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In 1943, two hundred fortunate individuals received an unusual Christmas greeting by mail in the form of a short story entitled "The Greatest Gift" by Philip Van Doren Stern. It was a simple yet profound story about a mysterious stranger who encounters a suicidal man on Christmas Eve. The despondent man is offered the "gift" of knowing what his town would be like if he had never existed. Despite being an authoritative Civil War historian, editor and biographer, Stern had trouble finding a magazine publisher who would purchase his story. As a result, he decided to publish it himself and send it to two hundred of his closest friends, including his agent, Shirley Collier, who subsequently sold the story to the film production company

RKO. Thereafter, RKO recruited the talents of Dalton Trumbo, Clifford Odets, and Marc Connelly to pen a screenplay based on

> the story. However, RKO executives were unsatisfied with their work. They felt that their drafts strayed from the original concept too much and did not do justice to the original story.

In desperation, RKO's studio chief pitched Stern's fable to celebrated director Frank Capra who was in dire need of a first project for his newly incorporated Liberty Films. Upon reading "The Greatest Gift", Capra wrote in his autobiography "It was the story I had been looking for all my life!" Capra purchased "The Greatest Gift" from RKO for \$50,000 and the deal included the scripts by Trumbo,

Connelly, and Odets. Capra hired Albert

Hackett and Frances Goodrich to write another draft of the screenplay that would more closely follow Stern's story. Capra was both pleased with their work and the actors who were available to play central roles, such as James Stewart as George Bailey, Donna Reed as Mary Bailey and Lionel Barrymore as Mr. Potter. When Capra previewed It's a Wonderful Life to the press. he felt it was the greatest film he had ever made. In fact, he wrote in his autobiography that he thought it was the greatest film anybody had ever made.

Despite Capra's confidence in the film, it received mixed reviews when debuted to the press in 1946. The New York Times criticized it for being both overly sentimental and portraying an overly illusory concept of life. The FBI even issued a memo in 1947 accusing the film of containing subversive communist propaganda. After its general release in 1947, It's a Wonderful Life recorded a loss of \$525,000 at the box office. Despite these disappointments, the film won Capra a Golden Globe Award for Best Director and it was nominated for five Academy Awards. To Capra's surprise and delight, the film experienced resurgence in popularity decades later and became an undisputed classic holiday film. Most attribute this to the fact that the black and white version fell out of copyright and into the public domain. This allowed numerous TV networks to air it during the holidays and the public's appreciation of the film held up and gradually increased over the years.

The legendary Sheldon Harnick (Book and Lyrics) and Joe Raposo (Composer) dedicated 10 years to collaborating on a musical theatre adaptation of the film entitled A Wonderful Life. In 1986, an early version of the musical premiered at the University of Michigan. Unfortunately, a rights dispute and Raposo's illness and premature death in 1989 delayed development of the show. Harnick continued working on A Wonderful Life after Raposo passed away and in 1990, Paper Mill Playhouse presented a staged reading of the work. Then, in 1991, Washington D.C.'s



Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart on the set of It's a Wonderful Life.

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PROGRAM NOTES CONTINUED



Arena Stage produced it professionally for the first time. In 2005, there was an Actors Fund benefit concert of *A Wonderful Life* at the Shubert Theatre in New York City. Most recently, Harnick made some changes to the script of *A Wonderful Life* in preparation for Goodspeed's production.

The basic moral at the heart of "The Greatest Gift", It's a Wonderful Life, and A Wonderful Life is that we are interconnected and important in ways we can never fully understand. These timeless works serve to remind us that it is impossible to calculate our impact on the lives of those around us. What's more, the film and stage version add narrative elements that further convey what many consider the truly valuable things in life such as sacrifice for the common good, community, friends, family and love. They achieve this while immersing the audience in the nostalgia of traditional Christmas holidays, old-fashioned romance, post-war

America and the idealized ethos of small town USA. It's no wonder countless families have made this timeless classic a holiday tradition.

Director and award winning playwright Michael Perlman will be making his Goodspeed debut with this production of A Wonderful Life. He sees Goodspeed as the perfect place to stage the show because the intimacy of the space allows the audience to know and appreciate the characters in an unusually heightened way. He also sees Goodspeed as a theatre that is part of a small, close, community that is evocative of a simpler time. Perlman intends to pay homage to the classic movie while making the show at once familiar and new on stage. We hope you enjoy this heartwarming family musical that celebrates the power of love and the goodness in all of us.



A scene from It's A Wonderful Life.