Academy Awards—1935:
—Best Actor in a Leading Role (Clark Gable)
—Best Actress in a Leading Role (Claudette Colbert)
—Best Director (Frank Capra)
—Best Picture
—Best Writing, Adaptation (Robert Riskin)

National Film Registry—1993

Directed by Frank Capra
Cinematography by Joseph Walker

Clark Gable...Peter Warne
Claudette Colbert...Ellie
Walter Connolly...Andrews
Roscoe Karns...Shapeley
Ward Bond...Bus Driver #1 (uncredited)

FRANK CAPRA (director)
(b. Francesco Rosario Capra, May 18, 1897, Biscione, Sicily, Italy—d. September 3, 1991, La Quinta, California)

Frank Capra is the recipient of three Academy Awards: 1939 Best Director for You Can’t Take It with You (1938), 1937 Best Director for Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936), and 1935 Best Director for It Happened One Night (1934). In 1982 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Film Institute.

Capra directed 54 films, including 1961 Pocketful of Miracles, 1959 A Hole in the Head, 1951 Here Comes the Groom, 1950 Riding High, 1948 State of the Union, 1946 It’s a Wonderful Life, 1945 Know Your Enemy - Japan (documentary), 1945 War Comes to America (documentary), 1945 Two Down and One to Go (documentary), 1945 Here Is Germany, 1945 Your Job in Germany (documentary), 1944 Arsenic and Old Lace, 1944 Tunisian Victory (documentary), 1944 The Battle of China (documentary), 1943 The Battle of Russia (documentary), 1943 Divide and Conquer (documentary), 1943 The Battle of Britain (documentary), 1943 The Nazis Strike (documentary), 1942 Prelude to War (documentary), 1941 Meet John Doe, 1939 Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, 1938 You Can’t Take It with You, 1937 Lost Horizon, 1936 Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, 1934

Capra also has 44 writing credits, including the screenplay of It’s a Wonderful Life. He was also producer of 43 films, among them 1961 Pocketful of Miracles, 1959 A Hole in the Head, 1951 Here Comes the Groom, 1948 State of the Union, 1946 It’s a Wonderful Life, 1945 Know Your Enemy - Japan (documentary), 1945 War Comes to America (documentary), 1945 Two Down and One to Go (documentary short), 1945 Here Is Germany (producer), 1944 The Negro Soldier (documentary), 1944 Know Your Ally: Britain (documentary), 1943 The Battle of Russia (documentary), 1943 Divide and Conquer (documentary), 1943 The Battle of Britain (documentary), 1943 The Nazis Strike (documentary short), 1942 Prelude to War (documentary), 1941 Meet John Doe, 1939 Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, 1938 You Can’t Take It with You, 1937 Lost Horizon, 1936 Mr. Deeds Goes


**Roscoe Karns**—**Shapeley** (b. September 7, 1891, San Bernardino, California—d. February 6, 1970 (age 78), Los

WARD BOND...Bus Driver #1

American director, scenarist, and producer, was born in Bisaquono, a village near Palermo in Sicily. Youngest of seven children of Salvatore Capra, a fruitgrower, and the former Sarah Nicholas. Capra spent his first six years in an “old cracked house of stone and mortar, clinging by its toenails to the rocks in the village.” He celebrated his sixth birthday “in a howling Atlantic storm, in the Germania’s black steerage hold, crammed with retching, praying, terrorized immigrants.”

That first journey ended on Castelar Street, a Sicilian ghetto in Los Angeles. His father worked as a fruitpicker and Frank Capra sold newspapers after school. He “hated being poor” and to his parents’ dismay refused to end his education with high school. Money earned as a banjo player in Los Angeles nightclubs covered his admission fee at the California Institute of Technology in 1915. Capra studied chemical engineering for three years, paying his way by running the student laundry, waiting tables, and wiping engines at the Pasadena power plant. He wrote later that Cal Tech “changed his whole viewpoint on life from the viewpoint of an alley rat to the viewpoint of a cultured person.”

Graduating in the spring of 1918, Capra enlisted in the army. Having served in the ROTC, he was assigned as a second lieutenant to teach mathematics to artillerymen at Fort Scott, San Francisco. His father died in 1919 and after the war Capra went home to live with his mother. His two brothers and four sisters all had jobs (or husbands with jobs), but Frank Capra, the family’s only college graduate, remained chronically
unemployed. Around 1920, taunted by his siblings and convinced that he was a failure, he became depressed and ill, suffering from acute abdominal pains. He was bedridden for two months and did nor fully recover for a year. (Much later it was established that he had suffered a burst appendix.)

As soon as he was well enough, Capra left home. During the next few years he lived in flophouses in San Francisco or else hopped freight trains and wandered the West, working on farms or as a movie extra, or hustling a living as a poker player or salesman of wildcat oil stock. In 1922 he achieved a degree of respectability as a book salesman, peddling Elbert Hubbard’s *Little Journeys* in a fourteen-volume deluxe edition. All the same, Capra reportedly possessed only twelve cents when he read in the newspaper that Walter Montague was launching a new movie studio in an abandoned gymnasium in San Francisco.

Montague, an old Shakespearean actor, wanted to make screen versions of famous poems. Capra called him and intimated that he was “from Hollywood.” Montague was impressed and hired him (for a total fee of $75) to direct his first project, a one-reeler based on Kipling’s ballad “Fultah Fisher’s Boarding House.” Having taken in a few movies by way of learning his new trade, Capra enlisted the services of a cameraman he happened to know and set about casting his film with amateurs—“bellhops and so on.” His motives for insisting on a nonprofessional cast were not those of the neorealists: “I didn’t want real actors…[because they] might show me up.” Capra made his first movie in two days. It cost $1,700 and was sold to Pathé for $3,500. According to Alva Johnston, “critics noted that it was free from stunts, mannerisms, camera angles and Hollywood tricks. It had to be free from them as Capra never had time to learn anything of them.”

Capra left Montague when the old man decided that the poems on which he would base his future productions would be his own. Capra was already hooked on the movies, however, and got himself a job with another minor San Francisco producer, Paul Gerson; then one with Harry Cohn in Los Angeles. Having worked as property man, film cutter, title writer, and assistant director, he became a gag writer for Hal Roach’s *Our Gang* series before incarcering himself in Mack Sennett’s notorious “writers’ tower.” There he wrote a number of movies for the comedian Harry Langdon—a saintlike fool in a naughty world. When Langdon left Sennett to make feature-length movies for First National, Capra went with him as his writer and director.

Capra made three films with Langdon—*Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926), *The Strong Man* (1926) and *Long Pants* (1927). All of them, especially *The Strong Man*, were immensely successful with the critics and the public, establishing Langdon as a comedian of the caliber of Chaplin or Keaton. After he fired himself, Capra and began to direct his own movies, his career declined. Capra made one more movie for First National, *For the Love of Mike* (1927), a routine comedy about a waif raised by three bickering godfathers, a German, a Jew, and an Irishman. It was such a resounding failure that Cludette Colbert, who played the lead, returned to the stage for two years. Capra himself nearly abandoned the movies but in the end rejoined Harry Cohn.

Cohn, his brother Jack, and Joseph Brandt had founded their film production company in 1920, calling it the CBC Sales Corporation. CBC, soon known in the industry as “Cornbeef and Cabbage,” produced mostly shorts and two-reel comedies. It was one of the many small studios on “Poverty Row” in Los Angeles. Denied access to first-run houses, they churned out low-budget quickies for provincial exhibitors. This tough business became steadily tougher as the major studios carved up among themselves the means of production, distribution, and exhibition. Most of the independent producers went to the wall; the vulgar and egregious Harry Cohn survived because he was tougher and shrewder than his competitors. In 1924 CBC became Columbia Pictures, with the new policy of producing feature films. They were still quickies, generally made in a week or less, but they included a sprinkling of stars (often actors just dropped by the major studios). Costs were kept down by “bunching” the scenes in which these expensive assets appeared, so that all those scenes could be shot in a few days.

It was Capra who made a success of Cohn’s new policy. During his first year at Columbia he directed nine films. They included *The Way of the Strong* (1928), a melodrama about a criminal who loves and loses a blind girl, and *The Power of the Press* (1928), starring Douglas Fairbanks Jr. as a gangbusting reporter—the first of many Capra movies with a newspaper background. Cohn’s first attempt at something more ambitious than a routine quickie was an all-action naval adventure story called *Submarine* (1928). It starred Jack Holt and Ralph Graves and used some relatively expensive sets and effects. Capra, who took over from Irven Willett when Cohn became dissatisfied with his efforts, filmed his tough-guy stars without makeup and in unpressed uniforms and added other touches of realism, as well as some comedy. The result was highly successful, establishing Holt and Graves as a popular starring team and Capra as a “bankable” director. Cohn, who had started Capra at $1,000 per movie, now gave him a contract at $25,00 a year.

*Submarine*, which had sound effects and snatches of dialogue, was followed by Capra’s first real talkie, *The Younger Generation* (1929), a rags-to-riches-and back-again romance based on a Fanny Hurst bestseller. Capra welcomed the transition to sound. “I wasn’t at home in silent films,” he told an interviewer. “I thought it was very strange to stop and put a title on the screen and then come back to the action….When I got to
working with sound, I thought, my, what a wonderful tool has been added.” He used sound in the location shooting for Flight (1929), his second Holt-Graves armed services drama.

Capra wrote as well as directed Flight and, encouraged by its success, wrote a show business story called “Ladies of the Evening.” Cohn was enthusiastic and so were all of Cohn’s yesmen, but Jo Swerling, a New York newspaperman on a short contract with Columbia, said the story was preposterous and explained why at a meeting attended by “a little dark guy” he thought was Cohn’s secretary. In fact it was Capra, who after the meeting insisted that Swerling be hired as his collaborator. Capra’s script was rewritten as Ladies of Leisure (1930), which by the standards of the industry at that time—and of Columbia in particular—is a film of some sophistication. Under Capra’s direction, Barbara Stanwyck acted with a sincerity and naturalness that launched her as a star. The picture was Columbia’s first important critical success and the first of several Capra films written by Swerling.

After an engaging circus comedy called Rain or Shine (1930) came The Miracle Woman (1931). An early example of the exposé film…. It combines tough realism and romantic hokum in a way that even the New York critics found palatable. Platinum Blonde (1932), a Jean Harlowe vehicle, introduced in the newspaper woman Gallagher (Loretta Young) a prototype of the Capra heroine—a wisecracking working girl whose cynicism masks a tender heart. The sharp dialogue was written by Robert Riskin, and he and Capra went on to become Hollywood’s most admired writer-director team.

It was Riskin who wrote American Madness (1932), in which Capra’s social concerns quite suddenly emerged. This Depression movie tells the story of an idealistic bank president, Tom Dickson (Walter Huston), who terrifies his greedy board of directors by lending money to people whose only collateral is honesty and an appetite for hard work. Bedeviled by a crooked cashier and murderous gangsters, and uncertain of his wife’s fidelity, Dickson nearly loses heart. A run on the bank begins, but in the nick of time, the small businessmen who owe their survival to Dickson crowd in to deposit their money and demonstrate their confidence in his bank.

“Capra’s mastery of the medium is obvious in American Madness,” wrote John Raeburn, “as it would be in most of his later films. Form and content are inextricably linked, and meaning derives from the fusion of the two. The tempo of the film, for example, is perfectly synchronized with the action, building from long and leisurely tracking shots of the opening to increasingly jerky and staccato camera movements when the run on the bank begins: “As the intensity of the panic increases, Capra reduces the duration of each shot and uses more and more crosscutting and jump cuts to emphasize the ‘madness of what is happening.’ Riskin’s dialogue is vivid and colloquial, and ‘Capra added to the naturalistic quality of the dialogue by having speakers overlap another, as they often do in ordinary life; this was an innovation that helped to move the talkies away from the example of the legitimate stage… Capra also used sound as an important element for creating mood and for underscoring what was being seen on the screen… American Madness was not a film with sound added, but truly a sound film. “This is especially evident during the run on the bank, when “the camera and the microphone work together organically” to register the growing panic and hysteria of the mob. Raeburn considers Capra second only to Griffith as a director of crowds. The message of American Madness is in effect the one Roosevelt offered soon afterwards as the rallying cry of the New Deal—“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” However, this film, the first of Capra’s “fantasies of good will,” has been treated with great hostility by Marxist critics, who regard it as propaganda for paternalistic capitalism.

Denied an Oscar for American Madness, Capra tried again with The Bitter Tea of General Yen (1933). This was adapted from a novel by Grace Zaring Stone, not by Riskin but by Edward Paramore. Barbara Stanwyck plays a prim New Englander who goes to China during the Revolution to marry her missionary fiancé. Instead she falls into the clutches of a much-feared warlord (Nils Asther). While she tries to convert him to Christianity, he introduces her to art and the senses. Her sensual awakening comes in a dream that does not occur in the novel, a brilliant sequence that has reminded some critics of Cocteau. When the war turns against Yen, the heroine stays with him until his suicide.

The photography of this extraordinary film was the work of Joe Walker, cameraman on a score of Capra movies. Elliott Stein, who considers it Capra’s masterpiece, called it “a work of exquisite textures…. It is the only film the director ever made in which and interesting and credible narrative is given serious support from the writer—significantly not Riskin—down to the final reel.” It did not bring Capra an Oscar, but it demonstrated his victory in his struggle with Cohn to gain complete artistic control over his films, from choice of subject to final cut. “One man—one film” was Capra’s watchword; in his opinion, though moviemaking involves much consultation and collaboration, in the end “one man has to make the decisions, one man says yes or no. That man should be the director.”...
The first of the “screwball comedies” was based on a story called “Night Bus” by Samuel Hopkins Adams and featured two second-rank stars that Capra borrowed from other studios. Claudette Colbert (taking another chance on Capra) plays Ellie Andrews, escaping from her tycoon father in Miami to join her playboy fiancé in New York. Broke, she has to take a handout from Peter Warne (Clark Gable). A tough but fundamentally decent reporter also heading for New York. He has just lost his job and sees in this spoiled brat the makings of a scoop. When their bus is halted by a torrential rain, they share a single motel room (a blanket hung between their beds: “The Walls of Jericho”). They bamboozle her father’s detectives and hitchhike on together (Ellie showing her gumption and her legs to stop a car when Peter can’t). Their class-rooted hostility gives way to love, encouraged in the end by Ellie’s father (Walter Connolly) who, having made his millions by the sweat of his brow, knows a good man when he sees one.

Some contemporary critics (and many since) were appalled by this “wish-fulfillment” involved in this transformation of a bullying tycoon into a good fairy, a trick that occurs in other Capra comedies. In fact, Capra was by no means the only 1930s director guilty of this particular fantasy. As Andrew Bergman writes, the “cold-eyed, suspicious and edgy” comedy of 1930-1933 gave way in the mid-1930s to “a comedy at once warm and healing” which sought to reconcile the irreconcilable, creating “an America of perfect unity” in which “all classes are one.” The “screwball comedies” of the Depression were escapist variations on the American Dream, but they probably meant well and were certainly well-received, proving, as Bergman says, “a bonanza for Hollywood.”

It Happened One Night won Oscars for best film, screenplay, director, actor, and actress—the first movie to be so comprehensively honored. It was the great hit of 1934, making the names and fortunes of Capra, Columbia, Colbert, and Gable, and inspiring countless imitations. It owed its success to its pace and invention, its good-humored wit, its amiable romanticism, and its kindly observation of a great gallery of American types and characters encountered between Florida and New York. The picture has been called a picaresque, an early road movie, and (by Robert Stebbins) “the classic genteel romantic story” in which “the rich girl gives up her rebellious freedom for the pleasure of the hero’s wit and imagination” and the hero, in exchange for the girl, “weds his vitality and vision to the dominant social class.” But, Stebbins says, “Capra and Riskin brought as much to the genteel formula story as they took from it. Above all they took it out of the drawing rooms of the rich and filled it with the settings and people of everyday life.”

Broadway Bill, another screwball comedy, this time about horse players, was also released in 1934 and was also a hit. But at this stage in his career Capra arrived at a new conception of his role. No longer content to simply entertain, he decided he must use his mastery of the Hollywood entertainment machine to convey a message to the American public. “My films must let every man, woman, and child know that God loves them, that I love them, and that peace and salvation will become a reality only when they all learn to love each other. This revelation Capra attributes in a much-quoted anecdote to a “faceless little man” introduced to him during a period of illness by a Christian Scientist friend. His visitor, whose name he never learned, pointed out that he was able to “talk to hundreds of millions, for two hours—and in the dark. The talents you have, Mr. Capra, are not your own, not self-acquired. God gave you those talents; they are His gifts to you. To use for His purpose."

Capra embodied his message in a series of films, all but one of them written by Riskin, which Richard Griffith has labeled “fantasies of good will,” and which in fact bear a strong resemblance in mood and structure to an earlier Riskin-Capra collaboration, American Madness. The first (and for many the best) of the series was Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936).… Capra’s “Saturday Evening Post socialism” was decried by intellectuals, but the “little people” beloved of Mr. Deeds loved the movie and so did most of its reviewers. It brought Capra a second Oscar and was another box-office smash. Only Alistair Cooke observed that the director was “starting to make movies about themes instead of people.” Lost Horizons (1937), based on James Hilton’s sentimental utopian fantasy, was not about anything worth discussing but cost two million dollars and added “Shangri-La” to the language as the quintessential escapist haven….The movie took two Oscars and, according to some accounts, was the most profitable of all Capra’s films.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) centers on another of Capra’s embodiments of small-town idealism and naïve eccentricity…. Mr Smith was Capra’s last movie for Columbia; for his next he set up his own production company, Frank Capra Productions, with Riskin as his partner. Meet John Doe (1941) has been the most controversial of the Capra-Riskin movies…Meet John Doe, made at the end of the isolationist period when war with the Axis seemed imminent, has been taken as a deliberate reaffirmation of American values, but one that reveals a surprising uncertainty about their survival and perhaps even about their nature. Andrew Sarris has gone further than most to make the last point, saying that Capra here “crossed the line between populist sentimentality and populist demagoguery,” embodying in Gary Cooper “a barefoot fascist, suspicious of all
ideas and all doctrines, but believing in the innate conformism of the common man.”…}

During World War II Capra made a number of propaganda films for the War Department. Admired to the point of adulation at the time, some of them (like *The Negro Soldier*) have since been condemned as stereotyped or even racist. Capra’s own “Why We Fight” series is on the whole better balanced, and the effectiveness of these documentaries as hard-hitting propaganda has been widely recognized: Churchill called them the most powerful “statement of our cause” that he had ever encountered. Capra, who began the war as a major, ended it as a colonel, earning a DSM and the Legion of Merit, and becoming an officer of the Order of the British Empire.

After the war Capra set up a new production co, Liberty Films, Incorporated, which as it turns out made only one movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946)….This is Capra’s own favorite among his films and Griffith called it “one of the most personal visions ever realized in commercial cinema.”

There was much less enthusiasm for *State of the Union* (1948), adapted from a Pulitzer Prize-winning drama by Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse….The film was released by MGM, Capra having by then sold Liberty Films to Paramount….

In fact, none of Capra’s subsequent movies had much success…. In the typical Capra movie, as Richard Griffith has pointed out, “a messianic innocent…pits himself against the forces of entrenched greed. His inexperience defeats him strategically, but his gallant integrity in the face of temptation calls forth the goodwill of the “little people,” and through their combined protest, he triumphs.” During the golden age of Hollywood, Capra’s “fantasies of good will” made him one of the two or three most famous and successful directors in the world. However, beginning in the late 1950s, when the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics in France launched an *auteurist* reassessment of the American film. His reputation declined sharply. It seems surprising that the *Cahiers* critics had so little regard for a director who was so completely the “author” of his films—one of the few to have his “name above the title” in the credits and advertising and to win complete artistic control over his work. John Raeburn suggests that Capra’s best films were unknown to the French—too quintessentially American to be exportable. The *Cahiers* disciples in the United States were more aggressively negative, however, mostly on political grounds. Capra was accused of grossly oversimplifying and sentimentalizing serious political and social issues, and of a belief in “the tyranny of the majority.”

Ten years later, it was clear that this trend had reversed itself. Post-*auteurist* critics once more acclaimed Capra as a cinematic master, and perhaps more surprisingly, young people packed Capra festivals and revivals on campuses all over the United States. As John Raeburn writes, it was once more recognized that “for all their devotion to middle-class life, Capra’s films are saved from emotional thinness and rapid sentimentality by, on the one hand, a limited but omnipresent vein of social criticism and, on the other, by the director’s skill in animating and making credible an ideal conception of American national character….There is a strong libertarian streak in Capra’s films, a distrust of power wherever it occurs and in whomever it is invested.” Young people are won over by the fact that his heroes “are uninterested in wealth” and “are characterized by a vigorous…individualism, a zest for experience, and a keen sense of political and social justice….Capra’s heroes, in short, are ideal types, created in the image of a powerful national myth.”

There is always a degree of improvisation in Capra’s work. He went onto the set with a script written in master scenes only: “What you need is what the scene is about, who does what to whom, and who cares about whom…All I want is a master scene and I’ll take care of the rest—how to shoot it, how to keep the machinery out of the way, and how to focus attention on the actors at all times.” In this almost casual way, Capra produced movies of great but unobtrusive craftsmanship—unobtrusive because he thought it was bad directing to distract the audience with fancy technical gimmicks. William S. Pechter describes Capra’s style as one of almost classical purity; and it seems somehow appropriate to the American ethos of casual abundance that the director of quite possible the greatest technical genius in the Hollywood film, post-Griﬃth, pre-Hitchcock—a genius, as Richard Griffith has suggested, on the order of those of the silent Russian cinema at its zenith—should have placed his great gifts at the service of an apparently frivolous kind of comedy.”

Pechter maintains that Capra’s style is based on editing, “since it depends for its effect on a sustained sequence of rhythmic motion…But whereas Eisenstein’s complex and intricate editing seems, ﬁnally, to attempt to impose movement on material which is essentially static, Capra has the effect of imposing order on images constantly in motion, imposing order on chaos. The end of all this is indeed a kind of beauty, a beauty of controlled motion, imposing order on chaos. The end of all this is indeed a kind of beauty, a beauty of controlled motion, more like dancing than painting, but more like the movies than anything else…There is always a gap between what Capra wishes to say and what he actually succeeds in saying. He seems obsessed with certain American social myths but he observes that society itself as a realist….His films move at a breathtaking clip: dynamic, driving, taut, at their extreme even hysterical; the unrelenting, frantic, acceleration of pace seems to spring from the release of some tremendous accumulation of pressure. The sheer speed and energy seem, ﬁnally, less calculated than desperate, as though Capra were aware, on some level, of the tension established between his material and what he attempts to make of it.”
...Capra has been four times president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and three times president of the Screen Directors Guild, which he helped to found and which, under his presidency, did much to secure a degree of artistic control for Hollywood directors....He won a reputation for fierce independence in his dealings with Harry Cohn and other front-office tyrants, but on the set was said to be gentle and considerate, “a director who displays absolutely no exhibitionism.”

**COMING UP IN THE FALL 2013 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXVII:**

- **September 10** Jean Renoir *The Grand Illusion* 1937
- **September 17** Billy Wilder *Double Indemnity* 1944
- **September 24** Delmer Daves *3:10 to Yuma* 1957
- **October 1** Kon Ichikawa *Fires on the Plain* 1959
- **October 8** Peter Bogdanovich *The Last Picture Show* 1971
- **October 15** Sidney Lumet *Network* 1976
- **October 22** Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian *Death Row* 1979
- **October 29** Jim Jarmusch *Dead Man* 1995
- **November 5** Pedro Almodóvar *Talk to Her* 2002
- **November 12** Charlie Kaufman *Synecdoche, New York* 2008
- **November 19** Wim Wenders *Pina* 2011
- **November 26** Baz Luhrmann *The Great Gatsby* 2013

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The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center and State University of New York at Buffalo with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News