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This Theatre Resource Guide for *It’s a Wonderful Life* is designed to be used with students before and after attending the Festival Theatre production. The guide includes information and activities that will increase student understanding of this and other theatrical performances. You may reproduce any and all of the following pages to distribute to students or parents.

- **Getting to Know George Bailey**
  Page 3
  This synopsis of the play familiarizes students with the main characters and events of the play.

- **George Bailey in History**
  Page 4
  This page contains the historical background of the time period depicted in the play.

- **From Short Story to Film to Play**
  Page 5
  The information on this page explains the relationship of the play to the original short story and the classic film it was based on.

- **Staging the Story**
  Page 6
  This page contains information about theatre in *It’s a Wonderful Life* and encourages students to engage in creative problem-solving in relation to staging the play.

- **Lines of Dialogue**
  Page 7
  This activity page provides dialogue from the script and involves students in experimenting with different ways to speak or "deliver" characters’ lines.

- **The Part That YOU Play**
  Page 8
  This page reminds students of their role as audience members, stressing the importance of listening carefully and responding appropriately. Post-performance discussion questions are also included.
**GETTING TO KNOW GEORGE BAILEY**

*It’s a Wonderful Life* tells the story of George Bailey of Bedford Falls, a man whose life has not turned out as he expected. The play begins with George Bailey on Christmas Eve; he is facing arrest for bank fraud after being set up by the greedy Mr. Potter. Although George is a good man who has made many selfless decisions in his life, his current bad luck leaves him feeling deeply troubled and he considers giving up. On this fateful night, Heaven has different plans and a second-class angel named Clarence Odbody is sent to help George in his darkest hour.

“You see, George, you really had a wonderful life. Don’t you see what a mistake it would be to throw it away?” Clarence Odbody

George Bailey’s life touches many people – his family, friends, and other residents of Bedford Falls. For this reason, there are many characters to meet! There’s Mr. Gower, who works at the corner drug store, as well as Bert (a patrolman), Ernie (a mail carrier), George’s mother, Ma Bailey, and his younger brother, Harry. Plus, there’s Aunt Tilly, who’s married to Uncle Billy, and Sam Wainwright, an old schoolmate and friend of Mary Hatch. Here’s a list of the main characters, to help you keep track!

- **George Bailey** – the compassionate hero of Bedford Falls
- **Clarence Odbody** – George’s energetic guardian angel
- **Mary Hatch Bailey** – George’s kind and loving wife
- **Uncle Billy** – George’s absent-minded uncle and business partner
- **Mr. Potter** – a greedy, merciless businessman who owns most of Bedford Falls
- **Violet** – George’s childhood friend
GEORGE BAILEY IN HISTORY

Historical Background

*It’s a Wonderful Life* is often referred to as a classically American story. This is because it has been a popular story since the movie first came out in 1946. However, the story’s popularity is also due to the fact that George Bailey’s life takes place during many important moments in the American story.

For instance, much of this story takes place during The Great Depression, a time of dramatic economic downturn that began in 1929 and stretched throughout the 1930’s. Many Americans were left penniless and without work for much of the decade, as shown in the pictures to the right. Surviving was a struggle and citizens had to learn to trust each other and work together.

The Great Depression was followed by the United States’ entry into another uncertain era: World War II. America’s involvement in this war began after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and it affected the lives of every citizen at home.

As you watch the play, ask yourself these questions:

1. Does the historical background have a part to play in the story of George Bailey?

2. In what ways has George Bailey’s life turned out differently than he had planned?
Take a minute to think of your favorite movie. Imagine all of the different characters in that movie, all of the different settings and locations, and all of the special effects. Now, imagine trying to make the story of that movie work for live theatre, where everything happens in real time, on stage right in front of an audience. Yikes – what a challenge! How could you make it all work?

The playwright for this play is named James W. Rodgers. He had a HUGE task: he had to take a classic story from an iconic American movie and make it work on stage! He had to find creative ways to help the story transition from screen to stage, without losing any of its best moments.

The movie was directed by Frank Capra, who immigrated to the United States from Sicily, Italy in 1903. Mr. Capra was one of the most famous film directors during America’s Great Depression. Like It’s a Wonderful Life, most of Capra’s films are optimistic rags-to-riches stories, where an underdog triumphs over a powerful enemy. Other films by Frank Capra include It Happened One Night and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.

Though most people know It’s a Wonderful Life from the Capra film, George’s Bailey’s tale was first told in a short story. “The Greatest Gift”, which was written in 1944 by Philip Van Doren Stern, is the origin of George Bailey and Clarence and the inspiration for Capra’s film.
Theatre Conventions

When you attend a play, you agree to pretend. You agree to “suspend disbelief”, to pretend that the stage action and characters are real. To present a story on stage, actors and other theatre artists often rely on theatre customs. These customs, or conventions, are accepted ways of acting or doing something on stage. In *It’s a Wonderful Life*, watch for the following theatre conventions:

In this production, some actors are playing multiple roles. This means that sometimes an actor will simply change their costume and use a different voice in order to signify that they are playing a completely different character.

The play begins on the night of December 24 (Christmas Eve), 1945, but soon the action of the play goes back in time. The second scene takes place when George is a young man and then the story continues and works its way back to 1945. Changes in time period can be shown by lighting effects and costume changes.

Pantomime is a technique where actors use their movement to represent an object that is not actually seen. In this play, you will see a famous scene where George and Mary are throwing rocks at an old, abandoned house. By using pantomime, the actors are able to play this scene effectively without using actual rocks. As you watch the play, see if you can find any other examples of pantomime.

When you attend the play, watch for Festival Theatre’s use of these theatre conventions.
**Playwrights** are people who write plays. They write lines of dialogue for the actors to speak. The dialogue gives information about the story and the characters.

Read the lines of dialogue from *It's a Wonderful Life* printed here. What do they tell you about the story and characters?

Actors experiment with different ways to say or “deliver” their lines. Work with a partner. Try delivering these characters’ lines in different ways (boldly, fearfully, proudly, sadly, etc.)

Which line deliveries do you like best? Why?

When you attend *It’s a Wonderful Life*, listen for these lines and for how the actors deliver them.

**Group One:**
1. Clarence: I know all about you. I’ve watched you grow up from a little boy.

**Group Two:**
1. Mr. Potter: I’m not interested in your book, young man. I’m talking about the Building and Loan.
2. George: I know very well what you’re talking about.

**Group Three:**
1. George: Good luck to you.
2. Violet: I’m glad I know you, George Bailey.

**Group Four:**
1. George: Are you sure you had the money with you?
2. Uncle Billy: Yes. I was counting it...I think.

**Group Five:**
1. Mary: What’s the matter?
2. George: Nothing’s the matter. Everything’s all right.
The Part that YOU Play

Theatre Etiquette

To prepare for presenting *It’s a Wonderful Life*, the actors memorized their lines and practiced their movements. They worked with director Ed Moersfelder who helped them move about the stage and play their parts well. The costume and set designers planned with the director and created a look that was historically correct. The stage manager is ready to make sure everyone on stage and backstage does the right thing at the right time. All Festival Theatre needs now is YOU.

YOU.

YOU have a part to play in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. You are the audience. Your part requires you to listen carefully and watch closely. It’s okay to laugh or applaud if you enjoy the play, but remember that you and the actors are in the same room. Talking or whispering to friends during the performance might distract the actors. Help them play their parts well by playing YOUR part well.

Reacting to the Performance

After the performance, share your experience of *It’s a Wonderful Life* with your class, family, and friends:

Who was the most memorable character and why?

What did you learn about American life in the 1930’s and 1940’s? In what way is life in that era different than life today? How is it the same?

What were the lessons or themes of the play?

What causes George’s change of heart at the end of the play?

What was your favorite part of the play and why?

Do you think George’s story is a happy story - does he have a “wonderful life”? Why or why not?

RESOURCES

To learn more...

This is a small web page that has information on “The Greatest Gift,” the short story on which the film and play are based.

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038650/
IMDb page for *It’s a Wonderful Life* the film


For information about Arts Education opportunities at Festival Theatre, visit [www.festivaltheatre.org](http://www.festivaltheatre.org) or call 888-887-6002.