

There's Something About that Dress: Myrtle Wilson and Violet Bick

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A scene of interest to Fitzgerald readers and scholars in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* is one in which Violet Bick draws the attention of the men on the street gathered around Ernie's taxi as Violet walks by in a stunning dress. The scene as shot goes like this:

GEORGE

Hello, Violet. Hey, you look good. That'some dress you got on there.

CLOSE SHOT — *Violet. She reacts to this.*

VIOLET

Oh, this old thing? Why, I only wear it when I don't care how I look.¹ (FCC; IAWL Book 137)

This scene bears a striking resemblance to one in Chapter Two of *The Great Gatsby* in which Mrs. McKee compliments Myrtle Wilson on her dress:

"I like your dress," remarked Mrs. McKee. "I think it's adorable." Mrs. Wilson rejected the compliment by raising her eyebrow in disdain. "It's just a crazy old thing," she said. "I just slip it on sometimes when I don't care what I look like." (35)

In the scene as written in Capra's "bound blue script pages"—the shooting script—for the movie, the last line of dialogue bears an even closer resemblance to Myrtle's response to Mrs. McKee in the novel:

GEORGE

Hello Violet. You look swell—some dress you got on.

VIOLET

Oh, this old thing. I only put it on when I don't care how I look.² (FCC; St. Martin's 41)

The likelihood that Fitzgerald's hand is somewhere present in the Violet Bick-George Bailey exchange in *It's a Wonderful Life* increases as one examines the history of this scene. While it is often nearly impossible to discover who in fact contributed what in a Capra film, in the case of this scene there are some clear trails to be found in the Frank Capra Collection at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. When Capra bought "The Greatest Gift," the story by Philip Van Doren Stern upon which *It's a Wonderful Life* was based, from RKO with the idea of making it into the first feature production for his newly formed Liberty Films, it came with three extensive script treatments, at least one of these with more than one draft: there are two drafts by Marc Connelly, one by Dalton Trumbo, and another by Clifford Odets. Violet does not appear at all in the Connelly scripts (August

and October 1944); she does appear in the Trumbo script as a character seeking secretarial work (December 1944). In the Odéts treatment, she appears as a child discussing George Bailey with Mary (February 1945). In none of these scripts is there a dress scene.³

After buying "The Greatest Gift" (and the three early treatments) from RKO on September 1, 1945 Capra quickly hired Francis Goodrich and Albert Hackett, who (perhaps coincidentally in relation to the dress scene) had been Fitzgerald's friends shortly before his death and to whom he had inscribed a copy of *The Great Gatsby* (Goodrich 118, 122), to write "a new adaptation" on September 14 (McBride 511). The next draft in the archives, dated January 3, 1946 and referred to as the "First Draft Continuity," contains a scene in which Violet appears at the soda fountain, the scene which appears in the film; and it also contains what seems obviously the prototype scene for what will become the dress scene in the film. In it Violet is described as "now obviously a little sex machine"—language that makes it into the annotation of the final script as shot (FCC; *IAWL Book* 136). The prototype scene contains a flirtatious exchange between her and George, and the two men standing with him join George in following Violet with their eyes as she walks away. There is no reference in this version to a dress.⁴

At some point between the January 3, 1946 "First Draft Continuity" script and Capra's "bound script blue pages" (March 18, 1946) the Violet dress scene was written. It is this draft that contains the line "Oh, this old thing. I just *put it on* when I don't care how I look" (FCC; St. Martin's 141; emphasis added). When the script was shot, the line was changed to "I just *wear* it when I don't care how I look" (FCC; *IAWL Book* 137; emphasis added). There are several plausible alternatives concerning the authorship of this scene, as well as the "polishing" and reworking of the dialogue. It is likely that the prototype scene, which appeared soon after Goodrich and Hackett began their work on the project, was in fact theirs. From this point the trail becomes more difficult to follow. Capra had also hired in January a little-known writer, Michael Wilson, to "polish" the script (McBride 511), and to the chagrin of Goodrich and Hackett, Capra, in addition, brought in their friend, the successful screenwriter Jo Swirling, to work behind them on the script. The timing of Swirling's entrance into the process is unclear, but there came a point, apparently when the script was virtually complete, when Goodrich and Hackett, who were by then thoroughly disgusted with Capra, "put our pens down and never went back to it" (Goodrich 161). Capra's shooting script indicates that "about a fourth of the scenes were rewritten by Swirling and Capra during the shooting..." (McBride 511). It is conceivable that any one of the individuals mentioned above could have contributed to the writing and/or polishing of the Violet dress scene.

A more intriguing possibility is suggested by newspaper notices of Dorothy Parker's involvement in the *It's a Wonderful Life* project. On February 19, 1946 the *New York Herald Tribune* reported that "Dorothy Parker has changed her plans for returning to New York and will remain in Hollywood to do a polish job on the screenplay of 'It's a Wonderful Life' for Liberty films" (FCC, *IAWL Scrapbook*). Then on March 1, 1946 the *Hollywood Reporter* ran this notice: "Frank Capra and Dotty Parker are merging for 'It's a Wonderful World,'"⁵ the Jimmy Stewart starrer" (FCC, *IAWL Scrapbook*). Then on March 12 the *New York Mirror* ran this notice by Sheilah Graham: "Dorothy Parker, pessimist, scripting for Frank Capra. The title of the picture is 'It's a Wonderful World!'" (FCC, *IAWL Scrapbook*). Parker's uncredited "polish" work on *It's a Wonderful Life* has been duly noted in passing by commentators on the production of

the film (McBride 511), though little is known about the substance of her contributions. The interesting fact revealed by the press notices is that her work on the film coincides with the time that the Violet dress scene enters Capra's "bound script blue pages" (i.e., March 18, 1946). The scene that was shot, though close, was not exactly the scene that was written. Capra enjoyed having his actors take liberties with "the speech" they had memorized from the script: "I'd cut out lines in the middle or put new ones in right at the last minute," he said (*IAWL Book* 350). One can imagine that "put it on" in the script as written easily became "wear" in the film as shot.

The dress scene is, of course, precisely the kind of homage to Fitzgerald that one would expect of Parker. It is now a matter of legend that Parker uttered Owl Eyes' words, "The poor son of a bitch," as she paid her respects to Fitzgerald in the Wordsworth Room of the Pierce Brothers Mortuary shortly before his body was sent east to Baltimore and then Rockville, Maryland for burial (Mizener 336, 399). One can easily imagine another act of homage: "Oh, this old thing. I only put it on when I don't care how I look"; "Oh, this old thing. I only wear it when I don't care how I look." Close enough to Myrtle's words in either case, it seems, to serve as a tribute to Fitzgerald, who like George Bailey, stood in the darkness of not knowing how much his life had meant to others—and never, as Parker well knew, more so than in Hollywood.

Notes

¹The final script as shot in the Frank Capra Collection (FCC) is dated March 4, 1947. This script is reproduced in Basinger's *The It's a Wonderful Life Book*, which was published "In Collaboration with the Trustees of the Frank Capra Archives." Page references to the script as shot in the text are to this book.

²The Capra Collection contains another script referred to as "the estimating script" (also called the "bound script blue pages"), dated March 18, 1946 and used by Capra in estimating the budget of the film. It contains Capra's handwritten notes and is "substantially different" from the script as shot (Basinger 108). St. Martin's has reproduced this script without Capra's handwritten notes. In the case of the Violet dress scene there are no handwritten notes or annotations in the "estimating script," and the St. Martin's text corresponds, in the case of this scene, to the estimating script. Page references in the text are to the St. Martin's book.

³I am indebted to Joan Miller, Archivist at the Wesleyan Cinema Archives, who has been generous in providing information regarding the original scripts and related material in the *It's a Wonderful Life* Scrapbook housed in the Frank Capra Collection.

⁴Miller provided this information about the "First Draft Continuity" (Miller to Bryant Mangum January 17, 2007).

⁵Joseph McBride suggests that the mistaken substitution of "World" for "Life" in the newspaper notices likely results from the fact that James Stewart starred in the 1939 movie *It's a Wonderful World* (McBride to Bryant Mangum January 18, 2007).

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