



Row I Productions

W *THIS*
WONDERFUL
STUDY GUIDE *LIFE*



Suggested Grades 4 - 8

About the Movie

It's a Wonderful Life is a 1946 American film produced and directed by Frank Capra, based on the short story "The Greatest Gift", which Philip Van Doren Stern wrote in 1939 and published privately in 1945. The film is now among the most popular in American cinema and because of numerous television showings in the 1980s has become traditional viewing during the Christmas season.

The film stars James Stewart as George Bailey, a man who has given up his dreams in order to help others, and whose imminent suicide on Christmas Eve brings about the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody. Clarence shows George all the lives he has touched and how different life in his community of Bedford Falls would be had he never been born.



Scene from *It's a Wonderful Life*

It's a Wonderful Life is one of the most acclaimed films ever made, praised particularly for its writing. It was nominated for five Academy Awards including Best Picture and has been recognized by the American Film Institute as one of the 100 best American films ever made,^[4] placing number 11 on its initial 1998 greatest movie list, and number one on AFI's list of the most inspirational American films of all time.^[8] Capra revealed that the film was his personal favorite among those he directed, adding that he screened it for his family every Christmas season.

About the Play



Scene from *This Wonderful Life*

This Wonderful Life is an adaptation of the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Sometimes a play is adapted to a movie, and on occasion a movie is adapted into a play. Some popular plays which were later made into films are *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or even popular Broadway musicals like *Les Miserables*. Recently, Broadway has been adapting films for the stage. A few examples are *Elf* and *Billy Elliot*, both started as movies first. *This Wonderful Life* uses the technique of a narrator - the actor, Jeremy Kendall, expresses his love for the movie and his enthusiasm for playing all of the characters. This allows the audience to experience the story through the actor. We identify with him and delight in his ability to bring the film to life. He doesn't do the movie word for word - but rather highlights the scenes and memorable lines. Sometimes the narrator comments on the action - allowing the audience to enjoy its nostalgic moments, or even brings forth the stereotypes of some of the characters that were common in that era, but now people are more aware of diversity and cultural sensitivity. His contemporary awareness frames the play for a modern audience but still brings forth the timeless themes of family, community and the worth of the common man.

ABOUT ONE-PERSON SHOWS

A **one-person show** (**one-man show** or **one-woman show**) is a performance by a single actor—though there may be live or recorded musical accompaniment. The show may be a collage, such as Brian Bedford's *The Lunatic, The Lover and the Poet*, consisting of excerpts from Shakespeare's poems and plays. It may be autobiographical, such as Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*. It may be musical, such as Phyllis Newman's *The Mad Woman of Central Park West*, written with Arthur Laurents. Or it may be an impersonation, such as Julie Harris playing Emily Dickinson in William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*.

--NTC's Dictionary of Theatre and Drama Terms

HISTORY

We may assume that individuals have told stories in front of other members of their tribe or society for thousands of years. They would have orally passed down many of today's myths and legends in this manner. So it is a style of performance that has been with us for generations developing through theatrical people such as Greek Monologists, the strolling Minstrels of Medieval England and the French Troubadours.



French Troubadour

Edgar Allan Poe both lectured and recited poetry as a platform performer between 1843 and 1849; his performances stand as a paradigm of the one-person show hybrid simply called "the lecture-recital." The reading tours of Charles Dickens in Britain and America between 1858 and 1870 created a sensation. His American tour of 1867-68 was unparalleled until the arrival of the Beatles in the early 1960's.

One person shows enjoyed an unprecedented artistic and commercial vogue in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century (John S. Gentile Calls it the golden age of platform performance). Literary historians often associate the Victorian period with the highest development of the dramatic monologue as a poetic form. There were several discussions about the importance and distinction between the literary monologue and the performance monologue during the nineteenth century, however, this discussion confirms a continuous interchange between literature and performance, which may at times appear competitive but is more often productive. By the time the United States entered the twentieth century, the number and variety of professional one-person shows presented throughout the country was truly prodigious. This renaissance of solo performance also created ripples in the larger sense of American theatre; after this "boom" of the one-man show had passed, the presentational style seeped into popular theatre productions such as *Amadeus*, *Equus*, and *Evita* among others, modeling a combination of representational theatricality and presentational, direct-address style. By the 1960s, the term performance art became popular and involved any number of performance acts or happenings, as they were known. Many performers, like Laurie Anderson, developed through these happenings and are still performing today.

ABOUT THE CREATIVE STAFF

Jeremy Kendall (Narrator, George Bailey, others)

A veteran actor of stage and screen, he has starred in several films including Indie cult favorite, *Lilith*, shot in 2011 by filmmaker Sridhar Reddy. He has performed in roles for the Cleveland Playhouse, Dobama Theatre, The Nebraska Shakespeare Festival and the Nebraska Repertory Theatre. He has been the spokesperson for Metro Toyota in regional commercials, and has recently written a one-man show based on stories from the Battle of Gettysburg. Jeremy received his M.F.A. in acting from the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film at the University of Nebraska and is a proud member of Actor's Equity and SAG/AFTRA.



Jeremy Kendall

Dan Deal (Director)

Dan has been producing and performing in theatre for the past two decades. He has directed, choreographed and brought to the stage many classic theatre pieces, new works, reviews, cabarets and showcases in the thriving Lancaster Pennsylvania theatre community. Dan is part of the production team at Sight and Sound Theatres (The nation's largest faith based theatre organization) where he has helped to develop and bring to life numerous productions. Favorite credits include: *Jonah*, *Voices of Christmas*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Aida*, *The Last Five Years*, and of course... *This Wonderful Life*, to name a few. He'd like to thank you for attending today's performance and he hopes that it warms your heart as it reminds each of us that life is wonderful when it's shared with the people around us! Merry Christmas and God bless you!

Adam Boyer (Production Manager)

Adam is from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is a freelancer in the area, as well as the house electrician at the Strand-Capitol Performing Arts Center in York, PA. Before moving back to his hometown two years ago, he was a Head Electrician for several *Disney on Ice* and *Disney Live* productions and has toured North America and internationally. Adam holds an MFA in Theatrical Design from the University of Iowa and a BA in Theatre Technology and Design from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Steve Murray (Playwright)

Steve Murray is an award-winning arts journalist and playwright, and his plays, including *Hungry to Bed*, *Rescue & Recovery*, *Mileage* and *This Passion Thing*, have been produced internationally. *This Wonderful Life*, his take on the Frank Capra film, has been one of the most frequently produced scripts in the country since its premiere at Portland Center Stage in 2005. He received a 2010 Tanne Foundation Arts Award. Murray is critic-in-residence for Art Matters, an arts journalism project organized by the Macon Arts Alliance and Mercer University's Center for Collaborative Journalism.



WHO'S WHO IN BEDFORD FALLS – CAST OF CHARACTERS

Host - Jeremy Kendall – narrator, commentator, also plays the following roles.

George Bailey - the center of the story, a generous, seemingly unlucky man.

Franklin - an angel

Joseph - an angel

Clarence - an angel assigned to take care of George

Sam Wainwright - childhood friend of George

Harry Bailey - brother of George

Mr. Gower - owner of neighborhood drugstore

Mary Hatch - wife of George

Violet Bick - classmate of George

Uncle Billy - uncle of George and Harry

Mr. Potter - evil, greedy, land-owning mogul

Peter Bailey - father of George

Freddy - “Alfalfa” high school classmate

Man on Porch - a guy on his porch

Mrs. Bailey - mother of George

Mrs. Hatch - mother of Mary

Annie - the maid of the Bailey family

Ernie - the cabbie

Randall - some wisenheimer

Mrs. Davis - woman in town

Mr. Martini - the local bar owner

Nick - the bartender

Pete - son of George

Janie - daughter of George

Tommy - son of George

Zuzu - daughter of George

Mr. Welch - Zuzu’s teacher’s husband

Bert - police officer of Bedford Falls

List courtesy of Portland Center Stage

MOMENTS IN TIME

Knowing about life in Post-World War II America is important to understanding some of the circumstances in the play and movie. The action takes place on Christmas Eve 1946, just after WWII. The American economy was thriving, but the fear of war and the Great Depression were still lingering in the citizens' minds. This led to some of the important events of George Bailey's adult life.

The Depression: In 1929, the world economy took a dive when the stock market crashed on Wall Street. This was followed briefly by a series of economic ups and downs, but ultimately resulted in a worldwide recession. For ten years, the world economy was unstable. Banks began to close, unemployment rose. Farmers struggled. Trade was at an all-time low, resulting in fewer goods being available. The Second World War began in 1939, bringing much of the world out of the Depression. The cost of building armies and equipment forced the United States to borrow and spend. Thus, jobs were created and money was back in the market.



The Run on the Bank: The scene where the Bailey Building and Loan was threatened with a “run on the bank,” was particularly scary for many Americans in 1946. This was a common problem during the Great Depression and the citizens of Bedford Falls hadn't yet forgotten. Essentially, a “run” meant that the bank patrons wanted their money right away because they feared the bank would close and leave them broke. Banks (and George) couldn't return all the money, however, because of the way loan systems work. The money



that people put into a bank isn't just held in a vault. Instead, it is invested through loans to other members of the bank and only a small amount of money is kept in the bank, in order to facilitate the daily transactions. The rest of the money is constantly loaned and repaid. This is why George tells the people of Bedford Falls “Your money's in Joe's house – right next to yours. And in the Kennedy house...” When the consumers “run” the bank, the bank drains its funds trying to repay its consumers, leaving nothing left for bank operations, forcing it to close.

Suburban life: WWII also brought about a migration of people from the major cities to the surrounding suburban areas. With factories shifting from making war supplies to cars, automobiles were more affordable, giving families the opportunity to live outside the city. Suburban housing plans began to sprout up to accommodate these families. George's "Bailey Park" was similar to these plans. When George saw the way his neighbors were being treated by their landlord, Mr. Potter, he decided to protect the community from the poisons of Mr. Potter's business practices by selling the lots affordably to families like the Martinis.



QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Watch the movie before seeing the play. What are the differences of the film and the play? What are the similarities?
2. For some families, watching the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life* is a tradition every holiday season. What are some of your family traditions? Do you remember how they started?
3. Write a one page story. Give it to a class mate and have them turn it into a play. How did you choose the dialogue? How did you let the audience know who the character was?
4. What are some of the themes of the play? Why do you think they still are relevant today?
5. Choose a character from the movie. Imagine it was told from their point of view. What would you need to know about them?