

Guinness Choice

# It's a Wonderful Life



**ALL'S WELL** THOMAS MITCHELL (LEFT) REMEMBERS TO LOOK IN ON DONNA REED AND JAMES STEWART FOR A FAMILY CHRISTMAS

129 mins, USA, b/w

Dir Frank Capra

James Stewart, Henry Travers,  
Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore



Frank Capra's Christmas fantasy has come to be regarded as the ultimate feelgood movie, even though it initially flopped on its release. Over the years it has

grown in popularity through peak-season television screenings, but its reputation as a heart-warming festive tale is not entirely accurate. The central character, George Bailey, provided James Stewart with an opportunity to display his darker side, something Alfred Hitchcock was later to pick up on in *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958). George is as all-American

as the character Stewart portrayed in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), but is frustrated in his dreams of travelling the world by a home town that needs him more than he thinks he needs it. Owing to being deaf in one ear, George has to watch his brother become a war hero while he stays at home. Running the local bank with dotty Uncle Billy (Thomas Mitchell), he

finds happiness after marrying his childhood sweetheart (Reed) and starting a family. But when Uncle Billy mislays a fortune at the bank, George is driven to consider suicide until persuaded otherwise by angel Clarence (Travers), out to earn his wings and to show George what a sad, bad place the town would be without him. And all on Christmas Eve. The heart-rending finale, with all the townsfolk whom George has helped over the years banding together to bail him out financially, does not compensate for the fact that George has visibly plumbed the depths of despair before being offered his hope of salvation. Stewart is convincing in his bitterness and frustration, even if the most vitriolic outburst the censors allowed him was to call his uncle a 'stupid, silly man'. This was a far cry from his previous roles – even his Oscar-winning turn as a cynical reporter in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) – and signalled a sea change in the parts he would be offered henceforth. A special mention must also be reserved for Lionel Barrymore, whose wheelchair-bound financier Mr Potter has not a single redeeming feature. Resenting the challenge George's bank provides to his own financial institution, Potter schemes against him throughout the film. It is Potter who finds the money Uncle Billy has mislaid, only to feign ignorance when a desperate George comes to him for a loan, which Potter refuses. In most Hollywood movies Potter would redeem himself in the final reel by returning the money – but this isn't most other movies.