This article on It’s A Wonderful Life by Graham Fuller originally appeared in the Guardian on 24 Dec 2007.

The angel summoned to prevent George Bailey from committing suicide in It’s a Wonderful Life first sees him “when he was 12, back in 1919.” The champion of Bedford Falls’ working stiffs from the Depression through the uncertain postwar period would thus have turned 100 this year.

The town’s civic leaders might have honoured its favorite son’s centenary by erecting a statue of him at Bailey Park. At the least, they’d have sponsored a week of Yuletide screenings of George’s ‘biopic’ - it’s hard not to think in self-reflexive terms about the beloved Christmas movie, one of the most iconic and misunderstood in American cinema.

It’s a Wonderful Life’s enduring popularity seemed anything but inevitable upon the film’s initial release, when both critics and audiences responded coolly, or during the next three decades, when it languished in obscurity. But Frank Capra’s film is one that Middle Americans passionately want to believe in. For example, on December 7-9, Seneca Falls in upstate New York celebrated its annual It’s a Wonderful Life weekend, with personal appearances by Karolyn Grimes, who was six when she played ZuZu Bailey. Otherwise famous for flour and feminism, Seneca Falls was supposedly Capra’s inspiration for Bedford Falls; at therealbedfordfalls.com there’s a persuasive essay on why locals have a right to regard the film as a source of civic pride.

It had originated in an unpublished story that author Philip Van Doren Stern had enclosed with his Christmas cards in 1943. Capra brought in Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett to write the screenplay. Jo Swerling, Clifford Odets, Dalton Trumbo and Dorothy Parker also contributed - so, too, did Charles Dickens, for George is an amalgam of Bob Cratchit and Scrooge: a poor, selfless family man who is shown how to find redemption by experiencing a perilous alternative universe. George’s nemesis, Mr Potter (Lionel Barrymore), is the pre-redemption Scrooge reincarnated.

Capra had been one of the most successful directors of the 1930s, but by the time he’d completed his seven Why We Fight wartime propaganda films, his aggressive populism was unfashionable and his stock in Hollywood had fallen. As a man who has served his community and grown disillusioned in the process, George mirrors Capra. But that was irrelevant to postwar audiences, who didn’t want to see Stewart, who had starred in Capra’s You Can’t Take It With You (1938) and Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939), veer so far from his naïve image to play a man capable of such bitterness and self-pity. Stewart suffered from depression after his war service, and it adheres to George like his five o’clock shadow on Christmas Eve.

It’s a Wonderful Life was filmed at the RKO ranch in Encino, where Bedford Falls’ 300-yard main street was built, and at Culver City. It was released to mixed reviews in New York City on December 20, 1946, and nationwide-as blizzards struck—on January 7. Its inability to reach the break-even figure of $6.3m caused Capra and his partners, William Wyler and George Stevens, to sell the assets of their new production company to Paramount. Oscar-nominated for best picture, director, actor, editing, and sound, it won nothing, losing out to The Best Years of Our Lives, which Wyler had directed for Samuel Goldwyn. Capra must have seethed.

Re-released theatrically by a new owner in 1955 and shown occasionally on television, It’s a Wonderful Life fell into neglect. But in 1975 it entered public domain, the result of the copyright having lapsed, and in time the cable channel TBS began screening it relentlessly, as counter-programming, between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The phenomenon even generated spoofs on Saturday Night Live in 1986 and Married... With Children in 1989, and in the Christmas 1993 episode of
the latter show, Al and Peg Bundy struggle to find something to watch other than it's a Wonderful Life, which is hogging 16 channels.

A year later, Republic Pictures, the film’s inheritor, regained control of the copyright and licensed it to NBC, which began showing it twice at Christmas time - Katie Couric became the admiring host. The home video revolution of the 1980s was equally responsible for the film’s resurgence, but the ubiquity of the remastered and slickly packaged DVD versions, including a new double disk set, is eroding the TV audience. The December 14 broadcast received mediocre ratings. It will be aired again at 7pm [ET] tonight, one hour before TBS begins its 24-hour marathon screenings of Bob Clark’s A Christmas Story (1983), the season’s most popular movie on TV these days.

The film’s official standing is far from secure. In this year’s 10th anniversary edition of the American Film Institute’s 100 greatest films of all time - a resolutely middlebrow list chosen by critics, scholars and industry insiders - it placed 20th, nine places lower than in 1997.

It did top the AFI’s 2006 poll of the 100 most inspirational movies, but that’s an absurd proposition given George’s thwarted ambitions and his plunge into a psychological abyss. Only three of the 145 international critics and one of the 109 filmmakers polled by the British Film Institute’s Sight and Sound magazine in 2002 named it in their top 10 films of all time. It ranks number 62 on the recent Cahiers du cinema list of the 100 most beautiful films in the world - no mean feat given the rigour of French critics.

It’s a Wonderful Life hasn’t always been regarded as central to Capra’s oeuvre. Following the example of the Cahiers critics, Andrew Sarris acknowledged Capra as an auteur in his influential 1968 book, The American Cinema, though he damned his lurch from “populist sentimentality” into “populist demagoguery,” describing the Gary Cooper character in Meet John Doe (1941) as a “barefoot fascist”.

The Capra studies that blossomed in the 1970s focused on his populist films and the divisive “fascist” issue. One reason it’s a Wonderful Life may have been marginalised in early auteur criticism is that it conflicts with the consistent New Deal politics of Capra’s 30s films: A morally responsible “little man” who talked sense into the mob during the 1930 bank panic, George gradually realises he has betrayed his own American dream. He both defines and challenges populism - which is why he is Capra’s most compelling protagonist.

Not until the 1980s did academics start giving the movie the attention it deserved. By then it had been discovered by the white middle class that had voted Ronald Reagan into power. “And it was in those Reagan years,” David Mamet has written, “that It’s a Wonderful Life replaced Casablanca (1942) as the unofficial favourite film in America - the fantasy of the compassionate conservative.” Although Citizen Kane (1941) tops most “greatest” polls, The Godfather (1972) is now the film most Americans would name as their favorite.

As Mamet makes clear, George the generous banker (and advocate of the subprime mortgage) is no socialist, though the FBI still considered It’s a Wonderful Life subversive communist propaganda. The Bureau specifically objected to the depiction of Mr Potter.

According to an internal memo dated May 26 1947, the film “represented a rather obvious attempt to discredit bankers by casting Lionel Barrymore as a ‘scrooge-type’ [sic] so that he would be the most hated man in the picture. This...