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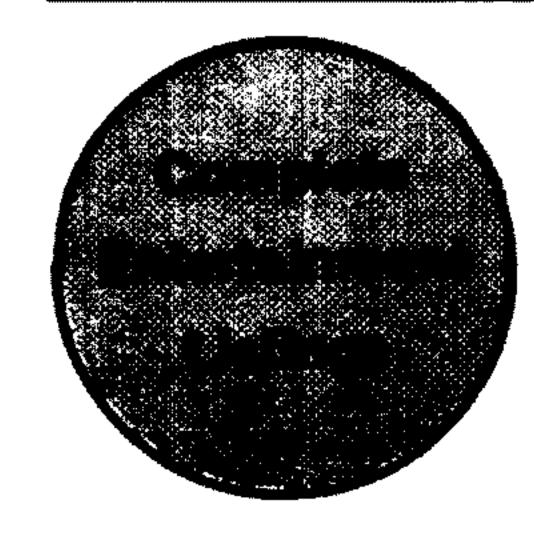
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Keaton, Chaplin and now, Sturges

American comedy film genius rediscovered



Pacific Film Archive to screen complete Sturges retrospective

"If you can't sleep at night, it isn't the coffee, it's the bunk" wins a coffee slogan contest and life turns topsy-turvy in "Christmas in July," the second film in the Preston Sturges retrospective (July 9).

Below, Sturges on set.



I thought everyone knew about Preston Sturges.

Seven months ago, when the Pacific Film Archive mounted a comprehensive, once-in-a-lifetime Sturges retrospective, I assumed the place would be packed to the rafters. God knows we need to laugh these grim days, and Sturges is one of the great comic directors — right up there with Keaton and the Marx Brothers and, for my money, a lot funnier than Chaplin. I couldn't imagine that people would let an opportunity for that much laughter go by — that they would miss an event of such magnitude.

Shows you how much I know.

"The first showings were practically empty," says Tom Luddy, Program Director for the Archive. "After a while word-of-mouth began to get around that there were some fantastic comedies showing at the Archive, and some of the later shows were fairly well attended. But we never came anywhere near selling out, and that's just unbelievable. Some of these films are never shown, and I thought people would tear down the doors."

Luddy, without whose consistently imaginative programming the Bay Area would be a lot less exciting, feels so strongly about the importance of Sturges' work that he has taken pity on us and arranged to repeat the entire Sturges Festival. In fact, he's even located another Sturges rarity—Remember the Night, scripted by

by Michael Goodwin

Sturges and directed by Mitchell Leisen — that wasn't included in the first series. The films will be shown on Sunday nights, starting with *The Great McGinty* on July 2nd, and concluding with an as-yet unconfirmed "mystery film" on August 27th. Eleven films will be shown in all, including a number that Sturges did not direct himself, but scripted for other filmmakers. Every major film that Sturges made will be screened!

It's bad enough that the Sturges retrospective was largely ignored the first time around, but if it happens again I'm gonna give up altogether and move back to New York. THIS IS A MAJOR EVENT, GODDAMNIT! The chance to view the entire output of Sturges' filmic career has never occurred before, and the man is simply too important an artist to pass up. So this time I'm assuming that nobody knows who Sturges is, or what he's done, and I'm gonna try to spell it out for you.

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

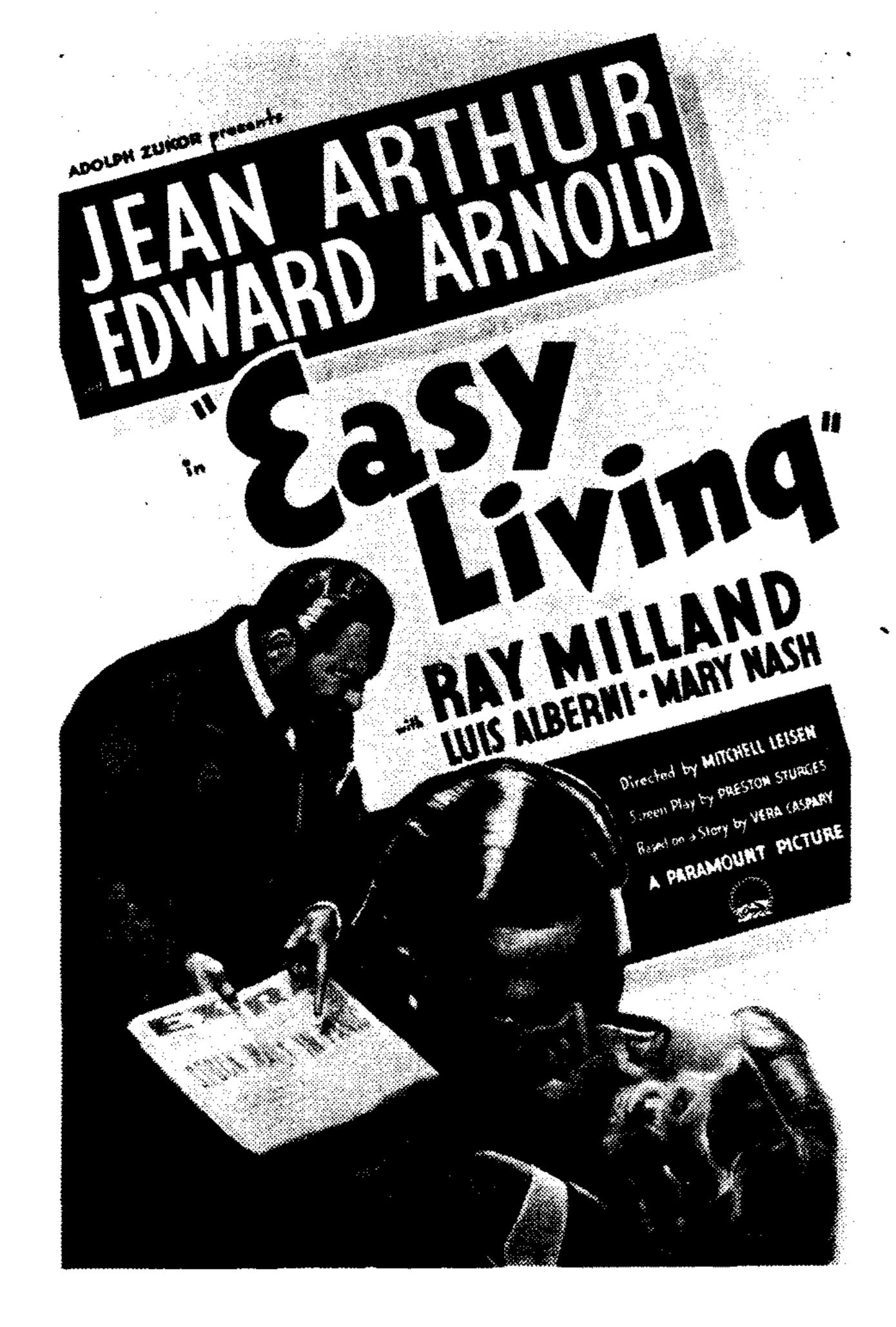
Well, not exactly. He made films that were, in a maddeningly indefinable way, much more than comedies. Finding a box in which to put Sturges' films is no easy matter. James Agee was struggling with the man's characteristic elusiveness as ear-

ly 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.

Continued on page 2







The incomparable films of Preston Sturges

Continued from page 1

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



PRESTON STURGES

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!' "

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.

A 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.

tion 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 filmmaker. 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 filmmaker.

If you remain unconvinced (and lemme tell you, comedy is bitchin' hard to write about without making it sound heavy and dull), do this one thing: go over to the Archive on July 2nd and see *The Great Mc*-Ginty. It only costs a buck to get in, the seats are really comfortable, the sight lines are excellent, and they have the best projection in the Bay Area. You'll dig the theater even if you hate the film.

But you won't hate the film. In fact, I'm prepared to make the following guarantee: If you catch *McGinty*, you won't even *think* of missing the rest of the series.

It's an unprecedented opportunity to discover, or rediscover, a major American filmmaker.



Eddie Braken in Hail the Conquering Hero (1944)

PRESTON STURGES RETROSPECTIVE SCHEDULE

July 2, The Great McGinty, (1940) Sturges recounts a great tale of political graft and corruption as a flashback from a tropical exile. (7 and 10:15) July 9, Christmas in July, (1940) a young couple's fortunes are reversed by winning a coffee slogan contest. (7 and 10) Also, Easy Living, (1937) directed by Mitchell Leisen, but scripted by Sturges. (8:20 only) July 16, The Palm Beach Story, (1942) A marriage turns sour and Claudette Colbert heads for Palm Beach and divorce meeting one of the world's wealthiest bachelors on the way. (7 and 10:00) July 23, The Lady Eve, (1941) Barbara Stanwyck's attempts at snaring beer heir Henry Fonda run foul and wild. (7 and 10:30) Also, Remember the Night, (1940), another Sturges script for a Leisen direction. (8:45 only) July 30, Sullivan's Travels, (1941) A young genius director tours the country as a hobo in search of dramatic material. (6:00 and 9:00) August 6, Hail the Conquering Hero, (1944) A Marine reject returns home falsely regailed as hero. (7 and 10:15).

August 13, Miracle of Morgan's Creek, (1944) Small town set in uproar as Betty Hutton gives birth to sextuplets, making front pages across the country, and she doesn't even know the husband's name "Ratskywatsky" (7 and 10:30) August 20, Unfaithfully Yours, (1947) Rex Harrison as the conductor who plots several ways to do in his wife, all to the strains of a different composer. (7:30 only) August 27, Rare Sturges film; Title to be announced.

All shows feature a second feature. Admission, \$1.00. Further information, 642-1412.