

Frank Capra: The Early Collection—The American filmmaker’s most ambitious and honest work

Charles Bogle
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Frank Capra: The Early Collection (2012), a box set presented by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, The Film Foundation and Turner Classic Movies, contains five movies released during American director Frank Capra’s time at Columbia Pictures. All of the movies were released prior to the strict enforcement of the Production Code, which censored morals and politics, and represent perhaps the filmmaker’s most ambitious, honest work.

Capra (1897-1991) was born in Sicily to a fruit grower and his wife. The family emigrated to the US in 1903, eventually settling in Los Angeles. Capra entered the film industry in the mid-1920s primarily as a writer of silent comedies. He worked with Hal Roach, Mack Sennett, Harry Langdon and others. He directed his first feature films, featuring Langdon, in 1926 and 1927. Capra started at Columbia, the studio with which he is most closely identified, in 1928, directing his first (part-)sound film, *The Younger Generation*, with Ricardo Cortez, in 1929.

In four of the five films included in *The Early Collection* box set, Capra was fortunate enough to have or be sufficiently wise in his choice of Barbara Stanwyck as his leading female performer.

The director’s *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), his fourth sound film, offers a fascinating glimpse of the skills that made Capra an actor’s director. He took a risk on starring the 23-year-old Stanwyck, who had up to that point evinced little if any of the gifts that would later lift her to the top of her profession. Capra’s patient and empathetic direction produced an Oscar-worthy performance and helped instill an acting method that Stanwyck would use for the rest of her career. *Ladies of Leisure* features strong supporting performances, and Capra’s collaboration with cinematographer Joseph Walker (who worked on all five of the movies in this collection) proves fruitful. The movie’s conclusion suffers, however, from Capra’s career-long penchant for happy endings even when they were not called for or were actually artistically detrimental.

Born into wealth, artist Jerry Strong (Ralph Graves) rescues call girl Kay Arnold (Stanwyck) from a New York City boat party. She agrees to sit for a portrait at his studio for \$2 an hour. During those sessions they fall in love.

Their love is threatened when Jerry’s mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Strong (George Fawcett and Nance O’Neil), step in to try to convince their son he should instead marry Claire Collins (Juliette Compton), a member of his social set. A plot twist leads, as noted, to a disappointingly traditional, sentimental ending.

Capra handles his young actress with great care. Stanwyck would later claim that “Capra loved actors.” Discovering that her first take

was always her best, Capra did not rehearse Stanwyck with the other actors and used multiple cameras to get her best performance in one shot.

By movie’s end, Stanwyck is capable of carrying off a difficult, emotionally powerful scene: Mrs. Strong visits Kay to tell her that if she and Jerry marry, their class differences would ruin her son’s future. Kay, who has been sitting quietly while the older woman speaks, bursts out, “You [meaning the upper class] always win. The only thing I ever got, the only thing I ever wanted, and I have to give it up.”

Canadian-born Marie Prevost, who would die penniless in 1937, brings a blunt, working class humor to the role of Dot, Kay’s friend and roommate. Her telephone conversations are a delight in themselves. *Rain or Shine* (1930)—the only film in the collection without Stanwyck—brings to the screen several vaudeville-trained character actors doing their best with sometimes interminably lengthy scenes.

After inheriting the Rainey Traveling Circus from her father, Mary Rainey (Joan Peers) faces losing the operation due to unpaid debts. A plot by the ringmaster, Dalton (Alan Roscoe), and the lion tamer, Foltz (Adolph Milar), to take over almost succeeds until circus manager Smiley Johnson (Joe Cook) and Mary’s rich boyfriend, Bud Conway (William Collier, Jr.), save the circus for Mary at the last minute, resulting in an ambiguous ending.

Two of the finer (though now virtually unknown) comedic actors from the vaudeville-silent movie era show their talents in *Rain or Shine*. The gifted Joe Cook brings his perfectly timed non-sequiturs and remarkable abilities (he could juggle, walk a tightrope, play various instruments, tell jokes, etc.) to his characterization of Smiley Johnson. Theater critic Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* once commented, “Next to Leonardo da Vinci, Joe Cook is the most versatile man known to recorded times.”

Popular former Keystone Studios (Sennett) comedienne Louise Fazenda sparkles in her portrayal of Frankie as a wisecracking circus “shimmy girl,” who is not as sexually promiscuous as she seems. However, neither Cook nor Fazenda can save this film, based on a Broadway play.

Evangelical revival meetings, complete with fake miracles, were common during the 1920s and especially during the desperate early years of the Great Depression, but the first movie to depict the fraudulent character of these goings-on was Capra’s *The Miracle Woman* (1931). The movie features a realistic storyline, another superb performance by Stanwyck and further successful collaboration

with cinematographer Walker. The film was inspired by real-life California evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson and Sinclair Lewis's novel *Elmer Gantry* (1927).

Following the death of her minister father, Florence Fallon (Stanwyck), loses respect for his unappreciative congregation and religion in general. Poverty-stricken, she accepts an offer from con man Bob Hornsby (Sam Hardy) to perform phony miracles for money at his evangelical tent meetings, which she does with great success until she becomes despondent over the fakery.

Under Capra's direction, Stanwyck once again conveys a wide range of emotions while remaining in control of her character. In her opening scene, she delivers her father's final sermon, aimed most directly at the church deacon and delivered with a blistering pace and barely controlled anger.

Walker's use of high-angle shots in the scene in which a young blind man considers jumping from a tall building helps bring the audience directly into this terrifying moment.

Capra's *Forbidden* (1932), based on Fanny Hurst's *Back Street* (1931), the first of four film versions of the novel, is a confusing mixture of romantic comedy and drama—but largely due to fine performances, the movie holds this reviewer's attention.

Lulu Smith (Stanwyck), a mousy, repressed librarian, suddenly decides to change her appearance—and behavior—and take a cruise to Havana. On the ship, she meets politician Bob Grover (Adolphe Menjou), who is married, and they begin a 20-year, on-and-off-again adulterous relationship that results in a baby out of wedlock and a life of sacrifices on Lulu's part. Advances by another man, reporter and later editor Al Holland (Ralph Bellamy), complicate her life (and the movie) further.

Romantic comedy prevails in the first two-thirds of *Forbidden* (with emphasis on the comedy), while the final third is a serious, near-tragic drama. Given the superior quality of that last portion, one wishes that Capra had chosen to jettison or at least abbreviate the comic section of the movie.

It was Stanwyck's career-long desire (“demand” is probably more accurate) that the audience reserve judgment on her characters. Her portrayal of Lulu Smith, who lurches from one bad decision to another while managing to retain our empathy, is an early example of Stanwyck's skills. Fortunately, Capra agreed wholeheartedly with the actress's approach.

The remarkable and underrated Bellamy (whose film career spanned some 60 years, from 1931 to 1990) creates a character who combines at times a bizarre sense of humor with a cruel, calculating nature. Menjou is best in the movie's romantic moments.

Capra's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) features an interracial affair against the backdrop of the Chinese civil war of 1925–1927. The director elicits powerful yet subtle performances from Stanwyck as would-be missionary Megan Davis, Nils Asther as Chinese warlord General Yen and Toshia Mori as his concubine.

The movie is flawed by Capra's inability or unwillingness to develop early references to American imperialism's interests and the Chinese Revolution in favor of foregrounding the Stanwyck-Asther relationship.

Megan Davis travels to Singapore to marry her doctor fiancé Bob Striker (Gavin Gordon) and join him in missionary work. Their wedding is postponed when Bob's orphanage is burned down during the revolution and he must get a passport from Nationalist leader General Yen to rescue the surviving orphans.

A rickshaw accident results in Megan becoming the general's

houseguest. She quickly finds herself torn between a physical attraction to Yen (a yen for Yen?) and a repugnance for his brutal, calculating side.

Stanwyck's ability to show a character's multi-sidedness (at the age of 25, no less) is on display in her portrayal of Megan. In one brilliantly conceived scene, shot from behind a mirror, she registers her sudden recognition that attraction to Yen is winning her inner battle by the slightest brightening of her eyes.

In one of the film's early scenes, US diplomats and industrialists ignore the plight of the Chinese, and General Yen's American financial advisor, Jones (Walter Connolly), delivers \$6 million to help fund Yen's Nationalist forces. That is the sum-total of the effort *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* devotes to revealing Washington's real interests in the outcome of the war. For much of the movie, especially the second half, the Chinese civil war is only a distant background.

Capra's pre-Code willingness to tackle “taboo” topics in an often artistically honest manner was never repeated again—not during his years of box office and critical success, with his populist-sentimental comedy-melodramas (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, 1936, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939, and *Meet John Doe*, 1941), which won him three Best Director Academy Awards, and certainly not during his post-World War II decline.

Stricter enforcement of the Code had something to do with this retreat, as did the pressures that increased on him as a successful filmmaker in explosive times.

Capra's modest background gave him certain advantages and insights. His star Stanwyck grew up under even harsher conditions in Brooklyn and said of the director, “He'd been kicked around, maybe not as much [as I had], but he understood it” (quoted in Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*).

His upbringing also provided him with insecurities and petty bourgeois aspirations that could only be assuaged by large-scale success, both financial and critical. His American heroes (Deeds, Smith, Doe) of the 1930s and 1940s, who single-handedly defeat malevolent plutocrats and corrupt politicians (not the capitalist system) supposedly responsible for the Great Depression, fulfilled that purpose.

Capra's outlook made him vulnerable to World War II's call for propaganda films, which the director was happy to answer, and two rounds of House Un-American Activities Committee hearings (Capra named names, but in private sessions with the FBI). In the final decades of his career, he could only produce abysmal, socially empty films such as *A Hole in the Head* (1959) and *Pocketful of Miracles* (1961).

The quality of transfer to disc in *The Early Collection* is excellent, and the collection includes informative commentaries.



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