

It Happened One Night

By Ian Scott

Film scholar Charles Maland reminds us that, “Frank Capra was an auteur long before the auteur theory” ever existed.¹ And it was true that artistic and directorial influence went hand-in-hand with commercial and critical success for Hollywood’s most famous filmmaker of the 1930s as he proceeded to stamp his name on a style of cinema that has rarely escaped the moniker, ‘Capraesque’ ever since. Witty, knowing and exuberant, Capra’s films were a slice of Americana that appealed to young and old, rich and poor, native born Americans and immigrant stock alike.

No film summed up his reach and popularity, the visionary appeal, everyman sensibilities, and even his social awareness, like Capra’s 1934 comic masterpiece, “It Happened One Night.” Ostensibly a screwball narrative’s excuse for a road trip involving two mismatched protagonists, in reality the movie went well beyond what many other directors had achieved up until that point in comedic social melodrama. “It Happened One Night” might conceivably have been nothing more than a low-rate farce; but in the hands of Capra, his brilliant screenwriter Robert Riskin, and his masterful cinematographer Joseph Walker, the film became a statement about social class, surviving the worst effects of the Depression, and even a commentary about the country itself.

Adapted from Samuel Hopkins Adams’s vignette, “Night Bus,” Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) is a wealthy heiress who marries a dashing but dim aviator and social climber, ‘King’ Westley (Jameson Thomas). Ellie’s father Alexander (Walter Connolly) regards the marriage as a sham and intends to get it annulled. But Ellie escapes her father’s disapproval by jumping off his boat moored near the Florida coastline, and races for the night bus that will take her to New York and back into the arms of Westley. Along the way she encounters recently unemployed reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable) and the two strike up an unlikely partnership as Ellie evades capture from private detectives seeking her whereabouts and Peter eyes an exclusive about the missing rich girl that will get him his job back.

With the scenario set, Ellie and Peter find themselves in a series of madcap scrapes. They have their possessions stolen; have to spend the night in the same room separated only by a loose-slung towel over a washing line that they christen the ‘walls of Jericho’; and their bus ends up in a ditch resulting in



This photo of Claudette Colbert as she appeared in “It Happened One Night” was featured in the April 1934 edition of Photoplay magazine. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

them having to find alternative means of transport. In the film’s most famous scene, they hitchhike along a road with Peter’s self-proclaimed thumbing technique failing to get them a ride while Ellie’s daring show of ankle from raising her skirt to passing motorists has the first car that sees her slamming the brakes on.

Naturally, Ellie begins to forget about Westley and Peter starts to forgive Ellie’s spoilt tendencies resulting in them falling in love. But, with their New York arrival imminent, Ellie wakes up in their motel to find Peter gone. Believing he has abandoned her, she agrees to come home to her father and a formal wedding ceremony with Westley.

As it happens Peter has been seeking money from his old editor in order to whisk Ellie away from her betrothed only to see her breeze past in a convoy as he returns to the motel to collect her. All this sets up a denouement of classic comedic confusion that all has to be resolved before love can finally triumph.

The success behind “It Happened One Night” really

came from Capra and Riskin's partnership having two key elements working perfectly in tandem, as Maland explains. "One [was] the engaging narrative pattern, but another closely related reason was the implicit value structure" they brought to their movies.² That structure, often associated with the politics of the era, was perceived to be about community and helping one another in the face of crisis. Thus the bus journey Ellie and Peter start out on is a riot of singing and camaraderie; Warne's usually sceptical editor mellows at the sight of Peter's devotion to Ellie and the potential union that might ensue; and even Alexander, reprimanded for bringing up Ellie the wrong way according to Peter, likes the idea of her marrying a normal, everyday guy who will look after her in this perilous world, rather than the upper class phoney, Westley.

More than this, as Richard Maltby has observed, the ability of "It Happened One Night" to overcome the moral strictures that were now permeating Hollywood thanks to the Production Code and have its wholesomeness trump the prospect of a married woman eloping with an unemployed man, were part of the movie's brilliance. In addition, the 'Taming of the Shrew' storyline turned the, until then, usual lower class female lead looking for salvation from a dominant patriarch on its head. Gable's Warne is transformed by Ellie, seeing the possibility of a new life and energising audiences with the promise that social barriers could be broken down and America might have a uniformity of purpose in the face of economic and cultural dislocation.³ As Robert Sklar describes it, Ellie was but one of a series of Capra characters at the start of the 1930s who had broken out of their "socially sanctioned cages" and "set in train possibilities of change" across the social spectrum.⁴

Riskin as writer was a leading advocate in highlighting these social and cultural markers in Capra's work, but friend and producer Myles Connolly – who commented on an early draft of "It Happened One Night" and urged the pair to make Ellie and Peter sympathetic to audiences who wouldn't necessarily fraternise with their ilk – was equally as important.

It was these contributions that helped establish Capra as a chronicler of the American condition in the 1930s and '40s, all the more impressive for a man who often insisted that his art was about comedy and entertainment far more than it was social and

political immersion in the issues of the day. But, as Bernard Dick puts it: "Capra could expand [a] film's social dimensions beyond the parameters set by the script – the result was pure Capra: a movie in which romance, social differences, political conversion, and the triumph of goodness coalesced into a myth of America."⁵ It was these constituent elements that suffused the narratives of his best films in this period; from "American Madness" (1932) and "Lady for a Day" (1933) through to "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" (1936) and "Meet John Doe" (1941). Nevertheless, none of these other great movies captured the same empathy or achieved the same enduring success as "It Happened One Night."

Therefore, while social, cultural and political themes were abundant in so many other Frank Capra films of the decade, it was "It Happened One Night" that chimed most with audiences. For they saw on screen the kind of America they lived in, but they also saw embedded in the characters and situations all the hopes and desires they aspired to as a populace as well. In short, no director and no film could quite match that projection of values and dreams in an era of such harsh realities.

¹ Charles Maland *Frank Capra* (New York: Twayne, 1995), p. 19.

² Charles Maland, p. 96.

³ Richard Maltby, "It Happened One Night: The Recreation of the Patriarch", *Frank Capra: Authorship and the Studio System*, Robert Sklar and Vito Zaggarro, eds (Philadelphia: Temple, 1998), pp. 145-46.

⁴ Robert Sklar, "A Leap into the Void: Frank Capra's Apprenticeship to Ideology," *Frank Capra: Authorship and the Studio System*, p. 44.

⁵ Bernard Dick, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row: Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), p. 95.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Ian Scott is Distinguished Visiting Professor at Central Washington University and Senior Lecturer in American Studies at the University of Manchester. He is the author of American Politics in Hollywood Film (2nd ed), Edinburgh: EUP, 2011, and In Capra's Shadow, The Life and Career of Screenwriter Robert Riskin, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006, among other works. His collaborative documentary film Projections of America appeared at various film festivals and on television during 2014-15.