Genre Films: OLLI: Spring 2021: week 2: Screwball Comedy

history of screwball comedy:
1st true screwball comedy: IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT: 1934: Frank Capra
popularity lasted into 1940s: but elements of genre persist in modern films
during Great Depression: great demand for films with strong social class critique:
also wanted: hopeful, escapist-oriented themes
screwball format: arose largely because major film studios wanted to avoid censorship:
1934: Production Code (Hays Code) became strictly enforced: in response:
studios: in order to incorporate prohibited risqué elements into their films' stories:
resorted to handling these elements in covert way:
verbal sparring between sexes served as stand-in for physical, sexual tension:
"a sex comedy without the sex" (Andrew Sarris)

characteristics of screwball comedy:
central romantic story: plotlines involving courtship & marriage:
   couple is opposites: idle rich socialite / hard-working guy:
      seems mismatched: even hostile toward each other at 1st
      eventually: they overcome their differences
female protagonist: self-confident: often stubborn
female dominates relationship with male: his masculinity challenged
female & male engage in humorous battle of the sexes
sometimes: final romantic union: planned by woman from outset:
   man doesn't know at all: BRINGING UP BABY
comedies of class: often: depict social classes in conflict
   rich vs. poor: but: reverse class snobbery: poor know best
upper-class: tend to be shown as idle & pampered:
   have difficulty getting around in real world: IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT
   theory: this portrayal of upper-class caused by Great Depression:
   poor audiences wanted rich to be taught lesson in humanity
lower-class: can pass themselves off as upper-class: no problem: LADY EVE
farcical situations: mistaken identities / secrets / male characters crossdressing:
   BRINGING UP BABY: couple must take care of pet leopard
escapist themes: pictures offered kind of cultural escape valve:
   safe place to explore serious issues of class:
   within framework both comedic & non-threatening
fast-paced repartee: sharp, witty script / dialog: with overlapping delivery:
   HIS GIRL FRIDAY / YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU
   combined with elements of slapstick: Fonda's pratfalls in THE LADY EVE
1st-rate supporting actors
screwball variations (sub-sub-genres):
comedy of remarriage: characters divorce & then remarry one another:
THE AWFUL TRUTH / THE PHILADELPHIA STORY / MR. & MRS. SMITH
MY FAVORITE WIFE / THE PALM BEACH STORY: loosening morality re: divorce?
heirs & heiresses: young, attractive, spoiled, very rich: mostly: woman has all the money:
IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT / HOLIDAY / BRINGING UP BABY: but not all are rich:
working-class screwballs: working stiffs: off-beat characters: hold variety of jobs:
Ginger Rogers: department store clerk: BACHELOR MOTHER
Don Ameche: cab driver: MIDNIGHT
Claudette Colbert: photographer: NO TIME FOR LOVE
Cinderellas: fairy godmother brings her all she could want:
Jean Arthur: fur coat lands on her riding in open-top bus: EASY LIVING
"Cinderella": not always woman: sometimes man:
Gary Cooper: inherits $20 million: MR. DEEDS GOES TO TOWN
show business screwballs: show business used as backdrop for screwball antics:
mad Broadway producer John Barrymore tortures protégé Carole Lombard:
TWENTIETH CENTURY
playwright J. Stewart marries stage actress R. Russell: NO TIME FOR COMEDY
screwball literati: takes place in world of journalism: before radio or TV: newspapers:
THE FRONT PAGE (1931): precursor: satire of political corruption
HIS GIRL FRIDAY (1940): remake of FRONT PAGE:
newspaper story turned into battle of sexes
IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT: journalist helps runaway bride
NOTHING SACRED: satire on press & its gullible readers
THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER: Monte Wooley as acerbic critic
screwball comedy-mysteries: comedy mixed with murder & mayhem:
screwball sleuths: well-dressed, well-spoken, well-heeled:
THE THIN MAN: William Powell & Myrna Loy play Nick & Nora Charles
THE EX-MRS. BRADFORD: Powell & Jean Arthur involved with murder
THE MAD MISS MANTON: B. Stanwyck as zany socialite who finds corpse
THE WHOLE TOWN'S TALKING: Edward G. Robinson as mild-mannered clerk who resembles notorious gangster
screwball families: are these families screwy or normal? what's "normal," anyway?
MY MAN GODFREY: William Powell as butler in chaotic home of rich family
YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU: Lionel Barrymore as "Grandpa":
he presides over family that doesn't pay taxes, sets off fireworks, etc.
RUGGLES OF RED GAP:
butler Charles Laughton goes West with nouveau riche American couple
ARSENIC AND OLD LACE: Cary Grant's family is peppered with murderers
screwball goes to war: after Pearl Harbor: Hollywood geared up for war effort:
THE MAJOR AND THE MINOR:
Ginger Rogers poses as young girl & ends up at boys' military academy
THE MORE THE MERRIER:
Jean Arthur endures wartime housing shortage in Washington DC
CHRISTMAS IN CONNECTICUT:
Barbara Stanwyck: housekeeping magazine writer: can't boil water:
must act as hostess to returning war hero Dennis Morgan
HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO: sharp satire from Preston Sturges:
Eddie Bracken as rejected Marine who becomes fake war hero
THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK:
Betty Hutton wakes up pregnant after party at military base