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(PRESTON STURGES)

From the mid-1930's until the late 1940's Preston Sturges held a unique reputation in Hollywood as "the genius of comedy". First as a screenwriter and then as a writer-director, Sturges made an unprecedented number of successful comedies, delighting the public as well as the critics at a time when laughter was desperately needed. His own career, bridging the traditional gap between a film's writer and its director, paved the way for future writers-turned-directors including John Huston, Billy Wilder and Samuel Fuller, among many others. But while many of these screenwriters, having made the jump, then fell back on other screenwriters to supply their material, Sturges remained his own man throughout his career, with nine of his twelve films based on his own original screenplays and most of his adaptations indelibly stamped with his special brand of wacky humor.

Preston Sturges was born Preston Biden in Chicago in 1898. When he was four his mother remarried and arranged for him to spend six months of the year in Chicago with his stock broker foster father, and the rest of the time in Paris, where his mother had formed lasting ties with dancer Isadora Duncan. In Paris Preston was dragged to museums and generally force-fed on culture, even being dressed in a Roman toga for a time by his history-conscious mother. He soon found life in America much more to his taste and absorbed his father's success ethic with great relish. Still in his late teens, Preston single-handedly saved his mother's mismanaged cosmetics firm Maison Desti, and then tried his hand at the stock market. World War I ended this experiment, and upon his discharge, Sturges patented a series of inventions (of which the best remembered is his kiss-proof lipstick) and contracted a short-lived marriage with a wealthy heiress. In 1927, after suffering a nearly fatal attack of appendicitis, Sturges abruptly and devotedly turned to writing plays.

Sturges' second play, Strictly Dishonorable (1929), was an instant hit, making him the toast of Broadway, but a series of failures followed, and Sturges turned to screenwriting. His first assignment - an adaption of the play The Big Pond as a Maurice Chevalier-Claudette Colbert

vehicle - was barely credited, but the positive reactions that the film drew enabled him to move to Hollywood. There 20th Century - Fox bought his first dramatic screenplay for THE POWER AND THE GLORY (1933), the first of Sturges' many treatments of the theme of the moral deterioration that accompanies the rise to power. This same concern helped shape his most notable script of the mid-Thirties - DIAMOND JIM (1935) - the biography of railroad tycoon Diamond Jim Brady, made for Universal. 1937 saw Sturges' first of two extremely fruitful associations with comedy director Mitchell Leisen as the screenwriter for EASY LIVING, an early screwball comedy starring Jean Arthur, Edward Arnold, and Luis Alberni. After a pair of less successful adaptations, Sturges again wrote a screenplay for Leisen, REMEMBER THE NIGHT (1940), a highly polished comedy starring Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck.

Later that same year Sturges made a decisive break with his post as a screenwriter, convincing Paramount production chief William LeBaron to let him direct his own screenplay for THE GREAT MCGINTY (1940). This unprecedented step was permitted by LeBaron only because Sturges offered to forego his salary as a writer in exchange for the privilege of directing. What Paramount expected to be a one-time fling turned out to be permanent and precedent-setting: THE GREAT MCGINTY was a complete success, winning the Academy Award for best screenplay and making it possible for Sturges to again direct his own script for CHRISTMAS IN JULY (1940). Paramount had begrudgingly admitted that he could direct, although the studio was not yet ready to give him top name stars and a large budget.

That came next, however, with Sturges' filming of his THE LADY EVE (1941), starring Henry Fonda and Barbara Stanwyck. Budgeted at over a million dollars, THE LADY EVE became Sturges' best known work. In 1941 Sturges also directed SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS, using his newly established reputation to push newcomer Veronica Lake into stardom, giving her a much deserved second billing after Joel McCrea. This was not the first time that Sturges chose to work with an ascending star (or even a descending one, on occasions) in preference to an established player. Despite the risks he was taking by "star making", Sturges castings were invariably successful.

After the release of PALM BEACH STORY in 1942, Sturges made three more films for Paramount, THE GREAT MOMENT, THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK, and HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO. Doubts about Sturges' comic trimmings to the essentially serious story of THE GREAT MOMENT - the tragic demise of the struggling inventor of general anesthesia - led Paramount to hire Stuart Gilmore to do extensive re-editing, a decision that undoubtedly contributed to its failure when the film was finally released in 1944.

THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK and HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO were another matter altogether. THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK encountered endless censorship problems, but an adamant Sturges steered the film past the Hays Office (perhaps, as James Agee suggested, "in their sleep") and both films were released just as written, to become two of the most successful comedies of the Forties.

By 1944 Paramount had learned its lesson with regard to Sturges, but learned it too late: angered by repeated studio interference, the writer-director left Paramount with the stock company and crew he had built up over the years and set up an independent production company, California Pictures Corporation, in partnership with Howard Hughes. The only picture that Sturges was able to complete as part of the partnership was THE SIN OF HAROLD DIDDLEBOCK (1947), a manifest homage to Harold Lloyd's art of comedy and the closest that Sturges ever came to the pure slapstick of the silent era.

The following year he returned to 20th Century - Fox and filmed one of his oldest projects, the sophisticated black comedy UNFAITHFULLY YOURS (1948), with Rex Harrison. In the face of generally unfavorable reviews, Sturges made only one more film for Fox, THE BEAUTIFUL BLONDE FROM BASHFUL BEND (1949), an unsatisfactory attempt to apply Sturges humor to the Western.

Several uncompleted projects followed, contributing to Sturges' precipitous financial decline. One last film, LES CARNETS DU MAJOR THOMPSON (THE FRENCH THEY ARE A FUNNY RACE) made in France in 1956, gave him hopes of making a comeback, but while working on several projects, chiefly for television, Sturges suffered a fatal heart attack in 1959.

April 26-27

THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK

CHRISTMAS IN JULY may be more warm-hearted, SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS more thematically rich, and THE LADY EVE more aristocratic, but THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK is the most consistantly inventive of Sturges' films. A breakneck farce on the capricious roulette game of success that is American life, it displays the Sturges stock company in full flower, and Eddie Bracken as nervous numbskull Norval, Betty Hutton as his inamorata, knocked-up Trudy Kockenlocker, and William Demarest as her short-fused father have all never been better. In short, one of the top three screwball comedies ever made (the others being Hawks' BRINGING UP BABY and Leo McCarey's THE AWFUL TRUTH.)

EASY LIVING

Sturges as screenwriter provided director Mitchell Leisen with the winning script for this fable of a working girl (Jean Arthur) who makes good after she is hit on the head by a fur coat thrown out the window by a millionaire. Among its many other virtues, EASY LIVING includes what may be Sturges' most unforgettable character, bluffing and blackmailing hotel impresario Louis Louis (Luis Alberni).

May 17-18

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS has been called Sturges' "8½": a comedy director's apologia pro vita sua in the form of a comedy about a comedy director (in a lovely performance by Joel McCrea) who aspires to direct a film with "social significance". Sturges' most audacious work, with a sleight-of-hand that may leave anyone gasping at its sheer effrontery, the film is also a must for anyone who mistakenly believes Veronica Lake was only a forties period piece.

HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO

The small town America of THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK provides the setting for this irrepressible and loving satire, led by Eddie Bracken as a slightly confused 4-F set up as a war hero by his Marine Corps buddies, and Ella Raines as his dubious but warm-hearted fiancée. Sturges' final film for Paramount, HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO demonstrates his virtuosity at the ecstatically energetic pacing and the non-stop humor that characterized the peak of his career.

June 26-27

THE LADY EVE

Sexy and boundlessly energetic Barbara Stanwyck goes after eccentric millionaire Henry Fonda with everything she's got, wiping him out at cards and then returning as Lady Eve Sidwick ("I've been English before"), bristling with ostrich feathers and shrieking with laughter at her own jokes. Deservedly Sturges' best known comedy, this sophisticated and occasionally risqué comedy is elevated to a class by itself by Fonda and Stanwyck's definitively scintillating performances.

June 26-27 (cont'd.)

REMEMBER THE NIGHT

Sturges' final script before making the jump to director, this beautifully fashioned tale of romance and redemption is marked by the same smoothe handling that he would later develop in THE LADY EVE. Although REMEMBER THE NIGHT is signed Mitchell Leisen, it might as well have been Sturges directing the sparkling cast led by Barbara Stanwyck as a light-fingered lady and Fred MacMurray as the prosecutor who falls in love with her.

June 28-29

UNFAITHFULLY YOURS

Three different pieces of music suggest three different solutions to his wife's suspected infidelity for conductor Sir Alfred De Carter (smashingly suave Rex Harrison) in the quintessentially Sturgean black comedy. The best of the director's 20th Century - Fox creations and Sturges' own personal favorite, UNFAITHFULLY YOURS will be shown in a gorgeous, recently rediscovered 35 millimeter print. "This late (1948) work written and directed by Preston Sturges is one of the best comedies ever made in this country..." -Pauline Kael, Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

CHRISTMAS IN JULY

A couple (Dick Powell and Ellen Drew) very much like that in O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi", very poor and very much in love, spend \$25,000 won in a contest only to learn that they haven't really won. With its warm and gentle treatment of the New York-style slum, CHRISTMAS IN JULY reveals Sturges' sentimental side, although not without a characteristic jab at Lady Luck and the obligatory outbreak of comic violence.

CREDITS

THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK

Directed by Preston Sturges

Cast: Betty Hutton, Eddie Bracken, Diana Lynn, Brian Donlevy, William Demarest,
Porter Hall, Almira Sessions, Jimmy Conlon

Paramount/ 1944/ 99minutes

EASY LIVING

Directed by Mitchell Leisen

Written by Preston Sturges

Cast: Jean Arthur, Ray Milland, Edward Arnold, Franklin Pangborn, William Demarest,
Luis Alberni

Paramount/ 1937/ 91 minutes

SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS

Directed by Preston Sturges

Cast: Joel McCrea, Veronica Lake, William Demarest, Franklin Pangborn, Porter Hall

Paramount/ 1941/ 91 minutes

HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO

Directed by Preston Sturges

Cast: Eddie Bracken, Ella Rains, Raymond Walburn, William Demarest, Jimmy Conlon,
Franklin Pangborn

Paramount/ 1944/ 101 minutes

THE LADY EVE

Directed by Preston Sturges

Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Henry Fonda, Charles Coburn, Eugene Pallette, William Demarest

Paramount/ 1941/ 97 minutes

REMEMBER THE NIGHT

Directed by Mitchell Leisen

Written by Preston Sturges

Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, Beulah Bondi, Elizabeth Patterson, Sterling
Holloway

Paramount/ 1940/ 86 minutes

UNFAITHFULLY YOURS

Directed by Preston Sturges

Cast: Rex Harrison, Linda Darnell, Rudy Vallee, Barbara Lawrence

Fox/ 1948/ 105 minutes

CHRISTMAS IN JULY

Directed by Preston Sturges

Cast: Dick Powell, Ellen Drew, Raymond Walburn, William Demarest, Ernest Truex,
Franklin Pangborn

Paramount/ 1940/ 70 minutes