

ely
film
society

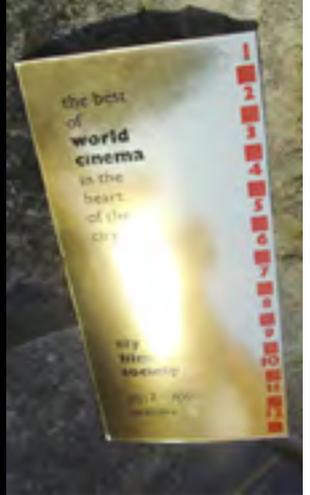
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June
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notes

RENEWING YOUR MEMBERSHIP?

From now on you'll be getting a shiny twelve-film carnet which will be punched at each film you attend, giving unrivalled flexibility of choice. These have been printed for us by local letterpress printer Gordon Chesterman. Local means, local talent, local commitment!!!



Sullivan's Travels

Preston Sturges, US 1941

Script by Preston Sturges

Joel McCrea John L. Sullivan
 Veronica Lake The Girl
 Robert Warwick Mr. LeBrand
 William Demarest Mr. Jones
 Franklin Pangborn Mr. Casalsis
 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 Colored Chef
 Almira Sessions Ursula
 Esther Howard Miz Zeffie



What are films for? Why do we make films? Many a serious filmmaker will roar their demands for artistic integrity, raise the radio mast transmitting the solution to our social problems, sweep the sky with searchlights in the quest for the reason for our existence. Others will hold the blazing torch of entertainment. Still others will unite their artistic endeavours in order to make money.

John L. Sullivan, director of cheap comedies, is convinced there must

be something better. What if films could make us better people? What if films could help us to help our fellow-man? What if films could answer the question 'O, Brother, Where Art Thou?'. Abandoning the artifice and futility of the sound stages, casting couches and front offices of Hollywood, Sullivan sets out to prove that that question is the best title for a film he could ever imagine. He sets out to find his 'brother' and himself. What he finds along the way confounds all of his

ideas and prejudices, his expectations and his desires. What many regard as the defining sequence of the film, seen by some as perhaps unconvincing and sentimental, nevertheless goes some way to answering my two initial questions and Sullivan's own titular conundrum.

The film's director, Preston Sturges, was a writer-director the like of which we haven't seen since. He was a well-connected anarchist in a system that frowned on such tendencies - unless

they made money. Directors such as Billy Wilder owed a great debt to him.

Sturges's America was cheerfully corrupt, absurd and frequently unaware of its own ridiculousness, and his films were so high on comic dynamism that you could readily forgive the wayward lip service to logic.

His glory days were brief. Within 10 years of his directorial debut, *The Great McGinty* [1940], he was worn out, and he died bankrupt in 1959. But in his heyday he made half a dozen comedies as subversive as any now, and a good deal funnier. *Sullivan's Travels* was probably his masterpiece.

Is the film serious underneath its hilarity? Perhaps not entirely, since Sturges, like Sullivan, never quite knew how to do it. But the way his assemblage of characters so often seem to realise their own failings at least betokens a sophisticated, perhaps kindly cynic. People have tended to say that Sturges' films were as confused as he was. If that is so, long live abstracted directors, since they tend to see the world as it is rather than as we might wish it to be.

Sullivan's Travels [1941] is generally considered one of celebrated writer/director Preston Sturges' greatest dramatic comedies - and a satirical statement of his own director's creed. One of his more interesting and intelligent films from a repertoire of about twelve films in his entire career, Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* satirizes Hollywood pretension and excesses with his particular brand of sophisticated verbal wit and dialogue, satire and fast-paced slapstick. Sturges was one of the first scriptwriters in the sound era to direct his own screenplays. He was assisted by future westerns film director Anthony Mann, and cinematographer John Seitz (who later filmed such notable *film noirs* as *This Gun For Hire* [1942], *Double Indemnity* [1944], *The Big Clock* [1948], and *Sunset Boulevard* [1950], as well as two other Sturges works, *Hail the*

Conquering Hero [1944] and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* [1944]).

This witty journey film from Paramount Studios skillfully mixes every conceivable cinematic genre type and tone of film possible - tragic melodrama, farce, prison film, serious drama, social documentary, slapstick, romance, comedy, action, and even musical, in about a dozen sequences. Due to confusion over the varying, inconsistent moods within the film, the marketing campaign decided to focus on Veronica Lake's peekaboo hairdo instead, with the tagline: "VERONICA LAKE'S ON THE TAKE." The film's title is a vague reference to *Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift's satirical 1726 tale of Lemuel Gulliver's fanciful journey into strange, unknown worlds). In addition, the main character John L. (Lloyd) Sullivan was also the name of a well-known cultural figure of the time, deceased sports hero-boxer John L. (Lawrence) Sullivan, the first heavyweight champion of gloved-boxing in the late 19th century.

For *Sullivan's Travels*, Sturges takes the gloves off as he takes on the Hollywood film industry's own take on the reason for making films in the first place:

Sullivan: This picture is an ANSWER to Communists. It shows we're awake and not dunking our heads in the sand like a bunch of ostriches. I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions, stark realism, the problems that confront the average man.

Lebrand: But with a little sex.

Sullivan: A little, but I don't want to stress it. I want this picture to be a document. I want to hold a mirror up to life. I want this to be a picture of dignity - a true canvas of the suffering of humanity.

Lebrand: But with a little sex.

Hadrian: How about a nice musical?

PRESTON STURGES

1898-1959



Preston Sturges' own life is as unlikely as some of the plots of his best work. He was born into a wealthy family. As a boy he helped out on stage productions for his mother's friend, Isadora Duncan (the scarf that strangled her was made by his mother's company, Maison Desti). He served in the U.S. Army Signal Corps during WWI. Upon his return to Maison Desti, he invented a kissproof lipstick, Red-Red Rouge, in 1920. Shortly after his first marriage, his mother demanded that he return control of the company to her. Kicked out of Maison Desti, he turned to inventing. A tickertape machine, an intaglio photo-etching process, an automobile and an airplane were among his some of his commercially unsuccessful inventions. He began writing stories and, while recovering from an appendectomy in 1929, wrote his first play, *The Guinea Pig*. In financial trouble over producing his plays, he moved to Hollywood in 1932 to make money. It wasn't long before he became frustrated by the lack of control he had over his work and wanted to direct the scripts he wrote. Paramount gave him this chance as part of a deal for selling his script for *The Great McGinty* at a cheap price. The film's success launched his career as writer/director and he had several hits over the next four years. That success emboldened him to become an independent filmmaker, but that did not last long--he had a string of commercial failures and acquired a reputation as an expensive perfectionist. He moved to France to make what turned out to be his last movie, *The French, They Are a Funny Race* (1955). He died at the Algonquin Hotel, New York City, in 1959.

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
FOUR LIONS
(Chris Morris, UK 2010)
Monday 17 July