

December 19, 2008

Wonderful? Sorry, George, It's a Pitiful, Dreadful Life

By WENDELL JAMIESON

MR. ELLMAN didn't tell us why he wanted us to stay after school that December afternoon in 1981. When we got to the classroom — cinderblock walls, like all the others, with a dreary view of the parking lot — we smelled popcorn.

He had set up a 16-millimeter projector and a movie screen, and rearranged the chairs. Book bags, jackets and overcoats were tossed on seat backs, teenagers sat, suspicious, slumping, and Mr. Ellman started the projector whirring. ["It's a Wonderful Life"](#) filled the screen.

I was not a mushy kid. My ears were fed a steady stream of the Clash and the Jam, and I was doing my best to conjure a dyed-haired, wry, angry-young-man teenage persona. But I was enthralled that afternoon in Brooklyn. In the years that followed, my affection for "It's a Wonderful Life" has never waned, despite the film's overexposure and sugar-sweet marketing, and the rolling eyes of friends and family.

Lots of people love this movie of course. But I'm convinced it's for the wrong reasons. Because to me "It's a Wonderful Life" is anything but a cheery holiday tale. Sitting in that dark public high school classroom, I shuddered as the projector whirred and George Bailey's life unspooled.

Was this what adulthood promised?

"It's a Wonderful Life" is a terrifying, asphyxiating story about growing up and relinquishing your dreams, of seeing your father driven to the grave before his time, of living among bitter, small-minded people. It is a story of being trapped, of compromising, of watching others move ahead and away, of becoming so filled with rage that you verbally abuse your children, their teacher and your oppressively perfect wife. It is also a nightmare account of an endless home renovation.

I haven't seen it on a movie screen since that first time, but on Friday it begins its annual pre-Christmas run at the IFC Cinema in Greenwich Village. I plan to take my 9-year-old son and my father, who has never seen it the whole way through because he thinks it's too corny.

How wrong he is.

I'm no movie critic, and I'll leave to others any erudite evaluation of the film as cinematic art, but

to examine it closely is to experience “It’s a Wonderful Life” on several different levels.

Many are pulling the movie out of the archives lately because of its prescience on the perils of trusting bankers. I’ve found, after repeated viewings, that the film turns upside down and inside out, and some glaring — and often funny — flaws become apparent. These flaws have somehow deepened my affection for it over the years.

Take the extended sequence in which George Bailey ([James Stewart](#)), having repeatedly tried and failed to escape Bedford Falls, N.Y., sees what it would be like had he never been born. The bucolic small town is replaced by a smoky, nightclub-filled, boogie-woogie-driven haven for showgirls and gamblers, who spill raucously out into the crowded sidewalks on Christmas Eve. It’s been renamed Pottersville, after the villainous Mr. Potter, [Lionel Barrymore](#)’s scheming financier.

Here’s the thing about Pottersville that struck me when I was 15: It looks like much more fun than stultifying Bedford Falls — the women are hot, the music swings, and the fun times go on all night. If anything, Pottersville captures just the type of excitement George had long been seeking.

And what about that banking issue? When he returns to the “real” Bedford Falls, George is saved by his friends, who open their wallets to cover an \$8,000 shortfall at his [savings and loan](#) brought about when the evil Mr. Potter snatched a deposit mislaid by George’s idiot uncle, Billy ([Thomas Mitchell](#)).

But isn’t George still liable for the missing funds, even if he has made restitution? I mean, if someone robs a bank, and then gives the money back, that person still robbed the bank, right?

I checked my theory with Frank J. Clark, the district attorney for Erie County upstate, where, as far as I can tell, the fictional Bedford Falls is set. He thought it over, and then agreed: George would still face prosecution and possible prison time.

“In terms of the theft, sure, you take the money and put it back, you still committed the larceny,” he said. “By giving the money back, you have mitigated in large measure what the sentence might be, but you are still technically guilty of the offense.”

He took this a bit further: “If you steal over \$3,000, it’s a D felony; 2 1/2 to 7 years is the maximum term for that. The least you can get is probation. You know Jimmy Stewart, though, he had that hangdog face. He’d be a tough guy to send to jail.”

He paused, and then added: “You really have a cynical sense of humor.”

He should have met me when I was 15.

The movie starts sappily enough, with three angels in outer space discussing George’s fate. Maybe

that's what turned my dad off, that or the saccharine title. I'm amazed they didn't spoil it for me in 1981, but I may not have been paying attention yet.

Soon enough, though, the darkness sets in. George's brother, Harry (Todd Karns), almost drowns in a childhood accident; Mr. Gower, a pharmacist, nearly poisons a sick child; and then George, a head taller than everyone else, becomes the pathetic older sibling creepily hanging around Harry's high school graduation party. That night George humiliates his future wife, Mary ([Donna Reed](#)), by forcing her to hide behind a bush naked, and the evening ends with his father's sudden death.

Disappointments pile up. George can't go to college because of his obligation to run the Bailey Building and Loan, and instead sends Harry. But Harry returns a slick, self-obsessed jerk, cannily getting out of his responsibility to help with the family business, by marrying a woman whose dad gives him a job. George again treats Mary cruelly, this time by chewing her out and bringing her to tears before kissing her. It is hard to understand precisely what she sees in him.

George is further emasculated when his bad hearing keeps him out of World War II, and then it's Christmas Eve 1945. These scenes — rather than the subsequent Bizarro-world alternate reality — have always been the film's defining moments for me. All the decades of anger boil to the surface.

After Potter takes the deposit, George flies into a rage and finally lets Uncle Billy know what he thinks of him, calling him a “silly, stupid old fool.” Then he explodes at his family.

If you watch the film this year, keep a close eye on Stewart during this sequence. First he smashes a model bridge he has built. Then, like any parent who loses his temper with his children, he seems genuinely embarrassed. He's ashamed. He apologizes. And then ... slowly ... he starts getting angry all over again.

To me Stewart's rage, building throughout the film, is perfectly calibrated — and believable — here.

Now as for that famous alternate-reality sequence: This is supposedly what the town would turn out to be if not for George. I interpret it instead as showing the true characters of these individuals, their venal internal selves stripped bare. The flirty Violet (played by a supersexy Gloria Grahame, who would soon become a timeless film noir femme fatale) is a dime dancer and maybe a prostitute; Ernie the cabbie's blank face speaks true misery as George enters his taxi; Bert the cop is a trigger-happy madman, violating every rule in the patrol guide when he opens fire on the fleeing, yet unarmed, George, forcing revelers to cower on the pavement.

Gary Kamiya, in a funny story on Salon.com in 2001, rightly pointed out how much fun Pottersville appears to be, and how awful and dull Bedford Falls is. He even noticed that the only entertainment in the real town, glimpsed on the marquee of the movie theater after George emerges from the alternate universe, is [“The Bells of St. Mary's.”](#)

Now that's scary.

I'll do Mr. Kamiya one better, though. Not only is Pottersville cooler and more fun than Bedford Falls, it also would have had a much, much stronger future. Think about it: In one scene George helps bring manufacturing to Bedford Falls. But since the era of "It's a Wonderful Life" manufacturing in upstate New York has suffered terribly.

On the other hand, Pottersville, with its nightclubs and gambling halls, would almost certainly be in much better financial shape today. It might well be thriving.

I checked my theory with the oft-quoted Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy at [New York University](#), and he agreed, pointing out that, of all the upstate counties, the only one that has seen growth in recent years has been Saratoga.

"The reason is that it is a resort, and it has built an economy around that," he said. "Meanwhile the great industrial cities have declined terrifically. Look at Connecticut: where is the growth? It's in casinos; they are constantly expanding."

In New York, Mr. Moss added, Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) "is under enormous pressure to allow gambling upstate because of the economic problems."

"We ease up on our lot of cultural behaviors in a depression," he said.

What a grim thought: Had George Bailey never been born, the people in his town might very well be better off today.

Not too long ago I friended Mr. Ellman on [Facebook](#). (To call him by his given name, Robert, is somehow still unnatural to me.)

I asked him about inviting us to stay after school to eat popcorn and watch "It's a Wonderful Life." He said it was always one of his favorite films, if a little corny and sentimental, and that he always saw staying late with us as part of his job. If anything, he said, there was just as much to learn after school as there was during it.

He reminded me that it was an actual film print we saw; this was before video took hold. And he also proved to be a close viewer. It was Mr. Ellman who pointed out to me how cruel George is to Mary the night they first kiss, and who told me to keep an eye out for Ernie's vacant stare when George gets into the cab. He said he cried the first time he saw it.

I asked him if he'd continued those December viewings.

"In later years," he wrote, "it became too difficult to get students to stay. We started doing a

festival of student-written/student-directed one-act plays right after the end of the fall show. Everyone was too busy to stay and watch a movie.”

It's a shame.

So I'll tell Mr. Ellman a secret. It's something I felt while watching the film all those years ago, but was too embarrassed to reveal.

That last scene, when Harry comes back from the war and says, “To my big brother, George, the richest man in town”? Well, as I sat in that classroom, despite the dreary view of the parking lot; despite the moronic Uncle Billy; despite the too-perfect wife, Mary; and all of George's lost opportunities, I felt a tingling chill around my neck and behind my ears. Fifteen years old and imagining myself an angry young man, I got all choked up.

And I still do.

"It's a Wonderful Life" continues through Tuesday at the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at West Third Street, Greenwich Village; (212) 924-7771; ifccenter.com.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
