

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

Actor James Stewart and director Frank Capra each called "It's a Wonderful Life" one of their favorite films.

It was also one of the first films they worked on after World War II. Each had difficulty adjusting to civilian life after serving in the armed forces. Stewart said in an interview with Jane Bakewell of the British Film Institute in 1972 that he had been unemployed for a while after the war when Capra called him to talk about a movie idea.

"I went over (to Capra's house) and we sat down and he said, 'This picture starts in heaven,'" recalled Stewart. "That shook me. ... He said, 'You're in terrible trouble and you are about to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge and an angel comes down and he tries to save you, but he can't swim. So you save him.' ... And then Frank got a little mixed up. He said, 'This sounds terrible doesn't it?' ... So I said, 'Frank, if you want to do a picture that starts in heaven, where I have a guardian angel then I'm your boy.'"

Stewart was finally convinced to take the role of George Bailey by actor Lionel Barrymore, who played Bailey's boss, Mr. Potter.

"It's a Wonderful Life" – which will screen at The Brattle Theatre from Dec. 17 to Dec. 21 – came from a Christmas card written by Philip Van Doren Stern. Writer Kathleen A. Ervin reported in *Failure* magazine that Stern originally wrote a short story called "The Greatest Gift of All" that he could not sell. Undaunted, he wrote it on a greeting card and sent it all over Hollywood, including to Charles Koerner, then-head of RKO Radio Pictures. Koerner bought the film rights and wanted to develop the idea as a

feature for actor Cary Grant; but no workable script could be created, so the project was shelved.

Director Frank Capra also came across the story. For the director, it represented some of his own mixed feelings after the war. Ervin reported that Capra told *Esquire* magazine in 1981 that after the war, he thought that he might have been too idyllic in the years prior to his experience in World War II. His pre-war movies, like "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" (1936), might have been too "Pollyanna," Capra believed.

"Perhaps I had put too much faith in the human race – you know, in the pictures I had



made," said Capra. "Maybe they were too much as things should be. I began to think that I really was a Pollyanna. ... ('It's a Wonderful Life') is a movie about a small town guy who thinks he is a failure and wishes he had never been born. He's surprised to learn that he was not a failure, that he did fit into the scheme of life and actually contributed much to the happiness of several people. I think people everywhere will be able to associate themselves with the character and will perhaps feel a bit better for having known him."

Capra bought the rights to "It's a Wonderful Life" for \$10,000 on Sept. 1, 1945. He filmed it seven months later from April 15 to July 27, 1946 at RKO Encino Ranch. It was released on Dec. 20, 1946, receiving mixed reviews from critics. For the year, it ended up being 26th at the box office, one place ahead of the

other Christmas classic, "Miracle on 34th Street." It received five Academy Award nominations for Best Actor, Best Director, Best Picture, Best Sound and Best Film Editing.

The movie also earned the RKO Effects Department a special award from the Motion Picture Academy for creating new film snow, according to IMDB.com. Snowfalls were then created by using cornflakes painted white; when they fell, they were so loud that the dialogue had to be dubbed in later. Wanting to record the sound live, Capra developed the new falling snow effect by using "foamite," a fire-fighting chemical, mixed with soap and water, then pumping it through a wind machine. Six-thousand gallons of the foamite snow were used in "It's a Wonderful Life."

The movie didn't become a holiday classic until its copyrights ran out in 1974. With TV and cable channels playing it repeatedly, people began to appreciate the movie more. Jeanine Basinger, curator of the Frank Capra archives and chairman of film studies at Wesleyan University, told Ervin that she believes people are drawn to Capra's movie because of the crisis of faith and identity experienced by the main character George Bailey.

"A lot of people don't get what they want out of life," said Basinger. "They stay in the same little town that they're in and they have smaller lives than that. The movie raises a lot of real questions."

Capra, himself, said that he felt very passionate about "It's a Wonderful Life."

"There's more to the picture than I put in it. ... There's more to it than we thought we had. It's the picture I waited all my life to make."

- Jason Nielsen