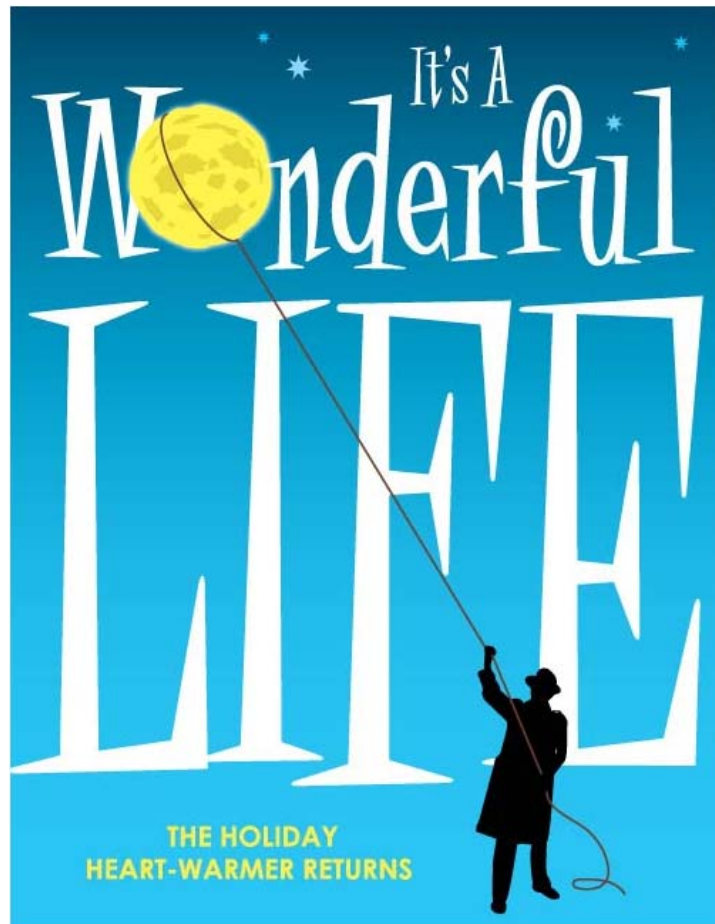


ARTS CLUB THEATRE COMPANY
TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE
2010/2011 Season



Granville Island Stage
November 18, 2010 – January 2, 2011

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WELCOME

This guide was created to encourage teachers, students, and audience members to explore the play further, either before or after the actual performance.

If you have any questions, comments or suggestions for the guide, please contact our group sales representative at 604.687.5315 x253, or by email at groups@artsclub.com.

ABOUT THE COMPANY

The Arts Club of Vancouver was founded in 1958 as a private club for artists, musicians, and actors, and officially became the Arts Club Theatre in 1964 when the company opened its first stage at a converted gospel hall at Seymour and Davie Streets.

Now in its 47th season of producing professional live theatre in Vancouver, the Arts Club Theatre Company is a non-profit charitable organization that operates two theatres, the Granville Island Stage and the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, on a year-round basis. Our popular productions range from musicals and contemporary comedies to new works and classics. The company also tours provincially on a regular basis, with a three-show season presented at venues around British Columbia.

It's a Wonderful Life is generously supported by Production Sponsor:



FILM SYNOPSIS

In this **holiday favorite**, George Bailey's guardian angel swoops in to remind him that faith, hope, and family, make life truly wonderful.



Philip Grecian's stage adaptation of *It's a Wonderful Life* is very faithful to the 1946 film directed by Frank Capra. Although the film was not a commercial success at the time of its release, it has become a holiday favourite thanks to repeated television airings since the 1970s, and is now recognized as a classic. The film is ranked at #11 on the American Film Institute's Top 100

American Films list, released in 1998.

The play begins with various characters praying for George Bailey. The action moves to Heaven, where the prayers are being heard by The Boss, who sends Clarence the Clockmaker to try to save George's soul. Clarence, a somewhat inept angel who has not yet earned his wings, gets a full briefing on George's life from another angel, Joseph. Clarence is eager to help George and thereby earn his wings.

Along with Clarence, we watch the pivotal events of George's past. As a young boy, he saves his brother Harry from drowning in a frozen pond, but the icy plunge costs George his hearing in one ear. Later, while working at Gower's Drugstore and dreaming of a life of travel and adventure, George averts tragedy when his boss, who is reeling from the news of his son's death, inadvertently prepares a toxic prescription for a sick child.



Photo by David Cooper.

As a young man, George is all set to travel on a cattle ship en route to college to study architecture. The night before his departure, he attends his younger brother Harry's high school graduation dance and meets Mary, whom he has known since childhood but never before taken an interest in. The two hit it off romantically after plunging into the pool under the school gymnasium floor—the ingeniously designed (by George) floor

has been opened beneath their feet by Mary's beau, jealous of her dancing all night with George. As George walks Mary home, they sing together and stop by the old, abandoned Granville House. George says it's haunted; Mary thinks it's beautiful. Both throw stones at the windows and make a wish. They are about to kiss when George receives the news that his father has had a stroke.

The stroke proves fatal—both to Mr. Bailey and to George’s dreams. After his father’s death, George is appointed to run Bailey Building and Loan, the only financial business in town not operated by the ruthless Potter. George’s travels and his college career are postponed as the only means of keeping Bailey Building and Loan, which has helped countless residents of Bedford Falls to own their homes rather than live in one of Potter’s slums, out of Potter’s hands. Meanwhile, Harry goes to college and becomes a football star.

Mary also goes to college, and when she returns, George reluctantly agrees to visit her. The chemistry between them is still palpable, and they eventually marry. They are on their way to catch a train for their honeymoon when the stock market crash causes panic at Bailey Building and Loan. George must use his entire savings to keep his shareholders from wiping out his business, or going bankrupt themselves if they choose to sell their shares—at half their value—to the opportunistic Potter. At the end of an exhausting day, George is escorted to the old Granville House and there he finds Mary, who has begun the old house’s magical transformation into their family home. She reveals that this was what she wished for on the night they threw rocks at the windows; her wish has now come true.

Act Two of the play begins with Potter offering George a job at ten times his current salary, but George declines, refusing to surrender the Building and Loan to such a heartless economic predator. He returns home to find Mary pregnant with the first of what will be their four children. The narrative skips ahead through the war, where George’s brother Harry has distinguished himself brilliantly.

It is now Christmas Eve, and the eve of Harry’s return to Bedford Falls, where a hero’s welcome awaits him. George’s absent-minded Uncle Billy has lost an \$8000 deposit at the bank, having unwittingly handed it to Potter along with some newspapers trumpeting Harry’s accomplishments. The lost deposit will spell the end of Bailey Building and Loan unless George can come up with \$8000 in a hurry. At home, he is uncharacteristically short-tempered with his children, and on the phone, he chastises the teacher of his youngest girl, Zuzu, for sending her home without a coat on. We see George share a moment of tenderness with Zuzu—a brief respite in his incredibly stressful day.

After yelling at his other children, George feels remorse and abruptly leaves the house. Mary starts phoning friends and relatives to help her find George. Meanwhile, George goes to Potter to ask him for a loan of the \$8000. Potter asks what sort of collateral he has, and George says he has a life insurance policy worth \$15,000. Potter accuses George of financial mismanagement and threatens to have him arrested, taunting him that he is worth more dead than alive.

As this truth sinks in, a desperate George heads to the bridge, contemplating suicide. He prays for a sign. A man comes along, and on learning George’s name, he punches George in the mouth—it turns out he’s the husband of Zuzu’s teacher, whom George

had insulted on the phone earlier that evening. With no hope left, George is about to jump off the bridge and end his life. At this moment, Clarence is at last able to



Photo by David Cooper.

intervene—he appears as a drowning man under the bridge, and George dives in to save him. As the two men dry off in a nearby tollbooth, Clarence tells George he's his guardian angel. George scoffs and says he wishes he's never been born. Clarence decides to show him what life would be like if he had never been born.

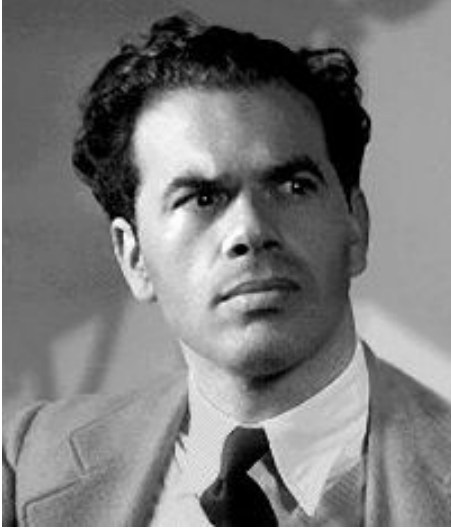
He takes George back to Bedford Falls, now called Pottersville. George and Clarence make quite an impression at a neighbourhood bar, where George's friend

Ernie is the bartender. Ernie doesn't recognize George and has no patience for Clarence's eccentricity: as the cash register rings, Clarence says that every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings. They are unceremoniously kicked out of the bar. George goes to see his mother, who also doesn't recognize him, and who is furious when he mentions Harry, who died as a boy because George wasn't there to save him from drowning. Mr. Gower is an alcoholic who served 20 years in prison for killing a child with a botched prescription. Mary is a spinster librarian. Many of the town's residents live in miserable conditions due to Potter's complete control of all the public institutions. On the whole, Pottersville is a bleak and corrupt shadow of Bedford Falls.

After so many hostile encounters with loved ones who don't seem to know him, George tells Clarence that he wants to live again, and implores him to return him to his family. George is now back on the bridge, where his police officer friend, Bert, finds him. When George realizes that he has been returned to his life, he runs home joyfully. Meanwhile, Clarence retrieves the missing \$8000 from Potter.

When George gets home, the whole town is there—everyone has chipped in money to make up the lost deposit, and offers have even come from friends overseas. Harry has flown in early from New York. George realizes that his ordinary life has meant a great deal and that he has made a difference in the world; he also recognizes that real richness lies in love and friendship, not in money or adventure. He hears a bell ring, and knows that Clarence has gotten his wings.

ABOUT FRANK CAPRA



Born in Sicily in 1897, Frank Capra moved with his family to Los Angeles just before his sixth birthday. Capra studied chemical engineering at what is now the California Institute of Technology, and received the highest grades in his class. In 1917, Capra enlisted in the army, and was inducted shortly after his graduation in 1918, less than a month before the end of the First World War. In December of that year he came down with Spanish Influenza. While recuperating the following year, Capra began to work as a film extra, making his first contact with many artists who would become part of his films later in his career.

Within a couple of years, Capra began writing and directing silent films. By the late 1920s, he had steady directing work at Columbia Pictures. In the 1930s, Capra emerged as the leading director in Hollywood, with films including *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *You Can't Take It with You* (all of which won Best Director Oscars for Capra), *Platinum Blonde*, *Lost Horizon*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. He became President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences from 1935-1939—a difficult position given the climate of labour unrest among the various professional guilds in the movie industry—and hosted the Academy Awards in 1936 and 1939.

During World War II, Capra rejoined the army and made a series of propaganda films, which were lauded for their craftsmanship. Capra took as much pride in these award-winning films as in his features.

Though many of his most critically and commercially successful films were screwball comedies—a genre in which he excelled—Capra was most passionate about his films which tackled more serious issues. These films, which include *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, *American Madness*, and *Meet John Doe*, are less well known today, but some of their weightier intentions are shared by *It's a Wonderful Life*. Ironically, the film, ranked at number one on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 Most Inspiring Movies of All Time, carries a potent critique of some good old American values—like ruthless capitalism, or self-determination without an accompanying sense of community responsibility.

Because so many of his films have a message—often the affirmation of the difference an individual can make against a unified mass—some critics have labeled them “Capra corn,” alleging overly simple storylines and pat emotions. But in all his films,

idealism triumphs over cynicism, making them as resonant today as they were 60 or 70 years ago.

Although it proved a critical and commercial failure upon its release, *It's a Wonderful Life* was Capra's last great film. He took an eight-year break from filmmaking in the 1950s, and made his last film, *Pocketful of Miracles*, in 1961. Widely considered one of the foremost American film directors of the 20th century, Capra died in his sleep in 1991.

ABOUT PHILIP GRECIAN



Philip Grecian is more than familiar with bringing holiday classics to the stage. His adaptation of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* has been on the boards for thirty years; his authorized stage adaptation of *A Christmas Story* (Seen on the Arts Club's Granville Island Stage last Christmas) enjoys approximately 100 productions a year; his staged radio version of *It's a Wonderful Life* is popular throughout the English-speaking world; and now he has created the fully staged version of the classic Frank Capra film.

He began his show business career at four years of age, as a ventriloquist and magician. By the age of 15 he had written a three-act comedy, which was produced at a local theatre. At 16 he was founding director for a city-funded community theatre. Three years later he spent a season with the Creede Colorado Repertory Theatre, and continues to maintain a connection with that company as a playwright and guest performer. Shortly after his season with Creede Rep, he returned to the city-funded theatre he had founded for six more seasons as Artistic/Managing Director and Resident Playwright, and then resigned to create a professional dinner theatre, where he served as Producer and Artistic Director. After establishing a strong financial base for the new theatre, Grecian left to work as a writer/director for film, video and audio production.

In 1994 he became Founding Director/Playwright for IHS Productions, Inc., which annually produces his stage adaptation of *In His Steps*, based on the Charles Sheldon novel.

Other works include *The Dragon of Nitt* and *The Lion and the Lyre* (both translated and performed in Russia), *Little Pills*, a farce suggested by Moliere's *Imaginary Invalid*, *Toby Saves the Farm*, a musical salute to tent shows and the old "Let's do a play in the barn" movies, an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and a translation of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Mr. Grecian has also written numerous staged radio dramatizations, including *Twisted Tales of Poe*, *The Blood Countess*, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR



Dean Paul Gibson is an accomplished actor who has become one of Vancouver's pre-eminent directors in recent years. In addition to his numerous credits at Bard on the Beach, including a rollicking *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2006, he has directed *A Flea in Her Ear* and *The School for Scandal* at the Arts Club. *It's a Wonderful Life* marks a departure from the farcical fare that Arts Club audiences have enjoyed in Gibson's hands. Here, he talks about the task of bringing this heartwarming work to the stage.

What are some of the challenges of staging a story that is so well known as a film?

When it's a film, when it's something that didn't start as a play, people want to come and see that thing that is the film. That's a particular challenge, because people want to come and see Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed and Lionel Barrymore and everyone else in between. We can't give them that, but we can capture the spirit and quality that the film represented.

It's really important to find the universal appeal of an enduring iconic film like this, to capture the essence of it. What is it about the film that speaks to so many people's hearts year after year? I've got to try to capture the essence of the film and put it on stage. That begins with a good adaptation and then actors that can inhabit those qualities: actors who have a particularly transparent and good heart.

How would you characterize the essence of *It's a Wonderful Life*?

It's hopeful. It's simply hopeful. So when we get so weighed down with the complexities of our lives today, to see a light in whatever tunnel that we might be traveling through is the thing that speaks to so many of us. We need to be hopeful. We need to be able to come through, rededicate, recommit to our families and, beyond that, to our life. Part of that journey for many people is to feel safe, whatever that means to you personally and individually. [The film] is hopeful, and that's what's so great about it. The humanity that comes out of it is of course something that appeals to all of us perennially. We're challenged to find it in amongst all the things that happen in the world, but when we do, that simple humanity is pure gold.

There's also a dark side to the film, isn't there?

[Frank] Capra [the film's director] was known for that; he was subversive. It is very dark.

George Bailey's journey is one of those instances of "I didn't choose it, it chose me." He wants to see the world and be a great architect, and he dashes all his personal dreams for the greater good of the community. Whatever the divine powers are—and it's not overt, but it's a seemingly Christian God—they decide that George needs to stay in Bedford Falls because his life is an integral part of its survival. Ultimately, George learns that where you live is more important than anything else; he learns the importance of maintaining his roots, and the payoff of those relationships is enormous.

I work really hard at maintaining relationships that go back 35 years, and I see those people still because they're such an important part of the fibre of my existence. Just knowing that can help me all the other places I go in the world. I've got a great sense of my history, and that really informs who I am.

Does *It's a Wonderful Life* play a part in your personal holiday traditions?

It was not a tradition in the Gibson family; we were more spontaneous. Mom loved *A Christmas Carol* with Alistair Sim; she loved watching the expressions on his face. I don't have an annual visit with *It's a Wonderful Life*. I know people who watch it every Christmas Eve, but I reacquaint myself with it serendipitously: it's on late and I'll catch half of it, or I'll sit down with a group of people who are watching it.

I remember the first time I saw it when I was a kid, and then the obsession with angels was born. I went around ringing bells because I was sure I could be a broker for people I knew who deserved their wings, so I'd run around ringing as many bells as I could.

A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

If you've adapted a story from one medium to the other, and it looks easy to your audience, you've done your job. Because it's not easy.

For one thing, people who loved the original piece expect certain things in the adaptation... and each person tends to expect a different "certain thing."

When I wrote the authorized stage adaptation of *A Christmas Story*, I had any number of people weigh in on what absolutely, positively had to be in it—including specific lines. The woman who helped me proof the galleys just before publication stopped reading one evening to ask, "Where's the line about lobsters?" "I didn't use it." "Put it in. It HAS to be in." I put in the line about Randy lying there like a slug under the same circumstances. People expect to see on the stage what they've seen in a film.

But you simply can't do that. For one thing, it's pretty tough to do cuts and dissolves. You need time for set and costume changes; so you have to juggle the time lines around. You have to figure out different ways to point things up—close ups and cut-in shots don't work onstage. You have to consider the differences between media... but you also must consider the advantages of the stage over film, most especially the immediacy of it all. How about that three-minute scene that would require a whole new set? Are the lines important? Can it be staged in another—already planned on—set? Can it be cut?

And how about all those people in a film? There are over 60 speaking roles in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Do we need them all? Is there room onstage for them all? Can we afford them all? In real time, does a cast that large slow the story down? Oh, yes. What's the effect of that many people in a film? How can that same effect be achieved onstage?

And how can the story be told for the stage to achieve, if possible, an even better effect than the film? Well, for one thing, the film was assembled in its present form, according to the story that goes around, after it didn't work in a more linear form.

Here's the way the story is told: The film as originally assembled did not open with the heavenly conversation. It was not narrated by angels. It told a straightforward story about George Bailey and, three-quarters of the way through the picture, as George is going to kill himself, Clarence appears.

It didn't work in its first cut. It seemed to jump genres. Sudden Heavenly intervention? Capra had a problem. He had to foreshadow Clarence's appearance—so he went back and filmed the beginning piece with the dialogue and the star field. He didn't have enough money to shoot any extra scenes on location, so he animated stars and had the actors do their lines in voiceover. Then he pulled in scraps of scenes from Bedford Falls while the angels narrated all the background. Next time you see the film, pay

close attention on the wide shot of the main street of Bedford Falls. If you look fast, you'll see, in the far background, a figure running toward the camera just before they cut to another shot. That's George.

It's a piece from his run through town late in the picture ("Merry Christmas Bedford Falls!") And that scene where they stop the film and George stands with his hands in the air, describing a suitcase? They needed to get in a lot of lines for the angels, and they were out of footage to cover... so they held the image while they finished up. That's the story, anyway.

And speaking of story... I had some concerns about the holes in the original story. If you sit down and closely examine the timeline in the film, you'll discover that it makes no sense, most particularly from the bank closings to World War Two. Nobody seems to have noticed this about the film, but I couldn't let it go for the stage. Had to fix it. Then, too, Clarence takes a long time to show up, doesn't he? Then he's around for about 20 minutes and disappears a little too soon. If you've got an angel as a main character, shouldn't he turn up sooner? Shouldn't he stay longer? That plastics factory just outside of town—we mention it once. Can we use it somehow again? Seems a shame to mention it, the drop it. How about Violet? She said her future in Bedford Falls is hopeless, didn't she? Then she said she was leaving. But then she decides to stay. How come? And what's going to happen to her? She should have a chance at happiness, shouldn't she? And Potter? In the film, he gets away with all that money. That's not fair. But more than that—the townspeople take up a collection to replace the money, but that doesn't mean the authorities will forgive perceived embezzlement; and if they do forgive George for it, Potter will surely pursue it.

When you adapt an existing story, there are certain things that get past you—things that wouldn't get past you if you were creating a story from the ground up. It becomes necessary to question absolutely everything about the story as it originally existed and ask why a lot. It becomes necessary to pay some attention to the timelines as stated and to question the motives of the characters as if you had created them from whole cloth.

Do you remember that, in the film, Clarence abbreviates "Angel Second Class" as "AS-2"? How does that make any sense? Shouldn't it be "ASC?" It is in the stage version. Who can say where the original abbreviation came from?

Since I had already written a staged radio drama version of the story, I had to try to forget everything I could about it... establish a fresh perspective by watching the film and reading the screenplay, write my first very rough draft... then go back to the radio drama to see if there were any wonderful ideas I'd established there that I could use in this new adaptation. There were a few—including some things about Violet's fate in a "Georgeless" world—that I thought were valid and strong and perfect enough to use for the full stage version.

—PHILIP GRECIAN

FROM PAGE TO SCREEN TO STAGE: ADAPTATIONS IN DIFFERENT MEDIA



The film version of *It's a Wonderful Life* was inspired by a short story, "The Greatest Gift" by Philip Van Doren Stern. Stern was unable to find a publisher for his story, and printed two hundred copies on Christmas cards for his friends in 1943. When Frank Capra found the story gathering dust on the shelves of Columbia Pictures, he said he had been looking for it all his life. With the help of screenwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, Capra adapted the story for film.

Playwright Philip Grecian turned the film into a radio play in 2003. Captivated by Grecian's transformation of another film, *A Christmas Story*, into a stage play, Arts Club Theatre Artistic

Director Bill Millerd approached Grecian about adapting his radio version of *It's A Wonderful Life* for the stage.

This chain of events is in keeping with a recent shift in direction for adaptations. After decades of plays providing the raw material for films, there is an increasing trend toward stage adaptations of films (which may or may not have begun as books.) Consider the recent success of musicals like *The Producers* (a 1968 Mel Brooks film, reborn as a Broadway musical in 2001, and then remade into a film in 2005), *The Lord of the Rings* (a mega-musical that played in Toronto in 2006), and *High Fidelity*, which began life as a novel by Nick Hornby in 1995 and was produced as film in 2000.

The trend continues, with stage version of *Fame—the Musical* returning London's West End despite the fact that, due to rights issues, only the title song is actually preserved from the original 1980 Alan Parker film of *Fame*. On Broadway, a stage version of *Legally Blonde* opened this May to mixed reviews.

Already Broadway is lining up for a summer opening of a stage version of *Xanadu* next month; and Mel Brooks and Susan Stroman, who brought *The Producers* to the stage, are now reuniting to do the same to *Young Frankenstein*. Disney is continuing their profitable project to bring stage musical versions of their film properties to Broadway this Christmas with *The Little Mermaid*. Meanwhile, the Dreamworks film *Shrek* is also in the works to become a dream musical, and a worldwide open casting call has gone out for actors to play the title character and donkey in a reading that will take place this summer.

Despite mixed reviews, the phenomenon looks like it will continue unabated. Also in various stages of development are stage versions of movies as diverse as *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *Moonstruck*, *Sister Act*, *Catch Me if You Can*, *Being There*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and *A Fish Called Wanda*.

FAVOURITE CHRISTMAS MOVIES

Like roast turkey and evergreen trees, certain films—usually watched at home on TV—have become part of many people’s Christmas traditions. Although director Frank Capra never intended *It’s a Wonderful Life* to be a Christmas movie, it has become one of the favourites. Here are some others.



A Christmas Carol (1951)

There have been countless film renderings of the Dickens classic, but when people talk about the film version of *A Christmas Carol*, they usually mean the black and white classic directed by Brian Desmond Hurst and featuring Alistair Sim’s unforgettable performance as Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge, a hard-hearted miser, is visited by the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, and ultimately redeemed; his giddy

transformation is indelibly rendered by the expressive Sim.

Miracle on 34th Street (1947)

An old man named Kris Kringle is recruited to fill in for a drunken Santa in the Macy’s Department Store Christmas Parade, and is such a hit that he gets hired as the store Santa. Maureen O’Hara plays a single mom, whose young daughter, played by Natalie Wood, is skeptical of Kringle’s claims that he is the real Santa Claus. The plot culminates in a bizarre hearing in which a lawyer tries to prove that Kris really is Santa Claus.

A Christmas Story (1983)

This sendup of all-American values in the 1940s centres around Ralphie, who desperately wants a Red Ryder BB Gun for Christmas. But his dream meets with a lot of resistance; almost everyone’s response to Ralphie’s request is “You’ll shoot your eye out.” The film featured Darren McGavin as Ralphie’s eccentric dad. Philip Grecian’s stage adaptation of this cult classic was a hit at the Arts Club’s Granville Island Stage in 2006.





How the Grinch Stole Christmas (1966)

The animated TV version of the Dr. Seuss tale features the voice of Boris Karloff as the narrator and the Grinch, a mean green creature who disguises himself as Santa Claus and tries to remove all the trappings of Christmas from Whoville. But when he gets caught by little Cindy Lou Who, he gets infected by the spirit of Christmas, and his heart goes from two sizes too small to two sizes too large. A live action version of the film, starring Jim Carrey, was released in theatres in 2000.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer (1964)

Narrated by Burl Ives and based on the title song, this claymation television feature pairs a couple of North Pole misfits: little Rudolph, shunned by the other reindeer for his red nose, and Hermie, an elf who wants to be a dentist. The two meet up after running away from their respective homes, and with the help of Yukon Cornelius, they save the North Pole from the Abominable Snow Monster.

A Charlie Brown Christmas (1965)

Another made-for-TV classic, this animated feature is a blatant attack on commercialism. Charlie Brown becomes the director of the school Christmas pageant in order to try to reconnect with the true spirit of Christmas. The film seems weirdly existentialist from today's standpoint, but Vince Guaraldi's soundtrack is one of the best Christmas albums of all time.



CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS: SOURCES OF CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS, MODERN AND ANCIENT

For many families, Christmas means watching *It's a Wonderful Life* on television, while decorating a Christmas tree, before a big Christmas feast. Many of our most beloved holiday traditions originate from surprising sources.

Pre-Christian Roman Traditions:

Much of what people associate with Christmas, a holiday that is ostensibly celebrates the birth of Jesus, actually pre-dates Christianity. In 274 BC, pagan emperor Aurelian proclaimed December 25th *Natalis Solis Invicti*, the festival of the birth of the invincible sun. Early Christians adapted this date and those of other Roman festivals.

Pre-Christian Germanic Traditions:

Germanic peoples of northern Europe also held mid-winter festivals. Evergreen trees and holly were important because they held their green colors despite the harshest winters. Another Nordic tradition is the Yule Log. The origin of the word yule is disputed, but it may be related to the god Yolnir, Jol in Old Norse. In his name people celebrated a 12-day festival of eating, drinking, and merriment.

Christian Traditions:

The most important Christian aspect of modern Christmas is Santa Claus. This character is traced to Saint Nicholas, a patron saint of children on whose day (December 6) gifts were given to kids. In Holland, St. Nicholas Day is the focus of the Christmas season and presents are exchanged on the evening of December 5.

Washington Irving and Santa Claus:

Santa Claus may have Christian origins, but modern notions of Santa Claus can be traced to the writings of Washington Irving—writings often meant as satire, yet which also often ended up being read as factual. His stories about New Amsterdam being dominated by a cult which celebrated the figure of Saint Nick were popular and he often returned to the figure of Saint Nicholas, even writing about “old fashioned” Christmas celebrations which he simply made up.

Charles Dickens and Christmas Feasts:

Charles Dickens' story *A Christmas Carol* depicted lavish Christmas feasts rife with “old fashioned” traditions—which were little more than literary creations. Nevertheless, people followed right along, enchanted with the atmosphere he created and wishing to capture it for themselves. As with Washington Irving, people accepted fiction as if it were true and allowed life to imitate art.

Queen Victoria, German Christmas, and Christmas Trees:

Queen Victoria came from a German family and, unlike English families, she celebrated Christmas with a small decorated indoor tree. Then, as today, people followed the fashions of royalty and were particularly infatuated when their teenaged

Queen ascended the throne. It wasn't quite the Christmas tree we know today, but it was romanticized and took on a life of its own.

Clement Moore, Christmas Eve, and a Secular Santa Claus:

Clement Moore is credited with writing the poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* which almost single-handedly created the modern American Santa Claus, from his appearance to his behaviour.

Thomas Nast and Santa Claus:

Illustrator Thomas Nast gave North America the physical pictures of Santa Claus, thus providing a common, shared vision of the primary symbol of an increasingly secular holiday. Nast also added numerous key details about his life which hadn't been used by others before. Nast's pictures showed Santa reading children's letters, watching their behavior, writing the naughty and nice lists, and living at the North Pole. Nast also established Christmas traditions like hanging stockings by the fireplace in his artwork.

Francis Church and the Meaning of Christmas:

An editorial writer of the *New York Sun*, Francis Church wrote the famous response to Virginia O'Hanlon about Santa Claus. Church described a coherent vision of what Christmas was supposed to be, replacing a literal Santa that children believe in with a metaphorical Santa representing a spirit of generosity and love.

Christmas Shopping and Commercialization:

It was just after World War II that people complained about over-commercialization of Christmas and started to try to "put Christ back into Christmas." During the conflict, people had to shop early in order to get Christmas gifts to the troops overseas in time. Merchants, of course, benefited from the early shopping and made a point of reminding people to shop early—even after the war ended.

WEBSITES TO EXPLORE

<http://www.filmsite.org/itsa.html>

An exhaustive summary and critique of the film in the context of American cinema.

<http://www.memorableplaces.com/iawring/iawringmain.html>

A webring with links to numerous sites relating to the film version of *It's A Wonderful Life*, maintained by fans of the film. (Warning: ads on the site may include adult content.)

http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1010792-its_a_wonderful_life/

Features links to dozens of reviews of the film.

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001008/bio>

An extensive biography of the film's director, Frank Capra, on the Internet Movie Database.

http://www.eeweems.com/capra/bio_1897_1930.html

A thorough timeline of the events of Capra's life up until 1930.

http://www.all-story.com/issues.cgi?action=show_story&story_id=132

Text of "The Greatest Gift," the short story on which the film is based.

http://www.angryalien.com/1204/wonderful_lifebuns.asp

Just for fun: A 30-second animated parody of the film, re-enacted by bunnies.

ATTENDING THE SHOW

ARRIVING AT THE THEATRE

Please arrive at the theatre with ample time (45–60 minutes, depending on the size of your group) to pick up and distribute tickets and resolve any seating issues within your group. Please ensure chaperones arrive before or at the same time as students.

Buses may unload passengers in the loading zone in front of the theatre but engines must be turned off while doing so. Once passengers have exited the vehicle, please be advised that you must find alternate parking for the duration of the show.

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please impart some general theatre etiquette to students. They should keep in mind that this is not a movie theatre and different audience etiquette applies to a live theatre environment.

- It is important to turn off wristwatch alarms, cellular phones, and beepers for the duration of the show. If you are concerned about missing an emergency call, please leave your name or device and seat location with an usher and we will alert you if a call comes through.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre or lobby.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- We request that you refrain from eating or unwrapping candy in the theatre, as it is a distraction for others.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- Seating at The Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage and the Granville Island Stage is assigned. Please sit in your assigned seat and respect the fact that other seats have been reserved for other patrons.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance, you will not be seated again until the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance. Even whispers carry!
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. We will be happy to address concerns on your behalf.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Imagine your town or school as it would be if you had never lived.
or
2. Choose someone who has had a significant impact on your life and try to imagine how your life would be different if they had never lived.
Is anything better? Worse?
3. What are your family's Christmas traditions? Are there any that are unexplainable to outsiders? If your family doesn't celebrate Christmas, what holiday traditions are special to you?
4. Research different religious beliefs that surround "guardian angels", or other spiritual beings that affect the course of human life. Do any religions or belief systems have beings that do evil, rather than good?
5. Choose a play, film, or book that started out in a different format. Which format works best? Which do you like better? Why? Do you think one format (i.e., film) is always more effective? Or does it depend on the story?

SOURCES

www.wikipedia.com