

Film festival a credit to York

Frank Capra made films for people

By LLOYD CHESLEY

Well, here I am writing about Frank Capra again. I can't keep track of all the times I've written about him and his films, but I do know that I still haven't used up my praise yet. His peak was in the thirties, but even a conservative rating would place him as one of the ten best directors in the entire history of the movies.

You may know him because of the publicity about his recently released autobiography, *The Name Above The Title*. You may know him for one of his films you may have caught on television or at a theatre. Everyone must have their favorite, but I'm not through deciding between *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town*, *Lost Horizon*, *You Can't Take It With You*, *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, *Meet John Doe*, not to mention *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *Pocketful of Miracles*.

Capra, in case you haven't guessed, made comedies. Things didn't start out so funny for him, though. His family took him from Sicily when he was a child on the supposition that they could be more than paupers in the U.S. They were wrong and lived a miserable existence which taught Capra a hatred of poverty. He worked his way through school and became a chemical engineer, but the only job he could get was making bootleg booze.

One day he found himself in a Jewish gymnasium in front of a poster advertising for help to make a movie. Not that he knew what a movie was, really, but he said he was an expert and he got the job. He ended up directing short films and

learning the best way possible: by making a lot of mistakes.

Then he got a job with Mack Sennett, the king of slapstick, as a gagwriter. He managed, after quite a time, to convince Sennett to let him direct their newest comedy star. Sennett agreed and Capra made three films with Harry Langdon, turning him into a comedian who ranks with Chaplin, Keaton and Harold Lloyd.

Then came Columbia and Harry Cohn. I hate to talk about Hollywood briefly. As the centre of all the world's greatest artists and intellects, it defies simple definition. Columbia was the poorest of the studios, and Harry Cohn one of the strangest of the movie's moguls.

Cohn had built Columbia against enormous odds, but still the studio was commonly known as "poverty row". In the early 30's it was almost an insult to be associated with it. In the 40's it was to be an honour, for at that time it was the producer of the finest in comedies and of off-beat films. Harry Cohn was master still, but the studio had begun to attract major directors, such as John Ford and Leo McCarey.

Success started with the first argument Capra had with Cohn when he joined the studio in the twenties. Cohn liked to be boss.

But by the time Capra was finished he had bullied his way into full autonomy and had turned out an unprecedented stream of big hits. He won three Oscars as best director, and two of his films were named best picture of the year, which is tantamount to the same thing. He made stars of Jimmy Stewart, Barbara Stanwyck and Jean Arthur and always managed to



Edward G. Robinson and Thelma Ritter in Frank Capra's *A Hole in the Head*.

assemble the most incredible group of supporting players possible. In the 1930's, Frank Capra was the biggest director in Hollywood.

During World War Two, Capra went into the army. A lot of great directors did, to lend their services as documentarists and morale builders. No one raised morale better than Capra, in an incredible series of propaganda films called *Why We Fight*. Twenty minutes long, these are chilling films today.

After the war, Capra was to be less in the public's eye because his themes of love and good neighborliness went out of popularity. His films were still terrific, in fact he made his own favorite in 1946, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

In the 50's he became interested in educational films. He worked with Bell Telephone on such clever films

as *Hemo the Magnificent* and *Our Mr. Sun*, a string of films that is a fore-runner of *Sesame Street*. His last film was *Pocketful of Miracles*. He decided to retire because age began to limit his ability to make quick decisions, the ability he always held as the key to his success. He has not left films altogether because he has written an autobiography which is one of the best portraits of film-making's greatest era, and one of the best manuals on film directing that I have come across.

Through the early part of his life Capra fought his worst enemy, poverty. In the 20s and 30s he had to fight his way into the toughest of industries. He had to fight Harry Cohn. In 1939 he had to fight his government so that *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington* could be released. In

the 40s he fought the Nazis.

In the 70s Capra came to York. Last week he spent three days lecturing on documentaries and all facets of feature-film production to every film student and anyone else interested. With the help of Columbia pictures there were many screenings of his classics climaxing with *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, which got a well-deserved standing ovation for its creator.

It isn't easy to talk to a 'straight from the shoulder' director like Frank Capra. He makes no pretense to intellectualism. He is as honest and tough as the films he made; and just as charming, too.

Anything he does is a tribute to him, and the interest he showed us at York was a fitting personal introduction to the man who, more than anyone, made films for people.

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