Gregory La Cava (10 March 1892, Towanda, Pennsylvania—1 March 1952, Malibu, California, heart attack) directed 169 films, the last of which was an uncredited directing job on One Touch of Venus 1948. Some of the others were Stage Door 1937, She Married Her Boss 1935, Gabriel Over the White House 1933, The Half Naked Truth 1932, The Life of Reilly 1923, and A Quiet Day in the Country.

Ted Tetzlaff (3 June 1903, Los Angeles—7 January 1995, Fort Baker, California) shot 114 films beginning with Atta Boy 1926 and ending with Hitchcock’s Notorious 1946. Some of the others were Those Endearing Young Charms 1945, Cafe Society 1939, Tom Sawyer, Detective 1938, Soldiers of the Storm 1933, Tol’able David 1930, and The Flying Marine 1929. He directed World Premiere in 1941, then from 1947 on directed 13 more features, among which were Son of Sinbad 1955, Johnny Allegro 1949, Fighting Father Dunne 1948 and Riffraff 1947.

William Powell (29 July 1892, Pittsburgh—5 March 1984, Palm Springs, California, cardiac arrest) acted in six Thin Man films, beginning with The Thin Man 1934. He played George Wilson in the first film made of Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby 1926. His first film was When Knighthood Was in Flower 1922; the last was Mister Roberts 1955. There were 98 in all, among them How to Marry a Millionaire 1953, Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid 1948, The Senator Was Indiscreet 1947, Life with Father 1947, Ziegfeld Follies 1946, The Great Ziegfeld 1936, Manhattan Melodrama 1934, and The Four Feathers 1929. Carole Lombard said of him, “That S.O.B. is always acting, even when he takes off his pajamas.” She also said, “Bill Powell is the only intelligent actor I’ve ever met.”

Carole Lombard (Jane Peters. 6 October 1908, Fort Wayne, Indiana—16 January 1942, Table Rock Mountain, Nevada, airplane crash) acted in 66 films, the last of which was To Be or Not to Be 1942. Some of the others were They Knew What They Wanted 1940, Made for Each Other 1939, Love Before Breakfast 1936, Twentieth Century 1934, White Woman 1933, No Man of Her Own 1932 and A Perfect Crime 1921. She was married twice: to William Powell from June 1931 to August 1933 (they remained close friends), and to Clark Gable from March 1939 to January 1942. She was killed during a trip selling war bonds, after which FDR awarded her a posthumous Medal of Freedom. “The epitome of the screwball heroine,” wrote Leonard Maltin, “this saucy, fast-talking blonde was Hollywood’s top comedy actress of the 1930s and subsequently became an icon to a later generation of wannabes, despite a relatively slim body of work.... Very few leading ladies in Hollywood were capable of being sexy and funny at the same time, but Lombard did it with ease, and her rapid-fire dialogue delivery and wry double takes set a standard rarely matched by subsequent screen actresses.”

Eugene Pallette (8 July 1889, Winfield, Kansas—3 September 1954, Los Angeles) acted in 242 films, the first and last of which were When the Light Fades 1913 and Suspense 1946. Some of the others were Heaven Can Wait 1943, The Lady Eve 1941, The Mark of Zorro 1940, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington 1939, Tapper 1937, Steamboat Round the Bend 1935, The Half Naked Truth 1932, Shanghai Express 1932, Huckleberry Finn 1931, The Santa Fe Trail 1930, The Virginian 1929, Jewish Prudence 1927, The Three Musketeers 1921, Tarzan of the Apes 1918, Intolerance 1916, and The Birth of a Nation 1915.

Mischa Auer (17 November 1905, St. Petersburg, Russia—5 March 1967, Rome, Italy, heart attack) acted in 161 films, among them Per amore... per magia... 1967, Mr. Arkadin 1955, Snow White and the Seven Thieves 1949, Brewster's Millions 1945, Up in Mabel's Room 1944,
His mistress than in unemployment, crime, or the mounting threat of war. Judson Hammond, a newly elected President of the United States who comes to office as a party puppet, amiable, weak, and more interested in MGM, with Walter Wanger as his producer, that La Cava made his first major hit, *This Picture*; *Something Always Happens 1928*.


His father, Pascal was a musician of Calabrian origin. LaCava’s first ambition was to be a painter, and he studied at the Chicago Institute of Art and the New York Art Students League until financial necessity forced him to look for a job. After a stint as a cub reporter in Rochester, NY, he became a newspaper cartoonist, working for the New York *Globe* and the *Evening World* among other journals. Around 1913 he began to work occasionally as an animator for the Barre studio, showing exceptional ability in this medium.

In December 1915, when the newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst established his own animation studio, the twenty-four-year-old LaCava was appointed editor-in-chief. He set up eight units, each producing an animated cartoon featuring characters from the Hearst comic strips. LaCava reportedly drew storyboards for all of these units and supervised all productions, himself working with Walter Lantz and others on such famous series as *The Katzenjammer Kids* and *Silk Hat Harry*. When the Bray studio took over the Hearst products in 1918, La Cava followed them there, remaining until these cartoons were discontinued in 1921.

He had become increasingly interested in live-action cinema, and at that point he went off to Hollywood to try his luck. He began as a gag-writer, working on one- and two-reel comedies featuring Lloyd Hamilton and on Johnny Hines’ “Torchy” series. La Cava’s first feature—and possibly the first film he directed—was *His Nibs*, a rural comedy starring Charles Sales and Colleen Moore, released in January 1922 by Exceptional Pictures. From 1922 to 1924 he directed a series of All Star Comedy two-reelers featuring Charlie Murray. He returned to feature direction in 1924, when he made two films for C.C. Burr Pictures, both starring Doris Kenyon. The first was a melodrama called *Restless Wives*, the second a comedy-drama, *The New School Teacher*, scripted by the director.

The following year, La Cava joined the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, where he worked for four years—his longest stint with any one studio. He directed ten silent features there, five of them vehicles for Richard Dix. One of these, included in the British National Film Theatre retrospective in December 1976, was *Let’s Get Married* (1926), a mildly satirical comedy in which Dix plays a disaster-prone young man who escapes from jail and tries to marry his girl (Lois Wilson) before the cops catch up with him.

LaCava also made two comedies starring W.C. Fields. *So’s Your Old Man* (1926) casts Fields as a small-town would-be inventor scorned by all for his vulgarity, who confounds his wife and snobbish neighbors when he is selected as the official escort of visiting princess Alice Joyce. Roger Mc Niven, in his article about La Cava in *Bright Lights* (8 1979), points out that Fields’ apotheosis follows a three-day binge (on his own potent roach-killer) and suggests that “LaCava, an alcoholic, presented an absurdist view of the world, delightfully distorted through a whiskey bottle. . . Drunkenness plays a large role in the lives of most of his protagonists. It goes hand in hand with their fantastic shifts from one economic stratum to another.”

LaCava’s other Fields movie was *Running Wild* (1927), in which the comedian plays the unlikely victim of a massive inferiority complex. Eventually cured under hypnotism by a stage magician, he sets out to reverse twenty years of disparagement by his family, his boss, and dogs. Fields credited La Cava with the best comedy mind in Hollywood (next, of course, to Fields’ own). John Gillett maintains that “La Cava did for W.C. Fields what Capra did for Langdon.” and attributes to the director’s training as a cartoonist the “prevalence of sight gags and beautifully timed visual ‘business’” in these and later comedies.

*The Half-Naked Truth* (1932) Roger McNiven has described in its “outlandish publicity stunts and in the freakish sexuality and pathos- tinged stupidity” of the heroine, “is the direct antecedent of the Jayne Mansfield films, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957) and *The Girl Can’t Help It* (1956)” directed by another former cartoonist, Frank Tashlin.

This picture completed La Cava’s relatively prolonged stint with RKO. Thereafter, the director—whose drinking habits and independent spirit led him into constant battles with his employers—never made more than three movies in succession for one studio. It was at MGM, with Walter Wanger as his producer, that La Cava made his first major hit, *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933). Walter Huston plays Judson Hammond, a newly elected President of the United States who comes to office as a party puppet, amiable, weak, and more interested in his mistress than in unemployment, crime, or the mounting threat of war.

**MY MAN GODFREY** (1936) 94 min.

William Powell...Godfrey Smith/Godfrey 'Duke' Parke
Carole Lombard...Irene Bullock
Alice Brady...Angelica Bullock
Gail Patrick...Cornelia Bullock
Eugene Pallette...Alexander Bullock
Alan Mowbray...Tommy Gray
Jean Dixon...Molly (Bullocks’ maid)
Mischa Auer...Carlo (Angelica Bullock’s protege)
Robert Light...Faithful George (Cornelia’s boyfriend)
Jane Wyman...Party guest (uncredited)

Directed by Gregory La Cava
Based the novel by Eric Hatch
Script by Morrie Ryskind, Eric Hatch and Gregory La Cava
Produced by Gregory La Cava
Cinematography by Ted Tetzlaff
Film Editing by Ted J. Kent & Russell F. Schoengarth
Runtime: 94 min

Nominated for six Oscars: Best Actor in a Leading Role (Powell), Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Auer), Best Actress in a Leading Role (Lombard), Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Bullock), Best Director (La Cava) and Best Writing, Screenplay (Hatch & Ryskind)

National Film Preservation Board, USA 1999
National Film Registry
Then Hammond is concussed in a car accident—engineered, it is hinted by the Archangel Gabriel for the good of America and the world. As a result, he is transformed into an inspired and decisive leader. He dispenses of Congress, shoots all the gangsters, blows up the Navy, and makes peace with all the nations of the world. This accomplished, he passes out again and comes to horrified by what he has done. Gabriel intervenes again before it can be undone.

This piece of propaganda for a “benevolent” American dictatorship has been condemned in some quarters for its vigilante spirit,” but it is apparently far less fascistic than the particular novel on which it was based, the work of a British brigadier named Thomas Tweed. It seems, in fact, an odd assignment to have been handed to La Cava—remote from the amiable satires on the follies of the rich in which he was most at home. Nevertheless, the picture was praised by many contemporary reviewers for the excellence of its acting and the economy and lucidity of its direction and was immensely successful with Depression audiences hungry for magical solutions to their problems.

La Cava had a more congenial subject in Bed of Roses (1933), starring Constance Bennett as an ex-convict who forsakes hard-up barge captain Joel McCrea in favor of millionaire John Halliday, whom she blackmails by claiming that he raped her while drunk. She eventually learns that true love is worth more than money, but on the way to this conventional conclusion is invested with a ruthlessness remarkable even in the “gold-digger” genre, though this is balanced by a streak of nobility in her character.

Roger McNiven has explained that La Cava’s scripts, like Leo McCarey’s, “were subjected to considerable manipulation during shooting. Situations, lines of dialogue and gestures were freely inverted with a view to creating very idiosyncratic characters. Consequently, the narrative structures are often episodic and unpredictable in tone. Sequences which begin farcically suddenly turn darkly melodramatic, and vice versa. These shifts are manifested in the performances, which are given maximum expressive weight by long takes and fluid camerawork which intimately observes the characters.” Bed of Roses, McNiven writes, “what could have been a trite tale of a bad girl’s reputation became a scathing comedy of manners mocking every level of society. This is where La Cava’s greatness lies: in balancing the absurdities of social extremes in comic and dramatic contexts, with unexpected nuances of feeling.”

My Man Godfrey (Universal, 1936), was produced as well as directed by La Cava, who also collaborated on the script with Morrie Ryskind and the author of the original story, Eric Hatch.

Graham Greene found this “adventure of a sane man among the witless wealthy” acutely funny for most of its length, but regretted that the film’s social conscience becomes in the end overt: “Mr. Powell is made to preach a sermon to the assembled family on social reform...and—cursory moral—a huge luxury club rises on the site of the rubbish-dump in which his old down-and-out friends are given employment in elegant uniforms.”

A more recent critic, Richard Corliss, finds an element of cruelty in the film’s humor: “My Man Godfrey is one screwball comedy in which almost everyone seems...really insane. And La Cava’s matter-of-fact mise-en-scène imparts a kind of documentary detachment to the film. You get the feeling that psychosis is being rouged up as humor.” Corliss calls the picture “a manic Messiah story,” in which “Godfrey is God come to free the people from selfishness and pretense.” Another critic, Lauren Rabinowitz, has scrutinized the movie in terms of Vladimir Propp’s structuralist study The Morphology of the Folktale, identifying Godfrey as “the fairy tale prince who disguises himself as a peasant.”

Frank Capra wrote that “the meteor Gregory La Cava...was an extreme proponent of inventing scenes on the set. Blessed with a brilliant, fertile mind and a flashing wit, he claimed he could make pictures without scripts. But without the scripts the studio heads could make no accurate budgets, schedules, or time allowances...He stuck to his off-the-cuff guns. Results: fewer and fewer film assignments for him—then none. ...So he mixed his exotic fuels with more mundane spirits and brooded himself into oblivion...La Cava was a man out of his time—a precursor of the New Wave directors of Europe.”

Roger McNiven also maintains that La Cava’s fondness for improvisation, his impressionistic mise-en-scène, and his constant and disturbing shifting of “the spectator’s involvement with characters” distinguished him among directors of the 1930s and looked forward to later trends. For John Gillett, La Cava “imposed his own view on a variety of subjects and combined a surface brilliance with a subversively better view of American society which makes him, in his best work, at least the equal of his better-known contemporaries.”

From Graham Greene’s contemporary review of My Man Godfrey in The Spectator 2 Oct 1936 [in The Pleasure-Dome, GG The Collected Film Criticism 1935-40. Ed. John Russell Taylor Oxford 1980]: My Man Godfrey, for three quarters of its way, is acutely funny. The adventure of a sane man among the witless wealthy, the story opens with a ‘scavenging party’ at the Waldorf-Ritz to which competitors are expected to bring, besides such assorted objects as bowls of goldfish, goats and mangles, ‘a forgotten man.’ Mr. William Powell, unshaven and for once more bitter than bright, is secured by a lovely nitwit from a rubbish-dump under Brooklyn Bridge. The chaotic scene of the shrieking alcoholic rich, leading goats and waving mangles through the great chromium halls is perhaps the wittiest, as well as the noisiest sequence of the year, but the film does not maintain quite so high a standard. Mr William Powell, adopted in place of a dead Pomeranian by the lovely brainless competitor, Miss Carole Lombard, whose voice unwinds in an endless enchanting ribbon of inanities, becomes the family butler, but alas! Before the end he proves to be of even better blood, and Boston blood at that, than his employers, nor does ‘the social conscience’ remain agreeably implicit. Mr. Powell is made to preach a sermon to the assembled family on social reform after saving them from bankruptcy by his knowledge of the stock markets and—curious moral—a huge luxury club rises on the site of the rubbish-dump in which his old down-and-out friends are given employment in elegant uniforms. But though the ‘social conscience’ is a little confused, the film, in earlier sequences, well conveys the atmosphere of an American Cherry Orchard, of a class with little of the grace and all the futility and some of the innocence of its Russian counterpart. Unfortunately, to these Americans prosperity returns, there is no dignified exit while the axes thud in the orchard, only the great glossy club rising over the wilderness of empty tins, and, last muddle and bewilderment, the marriage of the reformer and the brainless ‘lovely.’

From The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia. Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink Press. Detroit 1998, entry on La Cava by Stephen Hanson: La Cava, perhaps more than other directors working in the screwball genre, was able, by virtue of doing much of the writing on his scripts, to impose his philosophical imprint upon the majority of his films. While he was often required to keep a foot
in both the conservative and liberal camps, his films do not suffer. On the contrary. They maintain an objectivity that has allowed them to grow in stature with the passage of years. My Man Godfrey, Stage Door, and Gabriel Over the White House, which is only now being recognized as a political fantasy of great merit, give overwhelming evidence that critical recognition of Gregory La Cava is considerably overdue.

From Peter Bogdanovich’s Movie of the Week, Ballantine NY 1999: Right up there with Barrymore in comic genius—and a knockabout in her own right—is the wondrous and unique Ms. Lombard, for whom the movie genre “screwball” was coined when she did the screwiest society girl ever seen, opposite her ex-husband William Powell in Gregory La Cava’s memorable and still delectable Depression-era comedy, My Man Godfrey (1936).

Gary Morris, “Forgotten Master,” Bright Lights Film Journal: Gregory La Cava is probably the greatest classic Hollywood director still in need of rediscovery. While for many people 1930s Hollywood means Chaplin, Hitchcock, von Sternberg, Hawks, Ford, and Lubitsch, with passing nods to Borzage and McCarey, La Cava—who created several of that decade’s most enduring classics—has been unjustly forgotten, misrepresented as simply a clever studio director whose authorship even of masterpieces like Stage Door and My Man Godfrey was overshadowed by everything from the genre (screwball comedy) to the actors (strong personalities like Katharine Hepburn, William Powell, Ginger Rogers) to the writers (George S. Kaufman and Dorothy Parker among them). The man W. C. Fields called the best comedy mind in Hollywood—no small compliment coming from Fields—is virtually forgotten today.

During the re-evaluation of American commercial cinema that started

Michael Mills, “Screwball Comedy,” ModernTimes.com:
“‘There’s a pitch in baseball called a screwball, which was perfected by a pitcher named Carl Hubbell back in the 1930s. It’s a pitch with a particular spin that sort of flutters and drops and goes in very unexpected manners. . . screwball comedy was unconventional, and went in unexpected directions’”
Andrew Bergman

The film critic James Agee described the essence of Laurel and Hardy’s comedy as the scene in which the two are moving a piano across a narrow suspension bridge in the Alps, and halfway across they meet a gorilla. This may be more than the essence of Laurel and Hardy. It may be the essence of all American Comedy. It’s nuts, it’s illogical, it’s impossible, and it’s hilarious. It’s also abundant with endless comic variations, opened to unexpected solutions, and primarily grounded in danger.

What is typical American comedy? There are many things that Hollywood makes comedy about. Actually any subject is fair game. But there seems to be a single subject that persists—the battle of the sexes as presented in the Hollywood Romantic comedy. Only in America can you find the male-female relationship depicted as a vicious though delightful clash in which the man and women resist their feelings for one another by battling each other with a particularly desperate passion. And only in America can the story of destructive sexual passion be cultivated as a freewheeling slapstick event laced with acid wit. A subject that in most cultures would be recounted as stark tragedy, in the hands of Billy Wilder, Charles Brackett, Howard Hawks, or Frank Capra, is perfect material for comedy and romance.

Screwball, (Screw-ball [skrue’bôl] Noun, Slang, meaning unbalanced, erratic, irrational, unconventional), became a popular slang word in the 1930s. It was applied to films where everything was a juxtaposition: educated and uneducated, rich and poor, intelligent and stupid, honest and dishonest, and most of all male and female. When two people fell in love, they did not simply surrender to their feelings, they battled it out. They lied to one another, often assuming indifferent personas toward each other. They often employed hideous tricks on each other, until finally after running out of inventions, fall into each others arms. It was fossilized comedy, physical and often painful, but mixed with the highest level of wit and sophistication, depending wholly on elegant and inventive writing.

Some characteristics of Screwball Comedy:

Reverse class snobbery, to be poor is somehow to be more noble. What’s more, to be rich is to be castigated, passions befitting theater
patrons, during the Great Depression.

A very skillful blend of sophistication and slapstick. Although screwball characters move in an elegant world, where even a simple bathroom appears to be the center of their universe, they may still whack one another over the head, but while The Three Stooges use sledgehammers, screwball characters use silver chafing dishes, and the like—weapons of the upper class.

A well written script, laced with barbed dialog. An overlapping style of delivery, with lines tossed off in rapid fire.

An emphasis on elegant clothes, cars, and furniture. The use of exotic locals, even the dump site in “My Man Godfrey”, (see below).

The hero or the heroine living by his or her wits alone, though this is often balanced by a reliable gainfully employed love interest.

Last and probably most important, supporting casts of first-rate character actors playing eccentric types as well as a stable of familiar faces in leading roles (Cary Grant, William Powell, Carole Lombard, Claudette Colbert, Katharine Hepburn)

One of the most unusual screwball comedies was “My Man Godfrey (1936)”, a Universal production directed by Gregory La Cava. It begins at a garbage dump along New York’s East River. People in evening clothes, taking part in a scavenger hunt for a charity event, step out of a roadster to look for a “forgotten man”, a 1930s term for the unemployed and homeless. A derelict, after pushing one woman into an ash heap, agrees to go along with her sister. His dignity and sardonic humor impress her, and she hires him as butler for the family’s Fifth Avenue mansion. The wealthy family turn out to be spoiled, selfish, and inane—“empty-headed nitwits,” as the derelict-turned-butler calls them.

He, it turns Out, is also from a rich family; he landed in the dump through despondency over a broken love affair. Through his butler work he pulls his life together and in the end opens a posh nightclub, the Dump, on the dump site to provide employment, food, and shelter to “forgotten men.” The film’s predominant point, however, is not that the poor are redeemable, but that the wealthy are.

Screwball comedy crested in the late 1930s. And with the increasing hostilities brewing in Europe, the glib, and at times genteel barbs between two highly disillusioned participants seemed docile, and trivial. Certainly Romantic comedy had its place during the war years. Films such as, “Mr. Lucky (1943)”, used the urbane characters of the Screwball genre, augmenting them with a win the war at all costs purpose. By wars’ end the less sophisticated, but more utilitarian comedy of Preston Sturges had come into fashion.

The invasion of television, and the dismantling of the Hollywood studio system put an end to the classic Romantic comedy. There was, however a brief revival in the postwar years with such forgettable films as “The Mating of Millie (1948)”, “Please Believe Me (1950)”, and “Confidentially Connie (1953)”.

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**Arundhati Roy’s Buffalo schedule:**

**Arundhati Roy reads from and discusses her Booker Prize-winning novel The God of Small Things.** Wednesday, September 8, 2004, 8 p.m. Unitarian Universalist Church, 695 Elmwood Avenue, c.Corner of Ferry, in Buffalo. Admission $10.


Another World is Possible: A Conversation with Arundhati Roy and Democracy Now host Amy Goodman. Introduced and moderated by Bruce Jackson. Thursday, September 9, 2004, 8 p.m.First Presbyterian Church, One Symphony Circle. Across from Kleinhahn’s Music Hall Admission, $10.

Books will be for sale at both events from Talking Leaves Books. Tickets for both events are available through Just Buffalo, The Western New York Peace Center, and Talking Leaves Books. Tickets may be purchased with a credit card over the phone by calling Just Buffalo at 716.832.5400.

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