

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

OCTOBER 3, 2001 (IV:5): SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS 1942

PRESTON STURGES (29 August 1898, Chicago—6 August 1959, New York, heart attack) is the first Hollywood director to get the double credit, "written and directed by." His only Oscar, in fact, was for the screenplay of *The Great McGinty* 1941. (He received best screenplay nominations for *Hail the Conquering Hero* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, both in 1944. He split the vote with himself and the award went to Lamar Trotti for *Wilson*, a film no one has heard of since. Some of his other films were *The French they Are a Funny Race* 1955, *The Beautiful*

Blonde from Bashful Bend 1949, *Unfaithfully Yours* 1948, *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* 1947, *The Great Moment* 1944, *The Palm Beach Story* 1942, *The Lady Eve* 1941, *Christmas in July* 1940, and *The Great McGinty* 1940. The five films in bold and *Sullivan's Travels* are considered his masterpieces. In 1919 Sturges invented kissproof lipstick.

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS (1942) Paramount, 90 minutes

Joel McCrea...John L. Sullivan	Jan Buckingham...Mrs. Sullivan
Veronica Lake...The Girl	Robert Winkler...Bud
Robert Warwick ...Mr. Lebrand	Chick Collins...Capital
William Demarest...Mr. Jones	Jimmie Dundee...Labor
Franklin Pangborn...Mr. Casalsis	Roscoe Ates...Counterman
Porter Hall...Mr. Hadrian	Jess Lee Brooks...Preacher
Byron Foulger...Mr. Valdelle	Edgar Dearing...Motorcycle cop
Margaret Hayes...Secretary	Elsa Lanchester...Bit Part
Robert Greig...Sullivan's Butler	Perc Launders...Yard Bull
Eric Blore...Sullivan's Valet	Preston Sturges...Studio Director
Torben Meyer...The Doctor	
Victor Potel...Cameraman	Written and Directed by Preston Sturges
Richard Webb...Radio Man	
Charles R. Moore...Chef	
Almira Sessions...Ursula	Produced by Paul Jones
Esther Howard...Miz Zeffie	Cinematography by John F. Seitz
Frank Moran ...Tough Chauffeur	Film Editing by Stuart Gilmore
Georges Renavent...Old Tramp	Art Direction Hans Dreier
Harry Rosenthal... Trombenick	Costume Design by Edith Head
Al Bridge...The Mister	Makeup Wally Westmore
Jimmy Conlin...Trusty	National Film Registry 1990

JOEL MCCREA (5 November 1905, South Pasadena, California—20 October 1990, Woodland Hills, California, pulmonary complications) appeared in nearly 100 films between *The Fair Co-ed* 1927 and *Mustang Country* 1976. After his appearance in *Buffalo Bill* 1944, he did mostly westerns. Some of his other films are *Ride the High Country* 1962, *The Oklahoman* 1957, *The Outriders* 1950, *Four Faces West* 1948, *The Virginian* 1946, *The Palm Beach Story* 1942, *Foreign Correspondent* 1940, *Espionage Agent* 1939, *Union Pacific* 1939, *Three Blind Mice* 1938, *Wells Fargo* 1937, *Come and Get*

It 1936, *Barbary Coast* 1935, *The Most Dangerous Game* 1932, *The Lost Squadron* 1932, *Kept Husbands* 1931, and *So This Is College* 1929.

VERONICA LAKE (Constance Frances Marie Ockleman, 14 November 1919, Brooklyn—7 July 1973, Burlington, Vermont, hepatitis) appeared in 30 films, 5 of them bit parts, and the last of them the eminently forgettable *Flesh Feast* 1970 she was also executive producer. Some of the others: *Slattery's Hurricane* 1949, *Saigon* 1948, *Ramrod* 1947, *The Blue Dahlia* 1946, *Miss Susie Slagle's* 1946, *Duffy's Tavern* 1945, *Hold That Blonde* 1945, *The Hour Before the Dawn* 1944, *So Proudly We Hail!* 1943, *The Glass Key* 1942, and *This Gun for Hire* 1942.

JOHN F. SEITZ (23 June 1892, Chicago—27 February 1979, Woodland Hills, California) shot about 160 films, beginning with *The Ranger of Lonesome Gulch* 1916 and ending with *Island of Lost Women* 1959. He was nominated for six Academy Awards: *Rogue Cop* 1954, *When Worlds Collide* 1951, *Sunset Blvd.* 1950, *The Lost Weekend* 1945, *Double Indemnity* 1944, *Five Graves to Cairo* 1943, and *The Divine Lady* 1929. Some of his other films were *Botany Bay* 1953, *Captain Carey, U.S.A.* 1950, *The Great Gatsby* 1949, *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* 1948, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* 1944, *Hail the Conquering Hero* 1944, *This Gun for Hire* 1942, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 1939, *The Littlest Rebel* 1935, *The Prisoner of Zenda* 1922 and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* 1921. You perhaps noticed several Alan Ladd films in that list: Seitz shot 23 of Ladd's 99 films—a curious fact of probably no significance whatsoever.

STUART GILMORE (1908, Tombstone, Arizona—19 November 1971, Los Angeles) edited all six of Sturges' great films. He also edited *The Andromeda Strain* 1971, *Airport* 1970, *Sweet Charity* 1969, *Hawaii* 1966, *The World of Henry Orient* 1964, *Hatari!* 1962, *The Alamo* 1960, *Journey to the Center of the Earth* 1959, *The Conqueror* 1956. He directed 5 films, among them the 1946 version of *The Virginian*.

ANTS IN HIS PANTS (*Sight & Sound* May 2000)

Light-hearted irreverence was Preston Sturges' forte but his comedies also have a serious edge. Philip Kemp recalls them below while comedy directors Terry Jones, Baz Luhrmann, Clare Kilner and Peter Farrelly offer tribute

For four years from 1940 to 1944, Preston Sturges exploded over Hollywood like a fireworks display. In that short period he wrote and directed for Paramount seven pungently exuberant comedies, and tossed in a biopic as makeweight. The first of the writer-directors, he pioneered the way for John Huston, Billy Wilder and a host of others. Then, only in his mid 40s and seemingly at the height of his powers, he abruptly fizzled, sputtered and plummeted to earth. Over the next 15 years he made just four more films, in which his erstwhile brilliance flared up only fitfully, before dying bankrupt and forgotten in that graveyard of burnt-out wits, New York's Algonquin Hotel.

It's an extravagant, even barely plausible trajectory, and one that might well have come from one of Sturges' own films. But then, Sturges' life and his films were constantly leaking into each other and few writers about him have been able to resist tracing the cross-connections. The reviews of James Agee, one of Sturges' earliest admirers, tended to talk less about the films than (as Penelope Houston put it) to "subject the film-maker to a curious brand of sustained psychoanalysis." Subsequent critics have frequently followed suit.

The temptation is understandable. The son of a culture-deranged mother who dragged him round every museum and art gallery in Europe and sent him to school in a frilly Greek tunic; an engineer, songwriter, tirelessly eccentric inventor and failed restaurant proprietor; a flamboyant socialite, four times married - few lives offer such rich pickings. But attempts to get a fix on Sturges the man often stem from the near impossibility of pinning down the films. His comedies - or at least the great run of seven he produced in the glory years - lurch breathlessly in every direction, at once sophisticated and raucous, urbane and philistine, careering headlong through slapstick, satire, farce, elegant verbal wit and shameless sentimentality with unstoppable momentum and not the least care for incongruity. Had his upbringing not instilled in him a fixed loathing of culture, Sturges might have quoted Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

Sturges has sometimes been pigeonholed as a satirist, and he certainly relished taking potshots at most of American society's sacred cows. In his first film as director, *The Great McGinty* (1940), it is proposed that corruption isn't a disease of the political system, but the very fuel on which it runs. "They're always talkin' about graft," says a character, "but they forget if it wasn't for graft, you'd get a very low type of people in politics - men without ambition - jellyfish." The film offers a parody of Horatio Alger-ish inspirational parables. The hero is a bum offered \$2 for his vote. Seeing his chance, he sells it 37 times and through this laudable show of initiative rises to be governor of the state. He's brought down not by righteous exposure but through an unwonted moment of honesty.

Likewise in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1943) fornication, illegitimacy and bigamy can be quietly overlooked when a girl glorifies her country by giving birth to sextuplets. ("Hitler Demands Recount" reads a briefly glimpsed headline.) Patriotism comes in for a further drubbing in *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944) in which a smalltown booby, rejected by the marines for hay fever, is hailed by his duped townsfolk as a returning war hero and is elected mayor. As for "Topic A", as Sturges liked to call sex: energy and ingenuity excuse pretty well anything, especially on the part of attractive young women. The heroines of *The Lady Eve* (1941) and *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) are both out-and-out gold-diggers pursuing rich men for the most mercenary motives. Both end up with the men they want and the cash.

But in all these cases the cross-currents of comic energy swirling through the films deflect any sustained satirical thrust. In *Conquering Hero* the hero is greeted at the railroad station by four brass bands all playing different tunes; it's an apt metaphor for Sturges' tumultuous brand of comedy. *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), which tilts at Hollywood, is often reckoned to be nearest to an expression of Sturges' own beliefs, but it's not easy to tell just who is being satirised or for what: the studio bosses, demanding another mindless trifle (*Ants in Your Pants* of 1941); the director Sullivan, wanting to make a socially significant movie "with a little sex in it" (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*); or the condescension of the rich trying a little social slumming for research purposes? At the end, having seen chain-gang convicts distracted from their misery by a Disney cartoon, Sullivan concludes: "There's a lot to be said for making people laugh... It isn't much but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan." Viewed as a credo, it's more than a touch glib; but given Sturges' love of self-cancelling paradox we should probably be wary of taking it at face value.

Satire, in any case, requires an edge of genuine scorn if not outright venom, and Sturges is usually having too much fun with his characters' antics to get round to disliking them. The rich are mocked, but good-humouredly. Henry Fonda's near-catatonic beer-fortune heir and his overgrown baby of a father (Eugene Pallette) in *The Lady Eve* are pathetic, incapable creatures, hamstrung by their wealth and all the better for being jolted by some silky female chicanery. The same goes for Rudy Vallee's emotionally stunted millionaire in *The Palm Beach Story*, while Sturges regards with unconcealed delight the bunch of elderly moneyed reprobates in the same film who call themselves the Ale and Quail Club and rampage viewhallooing through Pullman cars with dog and gun. To borrow a phrase from *Arsenic and Old Lace*, eccentricity doesn't run in Sturges' films, it gallops.

The prevailing mode in Sturgesian comedy - not that anything is allowed to prevail for long - is less satire than burlesque, not least for the stock company of gargoylish character actors who infest his films, grimacing in exasperation or alarm. Franklin Pangborn, jowls wobbling in prim outrage; Raymond Walburn, with his boot-button eyes and caterpillar moustache; Robert Greig, the quintessence of butlerly hauteur; and Sturges' favourite of all, the irascible William Demarest, primed to explode at any second - these and their like expostulate their way through the hubbub, usually tagged with absurd mittel-Europeanish names. They work best when serving as chorus to straight actors in the leads, a garish backdrop to the subtler comic talents of Barbara Stanwyck or Joel McCrea; less well when, as Sturges increasingly came to prefer, the leads are also cast for caricature. Agee considered Sturges "the smartest man for casting in Hollywood", a judgement belied by the director's preference for the charmless mugging of Eddie Bracken and Betty Hutton over McCrea, Stanwyck, Henry Fonda or Claudette Colbert.

In the 30s, before he became a director, Sturges scripted one of the wittiest screwball comedies, *Easy Living* (1937) for Mitchell Leisen. His own style of comedy unmistakably developed - or perhaps erupted - out of the classic screwball conventions, but laced with elements of silent-movie pratfall and overwound to his own breakneck pace. One of his loopy inventions was for "a device for making water flow uphill", and there's something of that desperate Sisyphian contrivance about his movies: the contraption rackets along, high on its own velocity, somehow managing not quite to trip over its own manic contortions. Yet now and then Sturges will suddenly apply the brakes to savour a morsel of near-baroque eloquence from an incongruous source. A barman, faced with a first-time-ever drinker, responds, "Sir, you arouse the artist in me"; in *Sullivan's Travels* Joel McCrea, preparing for his down-and-out safari, is warned by his butler: "Poverty is not the lack of anything, but a positive plague, virulent in itself, contagious as cholera... It is to be stayed away from, even for the purposes of study. It is to be shunned."

It's for these unexpected moments of solemnity, even of poetry, that Sturges deserves to be treasured as much as for the high-octane fizz and riot of his careening humour. His movies, for all their neurotic overspill, lastingly loosened the stays of filmed comedy; after him, anything went. He was too sui generis, too flailingly inconsistent, to attract disciples, and almost certainly wouldn't have wanted them. But every film-maker who has set out to push the envelope of comedy, from Frank Tashlin to Todd Solondz and the Coen Brothers, owes him a debt.

Terry Jones Co-director of 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail' and 'The Life of Brian', director of 'Personal Services'

It was my brother who introduced me to Preston Sturges when we were in our early teens. We went to see *The Palm Beach Story* and from the opening titles I was hooked. *The Palm Beach Story* remains one of my all-time favourite films, but *Hail the Conquering Hero* is perhaps more perfect. It has a classic storyline which appears simple and seamless.

Woodrow (played by Eddie Bracken) has been set on becoming a marine like his hero father since childhood. However, he is discharged on account of his chronic hay fever. He spends a year working in a shipyard while pretending in letters to his mother he's fighting with the marines. On his way home he runs into a group of marines who - against his wishes - arrange for him to return dressed in one of their uniforms. Unfortunately the entire town turns up to give Woodrow a hero's welcome with four marching bands. "They got four bands," says one of the marines. "That don't look good with only one medal." Before Woodrow can protest he's dressed in a corporal's uniform with a whole raft of medals. And events snowball from there on.

There's not a dud scene or a spare moment. It's like a wonderful piece of clockwork - all the scene has been set, the back stories told, the characters established while Woodrow is on the train home. Once he steps off it, the rapid series of events toboggan towards their climax with wondrous momentum. The tightness of the story stands in contrast with the delirious profusion of characters, each firmly established and each essential to the story, stirred into the action with reckless abandon.

As in all Sturges' films, the dialogue is sharp, fast, accurate and funny. Written in 1943 and completed in 1944 during the height of World War II, *Conquering Hero* had to contend with censorship and meet the patriotic aspirations of the government and the public. It does this while remaining effortlessly wry and subversive, and profoundly sceptical about love, politics and the celebration of heroism itself.

Its genesis was far from effortless. Sturges kept refining the story then found himself falling foul of the studio system. The first two previews brought a mixed audience response, whereupon Paramount chief of production Buddy DeSylva decided to recut the film. Sturges' contract ran out at that point and he was forced to stand by

helpless as his film was taken away from him. But the preview of the new version proved so disastrous Paramount allowed Sturges back to recut the film again, reshoot some scenes and shoot a new ending. In the end the film was released to great critical acclaim, though only modest commercial success.

Preston Sturges made it look simple, but then that was his genius.

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Clare Kilner Director of 'Janice Beard 45 wpm', released on 5 May

It was a dreary Saturday afternoon and I was meant to be working on my next treatment. Then the opening credits of Sullivan's Travels danced across the television screen - this could definitely be classified as work! I was at film school deciding whether to make a comedy or a drama for my graduation film. *Sullivan's Travels* had a huge influence on my decision - it freed me from the British sensibility that often considers comedy to be less important than gritty drama.

Sullivan's Travels is a masterpiece. The script is intelligent and funny and the characters are beautifully drawn yet quirkily flawed. Sturges poses incisive political questions about the middle classes and their attitude to social deprivation. ...

Eventually he's sentenced to years of hard labour on a chain gang. A church in a nearby village invites the prisoners to see a film. The projector whirs and all Sullivan can hear is laughter as he watches Mickey Mouse jump around on the screen. He sees the faces of the criminals as they escape their harsh reality and realises how valuable laughter is, that it can bring people together, enable us to see life from a different perspective and lift worries from the soul. He gives in and is soon roaring with laughter. This moment gets me every time: as they start laughing, the tears start rolling down my cheeks. The more they laugh, the more I cry.

It's an incredible moment in a film that's entertaining from beginning to end. Sturges makes his point about the futility of middle-class guilt fuelling self-indulgent films under the guise of worthiness. I did make my graduation film a comedy. On presenting the not-yet-dubbed print to the examiners, it was pronounced not remotely amusing. My tutors commiserated - "It looks beautiful... Comedy is always risky" - I was inconsolable. Then when we screened our graduation films, I decided to grin and bear it. The lights went down, the credits started... silence... a little chuckle, then another and another, the laughter grew and grew. This was my *Sullivan's Travels* moment.

Baz Luhrmann Director of 'Strictly Ballroom' and 'William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet'

I've always been fascinated by Sturges' films and by him as a person. What I really relish is the way he strikes a balance between high tragedy and comedy, making the transition in as little as a single gesture. I've tried to achieve the same effect in *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romeo + Juliet*.

It's a feat he pulls off effortlessly in *Sullivan's Travels*, where he starts in a physical madcap style, with people following a highly paid film director who goes out on the road to discover "real life". Then midway through the film, when it's still just on the edge of screwball comedy, Sullivan ends up in prison and the tone goes very dark. Then one night the prisoners go to see a Disney cartoon and the laughter frees them and the film makes the shift again. So the character has made a journey during which he recognises that the value of laughter is the same as the value of tears.

I've taken from Sturges and Lubitsch a way of creating a heightened audience-participation style. I call it "contract playing": you sign a contract with the audience in which they agree to participate in your film. Naturalistic film-making puts the audience to sleep; in the two films I've made the idea is to make them wake up and participate. In the film I'm making at the moment, *Moulin Rouge*, I hope to take contract playing to its furthest development, and *Sullivan's Travels* is very much on my mind. It's one of my all-time favourite films, which is ironic considering the way my life has gone. I feel a bit like Sullivan with the studio people trailing behind me

Preston Sturges's family operates the best Sturges web site (they even answer mail): <http://www.prestonsturges.com/main.html>. It's got a good biographical note and filmography, links to other sites, a bibliography (all of his scripts are in print, many of them edited by UB professor Brian Henderson).

Join us next week, Tuesday, October 9, for Billy Wilder's **Sunset Boulevard**. "All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my closeup," says Gloria Swanson as faded film star Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard's* unforgettable final scene. "This movie," wrote critic Roger Ebert, "cuts to the bone." It's a great film noir about Hollywood insiders

and outsiders, starring William Holden as a writer hoping to make it and Eric von Stroheim as an old-time director who has lost nearly everything. The film received eleven Oscar nominations and three Academy Awards and was selected for the National Film Registry.

If you can't wait until Tuesday for another great film, come down to MAFAC tomorrow at 3:00 for this week's presentation in the MAFAC Sunday Classics series, Brigitte Bardot in the restored version of Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963). For a complete schedule with descriptions of each film visit <http://www.sundayclassics.com>.

Email Diane engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu email Bruce bjackson@buffalo.edu visit our website www.buffalofilmseminars.com