to writing plays—I'm the first person they thought of to work with Mark and create this show.

What was developmental process of the piece? Did you start by watching the movie, reading the script, etc?

When my friends at PCS approached me about it, Mark was performing *Fully Committed* in London. So the theatre flew me out to meet him. We got together for lunch, talked about the things we loved about the movie, then sat down and watched it together on DVD. After that, we talked some more and realized we could work together on this.

Eight or nine months later, after I had a bare-bones script, PCS flew Mark, our director, Martha Banta, and me to Portland to spend a week workshopping it. That translated into the three of us watching bits of the movie and having long lunches. Then I would go back to my hotel room and write/edit some more. The truth is, after a certain point, it was no longer helpful to watch the movie, because the script had to become its own animal—not a live replication of the movie, but a theatrical celebration of it.

How did you choose which bits and pieces you wanted from the movie?

Turning a 2-hour-and-10-minute movie into a stage show that comes in around half that amount of time was one of the biggest challenges I've faced. The movie is packed with wonderful characters and scenes. The real task was to keep as many of them in as I could, try not to grieve the parts I had to cut out, and (most importantly) try to tell the story as cleanly as possible—so that even people who'd never seen the movie could follow it.

What inspired you most about Capra's film?

What inspired me most? That it's a lot tougher film than people recall. Everybody thinks *It's a Wonderful Life* is just a bunch of Capra-corn. They remember the goofy angel in his nightshirt, and Zu Zu's petals, and "Every time a bell rings," etc. The movie *does* have a happy ending. But to get there, it goes through some very dark, mature scenes that ask big questions about adult life, self-sacrifice and responsibilities we owe toward other people. After all, it starts with a man thinking about throwing himself off a bridge into an icy river.

Since it's a one-man show, did you have to envision how one person would do all these parts/scenes, or did you actually use the actor to create these scenes?

This was really tricky. Having seen him in *Fully Committed*, I knew Mark could make the lightning-fast changes from one character to the next. But in *that* show he had a phone headset and a switchboard as a prop. It was easy for the audience to follow when he was switching from one voice/character to another.

There's no easy convention like that in our show. Making those distinctions with his body and voice was something I left to Mark and to our original director, Martha, to figure out. Theatre is a collaborative art form. When you're a playwright, you do the best you can as a writer—but then you have to hand it over to the people who are experts at what *they* do: actors, directors, designers, and so on. That's really what makes theatre so interesting. You get to appreciate other people's skills.

Was much of it improvised?

There wasn't much improvisation, per se. Once we were in the rehearsal hall, we made tweaks every day – adding and cutting lines from the movie, as well as adding, cutting and trying out lines I wrote for Mark as the narrator/performer.

How did the play evolve over time? In what ways did the script change after you put it in front of an audience?

It was in a state of flux for about a year, while I was working on it in Atlanta, and checking in with Mark by phone. The script went through several different versions—some of them really crazy, with the narrator throwing out these over-the-top jokes and comments. I think that was something I just had to get out of my system before pulling things back down to scale. Ultimately, we all just wanted to create a respectful adaptation that straddled the line between film and theatre—a holiday event that a bunch of people could enjoy together.

Why did you change the title from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *This Wonderful Life*?

Well, I didn't. Here's an insight into the practical workings of theatre companies. Even though I was writing the show up until the first week of preview performances that November, Portland Center Stage had to announce its season of plays the previous spring. "Untitled *It's a Wonderful Life* Project" doesn't really look so good in season brochures. I can't remember exactly how the show got the name *This Wonderful Life*. But once it was out there, it stuck.

I don't mind it, though. The play isn't *It's a Wonderful Life*, and can't be. That's a movie. So for me, the title means: *This* is our version of *Wonderful Life*.

The play is now being performed all over the regional theatre market. Did you ever foresee that your project would reap this kind of success?

No, but I'm really glad it's connecting with theatres and audiences. It's a great to see people come together and share this story—and enjoy the heroic, exhausting performance of that one actor. A lot of hard work and love went into this project, and I hope you'll enjoy what we came up with.

—Matthew McMahan

This Wonderful Life

Glossary

Page

- 1 **"Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight"**
A Traditional American song. It was written down and published in 1844 as "Lubly Fan." It was performed throughout the United States and often altered to fit the local audience, changing the lyrics to "New York gals" or "Boston gals." The most famous version uses Buffalo, referring to Buffalo, New York, not the animal.

- 1 **boil**
An area of swelling and inflammation of the skin resulting from an infection; an annoyance.

- 1 **scurvy**
literally, a disease caused by lack of ascorbic acid; used as an adjective here, it means disgusting

- 2 **Bedford Falls**
The movie *It's a Wonderful Life* takes place in Bedford Falls. The town is fictional and the movie was filmed on a set, but many towns claim to be the inspiration. It is believed that the town was supposed to be located in upstate New York.

- 3 **dotty**
Amusingly absurd.

- 3 **World War II**
A military conflict that involved the majority of the world's countries. World War II began in September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Soon the conflict spread to most of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The two sides in this war were the Allies, which included England, France, and eventually the United States, and the Axis, which included Germany, Italy, and Japan. The United States joined the war in December 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The war ended in 1945 with an Allied victory.

- 4 **Joseph, Jesus, and Mary**
Refers to Jesus Christ, the Christian messiah; his virgin mother Mary; and Mary's husband, Joseph. All three are important to Christians and are often invoked in prayers.

- 5 **IQ**
Intelligence Quotient, a measure of intelligence based on the average abilities of people according to their age.

5 *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

A popular 1876 novel by Mark Twain about a young boy growing up in the pre-Civil War South along the Mississippi River in the fictional town of St. Petersburg, Missouri.

8 Tahiti

An island in the South Pacific. It is the most populated island of French Polynesia and has a rain forest. The island consists of two round sections centered around volcanic mountains; the smaller portion remains isolated by the rough terrain. In the 1760s, Tahiti began to be visited more often by explorers and became famous. Renowned explorer Captain James Cook visited the island in 1769 and in 1789. The crew of the *HMS Bounty* mutinied after leaving Tahiti.

8 Fiji Islands

An island nation in the South Pacific. It is composed of 322 islands, of which 106 are permanently inhabited. The first European explorer visited Fiji in 1643, but it was not until the 19th century that Europeans permanently settled in the islands. The people of the islands became known through the writings of members of Captain Cook's expeditions. Fiji was a British colony from 1874 until 1970, when the islands were granted independence.

8 Coral Sea

A part of the South Pacific, northeast of Australia off the Queensland coast and south of the Solomon Islands. It includes the Great Barrier Reef, which is the largest coral reef system in the world. The sea is an important source of coral for the Great Barrier Reef. Corals are marine organisms that are made up of groups of identical individuals.

8 I've been nominated for membership in the National Geographic Society!

Based in Washington D.C., the National Geographic Society is one of the largest non-profit scientific and educational institutions in the world. Its interests include geography, archaeology, natural science, environmental and historical conservation, and the study of world culture and history. The Society publishes the *National Geographic* magazine. For many years, subscriptions to this popular magazine were marketed as memberships in the Society.

8 harem

The wives, concubines, and women servants of a polygamous household.

8 telegram

A message transmitted by telegraph, a system that converts a message into electric impulses and sends it to a distant receiver.

9 Building & Loan

A financial institution that specializes in accepting savings deposits and making mortgage loans. They are often mutually held, meaning that the depositors and borrowers are members with voting rights, and have the ability to direct the financial and managerial goals of the organization.

9 Aunt Clara ... *Bewitched*

Bewitched was a popular American TV series which ran from 1964 to 1972. Aunt Clara was a character on the show, a lovable but forgetful witch whose spells didn't always work as planned.

9 Captain Cook

An English explorer, navigator, and mapmaker who lived in the 1700s. He was the first to map Newfoundland, a large island off the east coast of North America, and he made three voyages to the Pacific Ocean. He was the first European to make contact with the eastern coastline of Australia and the Hawaiian Islands. Cook died in 1779 while fighting with Hawaiians during his third voyage to the Pacific Ocean.

9 squall

A sudden shower or downpour; often at sea.

9 mortgage

The pledging of property to a creditor, such as a bank, as security for the payment of a debt. When buying a house, many people must mortgage their new home to get the money to buy it from the bank. If they do not pay back the loan on time, the bank can take possession of the house as payment for the loan.

9 charity ward

A section of a hospital that is dedicated to the poor who cannot afford to pay for medical care.

10 hard-skulled

Describes someone who will not understand your point of view or show compassion.

11 Jimmy Stewart

The well-known American film and stage actor who played George Bailey in the film version of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

12 druggist

A person authorized to fill prescriptions; a pharmacist.

12 a thousand and one nights

A reference to a collection of stories gathered over many centuries, starting around the 9th century CE, from authors and scholars all over the Middle East. The stories are framed by the tale of a Persian King who, after discovering his wife's infidelity, executes her. Every day he marries a new virgin only to execute her the next morning. When Scheherazade marries him, she begins to tell him a story, but does not finish it; the king keeps her alive so she may finish it the next night. Each night Scheherazade finishes one tale only to start a new one, and this goes on for a thousand and one nights. Each of Scheherazade's stories is different; they cover a wide range of topics.

12 Italy

Located in Southern Europe, this diverse country has been home to many cultures, including the Romans. Italy has traditionally been an important source of culture as the birthplace of universities, the Renaissance, and other important movements in art and philosophy.

12 Baghdad

The largest city and capital of Iraq, located on the Tigris River. It dates back to the 8th century and was once the center of the Islamic world and a center of learning.

12 Samarkand

The second largest city in Uzbekistan, a country in central Asia and a former member of the Soviet Union. It is known for its position on trading routes from China and as a center of Islamic scholarly study.

12 boarding house

A house where meals or room and meals can be had for pay.

13 Alfalfa .. *The Little Rascals*

The Little Rascals was a series of film shorts from the 1920s and 1930s about a group of neighborhood kids and their adventures. The actor Carl Switzer, who played the popular character Alfalfa in the series, also appeared in the original film *It's a Wonderful Life* as the character Freddie.

14 "Oyez oyez oyez!"

A traditional interjection that is repeated three times to introduce the opening of a court of law. It could be translated as "hear ye." The term "oyez" was common in medieval England and is still used by the United States Supreme Court at the beginning of each session.

14 Charleston

A lively dance that was popular in the 1920s.

- 14 Olympic-size swimming pool**
Refers to the type of pool used in the Olympic games and other events. The dimensions are 50 meters (164 feet) long by 25 meters (82 feet) wide, with ten lanes 2.5 meters (8.5 feet) wide, only eight of which are used in an event. The size of an Olympic pool is often used to describe the size of other objects.
- 15 *Rocky Horror***
The Rocky Horror Picture Show is musical comedy film made in 1975. It is a cult classic that parodies science fiction and horror films. Before being made into a movie, *The Rocky Horror Show* was a stage musical in London. In a famous scene at the end of the movie, most of the characters fall into a pool.
- 17 Greece**
Located in Southeastern Europe, Greece has been home to many empires, including the Byzantine and the Ottoman. Greece is considered to be the birthplace of democracy, western philosophy, political science, major scientific and mathematical principles, and drama.
- 17 Parthenon**
The temple of Athena built in the 5th century B.C. on the Acropolis, a high, flat-topped, sacred rock, in Athens, the capital of Greece.
- 17 Colosseum**
A large outdoor arena in Rome, Italy. It was one of the greatest engineering and architectural accomplishments of the Roman Empire. It was originally used for gladiator contests and other public spectacles.
- 17 airfields**
A field where aircraft can take off and land.
- 17 lasso**
A rope with a loop at the end, often used to catch horses or cattle.
- 18 stroke**
A serious medical emergency that can cause permanent brain damage or death. Strokes are the result of disruptions in the blood vessels supplying blood to the brain.
- 18 board of directors**
A group of elected or appointed people who oversee the activities of a business or organization.
- 19 penny-ante**
A small undertaking; something that involves a small amount of money.

19 slum

A heavily populated area that has a lot of poverty and poor housing.

19 vote-of-confidence

A vote showing support of something, such as Parliament voting that it supports the government.

20 “My Wild Irish Rose”

A song written in 1899 by Chancellor Olcott, an American actor, singer, and songwriter, for his production *A Romance of Athlone*. It has become an American classic.

20 picketing

A way to protest. It usually involves walking back and forth in front of a door to prevent anyone from entering the building. The term is also used for soldiers protecting an outpost from attack.

23 moss back

Literally, an old fish or turtle with a greenish growth of algae on its back. Also used to describe an extremely old-fashioned person.

23 soybeans

A type of legume, a vegetable like peas or beans, native to East Asia and long used as food and medicine.

26 Bermuda

Bermuda is a British Territory located off the east coast of the United States, a group of Islands in the West Atlantic Ocean. Its balmy climate and beautiful beaches have contributed to a large tourist industry.

26 caviar

The salted eggs of fish. Caviar is usually eaten as an appetizer and is considered a luxury food.

26 run on the bank

A financial crisis. Banks keep only a fraction of their deposits and use the rest to give loans and make other investments. When every depositor tries to withdraw all of his or her money, the bank does not have enough cash on hand to pay everyone in full. When depositors do not believe that a bank will be able to pay its debts, they want to withdraw all of their money to protect themselves. Ironically, this action ensures that, in fact, the bank can no longer pay its debts.

26 Great Depression

A dramatic, worldwide economic downturn that began in the United States in 1929, ending in most countries during the 1930s. The Depression had devastating effects on all kinds of industry and led to massive unemployment. The U.S. economy did not fully recover until 1939 with the start of World War II and the increase of demand for war goods.

26 Holy mackerel

An expression of surprise. A mackerel is a type of fish.

27 "I will pay them 50 cents on the dollar"

Potter will pay George Bailey's customers 50 cents for every dollar they deposited in order to buy their accounts. The customers will only get half the money they originally deposited, but eventually Potter will be able to obtain the full amount of those accounts from the Building and Loan.

28 Lady Liberty

A nickname for the Statue of Liberty, which stands on Liberty Island in New York Harbor. She is posed holding up a torch signifying enlightenment.

28 Grandma Walton

A character from the 1970s American television series *The Waltons*. The series was about a family in rural Virginia during the Great Depression and World War II. Grandma Walton was old but feisty, and did what needed to be done. Despite her quick temper, she always had wisdom to share with family and friends. Ellen Corby, the actress who played Grandma Walton, appeared in this scene in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

28 Waldorf Hotel

A famous luxury hotel in New York City.

29 bellhop

A person employed by a hotel to carry luggage and do errands.

29 "Entray, Monsoor"

A mispronunciation of the French "Entrée, Monsieur," which means "Enter, sir." Speaking French is often associated with higher-class establishments.

29 "Song of the Islands"

A Hawaiian song, and also the name of a 1942 movie starring Betty Grable.

29 record player spindle

The small pin that holds a record in place on a record player.

29 rotisserie

A cooking appliance with a spit that holds food as it rotates over a source of heat to cook it.

29 Jacuzzi

A brand name for a whirlpool bath or a recreational bath and pool.

29 Paris

The capital and largest city in France. It is located in the north central region of the country on the Seine River. Paris is a leading business and cultural center. It is a popular tourist destination because of its history, museums, many landmarks, and reputation as a very romantic city.

30 "I Love You Truly"

A popular song written in 1906 by Carrie Jacobs Bond. It has been used at weddings and recorded by many famous singers, including Bing Crosby.

30 "cotton to"

To taking a liking to something.

30 trophy wife

The younger and beautiful wife of a rich man. She is used as a status symbol.

30 Florida

Located in the southern United States, Florida is famous for its warm weather and is a common vacation spot.

31 Potter's Field

Traditionally, the expression "potter's field" refers to a place for the burial of unknown or indigent people. The term comes from Matthew 27:7 in the New Testament of the Bible, in which the repentant Judas returns 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests, who had given it to him in return for betraying Christ. The priests say, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they use the money to buy a field from a potter as a burial place for foreigners. The traditional site of this field is in the valley of Hinnom, which was a source of potter's clay.

31 "The Last Temptation of George"

The Last Temptation of Christ is a 1951 novel written by Nikos Kazantzakis about the life of Jesus Christ written from Christ's perspective. In the novel, Jesus, while free from sin, is still tempted by those things that human beings must face, such as fear, doubt, reluctance, depression, and lust. The novel was made into a movie in 1988. Both the book and the film were highly controversial.

32 yokel

A naïve or gullible inhabitant of a rural or small town.

- 34 stork**
A type of bird which is said to deliver babies to new parents.
- 34 Silver Star**
A United States military decoration awarded for extreme bravery in action.
- 34 Africa**
Located in the eastern hemisphere and south of the Mediterranean, Africa was one of the important areas of fighting during the Second World War. Most of the fighting in Africa took place between 1940 and 1943.
- 34 Ernie the cabbie parachutes into France**
Located in Western Europe, France was one of the first nations to enter World War II after Germany invaded Poland in 1939. In 1940 the French were forced to surrender to Germany, but France continued to be a major site of fighting. The liberation of France began with the invasion of Normandy, which started on June 6, 1944, when allied troops parachuted onto the beaches of Normandy.
- 34 draft board**
A civilian board that registers, classifies, and selects men for forced military service.
- 35 transport**
A ship or vehicle used for carrying soldiers or military equipment.
- 35 Congressional Medal of Honor**
The highest military decoration awarded by the United States government. It is given to someone who displays extreme bravery at the risk of his or her own life beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States.
- 35 bank examiner**
A representative of a bank who closely inspects the transactions of a business to make sure that everything is on order.
- 35 books**
The record of a business's financial transactions or financial conditions.
- 36 CEO**
The Chief Executive Officer or CEO is the executive with the main decision-making authority in a business or organization.
- 37 hock**
To pawn or sell.

- 38 bankruptcy**
Legally declaring the inability to pay one's debts. It is a negative action that usually leads to the end of a business.
- 38 "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"**
A well-known Christmas carol, written by Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley who founded Methodism. The song first appeared in a collection of hymns in 1739. The music has changed since it first appeared, now often using a chorus written by Felix Mendelssohn in 1840, but the majority of the lyrics are Wesley's original words.
- 39 pneumonia**
A disease of the lungs that causes fever, chills, cough, and difficulty breathing. It is often caused by an infection.
- 42 "playing the market"**
Investing money in the stock market. The stock market is a place for buying or selling stocks, a certificate of partial ownership of a business in exchange for investing money.
- 43 life insurance ... "a fifteen thousand dollar policy"**
A type of insurance that will pay a specified amount of money to a designated person if and when the insured person dies. It is meant to compensate the survivors for the loss of income and any final expenses. "A fifteen thousand dollar policy" means that George Bailey has life insurance that will pay his family fifteen thousand dollars upon his death.
- 43 stockholder**
The owner of a corporate stock.
- 43 misappropriation of funds**
To wrongly take or use money.
- 43 manipulation**
To manipulate: to manage or control artfully or by shrewd use of influence, often in an unfair or fraudulent way.
- 43 malfeasance**
Wrong doing or misconduct, especially by a public official.
- 46 tollhouse**
A house or booth where a fee is paid for some privilege, such as using a bridge or a road.
- 46 nightshirt**
A loose garment, resembling a shirt, meant to be worn in bed.

- 46 Mark Twain**
American humorist (1835-1910) who wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* among other works.
- 46 Angel Second Class**
A reference to military ranks such as private second class. In the world of the play, an angel who has not yet received his wings.
- 46 guardian angel**
An angel meant to take care of a specific person.
- 47 “tut tut tut”**
An interjection that expresses disapproval or disbelief.
- 47 Gabriel**
An archangel who is often considered to be a messenger from God.
- 48 ambient**
Surrounding on all sides; referring to an encompassing environment.
- 48 lewd**
Obscene or vulgar; something of a sexual nature that is seen as immoral.
- 48 double bourbon**
Bourbon is an American whiskey made from corn. Double refers to a serving twice the normal serving size.
- 48 flaming rum punch**
A mixed alcoholic drink made with rum, fruit juices, and other sweeteners that has been set on fire to caramelize the sugar.
- 48 mulled wine**
A typically red wine that has been combined with spices and is usually served warm. It is a traditional drink during winter, particularly during the Christmas season.
- 48 characters**
Interesting or notable people; people with obvious traits that attract attention.
- 48 rotgut**
A cheap or inferior liquor.
- 49 pixie**
A mischievous or harmful and annoying spirit or person.

49 Adam's off ox

An old American expression that means someone you don't know. It comes from the expression "not to know someone from Adam" and from the term "off ox," which refers to the ox on the right of a team of oxen. This ox is farther away from the driver and therefore less well known.

49 Rummy

A drunkard, someone who drinks too much.

49 panhandling

To stop people in the street and ask for food or money.

49 seltzer

Artificially carbonated water.

51 gin joints

A negative term for a place that sells alcohol. It is associated with the term speakeasy, which refers to establishments that secretly sold alcohol during the Prohibition Era in the United States, when alcohol was illegal.

51 jitterbug club

A club for dancing the jitterbug or various types of swing dance. Jitterbug also refers to the people who swing dance.

51 paddy wagon

An enclosed truck used to transport prisoners.

55 roughneck bar

A bar for rough or unpolished people.

56 "What the Sam Hill"

An American slang phrase that is used as a euphemism for "what the hell" or "what the devil." Its origin is unknown, but it first appeared in print in 1926.

57 movie house

An older term for a movie theatre.

57 emporium

A store carrying various kinds of goods; a general store or department store

57 warrant

An official document giving authority or instructions to do something. An arrest warrant entitles the police to arrest a certain person.

- 57 gingersnap**
A thin, brittle cookie sweetened with molasses and flavored with ginger. Zuzu Ginger Snaps were among the first National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) products in 1901.
- 58 “a smitch of...”**
A small amount of something.
- 59 Gangway!**
An interjection used to clear a passage through a crowd.
- 59 juke-a-box**
A jukebox, a coin-operated automatic record player.
- 59 charge accounts**
A customer’s account with a business to which purchases of goods are charged with the promise of later payment.
- 60 cable**
To send by a telegraph.
- 60 advance**
To supply with the expectation of repayment.
- 60 “Auld Lang Syne”**
A famous Scottish poem written in 1788 by Robert Burns. It was set to a traditional folk song and is regularly sung at midnight on New Year’s Eve to celebrate the New Year. The phrase “auld lang syne” could be translated into such phrases as “days gone by” or “long long ago.” The song is sung in several Frank Capra films.

Resources

Books

The Name Above the Title by Frank Capra

Frank Capra's autobiography about his life and career in Hollywood

American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra by Ray Carney

Discusses Frank Capra's films and the traditional American values and uncertainty represented in them

The Essential It's a Wonderful Life by Michael Willian

The It's a Wonderful Life Book by Jeanine Basinger

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The novel tells of migrant workers suffering the effects of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression.

For older readers:

The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression by Amity Shlaes

The Story of World War II by Donald L. Miller

For younger readers:

The Great Depression: Cornerstones of Freedom by Elaine Landau

World War II by Simon Adams

Money and Banking by Norman L. Macht

Websites

Frank Capra:	http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001008/ information about Frank Capra's life and career
<i>It's a Wonderful Life:</i>	http://www.reelclassics.com/Movies/Wonlife/wonlife.htm photos and information about the movie and people involved in making the film
	http://www.memorableplaces.com/iawlring/iawlringmain.html a site for fans of the movie to share their love of the film
the time period:	http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/snprelief.htm photos and information about American life in the 1930s
	http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade40.html photos and information about American life in the 1940s
banking:	http://www.bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs027.htm information about the nature of banking and different kinds of financial institutions

Films

Other Frank Capra Films:

American Madness (1932)
The Bitter Tea of General Yen (1933)
Lady for a Day (1933)
It Happened One Night (1934)
Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936)
Lost Horizon (1937)
You Can't Take it with You (1938)
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)
Meet John Doe (1941)
Arsenic and Old Lace (1944)
Why We Fight series (1943-1945)
State of the Union (1948)
A Hole in the Head (1959)
A Pocketful of Miracles (1961)

Other Classic Christmas Movies:

Babes in Toyland (1934)
Christmas in Connecticut (1942)
The Bishop's Wife (1947)
Miracle on 34th Street (1947)
A Christmas Carol (Alistair Sim, 1951)
White Christmas (1954)
We're No Angels (1955)
The Homecoming (TV, 1971)
A Christmas Story (1983)
A Christmas Carol (TV, George C. Scott, 1984)
Scrooged (1988)
The Muppet Christmas Carol (1992)
 George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker* (1993)
The Nightmare before Christmas (1993)
A Christmas Carol (TV, Patrick Stewart, 1999)
The Family Man (a contemporary variation on *It's a Wonderful Life*, 2000)
Elf (2003)
The Polar Express (2004)

Discussion Questions

Before Seeing the Play:

Discuss what makes us who we are. What determines our character? What guides our actions?

What does the expression “No man is an island” mean to you?

Throughout history, leaders have called citizens to action. What do you believe is the value and impact of an individual? Consider this question in light of issues we face today, such as our carbon footprint, the economy, or war. How has the recent election process brought such ideas to the forefront?

Discuss what elements are necessary for good storytelling.

In groups, talk about holiday traditions. Open your discussion to personal, regional, national, and worldwide holiday events that have become traditions. What has this time of year come to mean to many different peoples?

Discuss the positive and negative influences of money in our world. What is true wealth?

Divide into groups, each researching a different decade. Collect pictures of the clothes. Find phrases that made their way into the culture. What were the major occupations of the time, the foods, recreation, mannerisms, etiquette, and so forth? Have the groups report their findings in chronological order to show what has changed, what has dropped out of existence, and what has endured the test of time.

Discussion Questions

After Seeing the Play:

How does the use of a single actor affect your impression of the story? In what ways did he bring the audience into the story? What do you think about the authors' addition to the film's script? What did the actor do to show which character he was playing?

In what ways did historical events affect the story and Frank Capra's vision for the film?

No one ever discovers that Mr. Potter took the money from Uncle Billy. Why do you suppose Frank Capra didn't have him punished for stealing? How does Mr. Potter suffer for his attitudes and actions?

The movie was not a great success initially. Why do you think it is now considered one of the best Christmas movies? How have changes in the world since the movie was made affected our perception of it? How would you make this movie today?

Why do so many people pray for George and give him money when he needs it? How do George's previous actions indirectly save his life when he is contemplating suicide?

Some critics have said that Frank Capra's films, including *It's a Wonderful Life*, are too sentimental and not realistic. After seeing this play, do you agree or disagree? Why?

How might Bedford Falls have been different if George Bailey had left town and traveled the world? Would he have been any happier? Would he have ever come back?

It's a Wonderful Life is considered an American classic. What other films, plays, books, or songs would you consider quintessentially American works of art? What distinguishes a piece of art as distinctly American?

Compare and contrast this story with another holiday story such as *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Are there common themes in stories written for this season? Think about setting, mood, tone, and the point of view of the author and the main character.

We don't learn much about why Mr. Potter is the way he is. Knowing what we do about Bedford Falls, its citizens, and the time period in which this story takes place, what might have happened in Mr. Potter's life to make him the person we meet in the story?

George says many wonderful things about his father to Mr. Potter in the Building & Loan board meeting: "Why, in the 25 years since he and Uncle Billy started this thing, he never once thought of himself.... In my book he died a much richer man than you'll ever be!" At the end of the play, Harry toasts George as "the richest man in town." What do these two speeches tell you about George and his father? How are they similar or different? How are you similar to or different from your parents?

Activities

Interview someone who was alive during the 1930s and 1940s about what life was like at that time. Ask about everyday needs such as the price of a loaf of bread and a ticket to the movies, weekend activities, popular toys. What did their parents do for living? Do they remember rationing and what they did for the war effort?

Write a letter to someone who has had a major impact on your life. Talk about why that person is important to you and how their action affected you.

Choose a famous person in history and write about how the course of history would be different if he or she had never been born. Include how your own life would be altered.

Draw a picture or describe your idea of an angel. Consider what angels symbolize, types of angels and their traditional roles, the contemporary function of angels in society, and stories you have heard of encounters with angels.

There are a number of movies about angels coming to earth, *All Dogs Go to Heaven*, *Heaven Can Wait*, *City of Angels*, and *Michael* to name just a few. Write your own story about an angelic intervention, or create a movie story board. Think about what type of angel comes, what is in need of change, what does the angel do to effect that change, and the angel's voice or manner of speaking.

In the end, George comes to see the gifts life has given him and how he has been a gift to others. Make a list of the gifts life has given you. How have you been a gift to others?

All cultures have sayings and folk wisdom that are passed down through the years. *It's a Wonderful Life* has given us "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings." Share with a group other such sayings you have learned. Find others on-line or at the library.

George talks about the many places he would like to visit in his life. List some places where you would like to go and why you want to go there. How do people benefit from travel? How does travel benefit society as a whole?

Bedford Falls is a small town trying to progress. Write about the town or city where you live. What has changed since you were born? Who are the community leaders and other influential people? What impact have they had on the direction of your town or city? Consider the things that you believe to be positive and/or a hindrance.

Make a time line of your family. Start with the birth of a family elder and continue to the most recent birth in your family. In this time line include wars, major discoveries, pop culture, books, political events, natural disasters, and other significant events that have had an impact on your family's lives.

Answers to Matching Game on page 36: 1-j, 2-d, 3-g, 4-a, 5-h, 6-b, 7-f, 8-i, 9-e, 10-c

Take a couple of scenes from your favorite movie, create a script for a one-person adaptation, and perform it. Remember all the tools the actor in the play uses to portray the different characters in *This Wonderful Life*. Think about who your storyteller is and how that “character/narrator” feels about the story as he or she is moving it along. Possible movies might include *Shrek*, *The Princess Bride*, *Casablanca*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Star Wars*, or any other movie you love.

In the play and in the movie, the writers capture the spirit of the holiday as a time for singing songs, spending time with family and friends, and playing games. What games and/or songs do you and your family and friends share? Research other songs and games and share your findings with a group of students or friends.

“Auld Lang Syne” is a song heard in several Frank Capra movies. It is often sung on New Year’s Eve and other times of remembrance. Do some research on the song. What does it mean? What is the origin of this song? Why has it lasted?

The Ties That Bind: A Mapping Exercise

Write the name George Bailey on a sheet of paper, along with the names of four other characters in the story. Draw lines to connect George with each of these characters. Above the lines that connect George to the characters, write who they are to him in the “real” life George leads, and below the line write who they became when he does not exist.

Next, map yourself and your relationship to four people in your life. Above the line write how you are connected, and below the line write how your life would be different without that relationship. Challenge yourself to choose a wide range of people you know, not only family members and close friends.

In Their Shoes: An Exercise in Character Development

Explore the lives of those individuals who lived during the Great Depression and World War II. Using images and/or portraits from these time periods as inspiration, create character biographies that explore the thoughts and emotions of the subjects in the photographs.

—In an open space, place photos of characters in a circle on the floor. As students enter the room, have them each sit by a photo they are drawn to. Ask the students to study the picture. Notice every aspect of physical appearance: clothing (color, fit, style, etc.), expression, stance, etc. Once students feel they have a sense of the character's physical appearance, ask them to lie on their backs.

—Have students close their eyes and visualize the person they saw in the photo. Ask them to remember every detail that they can. Begin to visualize how the character moves, sits, and walks through the environment seen in the picture. When each student can envision this, have the students walk around the room and bring their attention to certain aspects of movement: tempo, body center, stance, etc.

—Next ask students to write inner monologues for their characters: what the character is thinking during the moment the photograph was snapped. Ask for volunteers to share their monologues with the entire group.

—*this exercise courtesy of Pittsburgh Public Theatre*

Matching Game

Match the character with his or her quote or description.

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| 1. Zuzu | a. hopes to travel the world, but gets stuck in Bedford Falls. |
| 2. Mr. Potter | b. "George Bailey, I'll love you till the day I die." |
| 3. Mr. Gower | c. is an Angel hoping to earn his wings. |
| 4. George Bailey | d. "You once called me a warped, frustrated old man. What are you but a warped, frustrated young man.... You're worth more dead than alive." |
| 5. Uncle Billy | e. almost dies after falling in the frozen river; later wins the Congressional Medal of Honor |
| 6. Mary Bailey | f. "This town is no place for any man unless he's willing to crawl to Potter." |
| 7. Mr. Bailey | g. almost poisons Mrs. Blaine's son. |
| 8. Sam Wainwright | h. loses eight thousand dollars. |
| 9. Harry Bailey | i. "Hee-haw!"; makes a lot of money investing in plastics. |
| 10. Clarence | j. gets sick on Christmas Eve; gives her dad flower petals. |