

# It Happened One Night

USA, 1934, Black & white  
Certificate A, 105 minutes

## Cast

Peter Warne	Clark Gable
Ellie Andrews	Claudette Colbert
Alexander Andrews	Walter Connolly
Mr Shapeley	Roscoe Karns
King Westley	Jameson Thomas
Danker	Alan Hale
Zeke	Arthur Hoyt
Zeke's wife	Blanche Friderici
Joe Gordon	Charles C Wilson
Director	Frank Capra
Screenplay	Robert Riskin
Cinematography	Joseph Walker
Music	Louis Silvers
Costumes	Robert Kalloch
Editing	Gene Havlick
Producer	Harry Cohn

*It Happened One Night* has a fairly basic plot: Ellie (Claudette Colbert), the headstrong but charming daughter of a millionaire (Walter Connolly) marries a suitor, King Westley, (Jameson Thomas) of whom her father does not approve. As a result, she runs away from her father at first opportunity and takes the bus to New York City to join her aviator husband. A recently fired reporter, Peter (Clark Gable) is on the same bus, recognises her and agrees to get her to New York undiscovered in return for her exclusive story. Peter and Ellie fall in love during the trip, she flees Westley and the remarriage ceremony to rejoin Peter and they live happily ever after.

*It Happened One Night* (1934) was Frank Capra's next project after *Lady For A Day* (1933), and was originally entitled *Night Bus*. It was based on a story by Samuel Hopkins Adams, which first appeared in *Cosmopolitan* magazine and retains many elements of the original story. It is also the first, and arguably the best, of all screwball comedies and established Clark

Gable as a star and Claudette Colbert (who died earlier this year) as queen of the genre.

The pairing of Colbert and Gable was a master stroke but one that came about by chance. The two main characters were written with other actors in mind. Capra wanted Robert Montgomery but Louis B Mayer refused to loan him to Columbia. Although he was obliged to give Columbia a star in exchange for Capra's loan out for *Soviet* (a project shelved during 1933 because it was controversial, hugely expensive and ultimately depressing), he did not want it to be Montgomery. The reason for this was that MGM, too, was planning a 'Bus' picture, *Fugitive Lovers*, in which Montgomery would take the lead.

The female lead was also difficult to cast. MGM's Myrna Loy rejected the part, as did Miriam Hopkins and Margaret Sullavan. Loy later explained, "They sent me the worst script ever, completely different from the one they shot". Then Capra went to Constance Bennett, who wanted to buy it for herself, and to Bette Davis, who wanted to do it but was not allowed to by Warners, as punishment for her insisting on being loaned to RKO for *Of Human Bondage* (1934). Columbia's studio boss, Harry Cohn, suggested Loretta Young, but Capra was not interested. He then urged Capra to cast Carole Lombard but she, too, turned it down because of a conflict with the schedule of her next film, *Bolero* (1934).

Nobody wanted to play in *It Happened One Night*. Actors don't like comedies much. They're not dynamic like melodramas - nobody gets hurt, nobody gets killed, nobody gets raped.

Frank Capra



Louis B Mayer lent Clark Gable to the production for a very modest \$10,000 at Capra's request, although Cohn complained that he was not the "first-class" kind of actor that had been promised. Casting Claudette Colbert was Cohn's idea, even though she and Capra had ended up hating one another after making *For The Love of Mike* in 1927. She was not enthusiastic, being used to Paramount's glamorous settings and gowns. Columbia were desperate, however, and agreed to pay her \$50,000 (twice her usual fee) out of a total budget of \$325,000. Not only that, but her contract entitled her to additional payments if the film went over time. Colbert insisted that she took the part "mostly to work with Clark". Gable, however, complained afterwards that "she made more in overtime than I made for the picture".

Announcing the Gable-Colbert teaming to exhibitors on November 22, 1933, Columbia proclaimed, "What this means to the exhibitor is that Columbia is getting the stars! They're none of 'em too big for a Columbia picture now".

Though Peter Warne in the Adams story shares a common touch with Gable's character in the movie, he was originally a college-educated chemist reduced to odd jobs and frequent unemployment. He is secretly one of nature's aristocrats, which blurs the class distinctions in his romantic pursuit of the runaway heiress. According to Capra, the script initially changed Peter to a highbrow artist and only later, after many rejections, was he transformed into the hard-boiled but idealistic reporter desperate to win back his old job.

The scriptwriter Robert Riskin, however, had used a similar character in his first script for Capra, the excellent *Platinum Blonde* (1931), which also had the situation of a reporter (Robert Williams) falling for a spoiled society dame (Jean Harlow). Capra saw Colbert's character

as the personification of all the rich, "classy", stuck-up women who ever gave him the brush-off. He renamed the character after one of the girls who he knew when he was trying to crash Pasadena society, Ellen Andrews (in the story, the character's name is Elspeth Andrews).

Capra thought that Colbert had "the best figure of any actress in Hollywood" and demonstrated his appreciation of it by showing her stopping traffic with a shapely leg in the hitch-hiking scene; and by having her do a discreet striptease in the famous "Walls of Jericho" sequence (where twin beds were separated by a rope over which a blanket was thrown). She had to be coaxed into displaying her leg and she did not want to strip as far as Capra wanted for the other scene, making it more suggestive as a result of her discretion. Furthermore, when Gable took off his shirt to reveal a bare torso, he inadvertently set a vestless trend among copy-cat American males.



*It Happened One Night* set a house record for an opening day when it premiered at Radio City Music Hall on February 23, 1934. The New York reviews were generally favourable, although the story was described variously as "improbable" or "preposterous", and the ticket sales did not initially live up to early expectations. Throughout the major cities of America, the film was pulled after two weeks but in smaller markets all over the country it was a different story.

It stayed one week and then it stayed another week and another. They began to talk about it - "Let's go see the Gable picture again and take so-and-so". The people discovered that picture.

Frank Capra

The film made 1934 the most profitable year for Columbia since 1929, the year of the mass conversion to sound. Whilst other studios were barely managing to survive, Columbia reported net earnings of over one million dollars. Indeed, *It Happened One Night* grossed around that figure and continued to play in theatres well into 1935. It was the first film to win all five major Oscars (Picture, Actor, Actress, Director and Screenplay) and has been remade twice as the musicals *Eve Knew Her Apples* (1945) and *You Can't Run Away From It* (1956).

JONATHAN BEARE

**PS**

THE Oscar won by Clark Gable for the 1934 film *It Happened One Night* is expected to fetch up to \$300,000 at a Los Angeles auction this month.

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AUDIENCE REACTIONS	10	***** *
	9	***** ***** ***** ***
THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION	8	***** ***** ***** ***
(Screened 28 November 1996)	7	***** *
	6	
	5	
Average Mark: 8.5	4	
No. of slips returned: 48	3	
	2	
	1	

Like *Remains of the Day*, which it has just replaced as highest rated film of the season so far, marks for *The Shawshank Redemption* were clustered at the top of the range. It was variously described as "excellent", "wonderful", "accomplished", "interesting" and "enjoyable". I wish I had been able to come along and see it again (as several of the audience did) - it obviously merits a second viewing, even though you know what's going to happen.

*A great script, beautifully filmed and acted - one of the best.*

*Man, I'd rather dip my outer extremities in a bucket of cement than be banged up in that place! A good effort!*

*A brilliant film - held my attention all the 2-1/2 hours!*

*The most gripping and exhilarating film I've seen in ages.*

*Why was John Redwood on Red's last parole board?*

*Good story, great acting and first class print.*

*Real old-fashioned story film - excellent.*

*Captivating, chilling, enthralling.*

*A wonderful film. Morgan Freeman excellent as always. Tim Robbins good also.*

*Sensitive, moving, strongly cast, touching, believable. A beautiful well-paced film. One of the best I've seen this year.*

*Second time showing for me, and very well worth seeing again. Kept my husband guessing on how it would end.*

*An excellent, totally gripping film.*

*Even better than I remembered it.*

*In my opinion, best film this season.*

*Good use of lighting. Possibly best use of voice-overs - really enjoyable.*

*An amalgam of many films - but none the worse for that. Really good entertainment. AND, oh! God! a happy ending!*

Previous scores: *Remains of the Day* 8.4; *Anchors Aweigh* 7.2; *The Usual Suspects* 6.8; *Once Were Warriors* 6.6; *The Roundup* 5.7

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