

It's a Wonderful Life - ENO, December 2022

The most well-known aspect of *It's a Wonderful Life* is its revelation of a parallel universe. George Bailey is on the brink of suicide at the start of the film. He changes his mind after being shown a nightmarish vision of a world in which he never existed – 'Pottersville' is a dark counterpart to the fundamentally wholesome 'Bedford Falls'. This section comes right at the end, yet the film as a whole is riven through with contradictions, flip sides, and paths hinted at but not taken. It is a tale of struggle, despair and abandoned dreams – yet ultimately redemption. The film has an obvious villain – Mr Potter – but he never gets his comeuppance. It is conservative, yet strangely subversive. George marries Mary, the love of his life, but before declaring himself he brutally shakes her, yelling "I don't want to get married to anyone, ever – do you understand that?". He brings four children into the world but they become part of his existential crisis ("Why did we have to have all these kids?"). Other parallel universes are hinted at but remain inaccessible: in his fantasy life, George is an explorer, an adventurer, travelling the world; in his real life, he is thwarted every time he tries to leave town.

These contradictions seep into the film's reception in the decades since it was made. The film was released in 1946 – and flopped. Today, it is regarded as one of the beloved films ever made – apart from by those who think it one of the darkest, and most terrifying. It is often cited as 'feelgood,' yet it explores lifelong disappointment and resentment, as well as corruption and suicide. It is considered old-fashioned and sentimental, and regularly tops the 'Best Christmas Film' lists; but its contemporary relevance seems to grow with every year. In 2018, during the Trump administration, the *Guardian's* film writer Peter Bradshaw wrote a piece with the opening line: "A crisis in housing, a racist ruling class and a struggle against a hideous ego-plutocrat who names everything after himself – this 1946 classic still resonates". As we witness further economic turbulence including – at the time of writing – the dramatic fall of the pound, George's feelings of powerlessness and his desperate financial state are increasingly familiar. *It's a Wonderful Life* is, then, an almost hyperbolic example of film critic Mark Kermode's view that 'you get from a movie what you bring to it.'

The film's conception and production history are as unusual as its critical journey. It was conceived by Philip van Doren Stern – apparently in a dream - as a Christmas story, with more than a passing resemblance to Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Unable to get his story published, he printed it himself and distributed it as a 'Christmas card' to friends and family in December 1943. The rights were bought by RKO pictures for \$10,000 and shown to director Frank Capra in 1944. Capra, who was already known for his portraits of small-town America such as *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (also starring James Stewart), was enchanted. Once Stewart had returned from serving in World War II Capra pitched the idea to him – as Stewart later recalled: "You play a fella in a small town. You get married, you have all these kids, and your father dies, and you have to take over the building and loans. And finally, you're going to kill yourself, you're going to jump off a bridge, and an angel, by the name of Clarence, comes in to help you, but he can't swim, so you go down and save the ..." He trailed off. "This doesn't sound very good, does it?" But Stewart – desperate to start working again – jumped at the chance. The film was shot during a heatwave in 1946, with the Christmas snow created out of foamite, chipped ice, and soap flakes.

Capra was thrilled with the finished film and optimistic of great success, but the critics disagreed. Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* felt it was a 'moralistic fable,' and that 'the weakness of this picture ... is the sentimentality of it'. The anonymous reviewer in the

British *Times*, similarly, wrote 'Mr Frank Capra has exploited the sentimental possibilities of his theme to the full' and that 'it is not a good film' (though the writer conceded it was a 'generous' film). Audiences were similarly ambivalent, perhaps feeling that in the immediate aftermath of World War II they wanted something more straightforwardly uplifting. The production effectively ruined Capra's Liberty Films production company, and fell into obscurity. However, a clerical error in 1973 meant its copyright lapsed – an oversight that effectively revived its fortunes. It was shown hundreds of times on US television during the following two decades, establishing itself as a national favourite. The copyright was reclaimed in the early 1990s, but the fondness for the film has persisted. It is frequently shown on the big screen, particularly around Christmas. The imagery of George Bailey running through the snow-lined streets of Bedford Falls hollering 'Merry Christmas!' to everyone and everything is as seasonal as mince pies.

But is the film as beloved as the endless polls of Christmas films suggests? For those not predisposed to its inspirational message, there are further elements in its debit column. The one person of colour – the Baileys' maid – is an uncomfortable stereotype and is treated with condescension. The other female characters are similarly constrained by cliché: Mary and Violet are seen initially as children, fighting over George's attentions. In later life, Violet is a 'good-time girl' (who in the 'nightmare' universe is seen being thrown out of a club), and Mary is the 'good wife' (who in the nightmare sequence is confined to a fate worse than death: a spinster, with a job in the library). And the sentimentality that troubled the early critics is still a sticking point. For Andrew Gilchrist, 'It's a picket fence of a film, nauseatingly wholesome as it trundles through 1940s America like a station wagon on its way back from the mall.'

Gilchrist goes on (tongue firmly in cheek) to suggest that the film's otherwise saccharine quality makes Pottersville look fantastic. It does, certainly, look fantastic in a cinematic sense. It is filmed in a different style, an unsettling *noir* with the set re-dressed in garish neon, and not a picket fence in sight. This aspect of *It's a Wonderful Life* – its self-conscious playing with film genre – is perhaps part of its appeal to contemporary audiences, and explains its influence across cinema history. There is a clear reference to 'Pottersville' in 1989's *Back to the Future II*, which portrays a grim parallel universe triggered by a time-travelling mistake. *The Truman Show* (1998) is another film in which the principal character craves another life, but is unable to leave his small town. The 'parallel universe' trope is increasingly common in contemporary cinema: *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* are just two examples from this year alone.

All is resolved at the film's end: the town comes together to help George, and the closing homily is that 'No man is a failure who has friends.' Is it, then, a 'happy ever after film'? Jenny Diski writes 'I've never understood how *It's a Wonderful Life* is seen as a beacon of Christmas hope. It's one of the darkest films I know.' And Rich Cohen puts it more bluntly: 'I don't care what your parents told you. "It's a Wonderful Life," ... is really the most terrifying Hollywood film ever made.' David Thomson, suggesting something in the middle, writes that while 'it turns out all right, thanks to ... Clarence, thanks to Christmas and it's being a movie...what else from 1946 still bears watching in the same suspense – as if your life depended on it?' For those seeking a feel-good 'Christmas film', *It's a Wonderful Life* delivers. Yet it will also satisfy those who like their Americana with a side-order of dark underbelly. Back in 1946 Capra could not have foreseen what contemporary audiences would bring to each screening. As he said, reflecting back on it some years after its release: "The film has a life of its own now, and I can look at it like I had nothing to do with it. I'm

like a parent whose kid grows up to be President. I'm proud...but it's the kid who did the work."