



Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success

By Joseph McBride

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Moviegoers often assume Frank Capra's life resembled his beloved films (such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*). A man of the people faces tremendous odds and, by doing the right thing, triumphs! But as Joseph McBride reveals in this meticulously researched, definitive biography, the reality was far more complex, a true American tragedy. Using newly declassified U.S. government documents about Capra's response to being considered a possible "subversive" during the post-World War II Red Scare, McBride adds a final chapter to his unforgettable portrait of the man who gave us *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, and *Meet John Doe*.

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Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success By Joseph McBride Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Hollywood's champion of the "common man" during the Depression, director Frank Capra (1897-1991) kept the American dream alive with films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's A Wonderful Life*. In this captivating biography the Sicilian immigrant filmmaker, admired for the liberal and proletarian sentiments of his movies, emerges as a deeply contradictory figure. Spurning his ethnic roots, ashamed of his parents, Capra lusted to be accepted by mainstream America. He was affiliated with conservative Republicans, spied on labor in the 1930s for powerful producers and collaborated surreptitiously with the McCarthyite witch hunt. Biographer of Orson Welles, McBride presents a man seething with bitterness, rage, self-doubt and sexual anxiety with his two wives. He analyzes Capra's reactionary idealization of small-town America and the misogynist undertones of his films. In a canvas crowded with stars like Claudette Colbert, Jimmy Stewart, Barbara Stanwyck and Gary Cooper, McBride convincingly paints a great director who lost his touch after the late 1940s, unable to adjust to postwar Hollywood or to function independently. Photos.

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From Library Journal

Capra is largely remembered today as a director whose films champion all-American optimism in a world where good ultimately triumphs. This exhaustively researched and densely--perhaps overly--detailed biography uncovers the man behind the camera and simultaneously debunks much of what Capra wrote in his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title* (LJ 4/15/71). The director's flag waving concealed shame about his Sicilian heritage, writes McBride, and he was not adverse to being one of the greedy rich his films derided. The analysis of Capra's oeuvre, including his days as a gag writer, reveals much about his psyche. The author of well-regarded biographies of Howard Hawks (Hawks on Hawks, LJ 12/15/81) and John Ford (John Ford, Da Capo, 1975) has written the definitive work about another major American director. For general audiences. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 10/15/91.

- Roy Liebman, *California State Univ. Lib., Los Angeles*

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From Kirkus Reviews

Huge, richly researched, absorbing revisionist biography of the filmmaker renowned for standing up for ``the little man''; by the author of studies of Orson Welles, Howard Hawks, John Ford, and others. In 1981, McBride was asked to help prepare an homage to Capra (1897-1991) for the National Film Institute's Life Achievement award. In researching Capra, McBride discovered that the director's well-received autobiography, *The Name Above the Title* (1971), was a self-aggrandizing fairy tale. Although such 30's and 40's films as *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *It's A Wonderful Life* seemingly displayed Capra as a giant talent supporting the cause of ``the little man,'' Capra was actually an insecure, anti-New Deal reactionary who always voted for the money and, as president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for several years running, always stood up for the studios rather than the newly formed talent guilds and unions. In his autobiography, McBride says, Capra reinvented his career and papered over the help he had from his excellent cameraman, Joseph Walker, who gave sculptural depth and richness to all his major films, and from writers Jo Swerling, Sidney Buchman, and Robert Riskin, who wrote all ``the little man's'' speeches, devised Capra's stories, and gave edge and shape to his characters. Capra apparently also misrepresented his ties with Columbia Pictures head Harry Cohn, who had (and exercised) right of final cut on all Capra pictures--although Capra trumpeted himself as a ``one man, one picture'' auteur. McBride thinks that Capra's need to appropriate credit belonging to others stemmed from insecurity about the nature of his own abilities and from a fear of success common to first-

generation professionals, who often think themselves imposters. Looking at some of his pictures late in life, Capra mused, ``...they don't seem to be mine. It's difficult for me to understand." Superb in every way. (Sixteen pages of b&w photographs--not seen.) -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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