COVER STORY

Golden Phoenix

'It's a Wonderful Life'

BY ERIK J. MARTIN

The first time I saw *It's A Wonderful Life* was in 1979, when it was played uninterrupted on local public television. I was just a 12-year old kid sprawled out in front of the living room TV, mesmerized—Christmas tree glistening off to the right and powderflake snow wafting down outside the front window as George Bailey stood grinning like a gingerbread man while his friends and family sang a heartwarming Auld Lang Syne. Over fifteen years later, I can easily say I've seen the movie over 30 times. The film has so touched my life that I even proposed to my fiancee during a Christmastime viewing two years ago! (She accepted: after watching George and Mary fall in love in one of the silver screen's classic romances, how could she say no?)

In this, the film's 50th anniversary year, *It's A Wonderful Life* is as rich and golden a viewer's experience as it's ever been. For all its would-be "sentimental hogwash, the movie has captured a world audience unlike any other film to date. It's ever-increasing charisma is undeniable, its acting and production standards impeccable, and its reflection of wholesome, simple human values is timeless. Yet, amazingly, this unanimous cinematic classic experienced a rocky history, failing to enchant its audience upon its inception in 1946 and reaping miserable profits. Considering its dismal initial impact in the post-war 1940s, it is amazing to consider the incredible shared cultural phenomenon it has become today. *It's A Wonderful Life* is truly the definitive film phoenix risen from the ashes.

What if Abraham Lincoln had never been born? Philip Van Doren Stern, an established author of the post WWI literary world, was shaving the morning of Lincoln's birthday, 1938, when that sudden thought struck him. He developed the concept, imagining what the world would be like for an ordinary man if he wished he'd never been born. Stern dismissed the idea for a while, but went back five years later, developing it into a story entitled, "The Greatest Gift," which he sent out to over 200 people as Christmas card substitutes in 1943.

The author's agent received a copy and was so impressed that he convinced Cary Grant's agent to purchase the story for $10,000. The property changed hands with over 10 different people (including Howard Hughes) until it finally came into the possession of Frank Capra—director extraordinaire of the '30s with already four Academy Awards to his name. Capra was so charmed by the story that he immediately decided to turn it into a full-length motion picture, under his production and direction. It would, in fact, be the first project attempted by his newly created company, Liberty Films, formed in col-

Erik J. Martin of Oak Lawn, Illinois is a longtime fan of the classic Frank Capra film which, he says, is partially responsible for his own happy life!

THE CLASSIC FINAL SCENE in Frank Capra's 1946 film masterpiece "It's A Wonderful Life."

laboration with William Wyler, George Stevens and Samuel Briskin—three other celebrated directors of their time.

The ultra-perfectionist Capra, however, was not satisfied with the troublesome script for his movie, which was renamed *It's A Wonderful Life* (referred to as *LIFE,* henceforth), so he assigned famous husband and wife screenwriters Albert Hackett and Francis Goodrich the job of entirely reworking the script—even penning a bit of it himself. Capra re-envisioned his story not as a Christmas yarn, but as a story intended for any time of year. He wasn't intimidated by the tale's dark implications of suicide and despair. He saw the potential for transcendence and inspiration, and the depiction of abundant human emotion. Capra was already well-skilled in this art by virtue of his previous sentimental works like *Meet John Doe*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.*

From the start, there was only one actor who could fill the "smalltown-everyman" shoes of George Bailey for Capra, and that was Jimmy Stewart. A proven winner for the director in the thirties, Stewart was more than eager to work with Capra on the first commercial post-war film for each of them. Tedious scrutiny went into the selection of the rest of the cast. Capra wanted, above all, colorful characters and recognizable personalities, so he picked a rich stock of excellent character actors. He wasn't afraid to cast actors against type, or to sign personable black actors, either.

Capra's work ethic was rigorous and gruelling. He engrossed himself entirely in *LIFE* only four months after returning from active duty in World War II as a filmmaker, compiling a top-notch crew and affixing a 90 day shooting schedule on a budget of over $2 million.

From the beginning, Capra conceived

LIFE as his masterwork. "I thought it was the greatest film I ever made. Better yet, I thought it was the greatest film anybody ever made," Capra states in his autobiography. "It wasn't made for the oh-so bored critics or the oh-so jaded literati. It was my kind of film for my kind of people."

As an immigrant child, Capra was impressed by common, everyday people whose lives he so grew to appreciate that his ambition was to someday project them onto the screen. His greatest talent rested in his power to represent the ordinary man's strength to face apparently insurmountable evil, thereby benefitting his fellow man. Capra realized this power early in his career, when he decided to create films that would exhilarate the depressed spirits of the American public, inspired personally by his dramatic recovery from a serious illness.

"Improving the individual and bringing a more hopeful outlook on life to him is the only way you can improve the nation and ultimately the world," thought Capra. It was 1946, and both he and his fellow Americans were numb to the events of the war. *LIFE* seemed like the perfect cinematic salve.

The shooting went smoothly for the most part, except for going over budget an extra $1.5 million (mostly due to Capra's insistence that the film be shot in sequence). The director felt confident, however, that *LIFE* would be the biggest box-office smash of 1947, as well as a complete critical success. The general release was set for January 30, 1947.

Suddenly, a serious problem arose. RKO, Liberty's official distributor, couldn't process Technicolor prints of their swashbuckler movie "Sinbad the Sailor" quickly enough for its scheduled Christmas release. Capra was informed that his film would have to be moved up for a Christmas Eve opening in 50 nationwide theaters to fill the gap. Labs worked round the clock to process prints of *LIFE*, barely finishing in time. But there were possible advantages to this move: it qualified *LIFE* for the 1946 Oscar races, as opposed to 1947; and it, being a Christmas movie at heart, would appeal to audiences as a seasonably-festive film.

However, several prominent factors surfaced that inhibited the movie's success. First, the film was marketed not as a Christmas picture, but rather as a romantic comedy, very similar to Capra's goofball comedies of the thirties. The lobby posters showcased Jimmy Stewart lifting up Donna Reed next to the captions, "It's a powerful love story," and "James Stewart..America's favorite feller." There was no mention of the "man overcoming the odds" theme that the movie propagated, nor any serious or somber aspects whatsoever. Then there was the presence of a terrible snowstorm that chilled the eastern United States, plummeting ticket sales. The reviews of the film were mixed, although on the average posi-

It's A Wonderful Life

THE CAST

George Bailey.....James Stewart
Mary Bailey.....Donna Reed
Clarence, the Angel.....Henry Travers
Uncle Billy.....Thomas Mitchell
Mr. Potter.....Lionel Barrymore
Violet.....Gloria Graham
Bert the Cop.....Ward Bond
Ernie the Cabbie.....Frank Faylen
Mrs. Bailey.....Beulah Bondi
Pop Bailey.....Samuel S. Hinds
Mrs. Hatch.....Sara Edwards
Annie.....Lillian Randolph
Sam Wainwright.....Frank Albertson
Young George.....Bobbie Anderson
Mr. Gower.....H. B. Warner

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE -- George Bailey romances Mary Hatch

tive, giving indications that most people liked the movie, some loved it, and others despised it. The latter critics struck *LIFE* a crippling blow, disheartening Capra's optimism.

Finally, and most importantly, the post-war audience of 1946 was simply not receptive to its implicit content. Americans, enjoying their holiday season in the first full year of peace, could have been disenchanted by the bleak, film noir-ish elements of *LIFE*. They simply were not ready for its theme depicting salvation preceded by a "dark night of the soul." America wanted escape pictures: westerns, intense realistic dramas, light comedies. Stewart recounts, "It took a while for the country to sort of quiet down. Then we could start to think about family and community and responsibility."

Capra's vision of the world had changed upon his return from the war to a more pessimistic, painful sensibility. He wanted to project some of these feelings onto the screen, and yet overcome these bleak themes with expressive optimism, humor and sentimentality—investing unlimited faith in the human spirit. The public, however, didn't seem to empathize with this struggle of the common man and his way of life. These were depression-era ideologies of reassurance to a beleaguered, individually-oriented public. But it was now post WWII, where group unity seemed to be the order of society and the economy was back on its feet. Depression- era consciousness where the individual questioned his own significance (as George Bailey does) was a thing of the past—better forgotten.

On the other hand, having been through an atrocious war, the public and critics alike craved a degree of credibility in Hollywood pictures—to put a name on it, realism.

Probably for this reason was *The Best Years of Our Lives, LIFE's* fiercest competitor, so overwhelmingly embraced by moviegoers and critics. True, it was in the same bleak vein as *LIFE* with its darker elements, but it was a film that didn't attempt to "rescue" the viewer from its pessimism with what might have been perceived as prudish optimism, or sappy sentimentality.

Not surprisingly, *Best Years* was one of 47's biggest box-office winners, and a shoe-in for the Academy Awards. It stole away every nominated category from *LIFE*, plunging Capra into the furthest pits of frustration over his much-toiled project. Indeed, *Best Years* seemed to swipe virtually everything away—it even beat *LIFE*'s release by one month. Being a very controversial and thus talked-about movie, it commanded nearly all the attention (even gossip) that *LIFE* might have received. Ironically, it was a William Wyler film—Capra's partner at Liberty and one of his dearest friends (although it wasn't a Liberty film).

The final dagger came at the close of 1947 as the gross receipts were tallied: after a $2.7 million investment, *LIFE* lost more than $525,000. Liberty Films was liquidated as a result some two years later. Capra, formerly the proud papa of what he considered a landmark motion picture achievement, abandoned all admiration, conversation and loyalty he had previously invested in his brainchild. As far as he was concerned, he had shelved *LIFE* forever.

The initial failure of *LIFE* can reasonably be summed up by the master himself: "To stay in business...you have to make pictures with universal appeal," Capra said. "Unless a picture has tremendous initial impact upon the public, it quickly passes from the first run to lesser homes and exhausts its money potential. If it starts out slowly, its run is taken off at the end of the week...that's one of the big troubles. Pictures aren't given a chance to find their audience."

But not everything was gloom and doom, and *LIFE* was far from an all-out loser. Capra was awarded the Hollywood Foreign Correspondent Association's "Golden Globe" award for best director of 1947 and *LIFE* was voted one of the ten best films of the year by the National Board of Review. It was nominated for five prestigious Oscars, and it had received critical acclaim by the majority of its reviewers (In December of 1946, Time and Life magazines covered the movie extensively in pictures and positive words, and Newsweek even put the film on its cover).

Furthermore, by 1954, RKO (Liberty's repossessor) announced an accumulated profit of over $3 million for *LIFE*. It was finally making some money, as it would continue to do when marketed for commercial television in the fifties and sixties by its numerous future owners (RKO sold *LIFE* to Paramount, who later dished it off to M & A Alexander Productions). The film even enjoyed a short-lived popular recovery around Christmas seasons in the fifties and sixties, thanks to annual viewings on television (it was, assumedly, probably shown only once on a single network each time of the year, thereby garnering only limited exposure).

Finally, in 1974, all passion for the film had fizzled out, and the economic market of TV could no longer be tapped. Republic Pictures didn't bother to renew its copyright on its critical 28th birthday (the year in which a work must be renewed, under the old 1909 law). *LIFE* entered the world of public domain, very unsure of itself and its future. Little did anyone know the incredible success this celluloid Lazarus would begin to enjoy after thirty years of relative public disregard.

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE -- Uncle Billy watches as Mary gives George their honeymoon money to distribute to depositors of the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan.

After three decades of, for the most part, audience indifference and lack of recognition, *LIFE* came back into the public consciousness with a vengeance. Capra became slowly aware of this throughout the fifties and sixties, when more and more grateful letters from fans began pouring in. Soon thousands of people were writing him on a variety of subjects—some inquiring about inconsistencies in the film (like Potter not being punished at the end for keeping the $8,000), some interpreting what the film meant to them, and even more expressing extreme heartfelt appreciation for so inspirational and transcendent a movie. He tried to respond personally to all their letters at first, but eventually found it impossible due to the overwhelming amount of messages he would receive, whereby Capra decided to simply store away his *LIFE* letters in a huge file.

However, as aforementioned, by 1974 the mild renewed success of *LIFE* had bottomed out, and it appeared that the movie was headed for occasional late-late show runs among other "B" fare forgotten pictures, thanks to its new public domain status. But becoming a non-property—although it spelled the end of TV royalties for Capra (almost) forever—did not detract in any way from its identity. Instead, it freed *LIFE* from the confines of economic exploitation by its previous owners and make possible another more positive kind of economic utilization—free use by television stations—which led to mass public exposure.

Now *LIFE* was earning its deserved audience via free (and soon cable) TV. The nationwide marketing of the film by commercial stations had its greedy financial motivations, of course, but the picture was quickly garnering cultural identification with its newfound audience, who were beginning to grow accustomed to it as an

annual holiday offering. Indeed, *LIFE* was making everybody happy: the TV stations were making money off its ratings, Frank Capra—though robbed of any profit capacity—was starting to feel proud all over again, and the public had found itself a favorite—one good enough to be ranked among other perennial American classics like *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Sound of Music.*

The resurgence was underway, and what had begun as a cult-following in the mid-seventies escalated into a widespread cultural phenomenon by 1980. Millions of Americans were cherishing *LIFE* and countless others were discovering it for the first time. It had become by far the best-loved Christmas movie, topping all other major holiday standards like *White Christmas, Miracle on 34th Street* and any of the five adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* in ratings and popularity polls (although the former two, along with *LIFE*, are the three Christmas films most often aired on TV, according to a survey of national TV logs taken in the '80s).

The rejuvenation of Capra's movie inspired an ABC TV remake in 1977 called *It Happened One Christmas*, starring Orson Welles and Marlo Thomas, surprisingly, in the George Bailey role. This color recreation with a feminist tone was a weak attempt, trying to evoke the emotional impact of the original amidst a contemporary setting, but never living up to the spirit of its predecessor. Nevertheless, the TV clone generated further interest in the original, and seemed to bestow a subtle reverence and respect onto *LIFE*—paying it a sort of broadcast "homage" in an updated form.

These were the obvious factors involved in *LIFE*'s ascendancy—logical reasons accounting for its attainment as a seasonal, cultural institution. On the surface, it would appear that the film's newfound charisma and irrefutable power had simple economic explanations—television could show it forever without paying a penny, public familiarity, and fondness in turn, grew due to its broadcasted repetition. A more thorough analysis into ideological speculations reveals so much more, however. People had to identify with the film's explicit and implicit content and incorporate its meaning into their lives somehow, to accept the picture as readily as they did. The phenomenon is arguably more a product of the seventies viewer than the movie itself.

Consider: Unlike the post-war conditions of the forties when the economy boomed and an exhausted public sought to escape from their negative memory of the war by looking for entertainment that would make them laugh, the seventies were a time of distress and isolation. Society, in the midst of whopping inflation, political dishonesty and ever-changing lifestyles and artistic and cultural expressions, was constantly searching for meaning. With the country suffering from a recession and society becoming desensitized to basic human values through exposure to violence and dishonesty in the media and in television, the individual began to question his own self-worth. People needed to hold onto something, and with friction existing within the traditional family system, there seemed very little salvation out there.

A film like *LIFE* came along just at the right time, helping to inspire a great number of Americans, and challenging them to reevaluate their own self-worth. The film's message, after all, propagates this: George Bailey reconsiders his existence and recognizes its priceless personal value, for all its failures and simplicities. A meaning-starved public could incorporate this then and apply it to their everyday lives, reinvigorating an optimistic consciousness.

This is not to say that *LIFE*

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE -- George Bailey refuses Mr. Potter's attractive offer.

singlehandedly changed the lackadaisical spirit of recession-ridden, Vietnam-embittered America. But it did offer its viewer a refreshing, alternative and novel philosophy in such value-deflated times.

The story's moral was taken to heart not because it was an escapist alternative but because it was both a realistic and applicable human truth. *LIFE* teaches us that dreams don't always come true, but these unfulfilled dreams are better than the kind that turn into haunting nightmares. George never leaves Bedford Falls or travels to Europe, but he recognizes the important role he has played in other people's lives and thus comes appreciate his self-meaning. Perhaps its '70s audience could collectively acknowledge this message—at least better than the audience of the '40s.

"It's a movie about a small town guy who thinks he is a failure and wishes he had never been born," said Capra. "He's supposed to learn that he was not a failure, that he fitted into the scheme of life...I think that a lot of people everywhere will be able to associate themselves with the character and will perhaps feel a lot better for having known him. People are seeking spiritual guidance and moral reassurance..and if the movies can't supply this, they will be serving no worthwhile purpose."

And then there is the element of wistfulness imbued in the film. Maybe what draws contemporary audiences most to *LIFE* is its power to invoke hometown nostalgia, its sense of close-knit community and simple human values—all of which are becoming ignored concepts today in our ultra-urbanized societies (ask yourself: could a Bedford Falls ever exist again on earth?).

Or possibly it's the element of quality in the film's production. It is, after all, a superbly crafted film in its method of acting, direction and technical innovation. Perhaps

it is Stewart himself who commands the picture, with his unique behavioral acting style. His charming mannerisms, tripping speech patterns, articulated facial expressions and innocent, lanky-frame create an unforgettable image of an irreplaceable George Bailey. The romantic tension he builds while "falling in love" with Donna Reed's character is spellbinding, and I think it remains an eternal source of wonder for new and old audiences alike.

There is also, one could argue, a correlation between some of *LIFE*'s thematic values to popular movies in the late '70s. *LIFE* in itself is a basic parable, pitting a force for good (George) against a force for evil (Potter)—the classic confrontation. George loses in the end, yet wins a personal victory. This was a dominant ideology of movies at this time: *Rocky* (1976), *Coming Home* (1978), and *Breaking Away* (1979) reflect personal triumphs in the midst of failures, while blockbusters like *Star Wars* (1977), and *Superman* (1978) intimated themes of good versus evil. These programmed values in '70s films could have very well made *LIFE* more digestible to the public, helping advance its success.

And what about today? What sustains the film's longevity in fact, I believe, is the established ritualistic tradition it has become. You must either be a cave dweller or movie hater to have not heard of the film by now. For the rest of us who tune faithfully every Yuletide season, it has become sheer necessity: we need to feel those goosebumps all over again when Capra brings the house down with his pass-the-Kleenex climax. Stewart and Capra, who in 1946 knew it was the best picture they'd done or probably ever would do, couldn't be happier. "It's part of the annual ritual now," said Stewart, a few years back. "That means a great deal to me, and I know it means an awful lot to Capra, because he says it's his favorite, too."

Yet, the film's amazing rejuvenation over the past 20 years may have been its own undoing. In 1986, *LIFE* fell victim to the colorization process, via Hal Roach Studios, a move that has drawn the ire of critics, purists and filmlovers everywhere. As a further exploitation of the movie, composers have been trying to turn *LIFE* into a musical for decades. Finally, old-fashioned greed has put the clamps on Capra's classic, perhaps for good. Republic Pictures was able to reassert exclusive rights to *LIFE* in 1994, and made a long-term deal with NBC, which now has exclusive broadcast reigns on the film.

In the end, the film has come full circle. Republic was able to reacquire its once-slighted masterpiece, and not without a collective sigh of relief from the many among us who worried that the overplayed film was wearing out its welcome like so much week-after-Christmas turkey hash.

Now, *It's A Wonderful Life* can begin to enjoy an anticipated single holiday viewing and become, like *The Wizard of Oz* (shown once a year on CBS) and *The Campbell Playhouse's* radio version of "A Christmas Carol" before it, a treasured and appreciated annual Christmas present.

And, thanks to videotape copies, an annual big screen showing at The Music Box Theater in Chicago, and even a *Lux Radio Theatre* radio version of the movie on cassette, *It's A Wonderful Life* fans will always be free as an angel to relish their favorite movie whenever they want.

Thanks for the wings, George! ■

NOTE-- Tune in to Those Were The Days *Saturday, December 14 for the Lux Radio Theatre version of* "It's A Wonderful Life" *starring James Stewart, Donna Reed and Victor Moore.*