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Written by Maureen Younger

ARTS

## Rated or Dated: It's a Wonderful Life

In the run-up to the big tinselly bang, our writers check out some celluloid classics. Does *Maureen Younger* still get the fuzzies watching Frank Capra's 1946 cockle-warmer?

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Heartwarming fare or lukewarm leftovers: does *It's a Wonderful Life* still satisfy those feelgood cravings?

**What and why:** Christmas can be a rather depressing time of year where we may find ourselves concentrating less on what we should be thankful for, instead focusing on what has gone wrong or what is missing in our lives. Therefore, if you're in need of a seasonal pick-up, you can't do much better than to sit down and watch *It's a Wonderful Life*.

This might seem an odd choice given that the film's plot hinges on the emotional turmoil of its hero, George Bailey (James Stewart), who becomes so desperate that he contemplates suicide. That is, until Angel Second Class Clarence Odbody (Henry Travers) comes along to make George, and by extension us, appreciate how wonderful life is.

Almost half the film is taken up with George's life leading up to this pivotal point. Thus we see him as a youth, full of dreams: he wants to escape his small town, go to college, travel the world and build great buildings. And then life and love get in the way.

His dreams come to nothing: he marries, has four children and ends up running the local bank, Bailey Brothers Buildings and Loan, on a small salary while his brother becomes a war hero and a close friend of his becomes a successful businessman. To all intents and purposes, George is leading a rather mundane life.

Worse is to follow. One Christmas Eve, George's Uncle Billy (Thomas Mitchell) misplaces \$8,000 just as the bank inspector calls. Facing bankruptcy and imprisonment, George is forced to beg arch-rival Mr Potter (Lionel Barrymore) for a loan to tide him over. Potter refuses. As George's only asset is his life insurance policy, Potter points out that George is now worth more dead than alive.

"It's hard to imagine a film like this being made today, but I'm not convinced such life-affirming films were that common back in 1946."

A thought that George seems intent to act upon until Clarence intervenes. Sent down from heaven to save George, if Clarence succeeds, he will finally get those wings he's been waiting 200 years for. He spots his chance when George tells him how everyone would have been better off if he had never existed. Clarence decides to show George exactly what life would have been like had George never been born.

Faced with this alternative reality, it turns out that although George's life might seem humdrum, his essential goodness has had ripple effects throughout the community and beyond. No more so when he saved the life of his younger brother, Harry (Todd Karns). Harry goes on to be a war hero, saving numerous lives on a military transport.

Of course, in this alternative world where George no longer exists, Clarence informs George that: "Every man on the transport died because Harry wasn't alive to save them because you weren't alive to save Harry."

Made to realise that his life did matter to those around him in ways he could never have imagined and seeing the reaction of the townspeople once they learn of his predicament brings home to George that he has, indeed, had a wonderful life. This neatly encapsulates the message of the film that no man is an island.



**Rated or dated:** It's hard to imagine a film like this being made today, but I'm not convinced such life-affirming films were that common back in 1946.

Directed by Frank Capra, it has his stamp all over it. Capra was adept at making uplifting and heartwarming movies depicting how the little man wins out no matter what the odds.

Capra was a gifted director who populated his films with a lot of humour and great character actors to balance out the sentimentality. His genius when it came to casting is best exemplified by the choice of James Stewart to play George. It's hard to make good characters endearing or interesting: Stewart manages both with apparent ease. As played by Stewart, George is good, goofy and loveable but also believable when in utter despair.

So is the film dated? Perhaps the most dated aspect of the movie for today's filmgoers is the depiction of George's wife, Mary (Donna Reed), whose sole ambition in life seems to be to marry George. Though to be fair, she is the one who sets the wheels in motion to solve his money troubles.

It also says something of the opprobrium then directed towards "old maids" (I'm quoting the film's terminology here) when George reviews what the world would have been like without him. Here Mary's single status is grouped alongside the accidental poisoning of a child and a transport of soldiers being killed. That seems rather harsh.

I'm also uncertain as to why being single means that Mary loses her dress sense or why her eyesight starts to fail, and thus while in "old maid" mode she resorts to wearing an unflattering pair of glasses as well as a rather hideous outfit.

"In essence, the film's message is that we all count no matter who we are, no matter what our circumstances. In an increasingly cynical and materialistic world, perhaps this film's message is more relevant than ever."

Yet in some ways the film seems more relevant than when I watched it the first time round. During the course of the film there's a run on the banks, houses are being repossessed and big business, in the form of Mr Potter, thinks solely of money and not people, seeing the latter as a discontented rabble rather than a thrifty working class.

Oh yes, and there's a lack of decent, affordable homes. One of George's most impassioned speeches is about the endless wait of people having to save up to buy a decent home. As George says: "This rabble do most of the living and paying and dying. Is it too much to ask for them to live, pay and die in a couple of decent rooms?"

And it's George's commitment to building decent homes via the Buildings and Loan that so infuriates Potter, who rents out shoddy housing at exorbitant rents to the town's population. Potter is the epitome of money-grasping big business, trying to get its tentacles into every aspect of people's lives, while having politicians in its pockets.

In that sense, the film doesn't seem dated at all.

It is the heart of the movie that makes this film a classic 70 years on, as witnessed by the fact I still cry every time I watch that final scene when Clarence finally wins his wings.

In essence, the film's message is that we all count no matter who we are, no matter what our circumstances. In an increasingly cynical and materialistic world, where it seems some people live their lives vicariously through others via social media, perhaps this film's message is more relevant than ever.

Potter might be the biggest man in town; Potter might be the most powerful man in town; Potter may be rich beyond anyone's dreams but by the end of the movie it's clear that it's the broke and average Joe, George Bailey, surrounded by his friends and family, who has had the far richer life.

It is George, not Potter, as George's war hero brother points out, who is "the richest man in town". **RATED.**

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