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It's A Wonderful Life

Reviewed by James Agee



A Town Would Be In Rough Shape Without It's Good Hearted Banker!

That's What Many People Would Call A Fantasy

One important function of good art or entertainment is to untie and illuminate the heart and the mind, to cause each to learn from, and to enhance, the experience of the other. Bad art and entertainment misinforms and disunites them. Much too often this movie appeals to the heart at the expense of the mind, at other the mind, at other times it urgently demands of the heart that it treat with contempt the mind's effort to keep its integrity; at still other times the heart is simply used, on the mind as a truncheon. The movie does all this so proficiently, and with so much genuine warmth, that I wasn't able to get straight about it for quite a while. I still think it has a good deal of charm and quality, enough natural talent involved in it to make ten pictures ten times as good, and terrific vitality or, rather, vigor - for much of the vitality seems cooked-up and applied rather than innate (The high school dance floor coming apart over a swimming pool is a sample of cooking-up that no movie has beaten for a long time).

But mistrust, for instance, a new work which tries to persuade me - or rather, which assumes that I assume that there is so much good in nearly all the worst of us that all it needs is a proper chance and example, to take complete control. I mistrust even more deeply the assumption, so comfortably stylish these days, that whether people turn out well or ill depends overwhelmingly on outside circumstances and scarcely if at all on their own moral intelligence and courage. Neither idea is explicit in this movie, but the whole story depends on the strong implication and assumption of both. Stewart, to be sure, is shown as an "exceptional" man - that is, a man often faced with moral alternatives who makes choices, usually for the good and to his own material disadvantage; but it is also shown that the whole community depends on his example and his defense of the helpless.

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Yet at its best, which is usually inextricable with its worst, I feel that this movie is a very taking sermon about the feasibility of a kind of Christian semi-socialism, a society founded on affection, kindness and trust, and that its chief mistake, or sin - an enormous one - is its refusal to face the fact that evil is intrinsic in each individual, and that no man may deliver his brother, or make agreement unto God for him. It interests me, by the way, that in representing a Twentieth Century American town, Frank Capra uses so little of the Twentieth Century and idealizes so much that seems essentially Nineteenth Century, or prior anyhow to the First World War, which really ended that century. Many small towns are, to be sure, "backward" in that generally more likable way, but I have never seen one so Norman-Rockwellish as all that. Capra's villainous capitalist - excellently played, in harsh black and white, by Lionel Barrymore - is a hundred per cent Charles Dickens. His New Capitalist - - equally well-played by Frank Albertson, in fashionable grays - makes his fortune, appropriately, in plastics, is a blithe, tough harmless fellow, and cables the hero a huge check, when it is most needed, purely out of the goodness of his heart. Like Stewart, he is obviously the salt of the earth. Some day I hope to meet him.

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