It Happened One Night

To the delight of movie audiences, Frank Capra released *It Happened One Night* in 1934. Although American viewers had been watching film comedies for two decades by the time that Capra’s film was released, *It Happened One Night* struck them in a surprisingly new way—not only was it funny, it was also wonderfully romantic. Along with two other films that debuted in 1934, Howard Hawk’s *Twentieth Century* and W. S. Van Dyke’s *The Thin Man, It Happened One Night* set the tone for a new type of genre film, the Romantic Comedy. Unlike other genre films that have evolved over time, the Western and the War Film, for instance, Romantic Comedies have basically remained the same since they began to be made in the 1930s, almost always pairing a man and a woman who meet, fall in love, are kept apart, and finally come together by film’s end. These pictures, it seems, have moved us for decades because they allow us to believe that there is, indeed, someone out there for each one of us, someone with whom we can live happily-ever-after.

A terribly gifted director, Capra began making motion pictures in the early 1920s; he would go on to make over 50 films during his long and distinguished career. Capra worked across all genres, becoming a purveyor of populist cinema during the 1930s and 40s, with pictures such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941), as well as the most prominent film industry spokesperson for Franklin Roosevelt’s post-Pearl Harbor, pro-war message during the early 1940s—he actually volunteered to join the army and to make a pseudo-documentary series of combat pictures known collectively under the title *Why We Fight* (1941-1945). He also became familiar with cinematic romance, especially with its comedic dimensions, making pictures such as *That Certain Thing* (1928), *So This is Love?* (1928), *The Matinee Idol* (1928), *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), and *Platinum Blonde* (1931) before turning his attention to *It Happened One Night*.

The film features Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable as Ellie Andrews and Peter Warne, unlikely romantic partners who are thrown together on a cross-country bus trip. Ellie is descended from money and only boards the bus because she is defying her father, Alexander Andrews (Walter Connolly), who has been keeping her under house arrest aboard his yacht in an attempt to keep her away from her fiancée, King Westley (Jameson Thomas). Literally diving overboard, Ellie swims ashore and begins a covert operation to get herself to New York City, where King awaits. Angry and embarrassed, her father posts her picture on the front pages of the nation’s newspapers, seeking her return. Ellie makes her way to a bus station, where she convinces another passenger to buy her a ticket so that she will not be recognized.

We encounter Peter at the bus station; drunk and surrounded by a cheering crowd of men, he is crammed into a telephone booth having a heated discussion with his newspaper editor. A talented, charming, rough-edged journalist, he has just lost his job after filing a story—while drunk—in some sort of nonsensical free-verse form that his editor finds impossible to understand. Peter plays to the crowd of admirers, pretending that he quits his job and tells off his boss, even though his editor, unheard by the crowd on the other end of the phone line, has already fired him and hung up. Swaggering from the phone booth—quickly sobering up after being canned—Peter does not let on that he is now a little more than desperate. Fate intervenes, however. Noticing that Ellie’s bag has been taken as she leans against the bus smoking a
cigarette, Peter races by her and after the thief. Unable to catch him, Peter returns and informs Ellie what has happened. Instead of being appreciative, she dismisses Peter, apparently lumping him together with the riff-raff who stole her bag. Boarding the bus, the two are forced to sit together, much to Ellie’s chagrin. Peter, though, eventually recognizes Ellie as the “runaway heiress,” and looking to resurrect his moribund career, he befriends the uneasy young woman, striking a bargain with her: he will get her safely to New York City if she agrees to give him an “exclusive” once she has been delivered over to her fiancée. With few options left to her if she wants to avoid being returned to her father, Ellie agrees to Peter’s conditions.

Typical of the populist fare released during the depression years of the 1930s, much of the tension that arises between Ellie and Peter is the result of class differences. Ellie, of course, would never choose to ride a bus under normal circumstances, and has no sense of the blue-collar esthetic that marks her situation. When the bus stops for breakfast and the bus driver informs the passengers that they have thirty minutes before they must be back on board, Ellie haughtily tells Peter that she is going into town to send a cable. When he informs her that she will never make it back in time, Ellie imperiously declares that the bus will wait for her. Of course it does not wait, but Peter is there to rescue her—both from her current precarious position and from her elitist sensibilities.

Capra masterfully sets the scenes in which Peter provides Ellie with her populist education—none more endearing than the one in which Peter teaches her the proper way to dunk doughnuts, something she has never had to learn having had the advantage of being surrounded by servants her entire life. Ellie, though, is not without her own talents, as, after yet another round of instruction by Peter—this one related to how best to thumb a ride on the highway—she steps up, raises her skirt, revealing an extremely fetching leg, and succeeds in stopping a number of cars when Peter had failed to stop any. “Aren’t you going to congratulate me?” asks Ellie. “For what?” responds Peter. “Well,” says Ellie mischievously, “I proved once and for all that the limb is mightier than the thumb.”

Forced to share a room at a “camp motel,” Peter strings a rope from wall to wall and hangs a blanket over it—dubbing the set up the “Walls of Jericho.” Ellie, naturally, is skeptical, unwilling to believe that a flimsy blanket will keep Peter on his side of the room. What keeps Peter in his place, though, Ellie comes to understand, is not any material barrier, but a powerful sense of middle-class integrity. Peter, it seems, is more than meets the eye—as it turns out he has the soul of a poet: “Who are you?” asks Ellie. “Who me?” responds Peter. “I’m the whippoorwill that cries in the night. I’m the soft morning breeze that caresses your lovely face.”

As it turns out, their class differences almost succeed in driving them apart. As the film winds down, Ellie readies herself to marry King Westley, thinking that Peter wants nothing to do with her. Contacted by Ellie’s father, Peter arrives at the Andrews estate, demanding that Mr. Andrews pay him back for what he had to spend on Ellie—it’s the principle that is important, says Peter. Thinking that Peter has come after the $10,000 reward Mr. Andrews has offered up for the return of his daughter, and surprised that Peter has rejected it, Mr. Andrews begins to understand the situation. “Do you love my daughter?” he asks Peter. “A normal human being couldn’t live under the same roof with her without going nutty! She’s my idea of nothing!” “I asked you a simple question,” says Mr. Andrews. “Do you love her?” “Yes!” responds an
exasperated Peter, “but don’t hold that against me, I’m a little screwy myself.” Exiting Mr. Andrews study, Peter encounters Ellie—who mistakenly thinks that he has only come for the money. After trading insults, Peter storms from the house, and the wedding proceeds. While walking Ellie down the aisle, her father whispers to her: “You’re a sucker to go through with this; that guy Warne is okay. He didn’t want the reward. All he wanted was $39.60, what he spent on you. Said it was a matter of principle.” And so it is—principles that Ellie, and her father, we hope, has done well to adopt. Having planted her car at the rear gate of the estate, Mr. Andrews convinces her to run—run to Peter if she wants to be happy! King Westley is paid off by Mr. Andrews, and, taking her father’s advice, Ellie returns to Peter. In a final, magical scene, shot from outside a camp motel room we hear a horn blow, and we understand that the Walls of Jericho that have separated Ellie and Peter—and perhaps those that separate us from our loves—have come tumbling down.

—Philip C. DiMare

See also:
Romantic Comedy, The

References:
