

A child shall lead them



'Wonderful Life' actor relishes film's message

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Jimmy Hawkins spent almost as much of his Hollywood career behind the camera as in front of it.

But, regardless of what side he's been on, he still likes to be associated with "uplifting, positive" material, he says.

Hawkins, a Catholic who played young Tommy Bailey in the 1946 movie "It's a Wonderful Life," became a producer midway through his career. His projects include a life of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

But the past beckons once more, as "It's a Wonderful Life" celebrates its golden anniversary with a one-time-only airing on NBC, 8-11 p.m. EST Saturday, Dec. 21.

Hawkins has written *The "It's a Wonderful Life" 50th Anniversary Scrapbook*, filled with interviews with and reminiscences of people associated with the holiday film, from

James Stewart and Donna Reed to the actors who played the other Bailey children, from director Frank Capra to the writer, set designer, cinematographer and the man who made the snow fall.

"I've gotten a lot of questions about the movie," Hawkins told CNS in a telephone interview from his Hollywood home.

An unexpected but welcome source of questions is the studio chieftains he must meet in order to sell them on his next feature film idea.

"It's nice to talk about it with all these young executives. They'll tell you things like, 'That's my favorite movie! I can't imagine that I'm talking to one of the cast members.' All while I'm sitting in the office of

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the president of some major studio," he said.

Just in case anybody hasn't seen it, Hawkins sums up the film's message this way: "Each man's life touches so many other lives. If they weren't there, it would leave an awful hole. What we were all put on earth to do, we've got to do."

Hawkins — a member of Holy Trinity Parish in Los Angeles — had a string of credits on TV after "It's a Wonderful Life."

"I was everybody's boyfriend," he said, including eight seasons as Shelley Fabares' boyfriend on "The Donna Reed Show."

As for the 1980 Seton movie, "A Time for Miracles," Hawkins said, "I think the man upstairs taps you on the shoulder and

gives you the instincts."

He thought it was time for a TV movie on the life of a saint, "but not one of a thousand years ago. Instead, one that people can relate to," he said.

He wanted to tell the story of "someone from their own experience" who overcame the same kind of struggles facing people in this era, he said.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton converted to Catholicism in New York at a time when the city looked less than kindly on Catholics. A widow, she managed to raise her family alone, he noted.

The selling jobs for projects are "all hard," he said. "Why is this one good? I do these positive, uplifting things. And the networks want all these other things."

Hawkins said he hopes the climate will change with the success of the CBS series "Touched by an Angel," which he called "my favorite show on the air right now."

Seneca Falls planner sure his village inspired film classic

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

Every Christmas season for nearly 20 years, Francis Caraccilo has watched "It's a Wonderful Life" with his wife, Gail.

"It's like we're playing this game every Christmas, watching the movie and pointing out things that could be Seneca Falls," said Caraccilo, Seneca Falls' village planner.

"I'm pretty well convinced," he said, that the movie's Bedford Falls is based on Seneca Falls. "It's been said for years, locally."

In the film classic, George Bailey works his way through a depression that takes him to the brink of suicide off a bridge — until he sees all the good relationships in his life in his small hometown and comes to realize his is, after all, a wonderful life.

"I just love the movie," Caraccilo said. "Seneca Falls or not, it's just a great movie."

This year Caraccilo, of St. Patrick's

Church in Seneca Falls, has become something of a celebrity. He's been mentioned on television and radio shows from Sacramento to Toronto, and in a nationally-distributed newspaper article — all since the *Finger Lakes Times* in December 1995 and Albany's *Times Union* this year quoted him in stories about the possible connection.

"We're having fun with it," he said. "I've never been so nervous in all my life."

His life, by the way, is 42 years young, eight years short of the age of the film.

The most convincing link of the film's Bedford Falls to Seneca Falls, the Seneca Falls native said, is the movie's bridge. A real-life incident in 1917 at a similar steel-truss bridge, Seneca Falls' Bridge Street Bridge, may have helped inspire the movie, he believes. Antonio Varacalli, an Italian immigrant who came to Seneca Falls to work on the barge canal, jumped from the bridge into the Seneca River to save a woman.

"He did save her but lost his own life,"

Caraccilo said. He noted a plaque on that bridge reads, "He honored the community / The community honors him."

Caraccilo thinks that movie director Frank Capra may have driven through Seneca Falls and seen that plaque. Capra produced inspirational films for the military during World War II, and Seneca Falls had two military installations, he added.

And, Caraccilo noted, the movie does refer to Rochester and Elmira, as if they're not far from Bedford Falls.

He also noted that Bailey Park, built by George Bailey to provide Bedford Falls with

affordable housing, resembles Rumseyville. That was built by 19th-century industrialist John Rumsey, he said, who, like George Bailey in the film, helped provide the down payments as well as the lower-cost homes.

Of course, other communities may lay claim to the Victorian downtown, the train station and residences in the movie, he said. And the writers and director of "It's a Wonderful Life" now dead, apparently never revealed the inspiration for Bedford Falls.

"But in a way maybe it's better that we don't have the proof," he said. "This little bit of mystery makes it fun."

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