



Written and Directed by Preston Sturges
Produced by Paul Jones
Cinematography by John F. Seitz
Film Editing by Stuart Gilmore
Art Direction Hans Dreier
Costume Design by Edith Head
Makeup Wally Westmore

Selected for the **National Film Registry 1990**

Joel McCrea...John L. Sullivan
Veronica Lake...The Girl
Robert Warwick ...Mr. Lebrand
William Demarest...Mr. Jones
Franklin Pangborn...Mr. Casals
Porter Hall...Mr. Hadrian
Byron Foulger...Mr. Valdelle
Margaret Hayes...Secretary
Robert Greig...Sullivan's Butler
Eric Blore...Sullivan's Valet
Torben Meyer...The Doctor
Victor Potel...Cameraman
Richard Webb...Radio Man
Charles R. Moore...Chef Almira Sessions...
Ursula Esther Howard...Miz Zeffie
Frank Moran ...Tough Chauffeur
Georges Renavent...Old Tramp
Harry Rosenthal... Trombenick
Al Bridge...The Mister
Jimmy Conlin...Trusty
Jan Buckingham...Mrs. Sullivan
Elsa Lanchester...Bit Part
Preston Sturges...Studio Director

PRESTON STURGES (29 August 1898, Chicago—6 August 1959, New York, heart attack) has 45 writing and 15 directing credits. He 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.

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 Stagle'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*.



Preston Sturges from *World Film Directors Volume One*. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Company NY 1987

Sturges, (Edmund) Preston (August 29, 1898–August 6, 1959), American film director, scenarist, and dramatist, was born in Chicago, the son of Edmund Biden, a traveling salesman, and his wife, Mary Desti. After a year of marriage Desti left her husband and went off with her infant son to study music in Paris. There she met and began her long friendship with the dancer Isadora Duncan. Short of money, she returned to Chicago, divorced Biden, and married Solomon Sturges, a wealthy broker who adopted her son in 1902.

Preston Sturges idolized his stepfather, a champion cyclist, amateur baseball player, and self-made man who gave the boy

what little stability and security his extraordinary childhood provided. Mary Desti, on the other hand, found her husband almost intolerably vulgar. For six months of every year, like some cosmopolitan Persephone, she escaped from him and Chicago to Isadora and *vie bohème* in Paris. She took her son with her, dressing him in Greek tunics, enrolling him in experimental schools, and immersing him Shakespeare, Molière, Greek drama, music, and museums. “They did everything they could to make me an artist. I wanted to be a good businessman like my father.”

When Preston Sturges was eleven this hopeless marriage came to an end. The boy was now installed all year round in French schools while his mother and Isadora toured Europe. In due course Mary Desti married Vely Bey, son of a Turkish court physician whose preparations for the beautification of the harem they began to market through a cosmetics company, Maison Desti, with branches in France and New York. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Preston Sturges was shipped back to the United States (by this time speaking English with a French accent). His mother, traveling again with Isadora, had turned Maison Desti over to Vely, in whose hands it was foundering. Seeing a chance to prove himself a businessman, Sturges, still in his teens, took charge. Living in great poverty in New York, he worked day and night to solicit famous customers and to market the new products he himself developed (including a “kiss-proof” lipstick), soon putting the business on its feet again. But the stock market was the arena in which he really wanted to succeed, and while continuing to direct Maison Desti he took a job as a runner with a New York brokerage house at seven dollars a week.

His plans were thwarted in 1917 by America's entry into the war. Sturges, then nineteen, tried to enlist in the air service but was turned down because of a minor sight defect. His mother, aggrieved by this rejection, returned from Europe and pulled strings until he was accepted. Having served out stateside what remained of the war, Sturges returned to Maison Desti. The business was once more in trouble, however, and this time even Sturges' energy and ingenuity couldn't save it. At this point he made the first of his four marriages, to an heiress named Estelle de Wolfe Mudge. For a time he settled down in the country and devoted himself to developing a variety of inventions, including a ticker tape machine and a small automobile with the engine in the rear. Sturges remained an amateur inventor all his life, but none of the devices he designed in the postwar years found a market and he seems for a while to have lost all his energy and ambition. His marriage broke up and in December 1927 he became desperately ill with acute appendicitis.

Sturges survived, but this encounter with death changed him—seems, indeed, to have been a “rebirth” like those experienced by characters in several of his films. For the moment he put aside his hopes of a business career and turned to the world that his mother had tried so hard to prepare him for, the theatre. His first play, *The Guinea Pig* (1929), made no great stir. He followed it with another comedy, written in two weeks, called *Strictly Dishonorable* (1929). It was immediately accepted and produced on Broadway by Antoinette Perry with immense success. It concerns a naive American girl choosing between her stuffy fiancé and a sophisticated European (and preferring the latter). This hit, which brought Sturges instant celebrity, was followed by two failures: the marital drama *Recapture* (1920) and the operetta *The Well of Romance* (1930), for which he wrote the lyrics as well as the dialogue. Sturges, who often invested in his own productions, lost a good deal of money on these, and to recoup, wrote his first screenplays.

The Big Pond and *Fast and Loose*, both filmed by Paramount in 1930, were play adaptations, and both credited Sturges only as author of the dialogue. In fact, the contributions of the so-called scenarists seem to have been slight, and both films follow Sturges' original scripts very closely. *The Big Pond*, for example, seems in retrospect a highly characteristic work in its love-triangle theme, its shameless reliance on the intervention of fate, its introduction of a tycoon character, and its delight in puns and verbal misunderstandings. Sturges' own play, *Strictly Dishonorable*, was filmed at Universal in 1931 (the adaptation being written by Gladys Lehmann) and Sturges then sold his 1932 play, *Child of Manhattan*, to Columbia for \$40,000. After that, to quote his biographer James Ursini, he "moved to where the money and the creative opportunity lay—Hollywood."

Sturges' first big success as a scenarist was *The Power and the Glory* (Fox, 1933), an original story about a railroad tycoon, Tom Garner, who wins power and wealth at the cost of emotional tragedy. The film employs an original and interesting technique that the studio dubbed "narratage," the story being told in a complex, nonchronological series of flashbacks purporting to be the recollections of a narrator whose voice, on occasion, is synchronized to the characters we see speaking on the screen. Directed by William K. Howard and moodily photographed by James Wong Howe, it provided a meaty part for Spencer Tracy and has been seen as a precursor, in some respects, of *Citizen Kane*.

After working on several scripts that were subsequently much revised by others, or abandoned, Sturges wrote *The Good Fairy* (Universal, 1935), adapted from Molnar's cynical comedy (and considerably sentimentalized in the process). Sturges was already recognized as one of Hollywood's more civilized and cosmopolitan writers, and on that account was often assigned to adapt foreign classics. His next script, however, was an original one and very much in the American grain, *Diamond Jim* (Universal, 1935). Another study of the rise and fall of a tycoon, it gave Edward Arnold one of his richest and most sympathetic roles. There is a good deal of Solomon Sturges in his stepson's portrait of Diamond Jim Brady, as there is in all the self-made captains of industry he drew.

Sturges contributed to several other movies during the mid-thirties, though how much is not clear. He also wrote the Mitchell Leisen comedy *Easy Living* (Paramount, 1937), adapted Marcel Pagnol's "Marseilles Trilogy" as *Port of Seven Seas* (MGM, 1938), and followed it with another adaptation called *If I Were King* (Paramount, 1938) derived from a play about François Villon. After *Never Say Die* (Paramount 1939), a Bob Hope vehicle somewhat mauled by Hope's regular gag writers, came another Leisen comedy, *Remember the Night* (Paramount, 1940), a celebration of small-town America.

Ambitious as he was, Sturges had long been eager to direct the films he wrote, and had learned all he could by watching others. In 1940 he offered Paramount a promising script for ten dollars on condition that he direct it himself. The studio agreed and the same year Sturges went to work on *The Great McGinty*. He had a three-week shooting schedule and a budget of about \$350,000. The movie opens in a seedy Latin American bar, where the bartender (Brian Donlevy) begins the story of how he got there. In 1920 he had been a bum in Chicago. Offered two dollars for his vote, he had ingeniously sold it thirty-seven times, thus earning the admiration of the local political boss (Akim Tamaroff). Muscle and a talent for graft had taken McGinty rapidly up through the political ranks. He had become mayor and

then governor, meanwhile acquiring a wife and a fortune. Unfortunately his wife had been chronically honest and eventually she had infected McGinty with the same disease. Bucking the system, he had wound up alongside his boss in jail, whence they had escaped into exile.

As James Ursini writes, the film shows Sturges' "budding visual sense" in scenes like one in which a suicide attempt is reflected in a dirty mirror that is shattered when the attempt is foiled, and in visual gags reminiscent of the silents. Sturges' screenplay won an Oscar and the picture was a hit. In spite of its savage cynicism about American politics and the American Dream, it established him at once as a comedy director of the first rank. In *McGinty* Sturges used a number character actors for whom he had written parts in earlier movies—men like William Demarest, Harry Rosenthal, Frank C. Moran, Jimmy Conlin, and Robert Warwick. Together with Eric Blore, Franklin Pangborn, Edgar Kennedy, and one or two others, they became permanent members of Sturges' "stock company," appearing in film after film in the cameo parts he loved to write for them. Far more than employees, some of them were among Sturges' closest friends and favorite companions.

Half a dozen of these old pros feature in *Christmas in July* (Paramount, 1940), which stars Dick Powell as an obsessive contest competitor who is tricked into believing that he has won a fortune with a terrible coffee slogan. The unpredictable working of destiny is a recurrent theme in Sturges' movies, and this film makes use of relevant images (a turning wheel, a black cat). The huge office where the hero works before his "ludicrous break," with row upon row of identical desks, is almost as overwhelming a symbol of the automation of human beings as the similar set in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960). ...

Sturges was given his first chance at a big-budget production with *The Lady Eve* (Paramount, 1941), in which Charles, a naive millionaire snakecollector (Henry Fonda), returns from an Amazonian Garden of Eden to the perils of civilization. He is hooked by Barbara Stanwyck who, exposed as a hustler, disguises herself as an English aristocrat to try again and eventually gets her sadder but wiser Adam: it is another example of the notion of character rebirth which Sturges had used for the first time in *The Great McGinty*. ...

Sullivan's Travels (1941) is Sturges' most personal film. A comedy with dark undertones about movie-making, about American and about Preston Sturges, John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) is a successful Hollywood comedy director who, inspired by conscience (and the example of filmmakers like Frank Capra) sells his reluctant bosses on the idea of a socially "meaningful" movie—"a commentary on modern conditions...something that would realize the potentialities of Film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is...with a little sex in it."...

The film presents a remarkably honest and sometimes harrowing picture of poverty and injustice in America, lightened though it is by witty lines, eccentric characterizations, and slapstick visual humor. Music (the so-called Hobo Symphony) is effectively used in the otherwise silent sequence where the principals experience the routine degradations of poverty. Andrew Sarris called the picture "a Swiftian glimpse of Hollywood and its occasional flirtations with social conscience."

There are none of these uneasy undertones in the "almost perfect comic masterpiece" that followed in 1942, *The Palm Beach Story*. An unremitting but lighthearted satire on ambition and greed, it has Claudette Colbert reluctantly leaving her

husband, an innocent and penniless inventor (Joel McCrea), and heading for Florida in search of a man with money....

Sturges was an inventor and he put several examples of the breed into his movies—impractical ones like the husband in *The Palm Beach Story*, or tragic like W.T. G. Morton, the real-life inventor of anesthesia, whose life is the subject of *The Great Moment*. The director was fascinated by the story of this Boston dentist who, to spare a young servant girl pain, gave away the secret of his discovery and died in poverty and ignominy...The picture was completed in 1942 but not released until 1944, after Paramount had edited it into hopeless confusion.

Sturges followed this depressing excursion with two comedies about small-town America during World War II. *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* centers on Trudy Kockenlocker (Betty Hutton), daughter of a local constable (William Demarest). One night she meets and is impregnated by a soldier who then disappears. The solution seems to be marriage to the town dummy, Norval Jones (Eddie Bracken), but a misunderstanding lands him in jail. However, Trudy's union is blessed by not one but six babies, and *Morgan's Creek* becomes worldwide front-page news. Precisely where the town is located is not made clear, but it is in the state governed by Dan McGinty (Brian Donlevy again). He finds it expedient to bend the law a little and "legalize" Trudy's nonexistent marriage to Norval, who is transformed from schnook to hero in the process. The film's astonishingly iconoclastic satire on marriage, motherhood, the Nativity, the nuclear family, patriotism, and American politics led it into a series of censorship battles from which it emerged, apparently, almost unscathed. When it was released in 1944, almost a year after its completion, James Agee concluded that the Hays Office must have been "raped in its sleep." Not surprisingly, perhaps, it was Sturges' greatest financial success, grossing over ten millions dollars.

Having built *Morgan's Creek* in the studio and populated it with his gallery of character actors, Sturges used the same resources again in *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944), a much less extreme satire on small-town values. Eddie Bracken stars again as the bumbling hero, now named Woodrow Truesmith. Like Norval he is rejected for military service on medical grounds (he has hay fever) but this time the rejection is critical, since he is the son of a Marine hero, weaned on the glories of the Corps. Woodrow takes a job in a shipyard and pretends to be overseas, then enters into a conspiracy with some sympathetic leathernecks to masquerade as a hero like his father. Returning home in spurious triumph, he is feted by the whole town, rediscovered by his old girlfriend, and nominated to replace the venal mayor. Discovered, Woodrow confesses all to the assembled populace with such touching frankness that he is renominated.

The frantic pace that builds throughout the last half of *Morgan's Creek* is redoubled in this movie. As James Ursini writes, "each medium shot is filled to the brim with characters naturally overlapping their lines and generally under the excitement of the moment. One cannot help but be amazed at the perfect timing Sturges' stock company demonstrates in these bits of ensemble acting." Ursini, who elsewhere points out how frugal Sturges is with close-ups throughout his work, goes on to explain that "the cinematic device which ties *Miracle* irrevocably to *Hail* is the long tracking shot. In this film as in its predecessor, there is

an abundance of camera movements which follow the characters through entire blocks of the town, thereby giving us a feel for the people and their daily surroundings." However, what James Agee wrote of *Morgan's Creek* is even more applicable to this picture: "In the stylization of actions as well as language it seems to me clear that Sturges holds his characters, and the people they

comically represent, and their predicament, and his audience, and the best potentialities of his own work, essentially in contempt."

Hail the Conquering Hero, completed in 1943, was Sturges' last film for Paramount. He wanted independence, and Paramount, for its part, was increasingly bothered by his soaring budgets, his arrogance, and his habit of writing most of the night so that shooting couldn't begin until the afternoon. When *Morgan's Creek* and *Conquering Hero* were released in 1944, their enormous profits gave Paramount second thoughts, but by that time Sturges had gone into partnership with Howard Hughes to form California Pictures

Corporation, releasing through United Artists. CPC was launched with a film that was intended as a comeback of the silent movie comedian Harold Lloyd, *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (1947).

The picture opens with the last reel of *The Freshman* (1925), in which Lloyd saves the day in a college football game. Sturges added sound to dovetail this silent footage into the next sequence, in which Lloyd is offered a job by an admiring local businessman....Before this picture was released, Hughes and Sturges went to work on *Vendetta*, an adaptation of a Corsican revenge story by Prosper Mérimée. Max Ophuls was hired to direct, but Hughes soon fired him and Sturges took over. He also displeased Hughes and CPC was dissolved, *Vendetta* eventually being completed by a string of other directors....

With the dissolution of CPC, Sturges went looking for a new backer with a script written fifteen years earlier, and landed Darryl F. Zanuck. He gave Sturges a suite of offices at 20th Century-Fox, a spectacularly generous contract, a two million dollar budget, and complete autonomy. *Unfaithfully Yours* concerns a famous conductor (Rex Harrison) who suspects that his wife (Linda Darnell) is having an affair with a younger man. In the course of a single concert he imagines himself killing her, forgiving her, and challenging her lover to Russian roulette, the nature of his fantasy reflecting the nature of the music he is conducting....

Sturges had once offered the script to Ernst Lubitsch, who had turned it down on the grounds that the public wanted "corned beef and hash," not caviar. *Unfaithfully Yours* is nevertheless a film very much in the Lubitsch tradition, albeit laced with Sturgesian slapstick. Lubitsch seems to have been right, however—it had mixed reviews and, perhaps because of the blackness of its humor, was not successful at the box office. Seeking to redeem himself at Fox, Sturges then embarked on a spoof Western called *The Beautiful Blonde From Bashful Bend* (1949), a rickety vehicle for Betty Grable. She plays a pistol-packing singer who falls in love with a card sharp, is jailed for shooting a judge, escapes, impersonates a schoolmarm, and takes on the local baddies in a final shoot-out. Sturges' only film in color, it is one of the weakest and least imaginative of all his works.

This second failure ended the director's brief career at Fox



and branded him throughout the industry as a bad risk. He stoically returned to his beginnings as a writer for other directors. Over the next few years he wrote half-a-dozen screenplays, of which some were optioned but none filmed. He also turned his attention to other interests. These included a factory, Sturges Engineering Company, which had helped to make him a millionaire during the war years, turning out diesel engines among other items, and a Hollywood restaurant, The Players. In 1955 he added a theatre and a dance hall to the restaurant, offering diners one-act plays and other entertainments which he produced, directed, designed, and sometimes wrote himself, turning his troupe of old actors into a repertory company. In 1951 he added a theatre and a dance hall to the restaurant, offering diners one-act plays and other entertainments which he produced, directed, designed, and sometimes wrote himself, turning his troupe of old actors into a repertory company. This venture was ahead of its time and failed, leaving Sturges near bankruptcy, hounded for debts, taxes, and alimony. After a brief interlude in New York he went even further back into his past, settling in Paris, where he had spent his childhood.

Sturges' last years, full of aborted plans and projects, produced one more completed film, *Les Carnets du Major Thompson* (*The French They Are a Funny Race*, 1956). Adapted from Pierre Danino's best-seller, it became in Sturges' hands a "conjugal comedy" about a stuffy Englishman (Jack Buchanan) in France, clumsily satirizing French and British stereotypes. It had some success in Europe, none in America. For three more years Sturges shuttled between Europe and the United States in search of backers for his manifold schemes, but without success. In 1959 he died of a heart attack.

"No one made better dialogue comedies than Sturges," wrote Gerald Mast, "primarily because no one wrote better dialogue....The Sturges emphasis on dialogue determines his film technique, which relies on the conventional American two-shot to capture the faces and features while the characters talk, talk, talk. But it is such good talk—incredibly rapid, brittle—that the film has plenty of life. Like Hawks, Sturges was a master of the lightning pace. When Sturges uses special cinematic devices, he inevitably turns them into self-conscious bits of trickery and gimmickry that harmonize well with the parodic spirit of the film." James Ursini has discussed Sturges' debt to Molière, Shakespeare, Congreve, and Feydeau, saying that he united "the sophistication of the stage with the visual slapstick that was so much a part of the silent film."

James Agee, who analyzed Sturges almost obsessively in his *Nation* articles, said of his films: "They seem to me wonderfully, uncontrollably, almost proudly corrupt, vengeful, fearful of intactness and self-commitment....Their mastering object, aside from success, seems to be to sail as steep into the wind as possible without for an instant incurring the disaster of becoming seriously, wholly acceptable as art. They seem...the elaborately counterpointed image of a neurosis." Penelope Houston, rather similarly, wrote: "His defenses were built up in depth, and his favorite approach was the oblique and glancing one, with all the retreats into burlesque left open. The world of his comedy is self-contained and self-protected, and he becomes ill at ease when confronted with an idea to be followed straight through, or a situation that can't be resolved in an explosion of nervous energy." The energy, which carries his plots over "chasms of improbability," and his crowded canvases, persuaded Andrew Sarris that he was "the Brueghel of American comedy

directors."

Sturges' fondness for pratfalls, slapstick and his "seamy old character actors" no doubt reflects his lifelong struggle to cast off his mother's influence—the stubborn pretense to philistinism—that his films conclusively refute. According to Alistair Cooke, he was "an accomplished linguist. A canny art critic... an epicure of extravagant tastes." Hollywood he once described as "a comic opera in which fat businessmen, good fathers, are condemned to conjugal existence with a heap of drunkards, madmen, divorcees, sloths, epileptics, and morphinomaniacs who are—in the considered opinion of the management—artists. Another wit, Alexander King, said of Sturges himself that he was actuated by a genuine affection for people, which rose naturally from a well of deep sympathy for anyone who must go through life without being Preston Sturges." He was married four times—to Estelle Mudge, Eleanor Post Hutton, Louise Sargent Tervis, and Anne Margaret Nagle—and has three sons. Courtly in manner, he had friends at every level of society.

1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die. Gen Ed. Steven Jay Schneider. Barron's, London, 2005. Sullivan's Travels. Entry by SJS.

As one of American cinema's earliest auteurs and cutting a distinctly modern figure (his mother's best friend was Isadora Duncan; he spent his youth criss-crossing the Atlantic; a "kiss-proof" lipstick and ticker-tape machine were among his patented inventions), Preston Sturges was responsible for an explosion of now-classic films in the 1940s. These films are known for their sophisticated verbal wit, uproarious physical comedy, and their affectionate portrayal of eccentric, scene-stealing supporting characters. But Sturges's work is also consistent in its exploration of the possibilities and prospects of upward—and occasionally downward—mobility. In what may be his finest, most complex film, *Sullivan's Travels* (1942), Sturges brilliantly mixes broad humor with sharp-edged cultural commentary, once again—as in *The Great McGinty* (1940), *Christmas in July* (1940), and *The Lady Eve* (1941)—revealing social identity to be a highly unstable proposition. capable of hyperbolic transformation through such prosaic means as disguise, confusion, and self-deception.

John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) is a can't-miss Hollywood director who specializes in lightweight entertainment, exemplified by broad comedies such as the 1939 film *Ants in Your Pants*. Naive and sheltered by a solicitous staff who have no interest in seeing their meal ticket change genres or become overly ambitious in his cinematic pursuits, Sully nonetheless sets his sights on directing an epic social commentary picture about tough times in depression-era America, to be entitled *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (a fictional title eventually used by the Coen Brothers for their own 2000 film, in clever tribute to Sturges). To research his topic, which involves such unpleasanties as suffering, deprivation, and racial inequality Sully insists on disguising himself as a hobo and making his way across the country to experience "real life" firsthand.

Once on the road, assorted adventures, meetings (notably with Veronica Lake's down-on-her-luck ingenue), and mishaps—some hilarious, others surprisingly poignant—transpire before Sully eventually comes to terms with his true calling as a lowbrow moviemaker with a gift for making people laugh. The lesson here is that strained seriousness and forced profundity have far less benefit for the masses than good old-fashioned humor, with its power to help people forget their troubles, if only for a while.

That *Sullivan's Travels* possesses an autobiographical dimension is impossible to deny, with Sturges affirming the value of what he himself did best—making smart comedies with the power to lift viewers' spirits—while ripping the pretentiousness of Hollywood's more sober and "socially committed" filmmakers. Personal statements aside, however, the tour de force script brings together a remarkable range of genres, including slapstick, action, melodrama, social documentary, romance, musical, and prison movie. Though it failed to garner a single Oscar nomination, *Sullivan's Travels* is the most remarkable film in the career of one of America's greatest filmmakers.

"Preston Sturges Elegy for the Wiene King" Schickel on Film.
Richard Schickel. Wm. R. Morrow & Co., NY, 1989.

It is time to set aside all those pop Freudian explanations of the life and art of Preston Sturges. Enough about the giddy aesthete mother dragging him around the galleries and theaters of Europe, thereby instilling in him a lifelong distrust of high, formal culture. Enough about the down-to-earth stepfather in Chicago, the athlete-inventor-businessman whose values—principally his definition of success in purely economic terms—Sturges so desperately tried to emulate. Enough about how little Preston's psyche was split down the middle by their conflicting demands and how that split affected his movies, mostly adversely.

How did we get off on that sidetrack anyway? Brian Henderson, in his introduction to a collection of some of the master's best screenplays, says it's all James Agee's fault. By the time Sturges became Hollywood's hottest director—the first and at that time the only one who wrote all his own pictures single-handedly—and the interviewers from the popular magazines were coming around to do their standard eccentric movie genius numbers, Sturges realized that there was good copy for them in his admittedly curious background. It would be diverting for their readers and diversionary for him. As Henderson says, it did not do in those days for an American movie director to wear his artist's heart on his sleeve. It was much more comforting to the bosses and to the typical moviegoer to play it a little dumb. And so Sturges alleged that he shared none of his mother's high aspirations, that all he wanted to do was make funny, knockabout comedies that turned a tidy profit—the goal to which Daddy had taught him all real American men must aspire. Never a man to prune back his best inventions, Sturges permitted this tale to grow lush and purple in the retelling, though it appears that one aspect of it—the fact that it was his mother who presented Isadora Duncan with the scarf that killed her when it became entangled in the spokes of a car wheel—was a true believe-it-or-not.

In any case, all this glorious Technicolor served Agee especially well. He as emotionally committed to a different kind of comedy—silent comedy, the values of which (obviously) were kinetic, not verbal, the air of which was more austere (to put it mildly) than anything Sturges was doing. The tale was used by the critic to explain why Sturges's films, which he seems to have admired more than he could bring himself to admit openly, so often failed to meet the formal standards he felt obliged to apply to comedy. Sturges's work appeared to Agee less well made than

that of Agee's childhood idols, the silent comedians. Moreover, this prefabrication permitted the critic to fit the director into the preexistent, overarching, and apparently permanent Hollywood myth in which the man of talent goes west and is corrupted by the vulgar values present there. Sturges, it seemed, was a prime candidate for yet another reenactment of this cautionary yarn, even gave evidence that he welcomed the casting.

Since Agee is for some reason Agee, a "great" critic who never got round to creating a great or even sustained body of critical work (he had a silky, confidential style, approachably middlebrow tastes and the good sense to die young, with several promises unfulfilled), everyone who has written about Sturges has had to contend with his fly-by-the-slicks psychologizing. Even if one were disputing it, as, variously, Manny Farber, Andrew Sarris, and Richard Corliss somewhat have, some of Agee's theory has stuck to their revisionisms. Not that Henderson, having done his best to strike down Agee on Sturges, offers anything useful by way of a replacement. Indeed, Henderson's performance both in his introduction and in his essays on each script in his



collection (*The Great McGinty*, *Christmas in July*, *The Lady Eve*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Hail the Conquering Hero*) is exceedingly strange. He seems to have mislaid whatever critical sensibility he has among the reams of Sturges's papers to which he had access. It is interesting, to be sure, to learn that the seemingly profligate Sturges never really abandoned even his half-developed ideas. He was always hauling them out of his trunk, refurbishing them, and using them as the basis for new projects. On the other hand, it is not at all interesting, or profitable, to follow his progress on a script from one

stage of revision to the next. The main thing we learn from Henderson's dogged pursuit of variously expanding and contracting ideas from draft to draft (with the final polish occurring when Sturges was on his feet, directing) is that he was a very craftsmanlike writer, an intelligent and reasonably ruthless self-editor, as, given the overall quality of his work, one suspected. In any event, this information, presented in mind-bending detail, argues neither for nor against Agee's reading of Sturges's character. But then Henderson appears to be a scholar in pursuit of an "edition," not a critic in pursuit of an insight.

He therefore misses a timely opportunity to start fresh on Sturges, unburdened by preconceptions.... I can sum up my view of Sturges very simply. Sturges was not, and never intended to be, the social critic, the satirist that Agee and the rest wanted him to be. James Curtis's biography *Between Flops*, a straightforward, well-researched, and admiring volume, makes it clear that Sturges was an utterly apolitical character without an ideological bone in his body; which explains why his politician characters (in *McGinty* and *Hero*) are so enduringly funny. He saw the typical American pol for what he timelessly is—a venal windbag—and was utterly undistracted by the thought that a true liberal (or conservative) commitment might cure that condition. In other words, Sturges was not, and never meant to be, a politicized social critic. He was, rather, an uncommitted observer, bemused and compassionate, but without any cures in mind for the conditions he observed. These were, he seemed to say, specifically American adjustments to, and evasions of, dull reality. The best we could hope for was the temporary palliative of a good laugh; that is, of course, the entire point of *Sullivan's Travels*, a movie I take to be

emotionally autobiographical, in its gentle contempt for the social-critical aspirations of his Hollywood contemporaries, but not a statement about any frustrated ambitions of his own.

Ants in his Pants (Sight & Sound May 2000)

Light-hearted irreverence was Preston Sturges' forte but his comedies also have a serious edge....

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 view hallooing 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 mittelEuropeanish 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



flauntingly 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.

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.

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIV:

- Jan 27 Samuel Fuller PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET 1953
 Feb 3 Henri-Georges Clouzot LES DIABOLIQUES 1955
 Feb 10 Jack Clayton THE INNOCENTS 1961
 Feb 17 Akira Kurosawa HIGH AND LOW/TENGOKU TO JIGOKU 1963
 Feb 24 Ján Kadar & Elmar Klos THE SHOP ON MAIN STREET/OBCHOD NA KORZE 1966
 March 3 Jean-Pierre Melville LE CERCLE ROUGE 1970
 March 17 Robert Altman, THE LONG GOODBYE, 1973
 March 24 Andrei Tarkovsky: NOSTALGHIA 1983
 March 31 Larisa Shepitko THE ASCENT/VOSKHOZHDENIYE 1977
 April 7 Warren Beatty REDS 1981
 April 14 32 SHORT FILMS ABOUT GLENN GOULD
 April 21 Pedro Almodóvar ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER/TODO SOBRE MI MADRE 1999

CONTACTS:

- ...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
 ...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
 ...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>
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