

It Happened One Night



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Frank Capra. Produced by Harry Cohn and Frank Capra. Screenplay by Robert Riskin. Based on the short story 'Night Bus' by Samuel Hoplin Adams. Costumes by Robert Kalloch. Cinematography by Joseph Walker. Art Direction by Stephen Gossen. Original Music by Howard Jackson & Louis Silvers. Edited by Gene Havlick.

Cinematic length: 105 minutes. Company: Columbia Pictures. Cinematic release: February 1934. DVD release 2002. Check for ratings. Rating 85%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

Clark Gable as Peter Warne,

Claudette Colbert as "Ellie" Andrews,

Walter Connolly as Alexander Andrews,

Roscoe Karns as Oscar Shapeley

Jameson Thomas as "King" Westley

Alan Hale as Danker

Arthur Hoyt as Zeke, a motel owner

Blanche Friderici as Zeke's wife

Charles C. Wilson as Joe Gordon,

Ward Bond as the Bus Driver

Bess Flowers as Agnes, Gordon's Secretary

Review

It Happened One Night eventually became the biggest hit of 1934/1935 and this was not directly due to Harry Cohn, its studio boss, who was also the film's executive producer. Expecting the film to be a failure, he put little money into its promotion. While most reviews were favourable, none were ecstatic and some were negative. It was only shown for one week at New York's radio city, a test of a film's likely popularity. Gable thought he had been the role as a punishment and Colbert called it the worst film in the world. The film became a hit eventually, and ultimately brought in about twelve times its cost because the public loved it. Word of mouth, particularly in small town America, got audiences in. The film's popularity with the public led to recognition within the industry. *It Happened One Night* was nominated for five academy awards and got them - to the surprise of many involved. Best Picture, Best Director Frank Capra, Best Actress Claudette Colbert, Best Actor Clark Gable and Best Screenplay Robert Riskin. Colbert was so sure she would lose she that she arranged to go on holiday and was at the train station the night of the awards ceremony. She was brought back and accepted the award in her travel clothes.

At the awards ceremony Gable and Capra were surprised and flustered. Thirty years would pass before another film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* won all of the top five.

This fact and winning these awards are almost always mentioned when this film is written about and discussed as an indication of its greatness, but what is not mentioned is that in 1934 all other categories except Best Film had only three nominees. This increases the odds for winning considerably. Other factors came in to play. For the 1933 /1934 awards such fine films as *The Invisible Man*, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Count of Monte Christo*, *The Scarlet Empress*, *The Painted Veil* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* were not even nominated in any category. Rivalries, deals and punishing obdurate stars by making sure they did not get a nomination meant that *It Happened One Night*, while not being set up to win, was winning in an easier field than it seems now. The film's academy awards are not really a strong indication of its quality.

Actually it doesn't need that indication, this film can stand on its merits.



Often labelled a screwball comedy, it is also an early road movie and an early version of the spoiled rich kid cast adrift and learning to be a better person by being in contact with the common people. That idea is as old as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. Hollywood still uses it occasionally. Here it works, but the film unintentionally reveals more than intended.

It starts with an argument on a yacht in Miami. "Ellie" Andrews (Claudette Colbert) is being held a virtual prisoner on board by her father, the magnate Alexander Andrews (Walter Connolly). He is trying to force her to annul her marriage to King Westley (Jameson Thomas) as he considers the man to be a gold digger and wrong for his daughter. As she says, she is over twenty- one

and as an adult she can do what she likes and she wants to go to New York to be with her husband. 1930s films seldom allowed for multiple interpretations, so how are we meant to view Alexander Andrews? Is he a bullying control freak? Or a parent concerned with his daughter, justified in doing what he does to protect her against herself? The way he turns out to be turns out to be right about his son in law only complicates matters. 1930s family values were very different to twenty-first century values. So are depictions of male-female relationships. When her father refuses to let her go she dives overboard, swims to Miami and pawns her watch for clothes, a bus ticket to New York and four dollars. On the bus she sits near Peter Warne (Gable) a just sacked journalist. Misadventures many comic, others sexually suggestive, begin.

Despite somebody (usually Clarke Gable) telling her she's spoiled rotten and the way he nicknames her Brat, she comes across as more assertive than bratish and considering that apart from her father the males she meets include two thieves in separate cons, a cranky, bossy bus driver (Ward Bond), A loudly lecherous creep and her treacherous gold digging husband, it amazes that she merely sticks to verbal abuse. Even Clark Cable appears at times to be smugly patronising, intrusive and an alpha male superiority freak. The scene where he teaches her to hitchhike comes as a welcome relief because he fails as about ten cars speed by. She lifts up her skirt and the first car stops.



This was a very daring scene for 1934 when Hollywood and English films relied on Lubitsch touches and innuendo concerning sexual matters. Also daring for the time were the scenes where they share a motel room. They have separate beds divided by a curtain. American censorship laws actually forbade scenes showing anybody, even clothed married couples, sharing a double bed. Even depicting a double bed was considered unwise by some studios.

Capra has often been labelled an overly sentimental filmmaker, given to glorifying the common people. A name for this even exists “capracorn”. This film has one scene where the passengers cheerfully sing “the Man on the Flying Trapeze’ together, showing Capra’s belief in the goodness of the common people. However Capra also depicts the cranky, bossy first busdriver, the two thieves and the teacherous, lecherous human weasel, Shapeley. There is also balance in individual characterisations. Andrews is a control freak but he also genuinely worries about his daughter. Fortunately Gable’s overly loud, overly intense persona has aspects of wit, compassion, fairness and courage that save his role and the film. When he and Andrews meet the acting has subtiles as both men realize that he should be the one his daughter marries.

While many films have imitated this film’s plot there is no way that the relationship between the three major players could represent people today. This not an uproarious comedy, but it an make you smile.



Frank Capra 1897-1991

