

[Vimeo link for this week's film and ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Zoom link for all SPRING 2022 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions](#)

**Directed by** Frank Capra

**Writing** Robert Riskin wrote the screenplay, based on a short story by Samuel Hopkins Adams.

**Cinematography by** Joseph Walker

**Film Editing** Gene Havlick

The film won big in the 1935 Academy Awards: Best Actor in a Leading Role (Clark Gable), Best Actress in a Leading Role (Claudette Colbert), Best Director (Frank Capra), Best Picture, Best Writing, Adaptation (Robert Riskin). It was entered into the National Film Registry in 1993.

#### Cast

Clark Gable...Peter Warne

Claudette Colbert...Ellie

Walter Connolly...Andrews

Roscoe Karns...Shapeley

Ward Bond...Bus Driver #1 (uncredited)

**Frank Capra** (b. Francesco Rosario Capra, May 18, 1897, Bisacquino, Sicily, Italy—d. September 3, 1991, La Quinta, California) is the recipient of three Academy Awards: 1939 Best Director for *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), 1937 Best Director for *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and 1935 Best Director for *It Happened One Night* (1934). In 1982 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Film Institute. Capra directed 54 films, including 1961 *Pocketful of Miracles*, 1959 *A Hole in the Head*, 1951 *Here Comes the Groom*, 1950 *Riding High*, 1948 *State of the Union*, 1946 *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1945 *Know Your Enemy - Japan*



(documentary), 1945 *War Comes to America* (documentary), 1945 *Two Down and One to Go* (documentary), 1945 *Here Is Germany*, 1945 *Your Job in Germany* (documentary), 1944 *Arsenic and Old Lace*, 1944 *Tunisian Victory* (documentary), 1944 *The Battle of China* (documentary), 1943 *The Battle of Russia* (documentary), 1943 *Divide and Conquer* (documentary), 1943 *The Battle of Britain* (documentary), 1943 *The Nazis Strike* (documentary), 1942 *Prelude to War* (documentary), 1941 *Meet John Doe*, 1939 *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1938 *You Can't Take It with You*, 1937 *Lost Horizon*, 1936 *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, 1934 *Broadway Bill*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1933 *Lady for a Day*, 1932 *American Madness*, 1932 *Forbidden*, 1931 *Platinum Blonde*, 1931 *Dirigible*, 1930 *Rain or Shine*, 1930 *Ladies of Leisure*, 1929 *The Donovan Affair*, 1928 *The Power of the Press*, 1928 *Submarine*, 1928 *The Way of the Strong*, 1928 *The Matinee Idol*, 1928 *So This Is Love?*, 1928 *That Certain Thing*, 1927 *For the Love of Mike*, 1926 *The Strong Man*, and 1922 *The Ballad of Fisher's Boarding House*. Capra also has 44 writing credits, including the screenplay of *It's a Wonderful Life*. He was also producer of 43 films, among them 1961 *Pocketful of Miracles*, 1959

*A Hole in the Head*, 1951 *Here Comes the Groom*, 1948 *State of the Union*, 1946 *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1945 *Know Your Enemy - Japan* (documentary), 1945 *War Comes to America* (documentary), 1945 *Two Down and One to Go* (documentary short), 1945 *Here Is Germany* (producer), 1944 *The Negro Soldier* (documentary), 1944 *Know Your Ally: Britain* (documentary), 1943 *The Battle of Russia* (documentary), 1943 *Divide and Conquer* (documentary), 1943 *The Battle of Britain* (documentary), 1943 *The Nazis Strike* (documentary short), 1942 *Prelude to War* (documentary), 1941 *Meet John Doe*, 1939 *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1938 *You Can't Take It with You*, 1937 *Lost Horizon*, 1936 *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1933 *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, 1932 *American Madness*, 1931 *Platinum Blonde*, 1931 *The Miracle Woman*, 1931 *Dirigible*, 1930 *Rain or Shine*, 1930 *Ladies of Leisure*, 1929 *Flight*, and 1928 *That Certain Thing*.



**Robert Riskin** (b. March 30, 1897, New York City—d. September 20, 1955, Los Angeles, California) began his career as a playwright, writing for many local New York City playhouses. Two of his plays, *Bless You*, *Sister* and *Many a Slip*, had successful runs. Riskin continued his Broadway career until the 1929. To take advantage of a need for screenwriters with stage experience after the emergence of sound in film, he moved to Hollywood in 1931 where Columbia Pictures bought screen rights for several of his plays. He became a collaborator with Frank Capra that same year with *The Miracle*. From 1931 to 1938, Riskin and Capra collaborated on eight films as screenwriter and director. Riskin contributed to at least six other screenplays directed by Capra. These films were nominated for 29 Academy Awards, including eight nominations for Riskin and Capra, and won ten, including three for Capra and one for Riskin. Riskin received Academy Award nominations for his screenplays and stories for five Capra films: *Lady for a Day* (1933), which Riskin had adapted from a Damon Runyon short story; *It Happened One Night* (1934), for which he won the Oscar; *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) with Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur; *You Can't Take It with You* (1938) with Lionel Barrymore and James Stewart; and *Here Comes the Groom* (1951) with Bing Crosby and Jane Wyman. Riskin joined Capra in an independent production company in

1939, but they fell out in 1941. After joining the war effort in the Office of War Information, Riskin returned to Hollywood in 1945, with the screenplay for *The Thin Man Goes Home*. He had an uncredited collaboration on the 1946 film noir classic *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*. Riskin and his brother Everett formed their own film company. Their first film, the minor James Stewart hit *Magic Town* (1946), was written and produced by Riskin, who also directed initially. The directing was finished by William A. Wellman.

**Joseph Walker** (b. Joseph Bailey Walker, August 22, 1892, Denver, Colorado—d. August 1, 1985, Las Vegas, Nevada) received 1982 Gordon E. Sawyer Academy Award. He was the cinematographer on 145 films, including 1952 *Affair in Trinidad*, 1952 *The Marrying Kind*, 1951 *The Mob*, 1950 *Born Yesterday*, 1950 *Harriet Craig*, 1950 *No Sad Songs for Me*,

1950 *A Woman of Distinction*, 1948 *The Dark Past*, 1948 *The Velvet Touch*, 1948 *The Mating of Millie*, 1947 *The Lady from Shanghai*, 1946 *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946 *The Jolson Story*, 1946 *Tars and Spars*, 1944 *Together Again*, 1944 *The Impatient Years*, 1944 *Mr. Winkle Goes to War*, 1943 *What a Woman!*, 1942 *A Night to Remember*, 1942 *My Sister Eileen*, 1941 *You Belong to Me*, 1941 *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, 1941 *Penny Serenade*, 1940 *This Thing Called Love*, 1940 *Too Many Husbands*, 1940 *His Girl Friday*, 1939 *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939 *Only Angels Have Wings*, 1938 *You Can't Take It with You*, 1937 *The Awful Truth*, 1937 *Lost Horizon*, 1936 *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, 1935 *Eight Bells*, 1935 *Let's Live Tonight*, 1934 *Broadway Bill*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1933 *Lady for a Day*, 1933 *Air Hostess*, 1933 *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, 1932 *Fifty Fathoms Deep*, 1932 *The Final Edition*, 1932 *Forbidden*, 1931 *Platinum Blonde*, 1931 *Subway Express*, 1931 *Dirigible*, 1930 *Rain or Shine*, 1929 *The Broadway Hooper*, 1929 *Flight*, 1929 *The Eternal Woman*, 1928 *The Sideshow*, 1928 *Restless Youth*, 1928 *The Street of Illusion*, 1928 *Submarine*, 1928 *Court-Martial*, 1928 *Virgin Lips*, 1928 *Say It with Sables*, 1928 *That Certain Thing*, 1927 *The Isle of Forgotten Women*, 1927 *Death Valley*, 1927 *Great Mail Robbery*, 1927 *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, 1926 *The Dixie Flyer*, 1925 *North Star*, 1924 *The Wise Virgin*, 1923 *Richard the Lion-Hearted*, and 1919 *Back to God's Country*.



**Samuel Hopkins Adams** (b. January 26, 1871, Dunkirk, New York—d. November 16, 1958, Beaufort, South Carolina) was a reporter for the New York Sun where his career began, and then joined McClure's Magazine, where he gained a reputation as a muckraker for his articles on the conditions of public health in the United States. Adams was a prolific writer, who wrote fiction as well. "Night Bus" (1933), one of Adams's many magazine stories, became the basis for the 1934 film *It Happened One Night*.

**Gene Havlick** (b. March 16, 1894, Enid, Oklahoma—d. May 11, 1959, Los Angeles, California, USA) won a Best Film Editing Oscar for his work on Frank Capra's 1937 *Lost Horizon*, and he was nominated for Oscars for 1938's *You Can't Take It with You* and 1939's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. He edited 108 films.



**Clark Gable** (b. William Clark Gable, February 1, 1901 in Cadiz, Ohio—d. November 16, 1960, Los Angeles, California) received the 1935 Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *It Happened One Night* (1934). He appeared in 82 films, among them 1961 *The Misfits*, 1960 *It Started in Naples*, 1959 *But Not for Me*, 1958 *Teacher's Pet*, 1958 *Run Silent Run Deep*, 1957 *Band of Angels*, 1956 *The King and Four Queens*, 1955 *The Tall Men*, 1955 *Soldier of Fortune*, 1954 *Betrayed*, 1953 *Mogambo*, 1953 *Never Let Me Go*, 1952 *Lone Star*, 1951 *Callaway Went Thataway*, 1951 *Across the Wide Missouri*, 1950 *To Please a Lady*, 1950 *Key to the City*, 1949 *Any Number Can Play*, 1948 *Command Decision*, 1948 *Homecoming*, 1947 *The Hucksters*, 1945 *Adventure*, 1942 *Somewhere I'll Find You*, 1941 *Honky Tonk*, 1941 *They Met in Bombay*, 1940 *Comrade X*, 1940 *Boom Town*, 1940 *Strange Cargo*, 1939 *Gone with the Wind*, 1939 *Idiot's Delight*, 1938 *Too Hot to Handle*, 1938 *Test Pilot*, 1937 *Saratoga*, 1937 *Parnell*, 1936 *San Francisco*, 1935 *Mutiny on the Bounty*, 1935 *The Call of the Wild*, 1934 *Chained*, 1934 *Manhattan Melodrama*, 1934 *Men in White*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1933 *Dancing Lady*, 1933 *Night*

*Flight*, 1932 *No Man of Her Own*, 1932 *Red Dust*, 1932 *Strange Interlude*, 1931 *Hell Divers*, 1931 *Susan Lenox <Her Fall and Rise>*, 1931 *Night Nurse*, 1931 *Dance, Fools, Dance*, 1931 *The Painted Desert*, 1925 *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, 1925 *North Star*, 1924 *White Man*, and 1923 *Fighting Blood*.

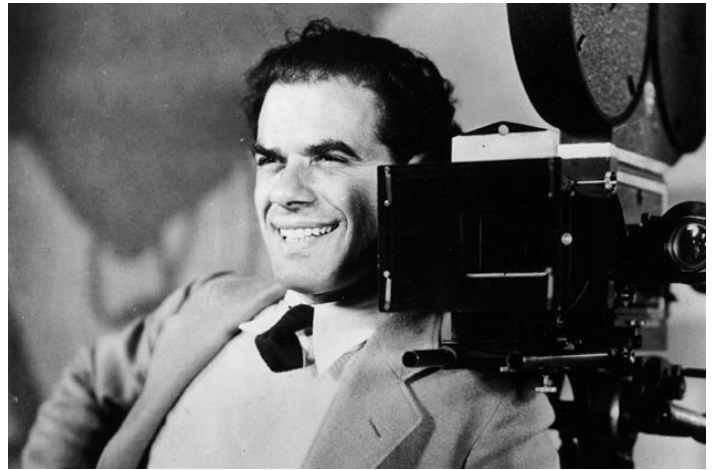
**Claudette Colbert** (b. Emilie Claudette Chauchoin, September 13, 1903, Saint-Mandé, Val-de-Marne, France—d. July 30, 1996, Speightstown, Barbados) appeared in 78 titles, including 1987 "The Two Mrs. Grenvilles," 1961 *Parrish*, 1959 "The Bells of St. Mary's," 1957 "Playhouse 90," 1956 "Robert Montgomery Presents," 1955 *Texas Lady*, 1955 "The Ford Television Theatre," 1954 *Royal Affairs in Versailles*, 1951 *Let's Make It Legal*, 1951 *Thunder on the Hill*, 1950 *The Secret Fury*, 1950 *Three Came Home*, 1949 *Bride for Sale*, 1947 *The Egg and I*, 1946 *Tomorrow Is Forever*, 1944 *Since You Went Away*, 1943 *So Proudly We Hail!*, 1942 *The Palm Beach Story*, 1940 *Boom Town*, 1939 *Drums Along the Mohawk*, 1939 *It's a Wonderful World*, 1938 *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*, 1937 *Maid of Salem*, 1936 *Under Two Flags*, 1935 *She Married Her Boss*, 1935 *The Gilded Lily*, 1934 *Imitation of Life*, 1934 *Cleopatra*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1934 *Four Frightened People*, 1933 *Torch Singer*, 1933 *I Cover the Waterfront*, 1932 *The Sign of the Cross*, 1932 *Misleading Lady*, 1931 *His Woman*, 1931 *Secrets of a Secretary*, 1931 *The Smiling Lieutenant*, 1930 *Manslaughter*, 1930 *Young Man of Manhattan*, 1929 *The Lady Lies*, 1929 *The Hole in the Wall*, and 1927 *For the Love of Mike*.

**Walter Connolly** (b. April 8, 1887, Cincinnati, Ohio—d. May 28, 1940, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California) appeared in 49 films, among them 1939 *The Great Victor Herbert*, 1939 *Those High Grey Walls*, 1939 *5th Ave Girl*, 1939 *Coast Guard*, 1939 *Bridal Suite*, 1939 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1938 *Too Hot to Handle*, 1938 *Penitentiary*, 1937 *The League of Frightened Men*, 1937 *The Good Earth*, 1935 *White Lies*, 1935 *She Couldn't Take It*, 1934 *Father Brown, Detective*, 1934 *Whom the Gods Destroy*, 1934 *Twentieth Century*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1933 *Lady for a Day*, 1933 *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, 1932 *Man Against Woman*, 1915 *A Soldier's Oath*, and 1914 *The Marked Woman*.

**Roscoe Karns** (b. September 7, 1891, San Bernardino, California—d. February 6, 1970 (age 78), Los Angeles, California) appeared in 150 films, among them 1964 *Man's Favorite Sport?*, 1959-1962 "Hennesey" (73 episodes), 1951-1954 "Rocky King, Detective" (9 episodes), 1948 *Texas, Brooklyn & Heaven*, 1948 *Speed to Spare*, 1948 *Devil's Cargo*, 1948 *The Inside Story*, 1946 *Avalanche*, 1944 *Minstrel Man*, 1943 *Stage Door Canteen*, 1942 *A Tragedy at Midnight*, 1942 *Woman of the Year*, 1941 *Footsteps in the Dark*, 1941 *Petticoat Politics*, 1940 *They Drive by Night*, 1940 *His Girl Friday*, 1938 *Dangerous to*

*Know*, 1938 *Scandal Street*, 1937 *Murder Goes to College*, 1936 *Cain and Mabel*, 1935 *Two-Fisted*, 1935 *Front Page Woman*, 1935 *Alibi Ike*, 1934 *Twentieth Century*, 1934 *Come On, Marines!*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1933 *Alice in Wonderland*, 1933 *The Women in His Life*, 1933 *Today We Live*, 1932 *The Crooked Circle*, 1931 *Ladies of the Big House*, 1931 *Dirigible*, 1930 *Man Trouble*, 1929 *New York Nights*, 1929 *This Thing Called Love*, 1928 *Jazz Mad*, 1928 *Moran of the Marines*, 1927 *The Jazz Singer*, 1927 *Ten Modern Commandments*, 1927 *Wings*, 1927 *Ritzy*, 1924 *The Foolish Virgin*, 1924 *The Midnight Express*, 1923 *The Ten Commandments*, 1920 *Life of the Party*, 1920 *The Family Honor*, 1919 *Brides for Two*, and 1915 *Mr. Carlson of Arizona*.

**Ward Bond** (b. Wardell E. Bond, April 9, 1903, Benkelman, Nebraska—d. November 5, 1960, Dallas, Texas). Ward Bond appeared in 274 titles, among them : 1957-1961 “Wagon Train” (133 episodes), 1959 *Alias Jesse James*, 1959 *Rio Bravo*, 1958 *China Doll*, 1957 *The Wings of Eagles*, 1956 *Pillars of the Sky*, 1956 *The Searchers*, 1955 *A Man Alone*, 1955 *Mister Roberts*, 1955 *The Long Gray Line*, 1954 *Johnny Guitar*, 1953 *Hondo*, 1952 *Thunderbirds*, 1952 *The Quiet Man*, 1951 *Only the Valiant*, 1951 *The Great Missouri Raid*, 1950 *Wagon Master*, 1948 *3 Godfathers*, 1948 *Joan of Arc*, 1948 *Fort Apache*, 1947 *The Fugitive*, 1947 *Unconquered*, 1946 *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946 *My Darling Clementine*, 1945 *They Were Expendable*, 1945 *Dakota*, 1944 *The Fighting Sullivans*, 1943 *A Guy Named Joe*, 1942 *Gentleman Jim*, 1942 *Wild Bill Hickok Rides*, 1941 *The Maltese Falcon*, 1941 *Sergeant York*, 1941 *Tobacco Road*, 1940 *Santa Fe Trail*, 1940 *Kit Carson*, 1940 *Little Old New York*, 1940 *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939 *Gone with the Wind*, 1939 *Drums Along the Mohawk*, 1939 *Young Mr. Lincoln*, 1939 *Return of the Cisco Kid*, 1939 *Union Pacific*, 1939 *Dodge City*, 1939 *They Made Me a Criminal*, 1939 *Son of Frankenstein*, 1938 *You Can't Take It with You*, 1938 *Numbered Woman*, 1938 *Gun Law*, 1938 *Born to Be Wild*, 1938 *Penitentiary*, 1937 *Topper*, 1937 *The Singing Marine*, 1937 *They Gave Him a Gun*, 1937 *You Only Live Once*, 1937 *The Devil's Playground*, 1936 *Legion of Terror*, 1936 *Crash Donovan*, 1936 *Fury*, 1936 *The Cattle Thief*, 1936 *Pride of the Marines*, 1936 *The Leathernecks Have Landed*, 1935 *Too Tough to Kill*, 1935 *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1935 *She Gets Her Man*, 1935 *Murder in the Fleet*, 1935 *'G' Men*, 1935 *Devil Dogs of the Air*, 1934 *Chained*, 1934 *Here Comes the Groom*, 1934 *The Most Precious Thing in Life*, 1934 *I'll Tell the World*, 1934 *It Happened One Night*, 1934 *Speed Wings*, 1934 *School for Romance*, 1934 *Frontier Marshal*, 1933 *Wild Boys of the Road*, 1933 *Heroes for Sale*, 1932 *Sundown Rider*, 1932 *Flesh*, 1932 *Air Mail*, 1932 *High Speed*, 1931 *Arrowsmith*, 1931 *A Connecticut Yankee*, 1930 *The Lone Star Ranger*, 1929 *So This Is College*, and 1929 *Salute*.



**Frank Capra, From *World Film Directors Vol. I, Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co., NY, 1987***

American director, scenarist, and producer, was born in Bisacquono, a village near Palermo in Sicily. Youngest of seven children of Salvatore Capra, a fruitgrower, and the former Sarah Nicholas. Capra spent his first six years in an “old cracked house of stone and mortar, clinging by its toenails to the rocks in the village.” He celebrated his sixth birthday “in a howling Atlantic storm, in the *Germania*’s black steerage hold, crammed with retching, praying, terrorized immigrants.”

That first journey ended on Castelar Street, a Sicilian ghetto in Los Angeles. His father worked as a fruitpicker and Frank Capra sold newspapers after school. He “hated being poor” and to his parents’ dismay refused to end his education with high school. Money earned as a banjo player in Los Angeles nightclubs covered his admission fee at the California Institute of Technology in 1915. Capra studied chemical engineering for three years, paying his way by running the student laundry, waiting tables, and wiping engines at the Pasadena power plant. He wrote later that Cal Tech “changed his whole viewpoint on life from the viewpoint of an alley rat to the viewpoint of a cultured person.”

Graduating in the spring of 1918, Capra enlisted in the army. Having served in the ROTC, he was assigned as a second lieutenant to teach mathematics to artillerymen at Fort Scott, San Francisco. His father died in 1919 and after the war Capra went home to live with his mother. His two brothers and four sisters all had jobs (or husbands with jobs), but Frank Capra, the family’s only college graduate, remained chronically unemployed. Around 1920, taunted by his siblings and convinced that he was a failure, he became depressed and ill, suffering from acute abdominal pains. He was bedridden for two months and did not fully recover for a year. (Much later it was established that he had suffered a burst appendix.)

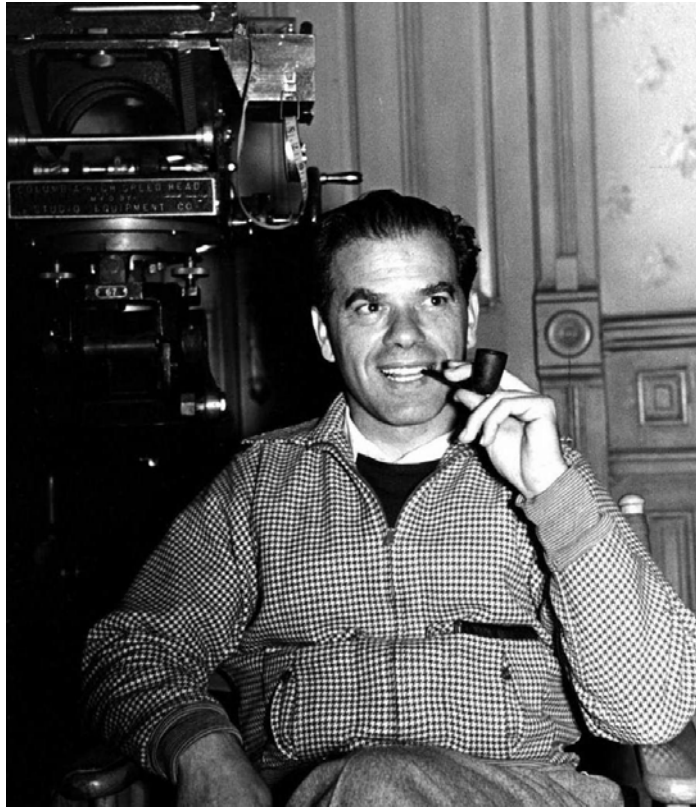
As soon as he was well enough, Capra left home. During the next few years he lived in flophouses in San Francisco or else hopped freight trains and wandered the West, working on farms or as a movie extra, or hustling a living as a poker player or salesman of wildcat oil stock. In

1922 he achieved a degree of respectability as a book salesman, peddling Elbert Hubbard's *Little Journeys* in a fourteen-volume deluxe edition. All the same, Capra reportedly possessed only twelve cents when he read in the newspaper that Walter Montague was launching a new movie studio in an abandoned gymnasium in San Francisco.

Montague, an old Shakespearean actor, wanted to make screen versions of famous poems. Capra called him and intimated that he was "from Hollywood." Montague was impressed and hired him (for a total fee of \$75) to direct his first project, a one-reeler based on Kipling's ballad "Fultah Fisher's Boarding House." Having taken in a few movies by way of learning his new trade, Capra enlisted the services of a cameraman he happened to know and set about casting his film with amateurs—"bellhops and so on." His motives for insisting on a nonprofessional cast were not those of the neorealists: "I didn't want real actors...[because they] might show me up." Capra made his first movie in two days. It cost \$1,700 and was sold to Pathé for \$3,500. According to Alva Johnston, "critics noted that it was free from stunts, mannerisms, camera angles and Hollywood tricks. It had to be free from them as Capra never had time to learn anything of them."

Capra left Montague when the old man decided that the poems on which he would base his future productions would be his own. Capra was already hooked on the movies, however, and got himself a job with another minor San Francisco producer, Paul Gerson; then one with Harry Cohn in Los Angeles. Having worked as property man, film cutter, title writer, and assistant director, he became a gag writer for Hal Roach's *Our Gang* series before incarcerating himself in Mack Sennett's notorious "writers' tower." There he wrote a number of movies for the comedian Harry Langdon—a saintlike fool in a naughty world. When Langdon left Sennett to make feature-length movies for First National, Capra went with him as his writer and director.

Capra made three films with Langdon—*Tramp*, *Tramp*, *Tramp* (1926), *The Strong Man* (1926) and *Long Pants* (1927). All of them, especially *The Strong Man*, were immensely successful with the critics and the public, establishing Langdon as a comedian of the caliber of Chaplin or Keaton. After he fired Capra and began to direct his own movies, his career declined. Capra made one more movie for First National, *For the Love of Mike*



(1927), a routine comedy about a waif raised by three bickering godfathers, a German, a Jew, and an Irishman. It was such a resounding failure that Cludette Colbert, who played the lead, returned to the stage for two years. Capra himself nearly abandoned the movies but in the end rejoined Harry Cohn.

Cohn, his brother Jack, and Joseph Brandt had founded their film production company in 1920, calling it the CBC Sales Corporation. CBC, soon known in the industry as "Cornbeef and Cabbage," produced mostly shorts and two-reel comedies. It was one of the many small studios on "Poverty Row" in Los Angeles. Denied access to first-run houses, they churned out low-budget quickies for provincial exhibitors. This tough business became steadily tougher as the major studios carved up among themselves the means of production, distribution, and exhibition. Most of the independent producers went to the wall; the vulgar and egregious

Harry Cohn survived because he was tougher and shrewder than his competitors. In 1924 CBC became Columbia Pictures, with the new policy of producing feature films. They were still quickies, generally made in a week or less, but they included a sprinkling of stars (often actors just dropped by the major studios). Costs were kept down by "bunching" the scenes in which these expensive assets appeared, so that all those scenes could be shot in a few days.

It was Capra who made a success of Cohn's new policy. During his first year at Columbia he directed nine films. They included *The Way of the Strong* (1928), a melodrama about a criminal who loves and loses a blind girl, and *The Power of the Press* (1928), starring Douglas Fairbanks Jr. as a gangbusting reporter—the first of many Capra movies with a newspaper background. Cohn's first attempt at something more ambitious than a routine quickie was an all-action naval adventure story called *Submarine* (1928). It starred Jack Holt and Ralph Graves and used some relatively expensive sets and effects. Capra, who took over from Irven Willett when Cohn became dissatisfied with his efforts, filmed his tough-guy stars without makeup and in unpressed uniforms and added other touches of realism, as well as some comedy. The result was highly successful, establishing Holt and Graves as a popular starring team and Capra as a "bankable" director. Cohn, who had started Capra at \$1,000 per movie,

now gave him a contract at \$25,00 a year.

*Submarine*, which had sound effects and snatches of dialogue, was followed by Capra's first real talkie, *The Younger Generation* (1929), a rags-to-riches-and-back-again romance based on a Fanny Hurst bestseller. Capra welcomed the transition to sound. "I wasn't at home in silent films," he told an interviewer. "I thought it was very strange to stop and put a title on the screen and then come back to the action....When I got to working with sound, I thought, my, what a wonderful tool has been added." He used sound in the location shooting for *Flight* (1929), his second Holt-Graves armed services drama.

Capra wrote as well as directed *Flight* and, encouraged by its success, wrote a show business story called "Ladies of the Evening." Cohn was enthusiastic and so were all of Cohn's yesmen, but Jo Swerling, a New York newspaperman on a short contract with Columbia, said the story was preposterous and explained why at a meeting attended by "a little dark guy" he thought was Cohn's secretary. In fact it was Capra, who after the meeting insisted that Swerling be hired as his

collaborator. Capra's script was rewritten as *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), which by the standards of the industry at that time—and of Columbia in particular—is a film of some sophistication. Under Capra's direction, Barbara Stanwyck acted with a sincerity and naturalness that launched her as a star. The picture was Columbia's first important critical success and the first of several Capra films written by Swerling.

After an engaging circus comedy called *Rain or Shine* (1930) came *The Miracle Woman* (1931). An early example of the exposé film....It combines tough realism and romantic hokum in a way that even the New York critics found palatable. *Platinum Blonde* (1932), a Jean Harlowe vehicle, introduced in the newspaper woman Gallagher (Loretta Young) a prototype of the Capra heroine—a wisecracking working girl whose cynicism masks a tender heart. The sharp dialogue was written by Robert Riskin, and he and Capra went on to become Hollywood's most admired writer-director team.

It was Riskin who wrote *American Madness* (1932), in which Capra's social concerns quite suddenly emerged. This Depression movie tells the story of an idealistic bank president, Tom Dickson (Walter Huston), who terrifies his greedy board of directors by lending money to people whose only collateral is honesty and an appetite for hard work. Bedeviled by a crooked cashier and murderous gangsters, and uncertain of his wife's fidelity,

Dickson nearly loses heart. A run on the bank begins, but in the nick of time, the small businessmen who owe their survival to Dickson crowd in to deposit their money and demonstrate their confidence in his bank.

"Capra's mastery of the medium is obvious in *American Madness*," wrote John Raeburn, "as it would be in most of his later films. Form and content are inextricably linked, and meaning derives from the fusion of the two. The tempo of the film, for example, is perfectly synchronized with the action, "building from long and leisurely tracking shots of the opening to increasingly jerky and staccato camera movements when the run on the bank begins: "As the intensity of the panic increases, Capra reduces the duration of each shot and uses more and more crosscutting and jump cuts to emphasize the 'madness; of what is happening.'" Riskin's dialogue is vivid and



colloquial, and "Capra added to the naturalistic quality of the dialogue by having speakers overlap one another, as they often do in ordinary life; this was an innovation that helped to move the talkies away from the example of the legitimate stage....Capra also used sound as an important element for creating mood and for underscoring what was being seen on the screen....*American Madness* was not a film with sound added, but truly a sound film." This is especially evident during the run on the bank, when "the camera and the microphone work together organically" to register the growing panic and hysteria of the mob. Raeburn considers Capra second only to Griffith as a director of crowds. The message of *American Madness* is in effect the one Roosevelt offered soon afterwards as the rallying cry of the New Deal—"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." However, this film, the first of Capra's "fantasies of good will," has been treated with great hostility by Marxist critics, who regard it as propaganda for paternalistic capitalism.

Denied an Oscar for *American Madness*, Capra tried again with *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). This was adapted from a novel by Grace Zaring Stone, not by Riskin but by Edward Paramore. Barbara Stanwyck plays a prim New Englander who goes to China during the Revolution to marry her missionary fiancé. Instead she falls into the clutches of a much-feared warlord (Nils Asther). While she tries to convert him to Christianity, he introduces her to art



and the senses. Her sensual awakening comes in a dream that does not occur in the novel, a brilliant sequence that has reminded some critics of Cocteau. When the war turns against Yen, the heroine stays with him until his suicide.

The photography of this extraordinary film was the work of Joe Walker, cameraman on a score of Capra movies. Elliott Stein, who considers it Capra's masterpiece, called it "a work of exquisite textures....It is the only film the director ever made in which an interesting and credible narrative is given serious support from the writer—significantly not Riskin—down to the final reel." It did not bring Capra an Oscar, but it demonstrated his victory in his struggle with Cohn to gain complete artistic control over his films, from choice of subject to final cut. "One man—one film" was Capra's watchword; in his opinion, though moviemaking involves much consultation and collaboration, in the end "one man has to make the decisions, one man says yes or no. That man should be the director."...

The first of the "screwball comedies" was based on a story called "Night Bus" by Samuel Hopkins Adams and featured two second-rank stars that Capra borrowed from other studios. Claudette Colbert (taking another chance on Capra) plays Ellie Andrews, escaping from her tycoon father in Miami to join her playboy fiancé in New York. Broke, she has to take a handout from Peter Warne (Clark Gable), a tough but fundamentally decent reporter also heading for New York. He has just lost his job and sees in this spoiled brat the makings of a scoop. When their bus is halted by a torrential rain, they share a single motel room (a blanket hung between their beds: "The Walls of Jericho"). They bamboozle her father's detectives and hitchhike on together (Ellie showing her gumption and her legs to stop a car when Peter can't). Their class-rooted hostility gives way to love, encouraged in the end by Ellie's father (Walter Connolly) who, having made his millions by the sweat of his brow, knows a good man when he sees one.

Some contemporary critics (and many since) were appalled by this "wish-fulfillment" involved in this transformation of a bullying tycoon into a good fairy, a trick that occurs in other Capra comedies. In fact, Capra was by no means the only 1930s director guilty of this particular fantasy. As Andrew Bergman writes, the "cold-eyed, suspicious and edgy" comedy of 1930-1933 gave way in the mid-1930s to "a comedy at once warm and healing" which sought to reconcile the irreconcilable, creating "an America of perfect unity" in which "all

classes are one." The "screwball comedies" of the Depression were escapist variations on the American Dream, but they probably meant well and were certainly well-received, proving, as Bergman says, "a bonanza for Hollywood."

*It Happened One Night* won Oscars for best film, screenplay, director, actor, and actress—the first movie to



be so comprehensively honored. It was the great hit of 1934, making the names and fortunes of Capra, Columbia, Colbert, and Gable, and inspiring countless imitations. It owed its success to its pace and invention, its good-humored wit, its amiable eroticism, and its kindly observation of a great gallery of American types and characters encountered between Florida and New York. The picture has been called a picaresque, an

early road movie, and (by Robert Stebbins) "the classic genteel romantic story" in which "the rich girl gives up her rebellious freedom for the pleasure of the hero's wit and imagination" and the hero, in exchange for the girl, "weds his vitality and vision to the dominant social class." But, Stebbins says, "Capra and Riskin brought as much to the genteel formula story as they took from it. Above all they took it out of the drawing rooms of the rich and filled it with the settings and people of everyday life."

*Broadway Bill*, another screwball comedy, this time about horse players, was also released in 1934 and was also a hit. But at this stage in his career Capra arrived at a new conception of his role. No longer content to simply entertain, he decided he must use his mastery of the Hollywood entertainment machine to convey a message to the American public. "My films must let every man, woman, and child know that God loves them, that I love them, and that peace and salvation will become a reality only when they all learn to love each other. This revelation Capra attributes in a much-quoted anecdote to a "faceless little man" introduced to him during a period of illness by a Christian Scientist friend. His visitor, whose name he never learned, pointed out that he was able to "talk to hundreds of millions, for two hours—and in the dark. The talents you have, Mr. Capra, are not your own, not self-acquired. God gave you those talents; they are His gifts to you. To use for His purpose."

Capra embodied his message in a series of films, all but one of them written by Riskin, which Richard Griffith has labeled "fantasies of good will," and which in fact bear a strong resemblance in mood and structure to an earlier Riskin-Capra

collaboration, *American Madness*. The first (and for many the best) of the series was *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936)...Capra's "*Saturday Evening Post* socialism" was decried by intellectuals, but the "little people" beloved of Mr. Deeds loved the movie and so did most of its reviewers. It brought Capra a second Oscar and was another box-office smash. Only Alistair Cooke observed that the director was "starting to make movies about themes instead of people." *Lost Horizons* (1937), based on James Hilton's sentimental utopian fantasy, was not about anything worth discussing but cost two million dollars and added "Shangri-La" to the language as the quintessential escapist haven....The movie took two Oscars and, according to some accounts, was the most profitable of all Capra's films.

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) centers on another of Capra's embodiments of small-town idealism and naïve eccentricity.... *Mr. Smith* was Capra's last movie for Columbia; for his next he set up his own production company, Frank Capra Productions, with Riskin as his partner. *Meet John Doe* (1941) has been the most controversial of the

Capra-Riskin movies....*Meet John Doe*, made at the end of the isolationist period when war with the Axis seemed imminent, has been taken as a deliberate reaffirmation of American values, but one that reveals a surprising uncertainty about their survival and perhaps even about their nature. Andrew Sarris has gone further than most to make the last point, saying that Capra here "crossed the line between populist sentimentality and populist demagoguery," embodying in Gary Cooper "a barefoot fascist, suspicious of all ideas and all doctrines, but believing in the innate conformism of the common man."...

During World War II Capra made a number of propaganda films for the War Department. Admired to the point of adulation at the time, some of them (like *The Negro Soldier*) have since been condemned as stereotyped or even racist. Capra's own "Why We Fight" series is on the whole better balanced, and the effectiveness of these documentaries as hard-hitting propaganda has been widely recognized: Churchill called them the most powerful "statement of our cause" that he had ever encountered. Capra, who began the war as a major, ended it as a colonel, earning a DSM and the Legion of Merit, and becoming an officer of the Order of the British Empire.

After the war Capra set up a new production co, Liberty Films, Incorporated, which as it turns out made only one movie, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)....This is



Capra's own favorite among his films and Griffith called it "one of the most personal visions ever realized in commercial cinema."

There was much less enthusiasm for *State of the Union* (1948), adapted from a Pulitzer Prize-winning drama by Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse....The film was released by MGM, Capra having by then sold Liberty Films to Paramount....

In fact, none of Capra's subsequent movies had much success....

In the typical Capra movie, as Richard Griffith has pointed out, "a messianic innocent...pits himself against the forces of entrenched greed. His inexperience defeats him strategically, but his gallant integrity in the face of

temptation calls forth the goodwill of the "little people," and through their combined protest, he triumphs." During the golden age of Hollywood, Capra's "fantasies of good will" made him one of the two or three most famous and successful directors in the world.

However, beginning in the late 1950s, when the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics in France launched an *auteurist* reassessment of the American film. His reputation declined sharply. It seems surprising that the *Cahiers* critics had so little regard for a director who was so completely the "author" of his films—one of the few to have his "name above the title" in the credits and advertising and to win complete artistic control over his work. John Raeburn suggests that Capra's best films were unknown to the French—too quintessentially American to be exportable. The *Cahiers* disciples in the United States were more aggressively negative, however, mostly on political grounds. Capra was accused of grossly oversimplifying and sentimentalizing serious political and social issues, and of a belief in "the tyranny of the majority."

Ten years later, it was clear that this trend had reversed itself. Post-*auteurist* critics once more acclaimed Capra as a cinematic master, and perhaps more surprisingly, young people packed Capra festivals and revivals on campuses all over the United States. As John Raeburn writes, it was once more recognized that "for all their devotion to middle-class life, Capra's films are saved from emotional thinness and vapid sentimentality by, on the one hand, a limited but omnipresent vein of social criticism and, on the other, by the director's skill in animating and making credible an ideal conception of American national character.,,,There is a strong libertarian



streak in Capra's films, a distrust of power wherever it occurs and in whomever it is invested." Young people are won over by the fact that his heroes "are uninterested in wealth" and "are characterized by a vigorous...individualism, a zest for experience, and a keen sense of political and social justice....Capra's heroes, in short, are ideal types, created in the image of a powerful national myth."

There is always a degree of improvisation in Capra's work. He went onto the set with a script written in master scenes only: "What you need is what the scene is about, who does what to whom, and who cares about whom...All I want is a master scene and I'll take care of the rest—how to shoot it, how to keep the machinery out of the way, and how to focus attention on the actors at all times." In this almost casual way, Capra produced movies of great but unobtrusive craftsmanship—unobtrusive because he thought it was bad directing to distract the audience with fancy technical gimmicks. William S. Pechter describes Capra's style as one of almost classical purity; and it seems somehow appropriate to the American ethos of casual abundance that the director of quite possible the greatest technical genius in the Hollywood film, post-Griffith, pre-Hitchcock—a genius, as Richard Griffith has suggested, on the order of those of the silent Russian cinema at its zenith—should have placed his great gifts at the service of an apparently frivolous kind of comedy."

Pechter maintains that Capra's style is based on editing, "since it depends for its effect on a sustained sequence of rhythmic motion...But whereas Eisenstein's complex and intricate editing seems, finally, to attempt to impose movement on material which is essentially static, Capra has the effect of imposing order on images constantly in motion, imposing order on chaos. The end of all this is indeed a kind of beauty, a beauty of controlled motion, more like dancing than painting, but more like the movies than anything else...There is always a gap between what Capra wishes to say and what he actually succeeds in saying. He seems obsessed with certain American social myths but he observes that society itself as a realist...His films move at a breathtaking clip: dynamic, driving, taut, at their extreme even hysterical; the unrelenting, frantic, acceleration of pace seems to spring from the release of some tremendous accumulation of pressure. The sheer speed and energy seem, finally, less calculated than desperate, as though Capra were aware, on some level, of the tension established between his material and what he attempts to make of it."

...Capra has been four times president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and three times president of the Screen Directors Guild, which he helped to found and which, under his presidency, did much to secure a degree of artistic control for Hollywood directors....He won a reputation for fierce independence in his dealings with Harry Cohn and other front-office tyrants, but on the set was said to be gentle and considerate, "a director who

displays absolutely no exhibitionism."



**Farran Smith Nehme: "*It Happened One Night: All Aboard!*" (Criterion Essays, 2014)**

Almost eighty years ago, the Academy Awards saw a clean sweep of its top five categories—screenplay, actor, actress, director, and picture—not by a grandiose epic or searing social drama but by a romantic comedy, a sparkling, gossamer thing about the love of a pampered heiress for a just-fired, often-drunk scamp of a reporter. The film begins with the heiress already married to an obvious fortune hunter. Her father has imprisoned her on his yacht, demanding that she accept an annulment. She runs away on a Greyhound bus and finds herself mixed up with that scoop-hungry reporter. They spend one night together, then another. They fall in love. A bare plot synopsis hasn't got much heft. And yet after all these years, *It Happened One Night* (1934) is almost universally acknowledged as one for the ages, its gorgeous spirit haunting all the romantic road trips, all the unlikely courtships, all the bickering, smitten couples that have come after.

It's a movie both escapist and egalitarian. Director Frank Capra, that great American cheerleader, assures everyone that this fair country's wide-open spaces, while not without peril, are full of fellowship and democracy. Our land can bring out the good in Ellen Andrews (Claudette Colbert), who is so spoiled that, in the first scene, she flings an entire steak dinner out a porthole. Her father (Walter Connolly) delivers a roundhouse slap, a moment that shocks them both. But for a Great Depression audience, one that Franklin Delano Roosevelt would still describe, in 1937, as "one-third . . . ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," wasting a lavish meal would have bordered on the criminal. Comeuppance must be on its way—and so it is, in the guise of reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable). When Pete is introduced, he's on the phone with the editor who canned him. As an appreciative audience gathers to listen, Pete tilts a bottle of booze down his throat and defends an unprintably bad story with "That was free verse, ya gashouse palooka." He remains fired, of course, wasting something else that was scarce and precious in 1934: a job. Thus these lovers share a definite recklessness. They distrust authority, cant, and, more problematically, each other. It's often said that social progress has weakened

love stories by removing all the important obstacles—the most obvious being the bygone taboo of sex before marriage, but another being the class system that’s woven throughout *It Happened One Night*. Yet, viewed today, the movie’s predicaments aren’t tintype relics of the fussy old days. A modern woman forced to spend the night with a hard-charging reporter she has just met is still likely to want reassurance that the room is all she’ll be sharing. And now, as in the 1930s, the rich tend to court and marry the rich.

Capra and his great collaborator, screenwriter Robert Riskin, use these very obstacles to make the audience believe in the equality of this surface mismatch. When one lover tastes victory, it’s always temporary. Ellie steals Pete’s seat on the bus, and when he objects (“That upon which you sit is mine”), she



smoothly gets the backing of the driver (Ward Bond, as ubiquitous a character actor as American cinema has to offer). Pete tries to talk to her during a pit stop, and she high-hats him, only to be told that while she was smoking a cigarette and ignoring her déclassé surroundings, a thief had time enough to scam with her cash-stuffed suitcase.

In what must be the movie’s most famous scene (although it has a lot of competition), Pete demonstrates, at length and with a fantastic amount of condescension, the proper way to hitchhike: “It’s all in the thumb.” Ellie, splendidly deadpan, watches an entire traffic jam’s worth of cars zip by Pete and his magic thumb, then slinks over and lifts her hem to reveal one of the loveliest legs in movie history. Cut to slamming brakes, then the couple in the rumble seat of a car. But here’s the thing: The man who has stopped (played by Alan Hale) turns out to be a road thief, bent on stealing their remaining suitcase. For all Ellie’s triumph, the creep was looking for a mark, and probably would have stopped in any event.

That’s the rhythm of *It Happened One Night*, a dance of syncopated folly and banter. Banter is distinct from mockery—it’s a seesaw, not a slingshot. It’s lust, sure, and love too, at least in the final reel. But before that clinch, banter is a sniff to say, “Your ego is absolutely colossal,” and a cheerful reply, “Yeah, yeah, not bad, how’s yours?”

Produced during the last hurrah of the so-called pre-Code era—those Edenic days before stringent enforcement of Production Code censorship began in July 1934—Capra’s movie straddles the two sides of thirties filmmaking. There are a few reminders that the gimlet eye of head censor Joseph Breen wasn’t on this film, such as the lines that bus-seat lecher Shapeley (Roscoe Karns)

delivers to Ellie, complete with exaggerated up-and-down leers: “Most girls you meet on the bus ain’t nothin’ to write home to the wife about.” When the bus passengers sing “The Man on the Flying Trapeze,” it’s an explosion of joy, the group united, from the Woody Guthrie-ish musicians in the back to the off-key driver in the front. But the song is even more inclusive than it at first seems. When

a sailor sings a verse, he suggests the trapeze man’s biggest fan was male: “He blew him a kiss, and he shouted, ‘Bravo!’” Too, the sight of Clark Gable’s bare chest—still capable of eliciting audience gasps—might have given pause once the Code was ascendant. (It seems that undershirt sales did indeed plummet soon after the film’s release, but one wonders if that was because average American men were delusional enough to think they’d look like Gable or if they merely realized that the King had demonstrated a new

way to scrimp on wardrobe spending.)

But for the most part, *It Happened One Night* sounds the trumpet for a new era. In that shirtless scene, Ellie and Pete have been forced to spend the night at an autocamp (forerunner of the motel), and Pete hangs a blanket between the beds—the “walls of Jericho.” What takes this setup from the cute to the ravishing is what happens when the lights are shut off and the full beauty of Joseph Walker’s cinematography takes hold. The rain outside makes the windows sparkle, and the light from them outlines Colbert’s form as she stands there in her slip, trying to calm her nerves. It’s a shot that, at the time, could have revealed more of Colbert’s state of undress, and indeed that’s how Capra had planned it. But Colbert objected, and Capra later said the scene was sexier in the near dark. *It Happened One Night* made the sexual longing unmistakable, but did it in a way that showed future filmmakers how to stay on the right side of the censors.

An ideal romantic comedy doesn’t ignore reality; it converses with it. The Depression may be softened by moonlight and shining eyes, but it is everywhere visible in *It Happened One Night*, from the woman on the bus who faints from hunger to the freight car full of hoboes who wave back at a joyous Pete as he races to propose to Ellie. One of the loveliest shots in the movie is the exquisite track that follows Ellie as she makes her way to the autocamp’s communal shower, while children chase each other and weary adults prepare to get back on the road.

How *It Happened One Night* made it to Oscar night is a Capra movie in itself, a tale of moxie at a low-rent studio and moneyed stars who learned the virtues of roughing it. For once, it’s safe to print the legend: Almost

no one wanted to make this movie. No one, that is, except Capra, who pulled Samuel Hopkins Adams's short story "Night Bus" from a file of possibilities. Even so, according to Capra biographer Joseph McBride, it wasn't love at first sight. Riskin recalled Capra describing the plot to him: "It's about a runaway couple." Riskin responded, "Sounds cute." Capra then pondered it alone in his office and popped back out to tell Riskin they'd do it. Riskin had already forgotten which story they were talking about.

With this ringing endorsement, development got under way—like it or not. McBride quotes Walker as saying he was "unhappy about doing this one." Capra's nephew and sound recordist Joe Finocchio described the general attitude as "Hell, let's get this stinking picture over with."

At least Harry Cohn, the fearsome head of the cut-rate Columbia Pictures, was amenable to the project. The

Depression was about to enter year five, millions of people were still on the road looking for work, and a bus was much cheaper than a train. Surely this meant the public might find a pleasing identification with bus riders on-screen. And whatever else you could say about Capra's latest proposal, it indisputably had a bus in it.

Trouble is, Hollywood's big ideas have always been mysteriously contagious. Capra envisioned MGM's Robert Montgomery in the lead, but Montgomery, wouldn't you know it, was already attached to an MGM movie with a bus in it (1934's *Fugitive Lovers*). Universal was making something called *Cross Country Cruise* (1934), with said cruise also taking place on a bus. The Columbia team needed to get a move on, but they couldn't even cast the leads.

Myrna Loy hated the script (and years later was philosophical: "Claudette had the legs for it"). Nixed by Miriam Hopkins, who supposedly called it "just a silly comedy." No-go from Margaret Sullavan. Constance Bennett was interested only if she could buy the whole story. Warner Bros. said no, you can't have Bette Davis. Carole Lombard was making *Bolero*. Cohn suggested Loretta Young, but she wasn't Capra's spoonful of sugar.

At last Cohn came up with Colbert, who had made her film debut with Capra in the 1927 silent *For the Love of Mike*—a film that was neither a success (it's now lost) nor a happy working experience. But Colbert was a canny woman ("I hear that French broad likes money" was how Cohn put it). She agreed to parachute in for Capra's latest if the studio wrapped things up in time for her Christmas skiing trip, and paid her \$50,000. That was twice her

normal salary and close to a cool million in today's dollars; the budget for the entire movie was about \$350,000.

MGM loaned them Clark Gable, not because Louis B. Mayer had suddenly gone all milk-of-human-kindness but because Gable was on the rise and making noises about wanting more money. *It Happened One Night* was the equivalent of Mayer telling Gable to go to his room and think about what he'd done. Gable reacted by (according to Capra) getting plastered before the first preproduction meeting and informing his director that Columbia might as

well be Siberia. Capra claimed that Gable then wove his way outside the office to yell at startled studio workers, "Why ain't you wearing parkas?"

Riskin and Capra had originally wanted to buy the rights to *Mutiny on the Bounty* as a follow-up to their previous collaboration, the hit *Lady for a Day* (1933), but the



studio told them the property cost too much. Preparations for *It Happened One Night* probably made a nice desert island look pretty good. Filming was also a pain in the neck, or Capra claimed that Colbert was, anyway, with the star arguing about whether she would show her leg until he threatened to use a double, a chorus girl, whose gams didn't measure up to Colbert's own. Somehow they all powered through, and the artists involved were too smart not to suspect, after a while, that they might be on to a good thing. "I think the wop's got something," Gable remarked midway through filming. Colbert herself later said she'd realized the movie had something only when she spotted her maid's enthralled reaction to the filming of the "Man on the Flying Trapeze" scene.

Even after it was released, *It Happened One Night* encountered some bumps. Reviews were mostly good, but attendance in big cities dropped steeply in the second week, and it was pulled. Smaller theaters still showed the film, though—and kept showing it, week after week, as audiences came back again and again to relive their favorite bits. "The people discovered that movie," Capra later stated, with a flash of his unique gift for mythological patriotism. He was right, though, and Capra's contemporary Otis Ferguson told his readers the film made "a pattern of life as we all know it, with the unflinching tough surface and the grace beneath that we at least hope to find."

When film artists set out to make a Deeply Serious Masterpiece, sometimes they bore people to death. By virtue of everyone's treating this movie as though it were an annoying kid sister, *It Happened One Night* became a



how-to guide for countless imitators to come. Everybody gave it the brush-off, and then at some indefinable moment—perhaps when Columbia's 1934 grosses began to come in—they all realized that here was true love. And true love may not always stick around in real life, but up on the screen it lasts as long as people watch it. You can't get much more Capraesque than that.



### Screwball Comedy (Wikipedia)

A subgenre of the [romantic comedy](#) genre that became popular during the [Great Depression](#), originating in the early 1930s and thriving until the early 1940s, satirizing the traditional love story. Many secondary characteristics of this genre are similar to [film noir](#), but it distinguishes itself for being characterized by a female who dominates the relationship with the male central character, whose [masculinity](#) is challenged.<sup>[1]</sup> The two engage in a humorous battle of the sexes, which was a new theme for Hollywood and audiences at the time.<sup>[2]</sup>

The genre also featured romantic attachments between members of different social classes,<sup>[3]</sup> as in *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *My Man Godfrey* (1936).<sup>[2]</sup>

What sets the screwball comedy apart from the generic romantic comedy is that "screwball comedy puts its emphasis on a funny spoofing of love, while the more traditional romantic comedy ultimately accents love."<sup>[4]</sup> Other elements of the screwball comedy include fast-paced, overlapping [repartee](#), [farcical](#) situations, [escapist](#) themes, physical battle of the sexes, disguise and masquerade, and plot lines involving courtship and marriage.<sup>[2]</sup> Some comic plays are also described as screwball comedies.

Screwball comedy has proved to be a popular and enduring film genre. *It Happened One Night* (1934)<sup>[2]</sup> is often credited as the first true screwball, though *Bombshell* starring [Jean Harlow](#) preceded it by a year. Although many film scholars agree that its classic period had effectively ended by 1942,<sup>[5]</sup> elements of the genre have persisted or have been paid homage to in later

films. Other film scholars argue that the screwball comedy lives on.

During the [Great Depression](#), there was a general demand for films with a strong social class critique and hopeful, escapist-oriented themes. The screwball format arose largely as a result of the major film studios' desire to avoid censorship by the increasingly enforced [Hays Code](#). In order to incorporate prohibited risqué elements into their plots, filmmakers resorted to handling these elements covertly. Verbal sparring between the sexes served as a stand-in for physical, sexual tension.<sup>[6]</sup> Though some film scholars, such as William K. Everson argue "screwball comedies were not so much rebelling against the Production Code as they were attacking – and ridiculing – the dull, lifeless respectability that the Code insisted on for family viewing."<sup>[7]</sup>

The screwball comedy has close links with the [theatrical](#) genre of [farce](#),<sup>[4]</sup> and some comic plays are also described as screwball comedies. Other genres with which screwball comedy is associated include [slapstick](#), [situation comedy](#), [romantic comedy](#) and [bedroom farce](#).

Films definitive of the genre usually feature farcical situations, a combination of slapstick with fast-paced repartee and show the struggle between economic classes. They also generally feature a self-confident and often stubborn central female protagonist and a plot involving courtship and marriage or remarriage. These traits can be seen in both *It Happened One Night* and *My Man Godfrey* (1936). The film critic [Andrew Sarris](#) has defined the screwball comedy as "a [sex comedy](#) without the sex."<sup>[8]</sup>

Like farce, screwball comedies often involve masquerade and disguise in which a character or characters resort to secrecy. Sometimes screwball comedies feature male characters [cross-dressing](#), further contributing to elements of masquerade (*Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), and *Some Like It Hot* (1959)). At first, the couple seem mismatched and even hostile to each other but eventually overcome their differences in an amusing or entertaining way that leads to romance. Often this mismatch comes about when the man is of a lower social class than the woman (*Bringing Up Baby* and *Holiday*, both 1938). The final romantic union is often planned by the woman from the outset, and the man is seemingly oblivious to this. In *Bringing Up Baby*, the woman says to a third party: "He's the man I'm going to marry. He doesn't know it, but I am."

These pictures also offered a kind of cultural escape valve: a safe battleground on which to explore serious issues such as class under a comedic and non-threatening framework.<sup>[9]</sup> Class issues are a strong component of screwball comedies: the upper class are represented as idle, pampered, and having difficulty coping with the real world. By contrast, when lower-class people attempt to pass themselves off as upper-class or otherwise insinuate themselves into high society, they are able to do

so with relative ease (*The Lady Eve*, 1941; *My Man Godfrey*, 1936). Some critics believe that the portrayal of the upper class in *It Happened One Night* was brought about by the **Great Depression**, and the financially struggling moviegoing public's desire to see the rich upper class taught a lesson in humanity.

Another common element of the screwball comedy is fast-talking, witty **repartee**, such as in *You Can't Take It with You* (1937) and *His Girl Friday* (1940). This stylistic device did not originate in the genre: it is also found in many of the old **Hollywood cycles**, including gangster films and romantic comedies.

### **THE SPRING 2022 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS #44:**

All films in the series but two (*Notorious* and *The Power of the Dog*) are available from Criterion or Netflix: **c** after a title indicates it is available on Criterion, **p**=Amazon Prime, **p\$**=Amazon Prime with an extra \$4 fee. *The Power of the Dog* is available, for now, only on Netflix. *Notorious* is available on FlixFilm (low-resolution versions are free on YouTube and Tubi.). All four subscription services let you cancel at any time, so you should have access to all 24 films for well under \$100. *The Gunfighter* is on Amazon Prime and, in low rez, free on Tubi. Nine of the films—all with “UB” after the title—are available free to anyone with a UB email account via the UB Library’s Swank and Kanopy portals. Five films are available only on non-UB streaming services: *Le Corbeau*, *The Gunfighter*, *Naked*, *Salesman* and *The Power of the Dog*. (The Swank titles will be available at UB’s Library for a year; the Kanopy titles for 3 years.)

- Feb 1: 1921 Victor Sjöström, *The Phantom Carriage* c UB-Kanopy
- Feb 8: 1934 Frank Capra *It Happened One Night* c p\$ UB-Swank
- Feb 15: 1941 John Huston *The Maltese Falcon* p\$ UB-Swank
- Feb 22: 1943 Henri-Georges Clouzot *Le Corbeau* c
- Mar 1: 1946 Alfred Hitchcock *Notorious* FlixFling, YouTube, UB-Swank, Tubi (free)
- Mar 8: 1950 Henry King, *The Gunfighter* p\$, Tubi (free)
- Mar 15: 1958 Orson Welles *Touch of Evil* p\$ UB-Swank
- Mar 29: 1962 Yasujiro Ozu *An Autumn Afternoon* c p\$b UB Kanopy
- Apr 5: 1973 Federico Fellini *Amarcord* c p\$ UB Kanopy
- Apr 12: 1993 Mike Leigh *Naked* c
- Apr 19: 2002 Phillip Noyce *Rabbit-Proof Fence* p\$ UB-Kanopy
- Apr 26: 2016 Asghar Farhadi *Salesman* p
- May 3: 2021: Jane Campion *The Power of the Dog* NETFLIX
- May 10: 2011 Martin Scorsese *Hugo* p\$ UB-Kanopy

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