

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: It's A Wonderful Life

USA, 1946. Rated G. 130 min

Cast: Jimmy Stewart, Donna Martin, Lionel Barrymore, Henry Travers;

Cinematographers: Joseph Biroc, Joseph Walker; Producer: Frank

Capra; Director: Frank Capra

You are now in Bedford Falls', reads the sign in the opening shot of *It's a Wonderful Life*, and indeed you are.

From the very beginning of Frank Capra's best known film, we are all in a world unmistakable to Capra's fans and detractors alike, which could be described as a live action Norman Rockwell painting. It's the kind of place that may never have really existed, America before things got complicated: young boys whose most frequent exclamations are 'gee whiz' and 'golly' sled down the hill in the old meadow; the entire population is on a first name basis; and no man leaves his house without a hat. It is a time; the implication goes, when everyone knew how to appreciate home, family and friendship. Everyone, that is, but George Bailey (Stewart). Though George's character has been flattened in our collective consciousness to a flawless do-gooder protecting the honest townsfolk from evil banker Mr. Potter (Barrymore), he is far more complex than that. For all the postcard charm of Bedford Falls, we see from the start that George's highest ambition is to escape. 'Nobody ever changes here, you know that', George's flighty Uncle Billy (Mitchell) tells him, summing up what makes it for some a paradise and for others a prison.

For George it's the latter, and he has no plans to stay, no interest in hanging around the quaint town square with all those small people and their small dreams. George's dreams are big: he wants to see great things, do great things and build great things, as he'll tell anyone who'll listen. But George must wait. Because his father (Hinds), who runs a building and loan, is more interested in turning a blind eye to his working class customers' late mortgage payments than he is in building a business empire, there is little money in the Bailey family for extravagant trips. Indeed, there is so little money for college that George and his brother, Harry (Karns), have to take turns. Naturally, George lets Harry go first, putting his dreams on hold. This is typical of

George: he is always making sacrifices. He sacrifices his college education for Harry, he sacrifices his honeymoon money to hold off a takeover of the building and loan, and when his father dies suddenly of a stroke, he sacrifices his future to run the family business, staying on in town and growing older, seeing the roots take hold, having kids, becoming drawn inextricably into the town's life.

But George remains immune to the charms of Bedford Falls. Like Harry, who married, moved away to a promising career and eventually became a war hero, he has a sort of salesman's false cheer and an easy way with people, but scratch the surface and you see the bitterness of all those lost dreams. He spends his days sleepwalking, pushing the family business



further than his father did, but with no greater financial reward. He, his wife (the irresistible Reed) and four children live in the same broken down, drafty old house at which he once threw stones in smug dismissal, and there's never quite enough money. Though Stewart was reportedly nervous about appearing in his first film after several years in military service, we see in his performance the darkness he would mine so effectively in his films over the next decade and a half. We often think of Stewart as the quintessential American everyman, a sort of scrappy, principled underdog fighting for justice, but in *It's a Wonderful Life* (as in many of his later films, from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* to *The Naked Spur* to, most disturbing of all, *Vertigo*) he's so filled with unconscious rage, so soured in his relentless sacrifice, that we can feel him inching closer to the edge of despair and collapse.

When Uncle Billy misplaces \$8,000 of the bank's money on Christmas Eve (the mix-up comes just as a bank examiner pulls into town, and George faces the very real threat of imprisonment), it all comes to a head in a long-brewing scene of domestic discord more chilling than if George had beaten his children with an iron pipe. Capra is most famous for his sentimentality, and he doesn't skimp here. But often forgotten in all his rousing final acts of redemption and salvation is the almost palpable bleakness he affects. Forget, for a moment, the tear-jerking family reunion that closes this holiday classic, and think instead of George exploding at Mary and the kids, overturning the gift-wrapping table, sitting and getting slowly drunk at the bar, crashing his car into a tree, and finally staggering out through all that snow to the bridge to stare down at the thrashing waters and decide that yes, he is worth more dead than alive. It is a powerful picture of a man ground slowly down by relentless disappointment and deprivation, and it recalls other Capra moments of desolation (most strongly the climax of *Meet John Doe*, when Gary Cooper stands atop a building in the snow preparing to throw himself into the void). After all, what can you say about a filmmaker whose trademark is a raven (Billy the raven made his debut in this film and subsequently appeared in all Capra's movies)? No matter how sentimental the ending, it is hard to forget such vivid anguish.

But we do forget it. We're so convinced of George's joy at returning to his life, so taken with his rapture in a split lip, a crashed car and an arrest warrant bearing his name, that we want to cry. There are those who claim to be unmoved by the film's ending, and while art is always subjective, in the case of *It's a Wonderful Life* such a skeptical attitude seems possible only in a bitter contrarian. Think too much about the movie and Capra's magic could begin to dissipate, the preposterousness of Bedford Falls and the movie's lesson could be revealed for the saccharine sentiment it is. Better, Capra might have said, to forget all the darkness, and focus instead on the film's lesson, that no matter how hopeless life may seem, there's always reason to go on.



Brattle Theatre Film Notes:

Lawrence Fahey is a reporter for the Brookline TAB. He grew up in Connecticut and has lived in Boston for the last ten years. He attended Emerson College.