

The name above the title

David Beard

The Name Above the Title is Frank Capra's autobiography. (Bantam Books, \$1.95) His story is that of the self-made man. Capra came to fame via the tough route. Born in Sicily, he revealed at an early age the characteristics that are classic in a rags-to-riches story. His family is poor, but tight knit. Action gives power to the character. There is a strong religious affiliation, even superstition in the background. Education is worshipped as a panacea. The self-made man has an acute sense of survival. He ultimately deludes himself that his success is also self-made. His blindness is the cost of survival in the success game. Often it leaves him devoid of depth and lacking a soul. Capra proves to be no exception to these general characteristics.

His story is told in the Capra-style of entertainment. Capra was never strong, nor did he pretend to be, on ideas. The formula in a Capra picture is story, character and action. His book becomes tedious in the latter stages when the Golden Era of Hollywood is over and the Second World War is finished. On the tough route of success the self-made man, in his passion for action, cannot feel the winds of time or chance. The survivor, without him knowing it, is an anachronism. This was Capra's fate, until he wrote his autobiography. He came full circle. He started as a writer. He lived long enough to add to the growing literature on film.

When Capra joined the gag writers on Mack Sennett's staff he was a graduate in engineering with a head full of education, a soul full of hope and his old army jacket. But to shake poverty, to live down social disadvantages a man must believe in something. Capra found belief in Capra. There were others in Hollywood like Capra. Sennett found and believed in Harry Langdon. Capra got his big break with Sennett. He directed Harry Langdon's successes. But Harry was toppled by his admiring critics and Langdon lost himself. Sennett lost both. Harry went on to failure. Frank returned to unemployment. For Sennett, October 1927, was not far away. "Mammy" was just on the horizon. But like all success storied

chance played her part. Columbia's desperation was Capra's luck. Operating on "poverty row" (Sunset and Gower) was one of the most unusual operations in motion pictures. A disaster area ruled by Harry Cohen. Cohen was to become the biggest name in Capra's life. He was also made out of the stuff Capra was made of, but with a vastly different style. Cohen could stand alone in the rat race, but Capra needed a Sennett or a Cohen to protect him and to be his tormentor. Capra functioned best when he had to prove himself to the higher-ups. At Columbia writing was in the past, directing was the future.

King Cohen entered Capra's life, but Cohen could not have known how important Capra would become to him and to Columbia. In dealing with Cohen, Capra kept a saying in mind. "Always have your hat on ready to walk out." Perhaps it is the self-made man's last illusion of independence and freedom to believe he has a choice. Capra may have had his hat on, but Cohen was the smarter man. Even later, after a major falling out, Cohen got Capra back. He knew how to feed Capra's ego as well as his pocket and thus keep him working for Columbia Pictures. Capra observed greater talents than his arrive with smiles and depart with shouts. Walt Disney was one of them. Cohen in his boorish manner tried to make or break his fellows. Others, Cohen believed, had to measure up to his ideas of toughness. Capra could, because he had the right training for survival in the Hollywood jungle. But a new sound would make all the inmates of the wilds a little frightened. Al Jolson produced the sound that went around the world on October 23, 1927. Cohen was cocky but Capra was sure. Capra's background in engineering made Cohen change his tune. It was no longer, "Dago, I'm gonna do you a big favor. I'm gonna offer you a contract; it was "Give me that science crap about sound again will ya Frank?" For the time being Capra flourished under King Cohen.

Success followed upon success. Capra was in that unique position of being the right age at the right time in the right

place. Opportunity seemed to come out to meet him. Such luck did not scare him. Even the two shadowy figures in the background of his success did not bring him to believe that fate could intervene. The lesson of D. W. Griffith and that of Mack Sennett could not bring Capra to doubt that the self-made man is subject to the Fates. A friend warned him, "Wait till you make two flops in a row for Cohen!" "Would the fair haired boy be fired - walk the streets again? Better men had hit the skids." The irony was the Capra's judgment was sharpened by his fear of failure and his obsession with success. When he came to play one of his hunches, **It Happened One Night**, there was a hint that luck might not be in a co-operative mood. The cast was assembled through a series of doubtful chances. Clark Gable had been naughty at M.G.M. and the big boss was punishing him by loaning him out to poverty row. Claudette Colbert was on a month's vacation from Paramount and only accepted the role when her salary was doubled. Myrna Loy, Mirian Hopkins and Connie Bennett had turned the role down. It had to be made in a month. When the picture was finished, everyone was glad to be through with it. But luck had not deserted Capra. It was a big hit at the box-office. It won a number of Academy Awards and became a classic. It gave Columbia the status it craved. Capra followed with other successes, **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington**, **Lost Horizon** and **You Can't Take it with You**. Capra left Cohen after thirteen years. **Mr. Smith . . .** was his last picture for Columbia.

After Columbia Capra formed his own independent company. By now history had a familiar sound. Langdon had moved into his own independent company and failed. Capra's first picture, **Meet John Doe** was not a success and **Arsenic and Old Lace**, although slight and charming, is hardly remembered. When the war came Capra was saved from knowing what fate may have doled out to him. He was drafted while completing **Arsenic**, from independence to the army.

Here the autobiography begins to flag. Capra recounts his meetings and his productions with and for the war chiefs. His story about F.D.R. is dull. For Capra it must have been a great moment, but he cannot write about F.D.R. and bring him to life as he does Cohen or Sennett. After the war and the decline of Hollywood Capra's life reflects the new solutions to the movie colony's problems. Names joined together to form companies. Capra's was called **Liberty Films**. Several

films were made, but what made Capra a great director, the studio system, had passed. But one bright shaft of fireworks lights up the last pages of Capra failing story. The making of his last feature, **A Pocketful of Miracles**.

It was a remake of a story called **Queen for a Day — Apple Annie and Dave the Dude**. All looked possible until Ford insisted on Hope Lang playing a part in the film. The great H. H. had other obligations and pulled out. One of Capra's friends thought of Bette Davis. Ford like the idea of his "old flame". But, when Bette arrived and everyone realized her love affair with Hollywood was over, the going was not smooth. The sparks flew when Ford told an interviewer that he had rescued Bette from oblivion. He was the hero of her comeback. Capra came through well with this description.

She flashed, and sparked, and crackled like an angry live wire thrashing the wind . . . goddamdest

insult . . . that sonofabitch Ford . . . helping ME . . . make a comeback . . . that shitheel . . . wouldn't let him help me out of a SEWER . . . Etc.

His description has caught her as no camera could — as herself. Miracles did not live up to the raves the previews gave it. Nor was it a comeback for Bette Davis. In the minds of her fans she could never be replaced — in fact she had never left. She was Queen Forever.

It was the end for Capra. Silence and exile followed. The ballsey little guy was finished . . . or so it seemed. He had played the success game and learned the rules as he went along. For the self-made man there is nothing worse than inaction. Capra had to learn to grow old gracefully. Time teaches that life is the master not success. His retirement has brought him a just reward — the great success of his truly entertaining autobiography of character and action — **The Name Above the Title**.

mountain. Rodin died an incredibly rich man, everybody robbing him, everybody exploiting his illustrious name. No words to describe him — incredibly fantastic. He was so much into his own works, that practically nothing else existed around him. This is where I got the idea that everything that came to him got trapped in his magnetism. He was like a giant star; floating things get trapped and circle around him.

The film itself isn't structured in a line-like thing, with a beginning, a middle and an end. It's structured in a circle, or a life-cycle. The cycle is such that there is a central character which is a circle itself. You could call Rodin the central planet with moons around it. These little moons orbiting the central theme give us that cycle from the very beginning of the time of Rodin to the end of Rodin's time.

HOW LONG IS THE FILM?

"It's about half an hour, but one could do a seven hour film on Rodin and it wouldn't be enough. I'd love to, of course, but it's economically and also timewise unfeasible. It's better to merely introduce Rodin and let the film arouse curiosity in those watching. It was a similar idea when I did the Moore film. The fascination about that film was, if anything, its simplicity. You try to simplify everything, into concepts, so that you know more about Moore, or Rodin, in twenty minutes than you would in a nine hour show. So I can't come on as a film-maker with all kinds of super symbolic things. The amount of material was immense; you practically start crying

when you're cutting shots out. I tried to avoid in this film to come on with all the facts and things at once, which would overpower everyone and put them to sleep. You have to go about it gently, and as simply as possible."

DID YOU USE MUSIC?

"I haven't used music in that sense. Instead, I've used clock chimes, old ones, with different tonal qualities. It begins in the early stages of spring, or the early stages of Rodin's life, with a quick, high sounding chime, and follows through from there. These chimes can be distorted so that it will sound a bit like music, just playing gently in the background though. If you examine the layers of importance to a film, music is the least important. It can't outdo anything else which is more important, like the man's own voice. The narration is done mostly in Rodin's words.

DO YOU DO A LOT OF ART FILMS?

"This is my second. I think I've done enough in art. There are so many other things to talk about. I'm not searching for something. We all have different things to talk about. It's a problem in film-making in our country. They pick a topic which should be a commercial winner — a love story or another "who-dunnit". But you've got to want to say something.

They say celluloid is a dead material, unlike stage where live people communicate to the audience. If an actor drops his

**SUBSCRIBE NOW TO
CINEMA CANADA!!**

\$5.00 A YEAR \$6.50 IN U.S.
IN CANADA & OTHER COUNTRIES

(please print)

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....PROV.....

SEND CHEQUE OR MONEY ORDER
TO:
CINEMA CANADA,
72 ISABELLA ST., No.8,
TORONTO 5, ONTARIO

SUPPORT CINEMA CANADA!

pants by accident, it is a live happening. Celluloid isn't — it is a plastic material. But it does come through to people, but only if someone has this inner dynamic life, this strong conviction for whatever the film is saying, in the first place. In this way, life is installed in this celluloid material called film.

CINEMA CANADA NEEDS TO BE FED INFORMATION

This is an urgent appeal to production companies, independent producers, directors, cameramen, independent film-makers, film schools, government film agencies, film co-ops, motion picture distributors, studio publicity departments, film labs, TV stations, experimental film-makers, film students, people dabbling in Super 8mm, video freaks, community organizations working with film, and any and all interested persons:

PLEASE SEND UP TO DATE INFORMATION ON RECENT AND CURRENT PROJECTS, PROPERTIES, PROJECTIONS OR PRINTING METHODS, ON ANYTHING HAVING TO DO WITH FILM IN A GENERAL OR SPECIFIC WAY!

We just love getting mail! Send feedback and new stuff to: CINEMA CANADA, 6 Washington Ave., Toronto, Ontario. (If rich, call (416) 924-5953 or 924-9968).