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This Article First Appeared in the February 15th, 1947 Issue of

The Nation

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It's A Wonderful Life

Reviewed by James Agee

A town would be in rough shape without it's good-hearted banker. That's what many people would call a fantasy.

One important function of good art or entertainment is to unite and illuminate the heart and the mind, to cause each to learn from, and to enhance, the experience of the other. Bad art and entertainment misinform and disunite them. Much too often this movie appeals to the heart at the expense of the mind, at other times it urgently demands of the heart that it treat with contempt the mind's efforts to keep its integrity; at still other times the heart is simply used, on the mind, as a truncheon. The movie does all this so proficiently, and with so much genuine warmth, that I wasn't able to get reasonably straight about it for quite a while. I still think it has a good deal of charm and quality, enough natural talent involved in it to make ten pictures ten times as good, and terrific vitality or, rather, vigor--for much of the vitality seems cooked-up and applied rather than innate. (The high-school dance floor coming apart over a swimming pool is a sample of cooking-up that no movie has beaten for a long time.)

But mistrust, for instance, any work which tries to persuade me--or rather, which assumes that I assume--that there is so much good in nearly all the worst of us that all it needs is a proper chance and example, to take complete control. I mistrust even more deeply the assumption, so comfortably stylish these days, that whether people turn out well or ill depends overwhelmingly on outside circumstances and scarcely if at all on their own moral intelligence and courage. Neither idea is explicit in this movie, but the whole story depends on the strong implication and assumption of both. Stewart, to be sure, is shown as an "exceptional" man--that is, as a man often faced with moral alternatives who makes choices, usually for the good and to his own material disadvantage; but it is also shown that the whole community depends on his example and on his defense of the helpless.

Yet at its best, which is usually inextricable with its worst, I feel that this movie is a very taking sermon about the feasibility of a kind of Christian semi-socialism, a society founded on affection, kindness, and trust, and that its chief mistake or sin --an enormous one--is its refusal to face the fact that evil is intrinsic in each individual, and that no man may deliver his brother, or make agreement unto God for him. It interests me, by the way, that in representing a twentieth-century American town Frank Capra uses so little of the twentieth and idealizes so much that seems essentially nineteenth-century, or prior anyhow to the First World War, which really ended that century. Many small towns are, to be sure, "backward" in that generally more likable way, but I have never seen one so Norman-Rockwellish as all that. Capra's villainous capitalist--excellently played, in harsh black and white, by Lionel Barrymore--is a hundred percent Charles Dickens. His New Capitalist--equally well played by Frank Albertson, in fashionable grays --makes his fortune, appropriately, in plastics, is a blithe, tough, harmless fellow, and cables the hero a huge check, when it is most needed, purely out of the goodness of his heart. Like Stewart, he is obviously the salt of the earth. Some day I hope to meet him.

I am occasionally mystified why the Catholic church, which is so sensitive to the not very grave danger to anybody's soul of watching Jennifer Jones trying to be a sex actress--roughly the equivalent of the rich man worming around in the needle's eye, or Archbishop Spellman as Christ's Best Man--never raises an eyebrow, let alone hell, over the kinds of heresy and of deceit of the soul which are so abundant in films of this sort--to say nothing of the ideas given, in such films, of the life after death. Fortunately, I don't have to wait for ecclesiastical permission to say that I am getting beyond further endurance sick and tired of angels named Clarence, Mike, et cetera; I am not even sure I want any further truck with Israel. These John Q. Public, common-man insults against the very nature of the democratic spirit are bad enough, applied to the living. If the after-life is just a sort of St. Petersburg overrun by these retired Good Joes-- taking steam baths in nebulae, scratching themselves with stars, and forever and ever assuring themselves and Almighty God that they are every bit as good as He is and a damn sight more homey and regular, then heaven, so far as I'm concerned, can wait indefinitely.

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