

The daring young man of the flying trapeze

FABIO TRONCARELLI*

At the end of September 1933, William Saroyan sent to Whit Burnett, director of the “Story Magazine”, a story called: *The daring young man on the flying trapeze*. Against any hope, the story was accepted and published in February 1934: it was a great hit, a very popular and successful text. Whit Burnett was of Irish origin and was a good friend of Edward O’Brien, a writer of Irish origin, born in Boston. O’Brien, in turn, was a friend of another writer of Irish origin born in Boston, Myles Connolly, who worked as a scriptwriter in Hollywood¹. Connolly spoke about Saroyan to a dear friend, the director Frank Capra, who had almost finished shooting a film considered a B-movie. The film was called *It happened one night* and became soon one of the greatest achievements in the history of Hollywood, winning five Oscars.

Capra was Italian and was looking for a personal triumph. When he knew that a young Armenian, son of immigrants like him and miserable like him, had written a story like that, he became almost sick, burned by a furious jealousy.

The worst was that this successful story ended with a suicide and that, for someone like Capra, an emigrant able to be triumphant against all the difficulties, who spent years as a hobo on the trains, this was really too much. So the little Sicilian, the son of Bisacquino, the country of both the ruthless Mafia and the ruthless hunger, had a stroke of genius. He called a group of country singers² and he shot a scene out of the script in which all sang *The daring young man on the flying trapeze*.

The title of the story was in fact the title of a song, an old song inspired by a famous trapeze artist, Jules Léotard, which fascinated everyone, namely women and girls, with its numbers on the trapeze. Saroyan had mentioned this song with bitter irony: America had touched the bottom of the Depression and there was no more place for the lightness and art of an acrobat. There was only place for the death that kills the art and the taste of life. But Capra didn’t share this sad conclusion. And he quoted the song on the trapeze with a different meaning: his film, which would be released simultaneously to the story, the 22 February 1934, was the antidote to the melancholy of the written text.

Capra ordered all to sing aloud, to actors and extras, including reluctant Claudette Colbert, including Clark Gable: to sing with passion, with cheerfulness on the music of the Hillbilly. Result?

* Università della Tuscia.

¹ W. Saroyan, *Starting with a Tree*, in J. Darton, *Writers on Writing*, New York, H. Holt and Times, 2002.

² Silver Screen Magazine, February 1934: photos of the scene.

One of the most memorable scenes of the whole history of cinema. Who is singing? The actors? The extras? No: it's all America that sings. All America of the Roosevelt era, who had a great desire to revenge, which still believed in solidarity inn, in brotherhood, the cheap brotherhood of poor people singing together in a pub.

That song, inserted in the film at the last minute, expressed the very heart of the film: the triumph of the spirit of pioneers, still alive despite the crisis of Wall Street.

The movie was a great success and Hollywood decided immediately to make another movie now titled as the song, which exploited the popularity of Capra. This film was directed by Clyde Bruckman with Walter Brenann and Mary Brian in 1935. But before this Popeye fought with the man who flies on the trapeze who has stolen his fiancée. The short film came out on 16 March 1934, directed by David Fleischer. Needless to say that is wonderful.

The story that I told is not know to anyone, neither in Italy nor in America. I discovered it, studying the life of the extraordinary director Frank Capra. It is quite interesting to understand his psychology. In the end who was Frank Capra? He was a man whose motto could be: never give up, never surrender. He was able to make a film as *It happened one night*, winning five Oscars, without a penny, without the support of the producer, without the players he wanted and without even the music. The song improvised on the set is the only music that is heard in a film that anticipates the modern aspirations to "direct sound".

The public liked very much the movie for this very reason: because it was an unusual Hollywood movie showing an unusual America.

Clark Gable, dragged in the film without his contentment, became a sex symbol because played without a vest, bare-chested, challenging the hypocrisy of his generation, full of grease and of shiny. Claudette Colbert, who hated the script, became famous not for her look but for her legs, her sexy legs exposed to get a ride. No, it was not really the usual America: Capra's country is the realm of cheaters, tricksters, charlatans, swindlers, capricious, bolds. Funny, impulsive, erratic men and women, wonderful interpreters of a Comedy written by Plautus with the help of Pinocchio. Behind them, images of the Depression become visible, worthy of the camera of Dorothea Lange: dusty roads, dark cars, hungry people: men stored on the Greyhounds bound to nothingness; women who wait hours and hours to make a shower; hobos hidden on a train wandering round and round. The film was successful because everyone recognized himself as a citizen of this America, represented in so many words, but also without bitterness. The movie was successful because urged everyone not to despair: not to commit suicide as the protagonist of Saroyan story: to rediscover the spirit of the pioneers, of the emigrants, who does not have to lose more than their chains. To follow his road, seeking his own way: on the road, as Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert did and how, so many years after, writers like Kerouac or actors like Peter Fonda in *Easy rider* will do.

The great history of a nation met with the little history of the individual. Thanks to a song. Thanks to the ambition of the spontaneous "picciotto" of Bisacquino.

And thanks to him Psychoanalysis has something to learn. There is no doubt that Capra was a megalomaniac and a great narcissist. Probably also his reaction against the encouragement to commit suicide of Saroyan was a defence mechanism against his suicide unconscious impulses, which are often the other side of narcissism. The fact remains, however, that Capra is nice and full of energy and that his narcissism has also a positive connotation. To quote André Green, we can say that there is a "narcissism of life" and a "narcissism of death": a pathological narcissism that destroys and a benign narcissism, which helps us to build our life. Only in this case the history of the individual can meet the great history: only when the spirit of the adolescent who never surrenders, catches the aspirations of a society ready to surrender. From this extravagant meeting, as happens in any *coup de foudre*, something unexpected is born: a strange happiness that makes us run on the line without thinking to the hell hole under our feet, like any daring young man flying on the trapeze of life.