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# Retrospective

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## (It Happened One Night)

U.S.A., 1934

Director: Frank Capra

*Dist*—Columbia-Warner. *p.c*—Columbia. *exec. p*—Harry Cohn. *asst. d*—C. C. Coleman. *sc*—Robert Riskin. Based on the story *Night Bus* by Samuel Hopkins Adams. *ph*—Joseph Walker. *ed*—Gene Havlick. *a.d*—Stephen Goosson. *m.d*—Louis Silvers. *cost*—Robert Kalloch. *sd*—Edward Bernds. *lp*—Clark Gable (*Peter Warne*), Claudette Colbert (*Ellie Andrews*), Walter Connolly (*Alexander Andrews*), Roscoe Karns (*Oscar Shapeley*), Alan Hale (*Danker*), Ward Bond and Ed Chandler (*Bus Drivers*), Jameson Thomas (*King Westley*), Harry Holman (*Auto Camp Manager*), Maidel Turner (*Manager's Wife*), Irving Bacon (*Station Attendant*), Wallis Clark (*Lovington*), Arthur Hoyt (*Zeke*), Blanche Friderici (*Zeke's Wife*), Charles C. Wilson (*Joe Gordon*), Charles D. Brown(e) (*Reporter*), Harry C. Bradley (*Henderson*), Harry Todd (*Flag Man*), Frank Yaconelli (*Tony*), Henry Wadsworth (*Drunken Boy*), Claire McDowell (*Mother*), Ky Robinson, Frank Holliday, James Burke and Joseph Crehan (*Detectives*), Mickey Daniels (*Vendor*), Oliver Eckhardt (*Dykes*), George Breakston (*Boy*), Bess Flowers (*Secretary*), Rev. Neal Dodd (*Minister*), Edmund Burns (*Best Man*), Ethel Sykes (*Maid of Honour*), Tom Ricketts (*Old Man*), Eddie Kane (*Radio Announcer*), Eva Dennison (*Society Women*), Fred Walton (*Butler*), Matty Rupert (*Newsboy*), Milton Kibbee and Sherry Hall (*Reporters*), Earl Pingree and Harry Hume (*Policemen*), Ernie Adams, Kit Guard, Billy Engle, Allen Fox, Marvin Loback, Dave Wengren, Bert Starkey, Rita Ross, Kate Morgan, Rose May, Margaret Reid, Sam Josephson, Ray Creighton, John Wallace, Mimi Lindell, Blanche Rose, Jane Tallent, Charles Wilroy, Patsy O'Byrne, Harry Schultz, Bert Scott, Emma Tansey, Marvin Spector, William McCall and S. S. Simon (*Bus Passengers*). 3,780 ft. 105 mins. (16 mm.).

Defying her father, the heiress Ellie Andrews sets out to reach her prospective husband, the aviator King Westley, on an all-night bus travelling from Miami to New York. Also on board is another independent spirit, reporter Peter Warne, who has just lost his job on the *New York Mail*. At first he is aggravated by Ellie's offhandedness, but after discovering her identity, he decides to pursue their relationship and telegraphs his paper about a possible story. Floods force the passengers to put up overnight at Doyle's Auto Camp, and to save money Peter and Ellie masquerade as husband and wife and sleep in adjacent single beds, separated by a makeshift curtain dubbed 'the walls of Jericho' by Peter. Ellie's father, meanwhile, has offered a \$10,000 reward for her return, and after a passenger spots Ellie's photograph in a paper, the couple begin hitch-hiking. A thief who picks them up steals Peter's suitcase; Peter retaliates by stealing his car. Now very attached to each other, they stop at another camp, although they are only three hours from New York. While Ellie sleeps, Peter races off to secure \$1,000 (to help set them up in married life) for the story. Finding him gone, the disillusioned Ellie returns to her father, who has now agreed to the Westley match. He later learns of Peter's true feelings, however, and suggests that Ellie change her mind while walking her up the aisle at the wedding ceremony. She duly complies, and later at an auto camp, she and Peter celebrate the destruction of the walls of Jericho.

Re-seeing *It Happened One Night* now, one's head teems with echoes of countless other films using the same ingredients: the cross-country pursuit filled with idiosyncratic characters; the hero and heroine at odds through both temperament and class; the brash, honest, decent newspaperman (Clark Gable) and the wilful, eccentric but also decent heiress (Claudette Colbert); the wedding ceremony climax, with a last-minute change in partners (Capra revived this himself in *Here Comes the Groom*). At the same time, one is struck by the freshness of the comedy, with its irresistible combination of nonchalant direction and star performances, all perfectly attuned to each other. Simply seen in terms of Capra's work, the spontaneity and deftness of the film is remarkable, though the basic storyline was hardly original even in 1934 ('bus' films had already formed a genre) and the script by Capra's key collaborator Robert Riskin has marked drawbacks in structure. Capra and Riskin's later films espousing their populist philosophy certainly

offer solid entertainment, yet their method of attack brings to mind the aggravated Ellie's comment to her father—"Your idea of strategy is to use a lead pipe". Here, one of the delights is to see Capra and Riskin using a feather duster. Many of the elements which dominate *Mr. Deeds*, *Mr. Smith* and *Meet John Doe* are here in attractive embryo. Peter Warne, for instance, is partly the kind of hardboiled reporter who might well have worked for Hecht and MacArthur's *Chicago Examiner* in *The Front Page* (take his habit of always reversing telephone charges). But he is also an early model of the Capra-Riskin American hero, with his disgust at all pretension or 'hooley', his sense of the sacredness of homely habits such as piggyback riding (we're told that Abraham Lincoln was an exponent) and dunking doughnuts in coffee. Another clear pre-echo occurs in the delightful song session on the bus, when "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" is struck up by a hillbilly trio at the back and subsequent verses are contributed by a jovial sailor, who swings from the luggage rack, and a soberly dressed citizen, who politely asks "Do you mind if I take the third one?". Subsequent films work these elements into extravagant set-pieces usually performed before a vast crowd of extras, but here they are spun out with almost improvisational ease in intimate surroundings. Though there are parts of the film which fail to ring true even on the level of caricature (the high society life of the Andrews' and King Westley; the surprisingly perfunctory newspaper scenes), in the main it is an effective portrait of the insecure, transient forms of life during the Depression, with much use of location shooting. And not only are Gable and Colbert perfectly matched (he alluringly gruff, she alluringly spiky), but the supporting players also fit their parts ideally—Roscoe Karns' pestering passenger ("Well shut my big nasty mouth!" he says when reprimanded), Alan Hale's jovial trickster, who lures his passengers into false security by singing his remarks rather than speaking them. Only Walter Connolly, whose character is inconsistently scripted, fails to live up to expectations.

GEOFF BROWN

(This film was briefly reviewed in the M.F.B., No. 8, p. 65.)