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Harold Lloyd in Mad Wednesday: *success and money unreconciled*

'30S GANGSTERS AND '40S SLAPSTICK

George Morris

Mad Wednesday
Scarface
New York Film Festival

This New York Film Festival has been one of the most invigorating I can recall. Festival Director Richard Roud and his retrospectives programmer, Mary Meerson, are to be especially commended for showcasing Preston Sturges' *Mad Wednesday* (1950) and Howard Hawks' *Scarface*, two legendary works by two of Hollywood's finest directors which have not been shown theatrically in this country for years.

Both films were produced by Howard Hughes, who was something of a legend himself. As he got older and richer, Hughes hoarded the theatrical rights to his movies as zealously as he did his privacy. But now Universal has acquired the theatrical and non-theatrical rights to the entire bizarre collection of movies that the late billionaire personally supervised and financed. So we can look forward to their turning up at regular intervals at the various revival houses around the city.

In his book on Sturges, James Ursini chronicles the fascinating history of what finally came to be known as *Mad Wednesday*. The director and Hughes had been friends for years. When the fiercely independent Sturges left Paramount at the height of his success in 1945, he formed a company with Hughes, California Pictures Corp. For their first project, the men agreed on *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock*, a story which Sturges has specifically tailored for the talents of Harold Lloyd.

The producer-director relationship became strained, however, when Sturges, a stubborn perfectionist, took more than a year in shooting the film and drove the budget up to $2 million. Annoyed, Hughes spent little money and less effort distributing the movie in 1947. When audiences and critics responded indifferently, he withdrew it from release. He then got Stuart Gilmore, Sturges' editor at Paramount, to cut the film further in order to make it more commercial. Hughes sent it out again in 1950 as *Mad Wednesday*, and it was this retitled, re-edited version that festival audiences saw.

Perhaps Hughes was also irritated by the implications of Sturges' script. *Mad Wednesday* may be the writer-director's most corrosive indictment of the big business ethic. It takes the Horatio Alger myth and turns it inside out, upside down, and sideways. Sturges always delighted in ridiculing American capitalism, but this movie has an unusually dark and bitter edge.

It begins cheerfully enough with an act of homage to Harold Lloyd. With the pluck and ingenuity of his silent-screen persona, Lloyd carries his college football team to victory. (For this sequence, Sturges invisibly spliced footage from Lloyd's 1925 classic *The Freshman* with his own.) Like Eddie Bracken in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *Hail the Conquering Hero*, Lloyd has heroism inadvertently thrust upon him. But unlike the chronically insecure Bracken, Lloyd immediately, unquestioningly revels in the glory. When an absent-minded tycoon (Raymond Walburn) follows him into the locker room with a job offer, Lloyd enthusiastically accepts, envisioning a rosy future working his way to the top of the company.

But Sturges leaves his hero on the threshold of fame and fortune and leaps forward to an image that has the effect of a shock cut. After a decade, Lloyd is still a clerk confined to a cramped corner of the office. This paunchy figure hunched over his papers is a pale echo of the brash, idealistic youth of before. In this opening sequence, which lasts only 10 minutes on the screen, Sturges has turned the American Dream into a nightmare. The physical change in Lloyd vividly conveys the spiritual atrophy of an individual who has spent the best years of his life blindly conforming to confused values.

Mad Wednesday subsequently gets pretty funny. Sturges whirls the story forward with lightning speed, boldly alternating scenes of pure slapstick with passages of the most consistently inventive comic dialog in American movies. He even recreates Lloyd's ledge-hanging signature, and throws in a lion for good measure. Right up there with Lloyd and the lion is Jimmy Conlin, that wonderful actor whose shriveling features practically define the shifty morality of Sturges' world.

But Sturges never completely abandons the grim tone of the beginning. When Lloyd is fired, he is freed from an unfulfilling and demeaning job. But his drunken celebration and its happy aftermath are deceptively liberating. He learns merely how to manipulate the system that formerly oppressed him. The supposedly happy ending doesn't really endorse Lloyd's triumph of American know-how. It reflects Sturges' own ambivalent feelings about success and money without comfortably reconciling them.

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