



IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT

LINDA MIZEJEWSKI

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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Praise for *It Happened One Night*

“Mizejewski is marvelously alert to the romance, sex, class feeling and star power that made *It Happened One Night* a landmark comedy. An indispensable guide to what “It” is all about.”

Maria DiBattista, Princeton University

“Linda Mizejewski’s *It Happened One Night*, like Frank Capra’s, is tough-minded and tender, politically and discursively astute, yet open to the humor and mystery of “young people in love.” Her command of the scholarship is impressive, her prose is nimble and sharp. A landmark study of a landmark film.”

Leland Poague, Iowa State University

“What a wonderful read! Mizejewski’s witty and lucid study of *It Happened One Night* offers a knowledgeable introduction not only to this important film but to the genre of romantic comedy and the scholarship it has inspired.”

Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, University of Oregon

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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For George, with romance and comedy

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Introduction

Little Picture, Big Classic

Legends and a Legendary Hit

It Happened One Night (1934) opens with tycoon Alexander Andrews (Walter Connolly) outraged to hear that his daughter Ellie (Claudette Colbert) is refusing to eat the food sent to her cabin on the yacht. “Well, why don’t you jam it down her throat?” he demands of the chief steward. “Well, it’s not as simple as all that,” the steward ruefully replies.

The steward is right. The daughter is not a child but a married woman, and the power struggle involves far more than physical force. A sleeper hit from a small studio, *It Happened One Night* is deceptively simple in other ways as well. In the 1930s, its audiences recognized it as a “bus story” of the type popular at the time, about two strangers meeting and falling in love over the course of a journey. In the script, Peter Warne (Clark Gable), the film’s romantic hero, describes it as “a simple story for simple people.” The settings are modest. Though it opens on a yacht, most of the action takes place on or around a Greyhound bus and dusty back roads. Because of this simplicity, Claudette Colbert reported her grave doubts, during the shooting, about the likelihood of the film’s success. Depression-era audiences wanted glamour from Hollywood, she said, “And here we were, looking a little seedy, riding our bus” (McBride, 1992: 307). Indeed, Colbert had only three changes of clothing in the entire film, and production values were not high. The most famous prop in this film is a blanket, and the film’s implied star endorsement was that real

men do not wear undershirts, a revelation made when Peter removes his shirt to reveal a bare chest in a key scene.

The place of *It Happened One Night* in film history is likewise reckoned to be straightforward. The film captivated Hollywood in the 1930s, inspired the genre of romantic comedy, turned “poverty row” Columbia Pictures into a major studio, and made Gable the top leading man of the decade. The name of its director, Frank Capra, has become short-hand for American populist cinema, with *It Happened One Night* as the prototype of the “Capraesque” film, which portrays the erosion of class difference and the triumph of the ordinary citizen.

Yet as the steward says, it’s not as simple as all that. Even the opening conversation of *It Happened One Night*, with its questions of power, need, and desire, resonate with the irony of wealthy people arguing about a hunger strike in the middle of the Depression. Likewise, the simple blanket and missing undershirt suggest both the gritty materiality and social enormity of what is at stake – bedding and skin, class and sex – in a movie set in an era when many Americans went hungry. Capra’s politics, Gable’s stardom, the development of Columbia Pictures, the meanings of this film in the Depression, and the implications for romantic comedy are complicated topics crisscrossed by contending histories. The aim of this book is to unpack these questions and themes and to map out the debates, contexts, and controversies that make *It Happened One Night* a key text for the history of cinema and for cultural studies.

Without dispute, *It Happened One Night* is the boilerplate for Hollywood’s favorite way of constructing the heterosexual couple. Its formula of the quarreling duo, spunky heroine, romantic triangle, and class/cultural conflict continues to dominate the genre of romantic comedy, easily making the transition into the twenty-first century. Undisputed, too, is the film’s status as a runaway hit. Breaking box office records on its initial release, it was the first film to sweep the Academy Awards, winning Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, and Best Actress – a feat equaled only twice later in the twentieth century. It was also one of only five comedies in that century to win the Academy Award for Best Picture.¹ Even in the early