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THE FILMS OF PRESTON STURGES

And Other

CLASSIC AMERICAN SOUND COMEDIES

Sundays, July 22 - September 22, 1973

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In response to renewed demand, the Pacific Film Archive is pleased to present, for the third time in three years, a retrospective survey of the films of Preston Sturges, the pre-eminent writer-director of American film comedy in the sound period.

In response to our 1972 season of Preston Sturges' films, an appreciation of Preston Sturges by Mike Goodwin appeared in the Night Times. As an introduction to this season's somewhat shorter, but basically complete, retrospective, we present the following excerpts from Goodwin's article:

"For eight glorious years, 1940 to 1948, a comic madman genius named Preston Sturges lived and worked in Hollywood. He made comedies.

Well, not exactly. He made films that were, in a maddeningly indefinable way, much more than comedies. Finding a box in which to put Sturges' films is no easy matter. James Agee was struggling with the man's characteristic elusiveness as early as 1944. "There are semi-defensible reasons to compare him to Shakespeare," Agee wrote, but he went on to add, "I suspect that Sturges feels that conscience and comedy are incompatible. It would be hard for a man of talent to make a more self-destructive mistake."

If Agee faults Sturges for copping out (which is how I interpret that last quote), it's only because, in addition to being a great comedian, Sturges came agonizingly close to being one of America's most cutting social critics. Like many great satirists, he seems to have been an "outsider" most of his life. He led a strange childhood, traipsing around Europe with his mother (a companion of Isadora Duncan) in search of "culture", but strongly drawn to his father, who was a successful, no-nonsense businessman. If he never reconciled these conflicting drives, he came pretty close when he invented, at the age of 21, the first "kissproof lipstick". From there, he could only go up -- and up he went.

At 30, he wrote a successful Broadway comedy. Shortly thereafter he was in Hollywood, writing movie scripts for directors like Mitchell Leisen. In 1940, at the age of 42, he made his first film -- THE GREAT MCGINTY. It was a terrific success, and for the next eight or nine years Sturges was the darling of Hollywood -- its comic master-in-residence.

From the very first, Sturges' films were characterized by an intelligent ambience and a graceful literacy. Striking turns of phrase and unspeakably intricate puns popped up at the most unlikely moments, and in the mouths of the strangest characters. Through it all, his sharp sense of satire ranged high and free. His characters (and "characters" is the word, all right) were almost Dickensian in their richness and comic absurdity.

Andrew Sarris has noted his sharp eye for American "types", and his sardonic view of the American way of life: 'Within the context of a Sturges Film, a gangster could declare with ringing, heavily accented conviction: 'America is a land of great opportunity.' An underpaid clerk could rise to fame and fortune by coining the slogan: 'If you can't sleep at night, it isn't the coffee, it's the bunk.' A sign in a flophouse could remind its denizens: 'Have you written to Mother?' In THE LADY EVE, when Henry Fonda plaintively confesses, 'Snakes are my life,' Barbara Stanwyck snaps back, 'What a life!'



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Sturges never talked down to his audience; he assumed they would get the jokes. He treated his characters with the same respect he showed his audiences: even the lowliest derelict in a Sturges film had elements of nobility. Help came from unlikely sources, but it was never far away. Sturges' cinema was a cinema of hope.

Yet Sturges' films are never just funny -- there's always a bitter edge to them, and more than a little pain. When you watch a Sturges film you laugh your ass off but the comedy masks (and not very well) an essentially pessimistic philosophy. His films start from a point of grim reality, and seldom get far enough away from it for comfort. His theme is always the same: you've got to laugh to keep from crying. It's this double-valued perspective that makes his films important-- that makes them art.

Cinema of hope based on an essentially pessimistic philosophy? It seems contradictory (and this may be why Agee considered Sturges' films to be 'neurotic'), but in fact that contradiction is the starting point for the comedy.

Consider SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS, Sturges' funniest movie, and the closest he ever came to tipping his hand. Set in the depression, it's about a movie director named Sullivan, who makes comedies. Sullivan decides that Meaningful Movies are where it's at, so off he goes into the world to research his next film -- a drama of social significance called BROTHER WHERE ART THOU? After a series of hilarious adventures too absurd to recount he ends up with amnesia, and before you know it he is on a southern chain gang, probably to rot in the swamps for the rest of his life. This part isn't funny --in fact, it's horrifying, and very realistic. For a comedy, it's a strange sequence indeed: Sullivan (with his memory restored, for all the good it does him) working in the hot sun and getting beaten by sadistic prison guards.

Eventually Sullivan gets out --and goes back to making comedies --but the point has been made. That Sturges can move from comedy to near-tragedy and back again is remarkable enough, but that he can do so without destroying the unity of his film tells us a great deal about what he's really up to. The slapstick in SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS is side-splitting, but to categorize the film as a mere comedy is to miss the point entirely. It's tempting to see Sullivan as a self-portrait, but I think Sturges is shooting for much more than comic escapism. I'd bet anything that Samuel Beckett digs Preston Sturges.

Well, shit, this seems to have turned into a serious essay on a comic film-maker. I was going to run down some of the slapstick, but I've talked myself out of it. The films really are funny, but it's the area beyond comedy that makes Sturges an important film-maker."

### SCHEDULE

Sunday, July 22 - 4:30, 7:30, 10:30 PM

THE GREAT MCGINTY (1940, 81 min) was Sturges' first film as director. In it, he takes the success ethic and throws it in the face of the audience. McGinty (Brian Donlevy) is a down-and-out hustler who stumbles into the political ring by voting thirty-seven times (at two dollars per vote) for the Honorable Mayor Tillinghast. Impressed by the ingenuity of this lowly character, the "Boss" behind the candidate puts him on the payroll. With this taste of prosperity, McGinty's ambitions flower and soon he has captured the state's highest office through graft, bribery and deception. It is a thoroughly corrupt society Sturges presents here and one in which, ironically, McGinty's only act of honesty causes his downfall and exile (to a Banana republic where he is a bartender). A perfect election-year film, THE GREAT MCGINTY is as funny as it is serious --and as such an ideal introduction to Sturges' unique schizophrenia, that crazy combination of slapstick and despair that makes Sturges America's first "sick humorist".

Sunday, July 22 - 6:00, 9:00 PM

EASY LIVING (1937, 91 min.) is almost too good to be true. Preston Sturges' screenplay is as good as any he ever wrote, and Mitchell Leisen's direction adds a dimension of visual elegance missing in Sturges' own movies. As Andrew Sarris suggests, "Curiously, EASY LIVING is the only film with which Sturges the writer was associated in the thirties that may be reasonably preferred to any of his own



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### EASY LIVING (con't)

forties films. Not only is EASY LIVING funny and gracious and generous in the best Sturges tradition; it is only velvety smooth and comfortably movieish in a way no Sturges-directed film ever was." Jean Arthur stars as an aggressive working girl whose life is changed by an accidental fur coat that flies out a millionaire's window and lands on her head. There is some priceless satire of the bombastic rich (in the person of Edward Arnold's J.B. Ball), and a hilarious bit of extended slapstick in a food automat gone berserk. There is even a set exemplifying Sturges' life-long interest in inventions --the ultra-modern apartment in the ritzy (but on the skids) hotel where the heroine crashes. With Ray Milland in a lead so typically Sturges that one almost remembers Joel McCrea in the part.

Sunday, July 29 - 4:30, 7:15, 10:00 PM

CHRISTMAS IN JULY (1940, 66 min) Like THE GREAT MCGINTY, CHRISTMAS IN JULY is another three-week, \$325,000 wonder. Not until Sturges had gained Paramount's confidence through the box-office returns from these first two films was he entrusted with bigger budgets, stars, and longer shooting schedules. This film features Dick Powell as a humble clerk who thinks that he's won an advertising slogan contest with the following dilly: "If you can't sleep, it's not the coffee, it's the bunk!" Sturges skewers a number of American sacred cows in the course of the film's fast-paced 66 minutes: he also shows a real affection for the immigrant members of the urban melting pot. Outrageous dialects, tenement block settings, street parties and scenes of community interaction help give CHRISTMAS IN JULY its strong feeling for big city life. With Ellen Drew.

Sunday, July 29 - 5:50, 8:35 PM

THE SCROUNDEL (1935, 75min) Directed by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. With Noel Coward.

When revived for the first time last year in New York, THE SCOUNDREL gathered this notice from the New Yorker critic, Penelope Gilliatt:

"In 1935, the young Noel Coward acted in a Ben Hecht-Charles MacArthur film called THE SCOUNDREL, which hasn't been seen publicly in New York until now for twenty years. I went to it when I was ten or twelve and have gone about mumbling lines from it ever since. "It'll be a perfect match," the Coward character says about the prospect of his getting married to someone vapid. "Two empty paper bags belaboring each other." And a walk in Central Park is proposed: "On a Sunday?" he says. "It's full of butlers." Coward plays a dissolute publisher seething with self-dislike and charm. His assistant consults him about the topics for the firm's new list. "Are we interested in the in the workingman's woes?" asks the assistant. "Only vaguely," says authority, definitely. No one gets to a full stop with the same speed and style as Coward. He props there like a polo pony beside a ball.

THE SCOUNDREL is really an experiment to see what will happen if you put together a lot of Hollywood stock ingredients and then throw in Coward to wreck them. Hecht and MacArthur had the notion of writing, producing, and directing a film that would confound cow-lidded moviegoing taste by taking the form of a violently suave fairy tale. The narrative goes into an eerie curl of mood three-quarters of the way through: Coward is killed in an air crash, returns from the dead healed even of liking booze, and can be put to rest (says God, in Coward's voice) only by the mourning of someone who really loves him. The ending, liquidly photographed, should put no one off. The film as a whole is a wonderful exercise in the debonair, with a kind of crippled poetry about it because of the tacit determination of the principals to note that there is all the difference in the world between a wisecrack and a wise saying."

Sunday, August 12 - 4:30, 7:45, 11:10

### THE PALM BEACH STORY (1942, 88 min.)

On a laugh meter, THE PALM BEACH STORY would rank near the top in any contest of comedies. The long sequence of the Ale and Quail Club (Sturges' best stock players) rampaging up and down the corridors of a train carrying Claudette Colbert to Florida for a divorce, is so frantically funny that one almost chokes for lack of breathing time. Joel McCrea and Colbert are perfect for the romantic leads, sort of married at the start, and sort of married at the end. Their misadventures provide Sturges with a "comedy of errors" plot not too far removed from Shakespeare, and also with a chance to zero-in on the "idle rich" with some devastating satire. With Mary Astor, Rudy Vallee.



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Sunday, August 12 - 6:10, 9:20 PM

TROUBLE IN PARADISE (1932, 86 min) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch

Writing at the time of its release, Dwight MacDonald hailed this exquisite jewel of a comedy as coming "as close to perfection as anything I have ever seen". The director echoed this judgement when he said, "For pure style I have done nothing better or as good as TROUBLE IN PARADISE." The opening shot sets the mood. A gondolier is heard addressing the Venetian night in a sweet tenor: passing by the camera, he is revealed as the Grand Canal's garbage collector. Pretty soon we find two upperclass types, Herbert Marshall and Miriam Hopkins, who meet while picking each others' pockets. The pair are both jewel thieves in their better moments, and leave Venice together for Paris, where they insinuate themselves into the company of a wealthy millionaires. The action and dialogue here is delectably refined, elegantly cynical. The famed Lubitsch touch and the polished Paramount style unite to perfection in TROUBLE IN PARADISE, which gets better with age and every viewing.

Sunday, August 19 - 4:30, 7:50, 11:10 PM

THE LADY EVE (1941, 97 min.)

Possibly the least neurotic of Sturges' comedies, combining screwball farce with romantic satire of delicious wit and charm. Henry Fonda is a gullible young brewery heir and snake fancier, Barbara Stanwyck an aggressive hustler who fleeces suckers on ocean liners, and a host of wonderfully crazy character actors (Eric Blore, Charles Coburn, Eugene Pallette) round out the cast.

Sunday, August 19 - 6:10, 9:30 PM

THE AWFUL TRUTH (1937, 93 min)

This is one of several first-rate comedies in which Cary Grant remarries his first wife, and leaves a cloddish suitor, played here by Ralph Bellamy, dumb-founded and deflated. Grant's talents for this kind of fast talking domestic farce are phenomenal, and under Leo McCarey's experienced direction, it's given some surprising twists and a consistently stylish surface. McCarey had directed some of the best Laurel and Hardy shorts, and a string of classics at Paramount (DUCK SOUP, BELLE OF THE 90's, RUGGLES OF RED GAP). THE AWFUL TRUTH was his only film for Columbia. McCarey's improvisational methods infuriated Cohn who crudely expressed such anger to McCarey. THE AWFUL TRUTH was a huge success, but Harry Cohn could never lure McCarey back.

Sunday, August 26 - 4:30, 8:00 PM

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS (1941, 90 min)

There's always an edge of bitterness to Preston Sturges' comedies, and more than a touch of pain. SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS, his funniest movie, is also one of his most poignant films in that it moves from comedy to near-tragedy and back again with a facility that is thoroughly remarkable. Half-way through, without a warning, the film turns deadly serious --and does so without losing credibility for an instant. That Sturges can bring the film BACK to comedy again is just one further indication of his genius. Veronica Lake is marvelous as a prototype hippie (circa 1935), and Joel McCrea is just as good playing Sullivan --a comedy director who want to make Serious Movies. The slapstick is glorious, but to categorize SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS as a mere comedy is to miss the point entirely. This is an amazing movie! (--notes from Mike Goodwin)

Sunday, August 26 - 6:10, 9:40 PM

BRINGING UP BABY (1938, 102 min.) Directed by Howard Hawks

No comedy ever shown here produced such convulsions in the audience, or so many requests for a repeat. In its verbal and visual slapstick, and especially for its actors -- Cary Grant as a staid paleontologist, Katherine Hepburn as a nutty whizgirl --BRINGING UP BABY far excels Peter Bogdanovich's semi-remake, WHAT'S UP DOC?

Sunday, September 2 - 4:30, 8:00 PM

HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO (1944, 100min.)

Smalltown America is mercilessly, and hilariously, dissected in this "wartime" comedy in which an army reject (Eddie Bracken) is mistaken for a war hero upon returning home. It was Sturges' last film for Paramount, and remains one of his most subversive satires of All-American values.



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Sunday, September 2 - 6:20, 9:50 PM

RUGGLES OF RED GAP (1935, 90 min) Directed by Leo McCarey

An absolutely delightful comedy about an English butler (Laughton) exported to the American Mid-West, RUGGLES OF RED GAP was a smash hit revival in several Paris theatres recently, where the French critics hailed it as a masterpiece of commercial film-making. In this country, where most people still prefer to see bad new films to good old ones, RUGGLES is still a submerged classic, and its director Leo McCarey a cult figure appreciated by a handful of buffs. You won't find a more entertaining comedy in town! With Charles Laughton.

Sunday, September 9 - 4:30, 8:00 PM

MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK (1944, 99 min.)

James Agee, who considered Sturges the most talented man in Hollywood as well as the most neurotic, was one of the few reviewers of the time who understood what Sturges was up to in his satires of American types and institutions. He wrote very perceptively on Sturges, and following are some excerpts from his review of MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK: 'The new Preston Sturges film seems to me funnier, more adventurous, more abundant, more intelligent, and more encouraging than anything that has been made in Hollywood for years ...The essential story is hardly what you would expect to see on an American screen: a volcanically burgeoning small-town girl (Betty Hutton) gets drunk, and is impregnated by one of several soldiers, she can't remember which: her father (William Demarest), her younger sister (Diana Lynn), and her devoted 4-F lover (Eddie Bracken) do all they can do to help her out: the result is a shambles, from which they are all delivered by a 'miracle' which entails its own cynical comments on the sanctity of law, order, parenthood, and the American home...to say nothing of cherished pseudo-folk beliefs about bright-lipped youth, childhood sweet-hearts, Mister Right, and the glamour of war. Sturges tells his story according to a sound principle which has been neglected in Hollywood --except by him --for a long time: in proportion to the inanity and repressiveness of the age you live in, play the age as comedy if you want to get away with murder. Thanks to these devices the Hays Office has either been hypnotized into a liberality for which it should be thanked, or raped in its sleep.'

Sunday, September 9 - 6:20, 9:50 PM

HIS GIRL FRIDAY (1940, 90 min) Directed by Howard Hawks

Based on Ben Hecht's THE FRONT PAGE, this is one of Howard Hawks' best efforts in the BRINGING UP BABY tradition of screwball farce. Roz Russell plays an ace reporter assigned to cover a politically motivated execution. Cary Grant proves once again his unique talents as a virile comic antagonist in the role of her editor and ex-husband. The sex switch in the lead role (Pat O'Brien played the reporter in THE FRONT PAGE) does more than add plausibility to the weak sub-plot in the original: indeed Hecht's cynical newspaper drama is reduced to the pretext for a typically Hawksian comedy of sexual conflict. Such a transformation leaves a few loose ends, but the result is an improvement over the original and proof of Hollywood's mastery of the art of verbal slapstick. With Ralph Bellamy again as the sucker who gets dumped on.

Sunday, September 16 - 4:30, 8:00 PM

A Rare Late Sturges Comedy (title to be announced later)- take a chance on this sneak revival of a long unseen (except once here last year) Preston Sturges Classic.

Sunday, September 16 - 6:20, 9:40 PM

PROFESSOR BEWARE (1938, 93 min)

Harold Lloyd's best films were his silents, none of which are in distribution today. He made a few sound films, including this somewhat silly but undeniably funny account of a crazy archaeologist obsessed by a 3000-year-old Egyptian love story. Harold dashes madly from one delirious dilemma to another in search of a missing tablet in scenes reminiscent of his best silent chase sequences. If enough of you show up to make a good size audience, you'll be rolling in the aisles: Lloyd's films produce laughter by contagion better than any.

Sunday, September 23 - 4:30, 8:00 PM

UNFAITHFULLY YOURS (1947, 105 min) Directed by Preston Sturges

Lubitsch description of this story as "caviar" is no overstatement. UNFAITHFULLY YOURS is possibly Sturges' most sophisticated and complex creation. In this film, there is a perfect balance and proportion between music, dialogue and visuals. From first frame to last, each of these elements serves to complement the other. Switching from fantasy



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UNFAITHFULLY YOURS (con't)

to reality, from slapstick to black comedy with a smoothness unrivalled in American comedy, Sturges weaves a cynical story of adultery and deception. Rex Harrison is ideally cast as a suave British symphony conductor who plots revenge for his wife's infidelity during the crashing climaxes of a Rossini score, or a Wagner overture. Others in the cast include Linda Darnell, Lionel Stander, and Rudy Vallee.

September, Sunday 23 - 6:30, 9:50 PM

BLUEBEARD'S EIGHTH WIFE (1938, 80 min.) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch

A long unavailable farce by Lubitsch, BLUEBEARD'S EIGHTHWIFE was scripted by the team of Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett. The story concerns the daughter of French nobility (Colbert) who condescends to marry a rich American because her family needs the money. The comedy involves her discovery of his past marital affairs. The film includes the famous sequence where Cooper throws a store into confusion when he tries to purchase just the top half of a pair of pajamas. With Claudette Colbert, Gary Cooper.