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**It's A Wonderful Movie**

**By Stephen Schochet**

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It's A Wonderful Life (1946) began as a short story called "The Greatest Gift". Writer Philip Van Doren Stern was unable to sell it to a publisher, so he sent the tale out as a long Christmas card to friends. His agent subsequently sold the fable to RKO pictures, where it went through several transformations. In one version a losing political candidate contemplated suicide, only to have an angel convince him to stick around and do good works. Finally it fell into the hands of Director Frank Capra who cried when he read it, said it was the story he had been looking for all his life, and purchased it to be the first project for his new production company, Liberty Films.

To play the unassuming savings and loan clerk, Capra wanted Jimmy Stewart who he had previously worked with in You Can't Take It With You (1938) and Mr. Smith Goes To Washington (1939). But coming back from World War II, the thirty-seven year old Stewart was no longer the easy going man about town he had been in the thirties. The former Academy Award winner for The Philadelphia Story (1940) had led a thousand men in bombing missions in the European theater in hard to maneuver B-24s. The loud engines damaged his hearing, in later years people when people would greet him and he would fail to respond, some would mistake his deafness for a cold personality. He was uncertain after five years away from the screen if he still wanted to be in the movies. Sometimes the profession seemed so humiliating. In 1943 when Stewart had tried to stay in the best hotel in Madrid, he was turned away because he was an actor. He went back to the air force base, got his Lieutenant Colonel's uniform and then they let him in.

When he returned to Southern California in 1945 Stewart took things easy. He refused to re-sign with his old studio MGM, despite tearful requests to do so from the hammy Louis B. Mayer. He was content to spend time flying kites and building model planes with Henry Fonda. When Capra came to make his pitch Stewart looked bored, out of it, causing the Director to lose confidence. "Well Jim, it's about a savings and loan clerk who wants to commit suicide. There's an angel named Clarence who shows him what life would have been like without him. . . aw forget it, it's a stupid idea." Capra was turning to leave when Stewart put his hand on his shoulder. "Frank, if you want me, I'm your man." At least

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that's how the film's publicists told it.

Stewart was morose and insecure as filming began. Since he went off to serve, Hollywood had found new leading men like Kirk Douglas and Gregory Peck who were seven years younger than he was. Some scenes called for the now graying actor to still be in high school. He felt ridiculous and considered plastic surgery. But he was helped greatly by his co-star Donna Reed who encouraged him throughout. In the romantic scene where George (Stewart) and Mary (Reed) declared their love for each other, Capra joked that Stewart was so nervous he wrapped a phone chord around them so he wouldn't run away. James was also helped by the film's villain Lionel Barrymore who was confined to wheelchair because of crippling arthritis. "Son, I want you to cheer up. Don't you know you make people happier being a movie star than you ever did shooting at them in a plane."

In the 1930's Capra had toiled at Columbia Pictures which was ruled by the autocratic Harry Cohn, long considered the meanest man in Hollywood. The Mogul kept the entire studio electronically

bugged, displayed a huge portrait of Mussolini in his office, and used an electrified chair to give unsuspecting victims sudden jolts. Capra had sat in it once, received a shock and angrily smashed the chair to bits. When filming began on *It's A Wonderful Life*, Capra was happy to be free of Cohn, but nervous. Now his own money was part of the investment. Known for making movie sets fun places to work, he was at first crabby and irritable with his cast and crew. Filming a snowy, Christmas movie in over one hundred degree heat in Encino did not help morale. Many of the heavily dressed actors fainted. But there were nice moments. One scene required Mary to throw a rock through an old mansion window and make a wish. Capra had a marksman ready off camera but to his delight Reed shattered the glass on her own. She turned to him and said, "Why so surprised? Don't you think an Iowa farm girl would know how to play baseball?"

As the shoot progressed Capra regained his confidence. He disdained special effects when Clarence Oddbody the angel (Henry Travers) did his magic, preferring to tell the story through his actor's faces. The Director started to believe he was making the greatest movie ever. As his mood lightened the Company enjoyed picnics and singing on the set which were hallmarks of Capra's earlier films.

Too dark, the Country wanted comedy like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. Too dated, *Wonderful Life* came off like a depression film rather than a post war movie. For whatever reason the three million dollar production failed to make its money back. Capra chose to fold his tent shortly after the movie's release calling Liberty Films, "The quickest way to go broke a man ever devised." Stewart panicked. The ex-war hero received a phone call from his agent. "Donna Reed loved working with you. She wants to do it again." "No way. That girl is jinxed." June Allyson became his leading lady of choice playing his wife five times. Decades later he would praise the performance of a bemused Donna Reed for making *Wonderful Life* great. "My God," she told her friends. "He sure didn't say that when it came out."

Years passed. From that point on Capra, unwilling to either risk his own money or work for somebody else directed very few movies. Stewart decided to portray a stronger image on screen. He refused to play in war movies saying they were unrealistic, choosing instead hard, gritty Westerns like *The Man From Laramie* (1954) which helped to make him rich and surpass John Wayne as the nation's number

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one box office star. Reed restored her career by winning an Academy Award for playing a prostitute in *From Here To Eternity* (1953) and then became one of television's most wholesome mothers. And *It's A Wonderful Life* fell into the public domain in 1973 because no one renewed its copyright. The forgotten film was shown repeatedly on almost every cable television station, finally got a huge viewership, and became a perennial Christmas Classic.

Stephen Schochet is the author and narrator of the audiobooks *Fascinating Walt Disney* and *Tales Of Hollywood*. The *Saint Louis Post Dispatch* says, "these two elaborate productions are exceptionally entertaining." Hear realaudio samples of these great, unique gifts at

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**By Chuck Dunlevy**

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