

# Donna Reed's daughter plays guardian angel for 'It's a Wonderful Life'

Mary Owen has made it her mission to ensure that small-town theaters can play the beloved Christmas classic



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December 24, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EST



Mary Owen at an IFC Center screening of "It's A Wonderful Life." (Julie Gold)

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Since 1974, when a copyright lapse sent it into the public domain, the 1946 Frank Capra drama "It's a Wonderful Life" has been a Christmas classic, largely because it offered free programming for television stations. Over two decades, the uplifting story of George Bailey (James Stewart) overcoming suicidal despair with the help of a guardian angel became the quintessential Christmas movie, replete with a suitably evil villain — the heartless banker Mr. Potter — and wholesome,

heartwarming romance, by way of George's loyal and resourceful wife, Mary, played by Donna Reed.

For the past 15 years, Mary Owen — Reed's youngest daughter — has been appearing at annual screenings in small independent theaters that have become a cherished seasonal ritual throughout the country. "It's become a tradition," she said recently from her home in Iowa City, 200 miles from where her mother grew up in Denison, Iowa.

*[Mary Bailey is the true hero of "It's a Wonderful Life"]*

But that tradition faced an existential threat on a par with George Bailey's earlier this year, when some small theaters thought they wouldn't be able to play "It's a Wonderful Life." Although several venues were able to book the film as usual, others say they were told they wouldn't have access to it until January, after an exclusive run sponsored by Fathom Events, Turner Classic Movies and distributor Paramount Pictures.

## The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

"The first time I heard about it I thought, 'We have left Bedford Falls,'" recalls Owen, referring to the fictional town where Bailey grows up and, by the end of the film, discovers that he has been a force for good all along. When she heard that her local nonprofit art house, FilmScene, might be barred from showing "It's a Wonderful Life," she was incensed.

"I've been part of this momentum of showing the movie in small, independent theaters since 2007, and it's become a tradition," said Owen, 65, who moved to Iowa in 2020 to help organize her mother's centennial. Preventing small theaters from showing "It's a Wonderful Life," she says, "goes completely against the essence of the movie" and its ideals of community, generosity and self-sacrifice.



Donna Reed and James Stewart (center) star in "It's a Wonderful Life." (Moviestore/Shutterstock)

It's tempting to see George Baileys and Mr. Potters at every turn in a story that possesses uncanny parallels with "It's a Wonderful Life," in which mom-and-pop values manage to overcome profit-driven commercialism. But it's not always as clear-cut as it seems. Life, while often wonderful, is just as likely to be ambiguous, contradictory and a little messy around the edges.

But a shared moral of both tales is that, for mom and pop to prevail, they have to stand up for themselves.

*["It's a Wonderful Life" is a holiday classic. The FBI thought it was communist propaganda]*

After conversations with Fathom and Paramount, FilmScene eventually joined the Fathom event, which took place in more than 1,000 theaters from Dec. 18 through Dec. 21. Some venues followed suit, while others took to the streets — literally. After initially being told she couldn't play "It's a Wonderful Life," Ellen Elliott, executive director of Friends of the Penn, which runs the nonprofit Penn Theatre in Plymouth, Mich., says she discovered that the Alabama Theatre in Birmingham had received an exemption. "I'm like what?!" Elliott recalled recently, adding that when she did some digging she found out other theaters in Michigan had also received exemptions. "Anybody who knows me knows I'm not going to lie down," Elliott noted. "Fathom does this with films all the time — we wanted to book 'Planes, Trains and Automobiles' at Thanksgiving, and that had a moratorium, too. But 'It's a Wonderful Life'? No. You don't do that with this film."

On Oct. 26, Elliott sent a text and Facebook post encouraging Penn patrons to show up to the next day's screening of "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein" for a group photo in front of the Penn with the message "Please preserve our community tradition" on its marquee.

"I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but people came and they kept coming," Elliott recalled, estimating that as many as 1,000 people showed up to the rally. "It was just like the end of 'It's a Wonderful Life,' where everybody comes to George's house. ... We got amazing pictures of the crowds, our NBC affiliate was there. They had reached out to Paramount twice that day and they never responded. But the next afternoon I got an email [from the studio] saying, 'We're happy to book this for you.'"



A community demonstration for "It's a Wonderful Life" at Penn Theatre in Plymouth, Mich. (Pete Mundt)

Since October, more theaters have been given the go-ahead to play "It's a Wonderful Life," but not all were so lucky. Chris Collier, executive director at Renew Theaters, which manages four nonprofit theaters in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, says he received an email from Paramount in August saying the film would be "out of release this holiday season due to the upcoming Fathom event." He simply took no for an answer and moved on. "We're small and we're still short-staffed from the pandemic," Collier explains. "On one level, it wasn't worth our staff time to fight a losing battle. The flip side is that the amount of time we could have invested lobbying Paramount we're now spending communicating with disappointed patrons about why we're not playing 'It's a Wonderful Life.'"



As for who plays Mr. Potter in this story, no one is willing to accept the role. Fathom Events CEO Ray Nutt insists that the company made an exception to its usual policy of demanding exclusivity, allowing more than 300 independent theaters to show “It’s a Wonderful Life” alongside the multiplexes that compose the bulk of its network (Fathom is owned by the three biggest theater chains in the United States: AMC, Regal and Cinemark). The Fathom engagement has been a box office success: When it ended on Dec. 21, “It’s a Wonderful Life” had earned more than \$1.4 million and a spot in the week’s top performers. And the movie had attracted more than 117,000 filmgoers, a reminder that in many towns, suburbs and exurbs, the multiplex is the community theater.

*[As "It's a Wonderful Life" turns 75, Karolyn "Zuzu" Grimes reflects on the film that belatedly changed her life]*

Paramount declined to comment directly, sending a statement through a spokesperson that any theater that wants to play “It’s a Wonderful Life” is able to play it — an assertion that raises the question of whether every time a Hollywood studio tries to dodge a potential PR crisis an angel gets his wings.

For Elliott, in Plymouth, Mich., the saga of “It’s a Wonderful Life” this year demonstrates the fragility of a theatrical ecosystem in which small, independent theaters are chronically at risk — even though they often demonstrated creativity and nimbleness in hanging on to audiences during the pandemic shutdown. “When a multiplex is allowed to take something that was born and originally shown in these little theaters and they’re restricted from it, you’re killing the little guy,” she says. “The small-town theater is being almost treated the same way as a multiplex, and it’s not the same. The distributors need to understand that.”



At a time when nostalgia and fan loyalty are increasingly butting up against the realities of private ownership — of everything from popular HBO programs to Twitter — “It’s a Wonderful Life” occupies a singular place in the collective psyche as something owned by everyone, a product of Bedford Falls, not Pottersville. Owen, who recently introduced the film at the IFC Center in Manhattan, said this year’s screenings were imbued with a different spirit than in years past.

“There was an exuberance I haven’t felt for a long time,” she said, adding that in addition to the post-pandemic joy of being together in a theater, something more aspirational was going on. “The universality of this movie is kind of unbelievable,” Owen said. “I also think it speaks to this idea of community that we really have lost. We’ve become so divided. People probably do recognize Pottersville as more of what we’re living in now, but they really do want to treat each other better.”

