

Study Guide prepared by
Catherine Bush
Barter Playwright-in-Residence

It's a Wonderful Life

Adapted by Catherine Bush from the screenplay by Frank Capra, Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett and Jo Swerling based on the story *The Greatest Gift* by Philip Van Doren Stern

*Especially for Grades 4-12

Barter Theatre's Gilliam Stage – Christmas, 2022

(NOTE: standards included for reading *The Greatest Gift* by Philip Van Doren Stern, seeing a performance of the play, and completing the study guide.)

Virginia SOLs

English – 4.5, 5.1, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.9, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.9, 7.1, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.9, 8.2, 8.4, 8.5, 8.7, 8.9, 9.1, 9.3, 9.4, 9.6, 9.8, 10.3, 10.4, 10.6, 10.8, 11.3, 11.6, 11.8, 12.1, 12.3, 12.4, 12.6

Theatre Arts – 6.1, 6.5, 6.7, 6.8, 6.18, 7.6, 7.18, 7.20, 8.5, 8.12, 8.18, 8.22, TI.10, TI.11, TI.13, TI.17, TII.6, TII.9, TII.12, TII.15, TII.17, TIII.11, TIII.12, TIV.12, TIV.13

Tennessee/North Carolina Common Core State Standards

English Language Arts – Reading Literacy: 4.5, 5.1, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.9, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.9, 7.1, 7.4, 7.7, 7.10, 8.1, 8.4, 8.6, 8.7, 8.10, 9-10.1, 9-10.4, 9-10.6, 9-10.9, 9-10.10, 11-12.1, 11-12.4, 11-12.7, 11-12.10

English Language Arts – Writing: 4.5, 5.1, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.9, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.9, 7.1, 7.7, 7.8, 7.9, 8.1, 8.7, 8.8, 8.9, 9-10.1, 9-10.7, 9-10.8, 9-10.9, 11-12.1, 11-12.7, 11-12.8, 11-12.9

Tennessee State Standards

Theatre - 4.6.1, 4.6.4, 4.7.1, 4.7.2, 4.8.1, 5.6.1, 5.6.4, 5.7.1, 5.7.2, 5.8.1 **Theatre 6-8** – 6.1, 6.2, 7.1, 7.2 **Theatre 9-12** – 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 7.1, 7.2

North Carolina Essential Standards

Theatre Arts – 4.A.1, 5.A.1, 5.AE.1, 5.CU.1, 6.C.1, 6.C.2, 6.A.1, 6.AE.1, 7.A.1, 7.AE.1, 7.CU.1, 8.A.1, 8.AE.1, 8.CU.1, 8.CU.2, B.C.1, B.C.2, B.A.1, B.AE.1, B.CU.1, B.CU.2, I.A.1, I.AE.1, I.CU.2, P.C.1, P.A.1, P.AE.1, A.C.2, A.A.1, A.AE.1

Setting

Various locations in Bedford Falls. The year is 1945. The story takes place in both past and present.



Characters

George Bailey – yearns for adventure

Mary Hatch Bailey – George’s wife

Pete Bailey – George’s son

Jane Bailey – George’s oldest daughter

Zuzu Bailey – George’s youngest daughter

Joseph – a senior Angel

Clarence Oddbody – Angel 2nd class, wingless

Mr. Potter – richest man in town, cruel

Peter Bailey – George’s father, runs the Building & Loan

Ma Bailey – George’s mother

Uncle Billy – George’s uncle

Harry Bailey – George’s younger brother, golden boy

Marty Hatch – George’s friend, Mary’s brother

Sam Wainwright – George’s friend, successful businessman

Violet Bick – the flirt of Bedford Falls

Ernie – drives a taxi

Bert – the town cop

Mr. Gower – a pharmacist in Bedford Falls

Mr. Martini – owns a bar in Bedford Falls

Nick – bartender who works at Martini’s

Tilly – secretary at Building & Loan

Potter’s Man – Potter’s attendant

Ruth Dakin Bailey – Harry Bailey’s wife

Mrs. Hatch – Mary’s mother

Mr. Carter – Bank examiner

Various other townsfolk, bank customers, employees, and members of the board



Note: Doubling of Actors

In this production of *It’s a Wonderful Life* with some actors will be playing more than one role. Doubling of actors requires distinction between characters. In this production, characters will be distinguished by costume, voice and other physical character traits.



Synopsis

“I wish I had never been born.” George Bailey is at the end of his rope. All his life he’s forsaken his dreams of adventure in order to do “the right thing”: giving up college so that his younger brother Harry could go, taking over the family business when his father dies, and forgoing the honeymoon of his dreams in order to use the cash to save the Bailey Bros. Building and Loan. Now it’s Christmas Eve in 1945 and the life George as worked so hard to build – the life he’s not even sure he wanted – is going to be taken away by the most money-grubbing, mean-spirited man in town... Mr. Potter. Uncle Billy has misplaced the deposit for the Building and Loan and the bank inspectors are coming. George is going to go to jail for fraud unless he can come up with the missing cash. When he asks Mr. Potter for help, Potter’s response is to call the police. Hopeless and despairing, George runs to a bridge at the edge of town and is about to jump off when a stranger stops him. Clarence Oddbody is an angel sent from Heaven to help George



realize that Life is the greatest gift. If he is able to convince George of this truth, Clarence will finally earn his wings. Together, Clarence and George review various scenes from George’s Past and then visit a Present where George never existed. George sees for himself that his very existence has made not only the town of Bedford Falls but the whole *world* a better place. He also realizes that a man doesn’t need to travel to have adventure – that his life has been filled with much love and many treasures. With thoughts of suicide forgotten; George runs home to his wife and children to discover the town has come together to save him from financial disaster – and jail. George Bailey has a wonderful life. And Clarence finally gets his wings.

Vocabulary Words

mission	successor	mercenary	share (noun)
acquaint	institution	bankruptcy	prosperity
outskirts	dissolve	discrepancy	reign
exploring	executive	enthusiastic	grindstone
scandal	devotion	extension	yokel
mortgage	ideals	stock	ambitious
foreclose	vouch	ceremony	scurvy
deficit	discontent	bootlegger	collateral
tussle	rabble	caviar	publicity
romance	frustrate	crisis	equity
deposit	gall (verb)	sufficient	warrant
appoint	condition	guarantee	atmosphere

Define the vocabulary words above then write sentences using them. Remember: anyone reading your sentence should be able to understand the word from the context in which it is used.

Biography of the Playwright

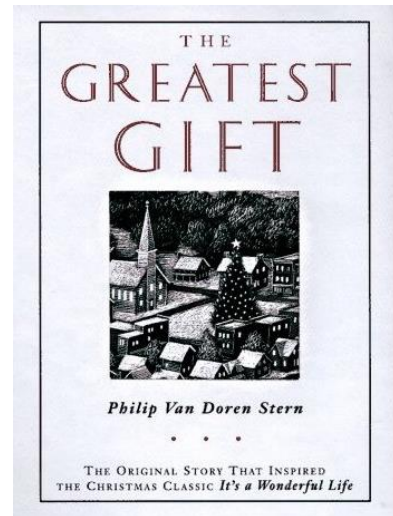
Catherine Bush is Barter Theatre's playwright-in-residence. Her plays produced at Barter include: *The Other Side of the Mountain*, *The Quiltmaker*, *Comin' Up A Storm*, *Wooden Snowflakes*, *Tradin' Paint*, *Where Trouble Sleeps*, *The Road to Appomattox*, *Walking Across Egypt*, *I'll Never Be Hungry Again* (book & lyrics), *The Controversial Rescue of Fatty the Pig*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Winter Wheat* (book & lyrics), *Ghost, Ghost, Come Out Tonight*, *Great Expectations*, *Dracula* (Barter at the Moonlite), *A Christmas Carol* (Barter at the Moonlite), *Frankenstein*, and *Kentucky Spring* (book). Other plays produced include: *The Executioner's Sons* (Echo Theatre), *The Frankenstein Summer* (Red Light District Theatre), *A Jarful of Fireflies* (Pioneer Playhouse), and *Just A Kiss* (New Theatre, Steinberg Award Finalist). Catherine has also written over twenty-five plays for the Barter Players, whose work serves the younger members of Barter's audience. She is a proud member of Dramatists Guild.



www.catherinebushplays.com

Biography of Philip Van Doren Stern, author of *The Greatest Gift*

Philip Van Doren Stern was born in the small town of Wyalusing Pennsylvania on September 10, 1900. A historian with a passion for the American Civil War, some of his better known works include *They Were There: The Civil War in Action as Seen by Its Combat Artists*, and *An End to Valor: The Last Days of the Civil War*. He is also well known for his contributions to the horror genre, including his famous biography *Edgar Allen Poe: Visitor from the Night of Time*. However, Stern is most remembered today for a short story that he wrote. Inspired by a dream, Stern finished *The Greatest Gift* in 1943 after working on it several years. Unable to find a publisher, he sent 200 copies to friends as Christmas cards. One of the cards came to the attention of David Hempstead, a producer at RKO Pictures. RKO purchased the motion picture rights to *The Greatest Gift* in 1944 then later sold the rights to Frank Capra's production company. Capra and screenwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett adapted the short story into the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. The film has since become a perennial Christmas classic. Philip Van Doren Stern died on July 31, 1984.





A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, an enterprising young actor. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, “With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh.” The price of admission was 40 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading “ham for Hamlet” caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared \$4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of *Cheers*, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney.

Robert Porterfield passed away in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington, had been at Barter in the 1950s as an actor and in the 1970s as stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the Producing Artistic Director in October 1992. During his tenure, attendance grew from 42,000 to more than 163,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements were also made, including renovation of the main stage (now Gilliam Stage) in 1995 and the 2006 addition of The Barter Café at Stage II (now the Smith Theatre). Rose retired in December of 2019 and Katy Brown, who had been at Barter since 1998 as the Director of the Barter Players and as an Associate Artistic Director, was named the fourth Producing Artistic Director – and is the first woman to hold the position.

Barter represents two distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre’s Gilliam Stage, and Barter’s Smith Theatre. Gilliam Stage, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Barter’s Smith Theatre offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting and is perfect for more adventurous productions. Barter Theatre is also home to The Barter Players, a talented ensemble of actors who produce plays for young audiences throughout the year.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.

***It's A Wonderful Life* - Fun Facts about the movie!**

- ❖ It's a Wonderful Life was nominated for 5 Oscars (Best Picture; Director; Actor; Sound Recording; Editing) but failed to win a single award.
- ❖ When the film was released in 1946 it was a box office flop. The failure of this film resulted in the bankruptcy of Frank Capra's new studio, Liberty Films.
- ❖ This was Jimmy Stewart's first film after finishing his service in World War II. He initially turned down the role of George Bailey but Lionel Barrymore (the film's "Mr. Potter") convinced him to take the part.
- ❖ Movie "snow" used to be created with painted cornflakes. It would make so much noise that any dialogue would have to be dubbed in later in postproduction. Frank Capra wanted to record the sounds live so a new snow effect was created using foamite, soap and water. The mixture was then pumped through a wind machine to create the falling snow. Over 6,000 gallons were used in production.
- ❖ The set of Bedford Falls took over two months to build on the RKO lot and became one of the longest sets ever created for an American movie. It covered over four acres and included over 70 buildings. Main Street alone was three blocks long and measured well over 300 yards
- ❖ The scene where Clarence comes to George on the bridge was shot on the RKO back lot on a 90-degree day. Because of the heavy clothing required it is possible to see Stewart sweating in a few shots.
- ❖ According to an interview with Karolyn Grimes, the actress who played Zuzu, the name Zuzu comes from Zu Zu Ginger Snaps. George makes reference to this near the end of the movie when he says to Zuzu at the top of the stairs, "Zuzu my little Ginger Snap!"



Word Search

Find the following words in the puzzle below: **Bedford Falls, George Bailey, Merry Christmas, Building and Loan, bridge, Mr. Potter, Zuzu, Great Depression, Uncle Billy, dance, snow, suitcase, adventure, Mary Bailey, Clarence, telephone, existence, angel wings, pharmacy, broken windows, lasso the moon, Sam Wainwright, petals, taxi**

Q T N T E L E P H O N E A E S
N A O L D N A G N I D L I U B
B N I B E D F O R D F A L L S
R O S U I T C A S E G D I R B
O O S E R U T N E V D A N C E
K M E R R Y C H R I S T M A S
E E R D H E C N E T S I X E I
N H P E C N E R A L C U Z U Z
W T E P O T T E R P E T A L S
I O D P H A R M A C Y S N O W
N S T H G I R W N I A W M A S
D S A Q Y E L I A B Y R A M O
O A E U N C L E B I L L Y P W
W L R Y E L I A B E G R O E G
S V G A N G E L W I N G S W F

True and False

Write **T** if the statement is **True** and **F** if the statement is **False**.

1. ____ The movie *It's a Wonderful Life* is based on the story *The Greatest Love of All*.
2. ____ This story is set in Seneca Falls, New York.
3. ____ Uncle Billy works at Potter's bank.
4. ____ Clarence Oddbody is an angel in need of his wings.
5. ____ George Bailey marries Violet Bick.
6. ____ Mr. Gower is a pharmacist.
7. ____ Harry Bailey is deaf in one ear.
8. ____ Mary Hatch is Mr. Potter's secretary.
9. ____ Mr. Potter is rich.
10. ____ Cousin Tilly loses the bank deposit.
11. ____ Zuzu is George and Mary's youngest daughter.
12. ____ George gives up his dreams to run the Building and Loan.
13. ____ Mary Hatch marries Sam Wainwright.
14. ____ Harry Bailey was a war hero.
15. ____ Clarence earns his wings at the end of the play.

Matching

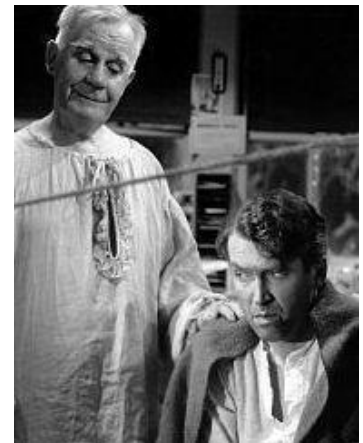
Match the noun in the 1st column with its corresponding description in the 2nd.

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 1. George Bailey | a. what Clarence needs |
| 2. Mr. Potter | b. The Bailey family business |
| 3. Mary Hatch | c. what George finds in his pocket |
| 4. poison | d. dreams of leaving Bedford Falls |
| 5. Angel wings | e. the setting of <i>It's A Wonderful Life</i> |
| 6. Building and Loan | f. George's wife |
| 7. Zuzu's petals | g. Mr. Gower's gift to George |
| 8. suitcase | h. where George contemplates suicide |
| 9. The bridge | i. Mr. Gower's accidental prescription |
| 10. Bedford Falls | j. wealthiest man in town |

Questions/Activities

1. Read Philip Van Doren Stern's short story *The Greatest Gift*. How does the story compare to the play *It's a Wonderful Life*? Which characters in the play are *not* in the short story? Why were they added to the play? What **themes** in the story can be found in the play? **Discuss.**

2. In this story, a man wishes for one moment that he had never been born – and an angel grants his wish. George Bailey is then able to see what effect his existence – or lack thereof – had on all the people he loved. **Pick an instance where someone made a profound impact on your life and write about it.** What did they do for you? How did it change your life? **Now rewrite the story without that person in it.** How does this story's end differ from the original story? **Discuss the impact every one of our actions has on the people around us.** How might George Bailey's life have been different if Mr. Potter had never been born? If Harry Bailey had never been born? If Mary Hatch had never been born? If Mr. Gower had never been born?



3. One of the biggest differences between film and live theatre is film's ability to "shoot" different scenes in different places. How do the set, lights and sound represent the various locations in this theatrical version of *It's a Wonderful Life*? Do you think this was effective? **Pick a scene from your favorite Christmas story and design a set for it that would work in your school's auditorium.** Some things to keep in mind: the number of people in the scene, blocking (how people are to move about the set) and sightlines (the ability of the audience to see the action on stage from any seat in the house.) **Create a rendering and model of your set and present it to your class, explaining your design.**

4. Select your favorite character from the play, pick an important day in his/her life that influences this play then **write a journal entry about that day as that character.** For example, you might pick the character of Mr. Potter and write about the day there was a "run" on The Building and Loan, or you might pick the character of Mr. Gower and write about the day you almost poisoned a customer. Be as specific as possible.

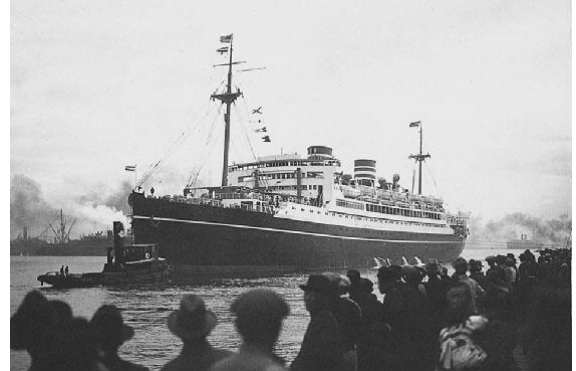


5. The day George and Mary were to leave on their honeymoon, there was a "run" on the Building and Loan. **What is a "bank run"?** The beginning of what event in our nation's history was signified by this specific bank run? How was the town of Bedford Falls affected? **Discuss.**

6. Clarence Oddbody is an Angel 2nd Class – in other words, he doesn't have his wings. Angels have been represented in many other movies in pop culture. **Make a list of all the movies you have seen where an angel character has been represented.** How do these angels compare to Clarence? What is the origin of the word "angel"? Is it strictly biblical? Do other cultures view angels the same way we do? **Research the history of angels in our culture and present your findings to the class.**

7. What is the difference between a Building and Loan and a bank? Do Building and Loans still exist today? What is their function in society?

8. George and Mary had planned to travel from New York City to Bermuda for their honeymoon in 1929. What were the various modes of transportation available at that time? Were commercial airlines an option? **Research how they might have made their trip and how long it might have taken them then map out the same journey today.** How does it compare? How has the transportation system in this country changed in the last eighty years?



9. Watch the film version of *It's A Wonderful Life*, then **write a paper comparing and contrasting** it to the play. Which did you like better? Why?

10. The movie *It's a Wonderful Life* has become a Christmas classic. Why do you think this is so? What is the overall "message" of this story? Does this message still apply today? Why or why not? **Discuss.**

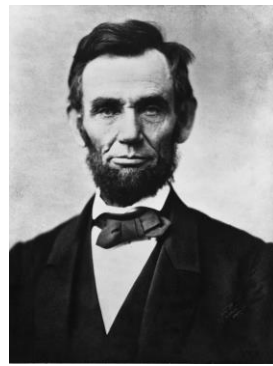
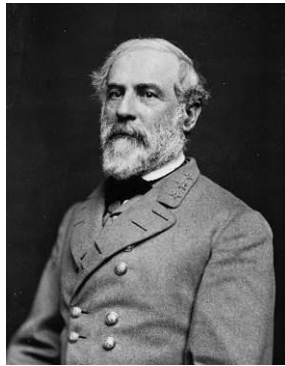
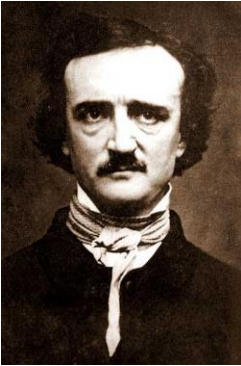
11. **Write a critique** of Barter's production of *Wait Until Dark*. Include the production values (set, costumes, lights, props, sound, etc.), each actor's performance and the script. What did you like? How would you have designed/directed/acted it differently?

12. This play is set in the small town of Bedford Falls, NY, and the main action is set in 1945. **How does time and place affect this story?** Would George feel the same way about his life if he lived in New York City? How would cell phones affect the story? What role did World War II play? **Discuss.**

13. Using pictures from magazines or newspapers, **construct a collage** representing one of the characters from *It's A Wonderful Life*. Display the collages around the room and see if the other students are able to match the collage to the character.



14. Philip Van Doren Stern is known primarily as a historian and an expert on horror genre. Some of his well-known works include biographies of Robert E. Lee, Abraham Lincoln, and Edgar Allen Poe. Imagine that the hero of his short story *The Greatest Gift* is not George Bailey but one of these three men. **Pick a scene from the play and rewrite it with one of these men in George Bailey's part.** How would they interact with Clarence? With Mr. Potter? With Violet Bick? **Rehearse your scene with some classmates and present it to your class.**



Suggested Further Reading/Links:

Other books by Philip Van Doren Stern

An End to Valor: The Last Days of the Civil War

Edgar Allan Poe, Visitor from the Night of Time

Soldier Life in the Union and Confederate Armies

The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln

Robert E. Lee, The Man and the Soldier; A Pictorial Biography

Other famous Christmas short stories

Christmas Eve by Washington Irving

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens

The Christmas Banquet by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Fir Tree by Hans Christian Andersen

The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry