

Librettist's Note

I was fourteen years old when I first saw *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was a Friday night in the middle of December (yes, I remember). Around midnight, I was manually turning the dial on our black-and-white TV set, going through the seven available stations, and I happened upon the movie, which was just beginning. I did not know the story. I had not heard of the film. By the end, like millions of others since its 1946 release, I was smiling giddily and sniffing through a flood of tears.

When Jake called me and suggested we take on an operatic adaptation of this classic movie, I thought about seeing the film for the first time. I knew that, for most people who would see the opera, the story is as well known as almost any tale from American folklore. The classic scenes, the great lines, the images of Jimmy Stewart, Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore, and the rest are part of our shared consciousness, almost a kind of secular scripture. I knew that this deep familiarity would provide unique challenges.

Opera requires all source material to be reinvented in ways that bring music to the emotional center of the theatrical experience—the marrow of the matter. To make this happen for *It's a Wonderful Life*, we would have to find ways to honor the spirit of the film while at the same time making cuts and boldly reimagining the story.

The first task in constructing a libretto is not that dissimilar to creating an outline for a silent film. Because it couldn't rely on language to communicate all the details about the characters, silent film depended on telling a story with large, active, and dramatic gestures. The subtlety of great silent films came from the marriage of those dramatic performances to the magic of the camera.

In opera, the magic is in the music. And the challenge is to give just enough language to leave room for the music to breathe and reinvent the story. For this reason, a table read of an operatic libretto should always feel incomplete. The task of the librettist is to be a minimalist, to write language that requires music to fulfill its dramaturgical function.

When the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro* begs for forgiveness with the line "*Contessa perdono*," there is a radical simplicity and directness to the text. But in the music that communicates it, we feel an earthquake of emotion as we recognize an imperfect man trying to take a tentative first step in reinventing himself.

Jake and I are constantly trying to make sure that our storytelling puts the human voice at the center of the operatic experience. I suppose that seems self-evident. And yet ... it is always a challenge to get the balance just right and find ways to avoid relying too much on language. Our aim is to create opportunities for



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the glories of singing to communicate the soul of the story.

This is not to imply that the language of a libretto is not crucial. Every word matters, just as every note matters. But the principal function of those words is to provide a foundation for music that expresses the truth at the heart of each moment on stage. Whether it is silliness and joy, as when George dances with his family in the attic, or each character's heartfelt expression of what life's greatest adventure might be, the goal is to find just the right music and vocal expression to allow the audience to experience viscerally what each character is feeling.

The film version of *It's a Wonderful Life* has such a beautiful script. As you will hear throughout the opera, I wove much of that great dialogue into the libretto. Those familiar with the film will certainly recognize iconic lines like, "The moonbeams will shoot out of your fingers and toes." That is a line that inspires music.

That said, however, the greatest poetry in the film blooms out of the indelible images that Frank Capra crafted to create the visceral feelings of hope and dashed dreams. Think of the close-up of George's face when he hears that his brother Harry has taken a job at his new father-in-law's factory, trapping George at home. Or think of the brash, honky-tonk town of Pottersville, in a world in which George Bailey has never been born. For an operatic stage work, we needed to find musical correlates for these moments—and for every moment that would allow the music to be the poetry that communicates George's emotional journey.

On the screen, George's disappointment is communicated with a close-up. In the opera, George sings his frustration and despair in a newly expanded aria. And to us, a world without a



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In distilling this classic Christmas story for our newly crafted production in San Francisco, Jake and I have cut material that, to us, did not sing enough, and we have expanded moments that could sing more. We have added new duets and solo music throughout the score in order to more fully allow this adaptation to fulfill the promise of being a truly operatic telling of a classic tale.

It is a risky thing, taking on a beloved classic—even more, one of *my* beloved classics. But having worked with Jake for so long, I knew he would distill the time-honored themes of this story into inspired music, allowing a familiar story to take on a new form, to be told and felt in a new way. The idea is not to *improve* on the source, but rather to illuminate the material from a new angle, to enable us to experience the characters and themes deeply and differently, to love them again as if for the first time.

“No one is a failure who has friends.” If you’ve seen the movie as many times as I have, you already know that this is the place where George will end his journey. But my hope is that our reimagining of Frank Capra’s classic movie in the opera you’re about to experience will connect you anew to a sense of wonder. And if this is your first encounter with *It’s a Wonderful Life*, or you’ve only stumbled upon it once on TV at some half-remembered point along the way, I hope our opera allows you to feel this beautiful story in a way that is as meaningful as it was for me on that long-ago December night. 🌸

Opposite top: Soprano Talise Trevigne played Clara for the 2016 world premiere of It’s a Wonderful Life in Houston.

Opposite bottom: From the original 1946 cast of It’s a Wonderful Life (left to right): Carol Coomes, Donna Reed, Karolyn Grimes, James Stewart, Jimmy Hawkins, and Larry Simms.

Left: James Stewart and director Frank Capra on the set of It’s a Wonderful Life.

Below left: Over the course of his career, Sicilian-born director Frank Capra (1897–1991) won three Oscars, for It Happened One Night (1935), Mr. Deeds Comes to Town (1937), and You Can’t Take it With You (1939).

Below: Members of the creative team for the operatic adaptation of It’s a Wonderful Life: director Leonard Foglia, conductor Patrick Summers, librettist Gene Scheer, and composer Jake Heggie.



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