STUDY GUIDE
Prepared by Jesse Bush, Jaime Wolffe, Matt Blakemore and Margaret Goldsmith
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Special Thanks to Ithaca Public Education Initiative for their generous support of the Hangar Theatre Student Matinee Program
ABOUT THE STUDY GUIDE

The Hangar Theatre is presenting *It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. As part of this production, we’ve prepared this study guide for teachers, parents and students, full of fun information and discussion-provoking exercises that educators and parents may find useful both before and after the performance.

❖ 2 Ways This Material Can Help Your Students Enjoy the Show (There are others.)

➢ Creating a Comfort Level: Some students have little or no experience with live theatre. By using this Study Guide, you can help your students know what to expect. The materials in this guide will help them anticipate content and themes, and help them understand what is expected from performers and an audience.

➢ Focusing Attention: Many audience members get more out of a production by watching or listening for something specific. You might ask them a question that watching the performance will answer. Also, before seeing the play, you might ask students to write in journals on a theme that the play will address. Students then might reconsider their responses on the facing page after seeing the production. Either way, listening for specific information will strengthen their focus on the performance.

We want the students to have the best possible experience both educationally and theatrically. We invite you to use this Study Guide, and let us hear from you and your students about how we are doing.

Have thoughts about this study guide and *It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* and production?

Send your letters and pictures to:

Hangar Theatre  
c/o Education  
P.O. Box 205  
Ithaca, NY 14851
SYNOPSIS

It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play is a theatrical adaptation of the beloved holiday movie. The audience is invited to witness the live broadcast of a radio drama version of this classic tale with actors performing in front of microphones with the assistance of a live sound effects (or Foley) artist. The performers enact the story of George Bailey and his journey to a greater understanding of how important a single life can be.

On Christmas Eve, 1945, prayers are heard in heaven for George Bailey of Bedford Falls, New York. To help George, Clarence Oddbody, an angel who has not yet earned his wings, is being sent to earth to keep the despairing George from taking his own life on this crucial night.

To prepare him for his task, Clarence is shown George's life: As a child, George stops his younger brother Harry from drowning in an icy pond, then catches a bad cold and loses his hearing in one ear. Weeks later, George goes back to work at his after school job in Mr. Gower's drugstore and prevents Gower, who has gotten drunk after learning that his son has died of influenza, from accidentally dispensing arsenic-filled capsules to a sick child. George promises the remorseful Gower never to tell anyone about the incident and he never does. In 1928, as a grown young man, George, who has always dreamed of travel to exotic places, is about to leave on a world tour with money he has saved since high school. That night, at his younger brother Harry's high school graduation party, he becomes attracted to Mary Hatch, a girl who has secretly loved him since childhood.

George walks Mary home but they are interrupted when George’s Uncle Billy comes for him with the news that his father has had a stroke. After Mr. Bailey's death, George's trip is canceled, but he still plans to leave for college until he learns that the board of directors of his father's financially tenuous building and loan society will not keep it open unless George manages it. Fearing that Mr. Potter, the town's richest and meanest man, will then have financial control of the town, George agrees to stay. Four years later, when Harry returns from college (financed by his brother), George again looks forward to leaving the stifling atmosphere of Bedford Falls and letting Harry run the business. However, when he learns that Harry has just married Ruth Dakin, whose father has offered Harry a good job, he again sacrifices his future to ensure Harry's. That night, George wanders over to Mary's house. Though he is adamant that he never intends
to marry, he realizes that he loves her. Soon they are married, but as they leave for their honeymoon, a run on the bank convinces George to check on the building and loan. He finds that because the bank has called in their loan, they have no money, only the honeymoon cash that Mary offers. Through George's persuasive words, most of the anxious customers settle for a minimum of cash, and they end the day with two dollars left.

As the years pass, George continues to help the people of Bedford Falls avoid Potter's financial stranglehold as Mary rears their four children. On the day before Christmas, after the end of World War II, the 4-F George elatedly shows his friends news articles about Harry, who became a Medal-of-Honor-winning flier, while Uncle Billy makes an $8,000 deposit at the bank. Distracted by an exchange with Potter, Uncle Billy accidentally puts his deposit envelope inside Potter's newspaper, and Potter does not give it back when he finds it. Later, after Billy reveals the loss to George, they vainly search, while a bank examiner waits.

Now on the verge of hysteria over the possibility of bankruptcy and a prison term for embezzlement, George goes home, angry and sullen. He yells at everyone except their youngest child Zuzu, who has caught a cold on the way home from school. He screams at Zuzu's teacher on the telephone, then leaves after a confrontation with Mary. He desperately goes to Potter to borrow the money against the building and loan, or even his life insurance, but Potter dismisses him, taunting him that he is worth more dead than alive. At a tavern run by his friend Mr. Martini, George is socked by Mr. Welch, the teacher's husband. Now on the verge of suicide, George is about to jump off a bridge when Clarence comes to earth and intervenes by jumping in himself. George saves him, and as they dry out in the tollhouse, Clarence tells George that he is his guardian angel. George is unbelieving, but when George says he wishes that he had never been born, Clarence grants his wish. Revisiting Martini's and other places in town, George is not recognized by anyone and discovers that everything has changed. Harry drowned and Gower went to jail for poisoning the sick child. The town was renamed Pottersville and is full of vice and poverty.
Finally, unable to face what might have been, George begs to live again and discovers that his wish is granted. At home, an elated George is soon greeted by Mary who has brought their friends and relatives, all of whom have contributed money to help him out. Harry arrives and offers a toast to his "big brother George, the richest man in town." As a bell on the Christmas tree rings, Zuzu says that every time a bell rings an angel receives his wings, and George knows that this time it was Clarence.
Philp Van Doren Stern’s short story “The Greatest Gift” came to the attention of RKO producer David Hempstead, who showed it to Cary Grant's Hollywood agent and, in April 1944, RKO Pictures bought the rights to the story for $10,000 hoping to turn the story into a vehicle for Grant. RKO created three unsatisfactory scripts before shelving the planned movie with Grant going on to make another Christmas picture, *The Bishop's Wife*.

At the suggestion of RKO studio chief Charles Koerner, the Hollywood director Frank Capra read "The Greatest Gift" and immediately saw its potential. RKO, anxious to unload the project, sold the rights in 1945 to Capra's production company, Liberty Films, for $10,000, and threw in the three scripts for free. Capra, along with writers Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett with Jo Swerling, Michael Wilson, and Dorothy Parker brought in to "polish" the script — turned the story and what was worth using from the three scripts into a screenplay that Capra would rename *It's a Wonderful Life*. The script underwent many revisions throughout pre-production and during filming. Final screenplay credit went to Goodrich, Hackett and Capra, with "additional scenes" by Jo Swerling.

In the 1980’s, Playwright Joe Landry was asked by his longtime friend, Frances Kondziela, to pen an adaptation of Frank Capra’s classic film for her high school ensemble. After the premiere of this original incarnation, the piece was produced by TheatreWorks in New Milford, CT, and was then chosen for its first professional production at the legendary Westport Country Playhouse. When the budget of this (still full-scale, literally putting the film on stage) production skyrocketed and was dropped from the slate, the concept of staging the piece as a live radio play of the period was born. This radio play adaptation was originally mounted at Stamford Center for the Arts in 1996, and has been performed there since with great success. It was at Stamford that the play was fine-tuned and took shape as the piece that in 2007 was one of the most produced plays in America. It was first produced in Ithaca at the Cornell University Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts in December of 2009.
**Philip Van Doren, Short Story Author**

Philip Van Doren Stern was born in the small town of Wyalusing Pennsylvania on September 10, 1900. He was raised in New Jersey, attended Rutgers University, and spent the greater part of his life living in New York City. A historian with a passion for the American Civil War, some of his better known works include *Robert E. Lee: The Man and the Soldier*, *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 the compiler of the extensive *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*. 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.

**Frank Capra, Film Director**

Filmmaker Frank Capra was Hollywood's top director in the 1930s. He created several immensely popular movies that captured the mood of the Depression-era United States, and he earned more Academy Award nominations than any of his contemporaries.
While other successful Hollywood directors in the Thirties were content to coast along on the charms of stellar performances and glitteringly unreal plots, Capra made a clear stand for films with a recognizable basis in the world the audience lived in, or more accurately, they wanted to live in. These were films that - along with the romantic clinches, chases and slapstick - provided idealism.

During World War II Capra entered the armed services and made propaganda (ideas spread to further a cause or belief) films for the Allies. They were considered the finest films made on the Allied side. After the war Capra started his own film company, Liberty Films Inc. It was then that he made *It's a Wonderful Life*, the story of an extraordinary but deeply discouraged man who, around Christmas, is allowed to see what the world would have been like if he had never been born. The film would become one of the classics of the American screen, ultimately recognized by the American Film Institute as one of the 100 best American films ever made, but when it was released, it was not a success.

Joe Landry, Playwright

At age 12, Joe's first job was in the film department at the library in his hometown of Fairfield, CT. This was before the dawn of home video, back in the days of 16mm, and their permanent collection included *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Lady Vanishes* and other early Hitchcock films. Joe's other main interest was the theatre. Encouraged by his parents, Joe was introduced to various theatres which he came to call home, including Playwrights Horizons and Roundabout Theatre Company in New York, Westport Country Playhouse and others. In 1995, Joe founded Second Guess Theatre Company, which produced over two dozen new plays, adaptations and revivals to critical-acclaim. In 1997, his play *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* premiered in Stamford, CT, and in 2007 it was one of the most produced plays in America. Joe's other plays include *Vintage Hitchcock: A Live Radio Play* and an adaptation of the cult classic *Reefer Madness*. Other projects include *Mothers and Sons*, a musical co-written with Kevin Connors. joelandry.com
David Feldshuh is a Phi Beta Kappa, philosophy major of Dartmouth College. He completed his actor training at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, studied mime with Jacques Lecoq, and joined the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, remaining there for seven years first as an actor and then as Associate Director. Subsequently, he completed a PhD in theatre focusing on creativity and actor training. He then earned an MD degree and completed a residency in emergency medicine, a specialty he continues to practice. As a Clinical Instructor in Emergency Medicine, Dr. Feldshuh mentors visiting medical students from Weill Cornell Medical College. His theatrical career includes regional theatre and off-Broadway directing as well as opera and film. He is author of three published and widely produced plays, most notably, Miss Evers' Boys, for which he was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in drama. As an HBO movie, Miss Evers' Boys received twelve Emmy nominations, winning five including Best Picture and the President’s Award for television presentations exploring vital social issues.

Dr. Feldshuh has served as Professor of Theatre and as Artistic Director of the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts at Cornell University for the past twenty-seven years. He is a Stephan H. Weiss Presidential Fellow, an award recognizing distinguished undergraduate teaching. In addition, Dr. Feldshuh is the recipient of the Menschel Distinguished Teaching Fellow.
Old Time Radio & the Evolution of Radio Drama

Back before there were televisions and computers, there was radio. Families of the 1930s and 1940s would gather around the radio and listen to their favorite programs such as Little Orphan Annie, Amos and Andy, The Guiding Light, and The Shadow. Millions of Americans tuned in daily to their favorite programs, just as today we tune in to our favorite television shows. Radio allowed the listener to create their own images of characters and settings, a luxury that we no longer have in these days of television.

Old-Time Radio (OTR) and the Golden Age of Radio refer to a period of radio programming lasting from the proliferation of radio broadcasting in the early 1920s until television's replacement of radio as the dominant home entertainment medium in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this period, when radio was dominant and the airwaves were filled with a variety of radio formats and genres, people regularly tuned in to their favorite radio programs. In fact, according to a 1947 C. E. Hooper survey, 82 out of 100 Americans were found to be radio listeners. The end of this period coincided with music radio becoming the dominant radio form and is often marked in the United States by the final CBS broadcasts of Suspense and Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar on September 30, 1962.

In 1916, David Sarnoff a New York based Marconi wireless operator wrote the following letter to his station manager...‘I have in mind a plan of development which would make radio a household utility. The idea is to bring music into the home by wireless. The receiver can be designed in the form of a simple radio music box and arranged for several different wavelengths, which could be changeable with the throwing of a single switch or the pressing of a single button. Baseball scores can be transmitted in the air...’

The concept of a wireless radio that could transmit into thousands of people’s homes gathered momentum in the early 1920’s and before too long, the wireless radio transmitter became a ubiquitous household fixture for many American families. In turn, wireless radio soon became one of the predominant forms of communal family entertainment.

In the late 1920’s the first dramatic radio series, an anthology program, was introduced on WGY - a General Electric station in Schenectady, New York in September 1922. An actor by the name of Edward H. Smith is credited with first suggesting the idea of real radio drama. He was associated with "The Masque," a theatre group in Troy, NY, and in the summer of 1922, approached WGY Program Director Kolin Hager with the idea of doing radio adaptations of some popular plays. Hager liked the idea, and agreed - on the provision that none of the plays run more than forty minutes. He was concerned that the attention span of the audience might not be up to the challenge of a longer production because conceptually, the idea was new.
The play was aired following several rehearsals in September 1922, and the station received more than two thousand letters from within a five-hundred mile radius. One letter from Pittsfield, Massachusetts claimed that the screams of the character "Hilda" were so real, that a policeman overhearing the program thru a window burst into the writer's home to stop the "assault.” The success of the first production caused Hager to commission a series of plays, to be offered thru the fall, winter and spring of 1922-23. By the end of the season, a total of forty-three plays were presented, all featuring the same group of actors. Radio Drama was composed by the combination and harmony of the following four basic elements - Narration, Music, Dialogue, and Sound effects.

In 1925 two white actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll presented Sam 'n' Henry, a "black" sitcom, on Chicago's WGN. Two years later, after a disagreement with management, they left WGN for WMAQ, also in Chicago, and the program's title was changed to Amos 'n' Andy. In 1929 they joined the NBC-Red and became radio's first major hit. Amos 'n' Andy began as a serial which saw 4,090 fifteen minute episodes broadcast (5 days a week, 52 weeks a year) between 1928 and 1943 when it became a weekly half-hour situation comedy. In 1950, Amos 'n' Andy, with an all black cast, starring Spenser Williams Jr. (Amos) and Alvin Childress (Andy), moved to CBS television. Growing anger over black stereotyping drove the show off the air in the summer of 1953.

The demise in Radio drama’s popularity came naturally as entertainment, broadcasting and different media technologies developed. The invention and ever increasing accessibility of public television mean that by the late 1950’s, Radio audiences had decreased. Radio began to lose its evening audience in 1948 when The Texaco Star Theatre, starring Milton Berle, became a national phenomenon. In 1951 “I Love Lucy” became the talk of the town and by 1954 it seemed as though radio drama had become a distant memory.
The Foley Artist/Sound Effects

A Foley Artist 'recreates' sound effects for the radio drama. By the 1930s, there were plenty of radio drama shows (kids' serials, detectives, mysteries, and soaps) most of which required realistic sound effects. The sounds basically fell into two broad categories: a) those that advanced the action or helped move the story line, and b) background or mood setting sounds. And all of these were produced with a combination of manual and recorded sounds.

Good sound effects artists in Old Time Radio were trusted by the directors to create the proper sound or background noise. Many common background scenes needed a combination of ordinary sounds, with perhaps just one change to vary the location or time period. For instance, the interior of a restaurant usually involved the sounds of dishes, glassware, and indistinct conversation. If we add the sound of a string quartet, we have a posh restaurant. However, should we substitute the sound of a juke box for the quartet and throw in an occasional fog horn, we now have a waterfront dive. Or instead, to our original mixture, we add a piano playing "Oh Susanna" and footsteps on wood, the result is an Old West saloon.

A good rule in radio shows was to identify any unusual sound through prior dialogue to prevent listeners' misconceptions. Take the roar of a waterfall; it sounds not unlike the sound of a dynamo or an internal combustion engine at a constant speed. Pity the poor radio audience who have visualized a young couple chatting in the cab of a speeding truck, only to be jolted into the realization that the couple are actually on foot, overlooking Niagara Falls.

Of course, regardless of the background, the volume would stay up just long enough to "set the scene" and then the engineer would decrease the volume so the actors' voices could be clearly heard over it.

Among the purists in Old Time Radio nostalgia, there exists a misconception that there was a time in which only manual sounds were used, and only much later did the recorded devices encroach. But recorded sound, in many forms, predated the Golden Age of Radio and the versatile transcriptions were used from the beginning.

In addition to a large stock of recorded music (usually classical and therefore free of copyright restriction) to fit every scene, there were sound effects records to replace the "real thing". That would usually be sounds of objects too large or too expensive for a radio studio, i.e. car engine, airplane, cannon, large crowds, explosions, and an ocean liner.

Also necessary would be records of sounds of creatures who couldn't read a cue: crickets, frogs, cows, elephants, etc. However, many good soundmen could, and did, imitate with their own voices the sounds of dogs, cats, horses, parrots, and others. Horses galloping could even be imitated by using cocoanut halves and an old board.

The manual sound effects were indisputably an important part of the Foley Artist's repertoire. Some sounds, which had to be done a variety of ways, were better done
manually, including footsteps and knocks on doors. A knock on a door can be timid, authoritative, fast, slow, or in a panic so it was much easier to do this one manually.

Likewise, any sound that could be created simply, would be favored over cuing up a record. So in addition to door knocks, footsteps, and telephone sounds, other sound effects were created manually including: twisting cellophane (crackling fire), squeezing a box of corn starch (footsteps in snow), blow through a straw into water (boiling water), rubbing dueling foils together (skating on ice), pull wet cork from any bottle and then prick balloon (opening champagne), squeeze folded sandpaper (breaking eggs) and rattle used flash bulbs in a can of water (cocktail shaker.)

Other manual sounds common in radio were: run finger nail along edge of pocket comb (crickets), shake 2 ft. length of inner tube, cut in inch-wide strips (wet dog shaking himself), pull large can or bucket from tub of water (body falling into water), snap open an umbrella (sudden ignition of fire), twist knob of combination padlock (Geiger counter or dial of safe), and drop handful of tiny pieces of sheet metal on board (breaking glass.)

Still other manual sound effects were: squeezing seltzer bottles into pail (milking a cow), shake stapled Dixie cup containing 6 to 8 BB's (rattlesnake) twist new wallet near mike (getting in or out of saddle), plunge knife into cabbage or melon (body being stabbed), shake small chain attached to piece of leather (ox or horse harness), drop metal washers (sound of coins), and scratch rough paper with unbent paper clip (writing with pen).

With the exception of syndicated shows, which were always transcribed (recorded), most programs were aired live through the late 1940s, when tape machines came into use. So mistakes resulting from inappropriate sound effects went out on the air live. Many of these were caused by the blank pistols that occasionally misfired. On one crime show, probably Gangbusters, an actor playing a hoodlum gave the line, "This is the end; take this lead, you rat." Two shots were to follow immediately but the gun jammed and the sound effects man looked frantic. The actor quickly changed his next line to: "Nah, shooting is too good for you; I'm going to stab you with this knife." At that point a shot rang out from the now-functioning pistol.

In radio drama, the successful combination of recorded and manual sound effects, suggested by the script writer, modified by the director, and created and produced by the sound effects personnel was an extremely important aspect of the production, and in many cases, the difference between a good program and a great one.
The Great Depression and World War II

What was going on in the world prior to the release of original film “It’s a Wonderful Life”?

The timing of the Great Depression varied across nations but in most countries it started in about 1929 and lasted until the late 1930s or early 1940s. It was a severe worldwide economic depression in the decade preceding World War II. It was the longest, most widespread, and deepest depression of the 20th century.

In the 21st century, the Great Depression is commonly used as an example of how far the world's economy can decline. The depression originated in the U.S., starting with the fall in stock prices that began around September 4, 1929 and became worldwide news with the stock market crash of October 29, 1929 (known as Black Tuesday). From there, it quickly spread to almost every country in the world.

The Great Depression had devastating effects in virtually every country, rich and poor. Personal income, tax revenue, profits and prices dropped, while international trade plunged by more than 50%. Unemployment in the U.S. rose to 25%, and in some countries rose as high as 33%.

Cities all around the world were hit hard, especially those dependent on heavy industry. Construction was virtually halted in many countries. Farming and rural areas suffered as crop prices fell by approximately 60%. Facing plummeting demand with few alternate sources of jobs, areas dependent on primary sector industries such as cash cropping, mining and logging suffered the most.

The banking system witnessed a number of "panics" during which depositors rushed to take their money out of banks rumored to be in trouble. Many banks failed under this pressure, while others were forced to merge: the number of banks in the United States fell 35 percent between 1929 and 1933.

Some economies started to recover by the mid-1930s; in many countries the negative effects of the Great Depression lasted until the start of World War II.

World War II began in 1939 as a conflict between Germany and the combined forces of France and Great Britain and eventually included most of the nations of the world before it ended in August 1945. It caused the greatest loss of life and material destruction of any war in history, killing 25 million military personnel and 30 million civilians. By the end of the war, the United States had become the most powerful nation in the world, the
possessor and user of atomic weapons. The war also increased the power of the Soviet Union, which gained control of Eastern Europe and part of Germany.

The war effort created a generation who, except for the rare individual or one of unusual circumstances, was called upon to step up into mature, responsible tasks long before the idealism of their youth would have preferred that they do so. They were needed to fight in a war which served to derail many a young man’s and woman’s dreams. As in “It’s a Wonderful Life” the circumstances that arose to prevent their following through on their dreams were imposed from the outside—the state of being at war and being called upon by a draft to enlist or else be enlisted. For the women, as well as the men who stayed behind, the war’s influence on their lives and the restrictions on the carrying out of their plans and dreams was similarly difficult.

This aura of necessary sacrifice permeated American culture during World War II.

We see that World War II plays a pivotal role in It’s a Wonderful Life. If Uncle Billy hadn’t been so excited about Harry Bailey getting the Medal of Honor, he wouldn’t have unwittingly wrapped $8,000 of building and loan money into Potter’s newspaper. That act is what sets up the crisis that brought the angel Clarence to help George Bailey. There’s also a scene in the 1946 film in which Joseph, the angel briefing Clarence on George’s life, tells how the folks of Bedford Falls contributed to the war effort.

Frank Capra (IAWL Film Director) was a major in the army Signal Corps during the WW II years 1942–45. He directed a series of well-regarded documentaries titled Why We Fight which were commissioned by the U.S. government to increase American support for the war effort. His first postwar film was It's a Wonderful Life (1946).

James Stewart, (IAWL Film Lead Actor “George Bailey”) was a major MGM contract movie star prior to WWII. Stewart was a patriotic man who believed when his country needed men to serve, he would join the rest as a regular soldier. He enlisted in 1942 and he was recognized as the first actor to serve in WW II. He ultimately rose to the rank of Brigadier General in the United States Air Force Reserve and when the war ended and he returned home, the first film he appeared in was “It’s a Wonderful Life”.
Bedford Falls

“It’s a Wonderful Life” is set in the fictional town of Bedford Falls. Film lovers have often contemplated where the “real” Bedford Falls might be located. “It’s a Wonderful Life” hints that its location is somewhere in upstate New York and Seneca Falls, New York claims that when Frank Capra visited their town in 1945, he was inspired to model Bedford Falls after it.

Seneca Falls’ claim begins with geography. It’s hard to dispute that Capra set Bedford Falls in New York State. Rochester, Buffalo, and Elmira are mentioned in the script and referenced as being relatively close. All three are an easy drive from Seneca Falls. And, a reference to Cornell University in Ithaca, just 40 miles south, was taken out of the script by the studio’s rights clearance lawyers.

Physical similarities between Seneca Falls and Bedford Falls are striking. In addition to the architecture along the main street and the steel truss bridge, Seneca Falls has many Second Empire Victorian homes (like the large, old house George and Mary owned in the movie). Both towns have a canal. In 1945, when the movie was shot, Seneca Falls was a mill town, just like Bedford Falls. Seneca Falls had the globe street lamps seen in the movie and even had a median on a portion of its main street. Capra’s Bedford Falls has a Genesee Street, and that is a common street name in Upstate New York. Seneca Falls has a Genesee Turnpike.

Frank Capra visited Seneca Falls in late 1945. He was going to visit an aunt in nearby Auburn and stopped in Seneca Falls and had his hair cut. Barber Tommy Bellissima didn’t know who Frank Capra was at the time, but when the movie came out, he recognized the name of his famous patron on the poster. He remembered Capra because the two had talked at length about their lives in Italy and common experiences as immigrants. Leaving Bellissima’s barbershop, Capra would have gone over the steel truss bridge on Bridge Street to get to the main part of town. On that bridge was a plaque honoring Seneca Falls resident Antonio Varacalli, who had leaped into the icy waters of the canal in April 1917 to rescue a girl who had just attempted suicide by jumping off the bridge. Varacalli saved her but he was overcome by fatigue from the rescue and drowned. Here on the bridge in Seneca Falls was a real story similar to the opening incident in his upcoming movie; One can imagine that Capra certainly would have been inspired.
Capra was still in the early planning stages of *It’s A Wonderful Life* when he visited Seneca Falls, having just signed the contract a few weeks before. Not only did the bridge over the canal and the guardian angel match the plot of “The Greatest Gift,” but Seneca Falls also had the size, look, and personality of the town depicted in the story. While the there is no mention of location in the short story, Capra on his own placed Bedford Falls in Upstate New York, very possibly in the town of Seneca Falls.

The town of Seneca Falls is holding their “It’s a Wonderful Life Festival”, celebrating the 65th Anniversary of the film, on December 9th through December 11th. Seneca Falls becomes Bedford Falls and will feature special appearances by "The Bailey Sisters" -- Karolyn Grimes ("Zuzu") and Carol Coombs-Mueller ("Janie"). For more information on how to join in the festivities, you can visit this website:  
http://www.therealbedfordfalls.com/
Themes

One of the reasons that *It's a Wonderful Life* is such a popular movie around the holidays is that it emphasizes that each life is important. During a season of magic and wealth, people often begin to feel that their lives have not been good enough. This film reminds viewers that even those who have the least important looking lives may be making the greatest impact on their fellow men. George's life seems wasted on doing the normal, daily things of life. Rather than becoming a big-name engineer or being a war hero, George takes life as it comes and makes the best of his circumstances. Although George does not feel that he has done anything important, the truth is everyone he knows would have suffered terribly had George not been born.

Some say that a society most honestly expresses its values through popular mediums of entertainment. If true, the message of modern American society is that to be happy, you must do everything you can to achieve your dreams or you'll end up a bitter, frustrated person full of regrets. *It's a Wonderful Life* flies in the face of that philosophy and presents a person who doesn't get a single thing he wanted out of life, yet winds up the richest man in town.

*It's A Wonderful Life* explores deep themes connected to what the holidays are traditionally supposed to concern: the values of basic goodness and sacrifice, the gift of friendship, the pitfalls of greed and commercialism, the sense of community and belonging that helps us feel truly connected in a society. It also contains darker themes and more rigorous morals about self-sacrifice, disappointment, and the fragility of happiness and the American dream. *It's a Wonderful Life* does not paint an idyllic world with a single dissonant threat to be stopped from artificially ruining things. There are the nearly fatal accidents involving George’s brother Harry and Mr. Gower the druggist, Peter Bailey’s death, and of course the war itself. In this world, tragedy and ruin are always right around the corner, and only the heroism of men like George Bailey offers any hope of something better. The dark alternate reality of “Potterville” is not the result of something going fundamentally wrong with the world; it is simply the way things would be had someone not prevented them. “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”
Pre and Post Performance Discussion Questions and Activities

BEFORE THE SHOW
Before television, how did people get news? (newsreels, radio broadcasts, newspapers …)

Has anyone here seen the movie IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE year after year? What do you look forward to most when you sit down to watch it?

What do you know about the actor Jimmy Stewart? Have you seen any other films that starred Jimmy Stewart?

What is the main difference between radio and TV?

What are similarities between radio and TV?

FOLLOW UP DISCUSSION
How did this story work as a radio play?

How did you take part?

What have you learned about producing a radio show? How is the actor’s performance different than in a film? What are the other elements besides the actors that completed the radio production?

The movie, IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE, came out in 1946. How is that year significant to this plot? (post war, hopeful, …)

Would IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE be as popular without the holiday references? Suggest another movie title that is very popular today, another one that people see year after year. What are themes in these movies that cause people to want to watch them multiple times?

How real is Clarence? What are some other film or literary references to angels? What do angels symbolize within these stories?

What are some economic similarities between the time period when the story takes place and our own? How does the story of George Bailey versus Mr. Potter reflect some of the conflicts facing us today? What is the difference between a recession and a depression?

ACTIVITIES
Clarence shows George how much life in Bedford Falls would be affected by his absence. Think of some of the important people in your life and how different your life would be if those people were not in it. Create an essay describing an action that another person did for you that affected your life in a major way and imagine how your life would be had that person not existed.
Pick a favorite character from the play and write a journal entry from their point of view. Pick an important day in their life and be specific. Choices could be writing as Mr. Potter about the day of the run on the bank or Mary about the day that she met George Bailey.

Read Philip Van Doren Stern's short story *The Greatest Gift*. How does it compare to the play? What characters are in the story but not the play. Why do you think the authors chose to leave them out? What themes are included in both the play and the story?

Create your own radio drama. Divide the class into small groups. These groups will devise a short script that includes opportunities for actors and foley artists. Find objects and devices for the foley artist to use. Present the dramas for the rest of the class.

**Website links:**

‘Jimmy Stewart remembers, It’s a Wonderful Life’


Article written by Jimmy Stewart himself from 1977. He reflects back upon how his involvement in the film came about and his relationship with Frank Capra. Some amusing anecdotal information about Capra explaining the concept of the movie to Stewart.

‘Frank swallowed and took a deep breath. "Well, what it boils down to is, this fellow who thinks he's a failure in life jumps off a bridge. The Lord sends down an angel named Clarence, who hasn't earned his wings yet, and Clarence jumps into the water to save the guy. But the angel can't swim, so the guy has to save him, and then..." Frank stopped and wiped his brow. "This doesn't tell very well, does it?"

Also has info on the development of the movie, production. Stewart writes with heartfelt retrospective and talks about how it is so loved internationally and an integral part of many peoples’ annual Christmas festivities.

‘The Story and Making of, It’s a Wonderful Life’

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

Extensive information on the process of bringing the story to life on film and its cinematography. Excellent information on Capra and how the movie was written for the screen. Capra talks about his own sense of loneliness leading up to and during the writing process and how he was informed to write it.

Lots of clearly presented and organized information that would be engaging to students - This online article is presented as an essay, broken up with headings and images. Very interesting and has a footnotes section too.

**Radio Drama: History and Production**
http://www3.northern.edu/wild/th100/radio.htm

Good information with timelines and lists of different radio dramas dating back to 1927. Tracks the fluctuations in Radio’s popularity as an entertainment form. Comprehensive list of external sites that will take you to more specific information on history of American broadcasting, Old time radio, etc.

Also sheds light on the interworking and literary devices of radio drama. Speech patterns and how environments and personalities are established. The creation of sound FX.. Excellent photos of a real 1930’s radio studio and sound FX studio in operation.

This is set out really clearly and comprehensively. Website has no adverts on it as it is a schools website. Really interesting and easy to read.
Continuing the Study of Theatre

There are many ways to be involved in theatre. The Hangar Theatre has many programs and performances all year long for you to see or take part in. Here are some of our programs:

**NEXT GENERATION SCHOOL OF THEATRE**
This 7 week summer training program fills your days with theatre activities for all skill levels. Acting, singing, dancing, playwriting, directing and more! With divisions for elementary, middle, and high school, students learn theatre from professionals and then apply their skills in a show on the Hangar stage! Call 607-273-8588 x19, email education@hangartheatre.org, or visit www.hangartheatre.org for more information.

**KIDSTUFF**
Every summer, the Hangar Theatre produces shows on its Mainstage specifically for young audiences. Discount tickets are available for groups. Visit www.hangartheatre.org for more information.

**ARTISTS IN THE SCHOOLS**
Throughout the Ithaca City and Newfield School districts, Hangar Theatre teaching artists stimulate learning and imagination in the classroom. Through the creative process, students develop self-confidence, meet learning standards, and improve academic and personal skills.

Call 607-273-8588 x19, email education@hangartheatre.org, or visit www.hangartheatre.org for more information.

**PRODUCTION APPRENTICES**
During the summer, it takes dozens of people to create the Hangar Theatre’s productions. Good help is hard to find and greatly appreciated. If you think you have what it takes to work behind-the-scenes of a professional theatre, there might be an opportunity for you. Internships and apprenticeships are available for hard-working middle and high school aged kids interested in technical theatre, costumes, props, stage management, lighting, sound and design. Call 607-273-8588, email education@hangartheatre.org, or visit www.hangartheatre.org for more information.