



## **It's a Wonderful Life**

West Virginia Public Theatre – December 2018

### **Summary**

Set in upstate New York during the first half of the 20th century, "It's a Wonderful Life" tells the story of a young man who wanted to travel, have adventures, go to college, and be an architect in a big city. But George Bailey's responsibilities to his family and to his community kept him from leaving the small town where he grew up. He held down a responsible job, raised a family, treated people decently, and helped out whenever he could. One tumultuous Christmas Eve, Bailey is shown how much he has meant to those around him and that happiness can be found in family, friends and fulfilling responsibility, right in your own home town. This charming Hollywood classic is almost as fresh today as when the original film was released in 1946.

### **Major Characters**

George Bailey – The protagonist, seen from ages 13-35 over the course of the play. He has big dreams, but he spends his life putting them aside in order to do the right thing.

Mary Hatch – George's loving wife. A realist who keeps George grounded.

Clarence – A well-meaning (if a bit bumbling) guardian angel, sent to Earth in response to the prayers of George's family and friends.

Mr. Potter – “The richest and meanest man in the county,” Mr. Potter is determined to put the Bailey Building and Loan out of business.

Uncle Billy – George’s clumsy and forgetful uncle and business partner in the Building and Loan.

Peter Bailey – George’s kindhearted father, founder of the Bailey Building and Loan, and one of the angels who sends Clarence for help.

Rachel – The Senior Angel who guides Clarence through George’s life.

Harry Bailey – George’s charming and successful younger brother.

Mrs. Bailey – George’s mother.

Zuzu, Tommy, Pete, and Janie Bailey – George and Mary’s children.

### **Vocabulary Words**

1. Ambitious – Having a strong desire and determination to succeed.
2. Banquet - An elaborate and formal meal, often followed by speeches.
3. Capsule - A small case of gelatin containing a dose of medicine.
4. Charleston – A lively dance of the 1920s.
5. Devotion – Love and loyalty for a person, activity, or cause.
6. Discouraged - Having lost confidence or enthusiasm; disheartened.
7. Discrepancy – A lack of compatibility between two or more facts.
8. Disenchanted – Disappointed by something previously admired, freed from illusion.
9. Enthusiastic – Having intense or eager enjoyment, interest, or approval.
10. Executive – A person with senior managerial responsibility in a business organization.
11. Frankincense – An aromatic resin from an African tree that is burned as incense.
12. Influenza – A highly contagious viral respiratory infection, commonly called “flu.”
13. Jukebox - A machine that plays a selected musical recording when a coin is inserted.
14. Measly – Too small in size or amount, not enough.
15. Narration – A commentary delivered to accompany a movie, broadcast, etc.
16. Obligation – A duty or commitment.
17. Scandal – An event regarded as morally wrong and causing public outrage.
18. Slum – A house of building unfit for human habitation.
19. Stockholder – An owner of shares in a company.
20. Tourist – A person who is traveling or visiting a place for pleasure.

### **Discussion Questions**

*Choose the questions most appropriate for your students.*

#### **I. Questions to Stimulate Discussion - Get them Talking and Thinking**

1. Did you learn anything from this play? If you did, what was it?
2. What is the message of this play? Do you agree or disagree with it?

3. Was there something you didn't understand about the play? What was that?
4. If you had a chance to ask a character in this play a question, what would it be?
5. If you were writing this play, would you have changed the ending? Explain why or why not.
6. Did any of the characters in this play make you angry? Tell us why.
7. Did you come to respect any of the characters in this play? Who was it and why did you come to respect that character?
8. Should George have taken the job that Potter offered him?
9. Do you consider George Bailey to be a role model? Tell us why.
10. Without good citizens like George Bailey and his father, what would have happened to Bedford Falls?

## **II. Questions About Plot, Character, Theme, and Other Literary Devices**

1. Compare the themes and plot structure of "It's a Wonderful Life" and "A Christmas Carol."
2. What is the setting (time and place) of this story? Could this story be told in any other time or place?
3. One way to examine plot is to determine what type of conflict it entails: (1) person vs. person; (2) person vs. society, (3) person vs. nature, and (4) person vs. self. Often, more than one of these types of conflict occurs in a story. Using this analysis, briefly describe the conflicts in this story and classify them according to the categories set out above.
4. As the story progresses toward a conclusion, internal as well as external conflicts suffered by the major characters are resolved. Describe George Bailey's internal and external conflicts. In addition, tell us how his choices lead to a resolution of these conflicts.
5. What motivates the protagonist in his or her struggle against the antagonist?
6. How does the protagonist work against the antagonist? Recount one specific episode in this struggle.
7. What motivates the antagonist to resist or struggle against the protagonist?
8. Subconscious motives are often the most powerful causes of human behavior. Are there any major characters who act on motives of which they are not aware? Describe any unconscious motives of the major characters and explain how these motives affect the actions of those characters.
9. What is the moment of climax, the moment of highest tension, when the solution to the problem is now in sight?
10. What does the title of the play refer to and how does it relate to the themes of the play?

### III. Questions Concerning Theatrical Devices and Effects

*These questions can be asked with respect to the entire play or limited to an appropriate scene, character, costume, etc.*

1. How do the costumes, set design, lights, sound and props contribute to the mood the director is trying to establish?
2. How did the actors create their characters? What did their voice, movements, and other acting choices tell us about their characters?
3. Analyze the use of music in the play. Did it enhance the story that the director was trying to tell? How would you have used music in this play?

### Theatre Etiquette

Learning theatre etiquette will enable you to avoid embarrassment. It is important to remember that the actors on stage can see and hear you at the same time you can see and hear them. Be respectful of the actors and your fellow audience members by being attentive and observing these guidelines. Going to a show is a special experience, one that you will remember for a lifetime. Everyone in the audience has been looking forward to seeing the performance just as much as you have, so it's very important to remember the rules of theatre etiquette. That way, everyone can have a good time.

Live theatre is really happening – right now – and it is an art form that depends on both actors and audience. When you walk into a theater, you can feel that something is about to happen. It is exciting just to be in the room. The stage holds the secret of what is about to come to life, as you find your seats for a performance that is being presented just for you! Sometimes it is so thrilling you want to get goofy, laugh and shout. But remember that when the play begins, everyone in the audience has a responsibility. You are part of the play. You are connected with the other people in the audience and the actors on stage. They can SEE you, HEAR you, and FEEL you, just as you can see, hear and feel them. If you are talking about what you did yesterday or opening a candy wrapper, you will miss something. And, it will miss you. Your laughter, your responses, your attention, your imagination, and most especially your energy, are part of the experience. In short, the play can be better because of YOU!

#### Rules to Follow

1. Arrive on time.
2. Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
3. Turn off cell phones and other devices. Also, no photos during the performance. All of this can be very distracting to the actors and those around you.
4. Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to many shows about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
5. Don't speak during the performance (not even whispering!) unless there is an emergency.
6. Remember that the overture (introductory music) is part of the performance, so be
7. quiet when it begins.

8. Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave due to an emergency, exit during intermission or an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment – both to the actors and your fellow audience members.
9. No food or drink in the theater please. Wait until intermission to search through your purse or bag – you may be making more noise than you think.
10. Applause is a sound actors love to hear! Appropriate times to clap are between acts or sets. You should applaud at the end of a solo or when the performance has concluded. Please feel free to have honest reactions to what is happening onstage.
11. You can laugh, applaud, and enjoy the performance.

### **Theatre Terms**

1. Actor – A person who performs in the play on stage
2. Apron – The portion of the stage that is outside the proscenium arch (the arch between the stage and auditorium)
3. Choreographer – Creates the show's dances, teaching routines to the actors.
4. Director – The person charged with the overall interpretation of a work, who conducts rehearsals, blocks the action (tells actors where & when to move), and assists the actors in developing their character.
5. Front of House – The part of the theater where the audience is seated.
6. House – Used to describe the audience or as a short way of saying “front of the house.”
7. House Manager – Person who ensures that the audience members are seated in their appropriate places by the time the play is to start: ensures that the play starts on time by communicating with the stage manager.
8. Pit – An area at the front of the house, usually sunken, where the musicians and conductor work during the show.
9. Props (Properties) – All the items used in a play or musical to help tell the story – not scenery or costumes.
10. Scenery – Everything on the stage (except props) used to represent the place where, and sometimes when, the action is occurring.
11. Stage Manager – The person who manages the stage and backstage during rehearsals and performances, responsible for running the entire show from curtain opening to final curtain call.

### **Resources**

<http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/its-a-wonderful-life.html>

<https://www.shmoop.com/its-a-wonderful-life/>