

It's a Wonderful Life (U)

19th December 2011

Director: **Frank Capra**
USA 1946

Running time : 130 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **James Stewart** (George Bailey), **Donna Reed** (Mary Hatch), **Lionel Barrymore** (Henry F. Potter), **Thomas Mitchell** (Uncle Billy), **Henry Travers** (Clarence).

SCRIPT: **Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett & Frank Capra**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Joseph Biroc, Joseph Walker & Victor Milner**. EDITING: **William Hornbeck**. MUSIC: **Dimitri Tiomkin**.

It's a Wonderful Life was one of a spate of films with angels and demons that came out both during and immediately after the war (*Here Comes Mr Jordan, 1941, Heaven Can Wait, 1943, A Matter of Life and Death, 1946*), whose mission was presumably to reassure a bereaved world population that whatever happened to their loved ones it was all by some heavenly design and moreover that life after death was a breeze. This last statement is somewhat of a generalisation but at any rate holds true for audiences, for all these films were comedies.

If the title of tonight's picture strikes you as optimistic to the point of insensitivity, immediately after a conflict that cost twenty million lives, then you may be right, but the fact is that no one seemed to notice the affront at the time, and surely none was intended. So far as Capra and Stewart were concerned – both had done war duties – it was back to business as usual and they simply picked up where *Mr Smith Goes to Washington, 1939* left off. (Ironically, Stewart had enjoyed the USAF career denied his character in the new film.) Their business was to entertain the American public, and at that moment, once the euphoria of victory had abated, people needed cheering, but also help adjusting to peace.

Capra's stock in trade had become a form of comedy which extolled solid (for which read small town) American values and often featured a well-meaning young man from the sticks who is manipulated by the press or some unscrupulous cynic. Stewart himself excelled at playing such a character, though he knew how to turn on his tormentors, too. *It's a Wonderful Life*, then, is at once a return to home territory for director and star, and also an attempt at something more mythic, almost Dickensian, as if it knew it would be shown at Christmas by networks in worlds to come.

The story is epic in conception. You have probably forgotten but like *Angels with Dirty Faces, 1937*, and countless other Hollywood films with serious pretensions, it begins with childhood scenes. We see the young George Bailey save his brother from drowning; we even see a young (bespectacled) Mary. George is no sluggard: he is tough, driven and determined; he knows where he is going. He wants to travel, build things: 'I'm gonna shake the dust of this crumby little town off my feet and I'm gonna see the world!'

Fate, however, conspires otherwise and he must man the family business. For lurking in the background to gobble up the town and its debtors the minute the benign old Building and Loan goes under is Henry Potter, a crippled and embittered plutocrat, the Gordon Gekko of Bedford Falls. Like his counterpart Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, also Capra's *Mr Deeds*, Stewart must stay in town and stand up to the badmen, rather than leave with his new wife. Knocked down once too often, he needs a bit of help from on high, however, and that's where Clarence the angel comes in.

Most of the film has been a flashback from that crisis point, triggering a celestial conversation over what to do about a fellow by the name of George Bailey... Right from the start we sort of know it's going to be okay, and we can sit back and watch George work it all out. Like Dorothy he has to learn the hard way the essential sufficiency of rural America, a place where if you have friends and loved ones you have all you need. Such is Capra's unambitious message to a world licking its wounds from a fight with rapacious expansionism.

David Clare