

Preston Sturges was a writer and director of a number of Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s including one of my favorites, "Sullivan's Travels" in 1941 through Paramount Pictures. It stars Joel McCree and Veronica Lake, two actors frequently used by Sturges who was known for using an ensemble actor approach. For me, this film about a filmmaker is specifically interested because, as a filmmaker myself, these films give unique insights into the approaches and attitudes of other filmmakers. Unlike many other "Hollywood on Hollywood" subject matter films such as "A Star is Born" and its ilk, the process of creativity is not invisible.

Stepping back a bit....

1. Sturges was born in Chicago 1898, died 1959
2. Mother was a singer and a bit of a free spirit, marrying four times in total.
3. Her third husband adopted Preston. He was a rich stockbroker.
4. Preston traveled extensively to and from Europe with his mother, mixing frequently with artistic and/or affluent people. "Change" was something he was not only accustomed to, he almost seem to thrive on. This will certainly be a factor in the films he would make.
5. He joined the air force in WWI and was trained but never went into action. After the war he worked in management for his mother's store-owner fourth husband.
6. In 1927 Sturges married the first of his four wives and began working as a professional writer. He wrote plays on Broadway. "Strictly Dishonorable" was very successful and got him the attention of Hollywood. He was hired by Paramount and began writing screenplays full time.
7. Sturges had been unhappy with the way his screenplays were directed, so in 1939 he gave the studio the screenplay of "The Great McGinty", which would later win the Oscar for best screenplay, for only \$10 in exchange for being hired to direct the film himself. From that point on, Preston Sturges would be a writer/director, one of the few such roles in Hollywood.
8. After three films as writer/director of comedies, he began to notice a trend among fellow comedy directors, a tendency for them to want to be taken more seriously. This led many of them to attempt to break away from comedy to make "serious" movies, films with social issues and dealing with tragic, emotionally driven characters. Sturges made "Sullivan's Travels" in response to those observations.
9. A theme which runs through many Sturges films is "honesty". I don't think he had anything against social commentary in film, but felt that people should be honest about what they are talking about.
10. Sturges loved Paramount where he made all of this Hollywood features and he loved the Hollywood system, but this did not stop him from satirizing and ridiculing it.

11. Some things to look at within the films themselves. First off, is style. Unlike many other well regarded filmmakers of this or any other era who create complex additional meaning in their films using complex camera angles, specialized lighting techniques, or other visual tricks, Sturges approach is deceptively simple. He tends to hold on long shots, allowing the actors to perform their script uninterrupted by the filmmaking style. Watch to see how long some of the shots are. In the opening scene when filmmakers are talking, there is an uninterrupted shot over three minutes long. He makes the script and the performance his top priority.
12. Alessandro Pirolini, in his book, The Cinema of Preston Sturges, a critical study suggests that Sturges creates pastiches in his films, mixing genres in a way few others do. This film will contain a prison film, social commentary, slapstick, a road movie, and a screwball romantic comedy.
13. In terms of "pastiche" as well as many direct and indirect references, it is interesting to look at the work of the Coen Brothers in light of Sturges' films. The Coens also mix and twist genres. In "Oh Brother Where Art Thou", a film whose title is taken directly from today's film, the genre is also moving from one to another; prison escape, musical, romantic comedy, political elections, etc. Their new film "Hail Caesar!" similarly merges many topics and genres, critiquing Hollywood in many ways similar to "Sullivan's Travels".
14. By shifting between genres, our expectations for what will happen next also continues to shift. This allows Sturges to expose and critique clichés which have always been a big problem with Hollywood storytellers.
15. I think this shifting also helps make the film less predictable and more engaging. The huge shifts in story direction create a feeling of the absurd. If you attempt to rationalize an absurd story, you are bound to fail and be frustrated. Instead, I would suggest that you observe and enjoy, letting the story take you where it is going. This shifting absurdity in storytelling is heartedly embraced by The Simpsons writers where an episode beginning with Homer buying donuts might end up being about Marge becoming a pilot or Bart being kidnapped. It is about the joy of the surprise.
16. Preston Sturges' films feel light as they begin. They give us familiar movie situations such as mistaken identities or frustrated relationships. However, his film begin to ask questions about ethics, responsibility, and truth, questions that it eventually gives unsatisfying answers to, so much so that we cannot come to the inevitable conclusion that: THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS. "Sullivan's Travels" offers an overt discussion of how film has the potential to impact people. Perhaps we can take a minute at the end to talk about that.
17. Characters in Sturges films are often in conflict with a large crowd. In such cases, there is often a girl who is the not only the love interest, but also has a foot in both worlds,

understanding the passion of the protagonist as well as the pragmatism of his opponent. This is the case in today's film.

18. Pirolini also discusses Sturges as being a predecessor of the postmodern movement. Simply put, this is a practice where the artist expects the audience to know many cultural references before the film begins. This is common today but quite surprising in the 1930s and 40s. Some of these references and jokes might be lost on us today, separated by too many decades, but others are certainly still accessible such as references to the Dionne Quintuplets. Sturges frequently alludes other films and filmmakers who were contemporaries of his or preceded him such as the Keystone Cop films of Frank Capra or Ernst Lubitsch. Example, Bond theme plays...
19. At times, and this could also relate to postmodernism, characters in Sturges films display moments where they seem aware that they are participating in a story. Listen, for example, for a line suggesting that it is "time for a plot twist".
20. Seen today, one of the strengths and attractive features of Sturges' films was his use of an ensemble cast or "stock company" where he repeatedly used the same actors in his films in varying roles. This included the star Joel McCrea. The Coen Brothers also use this stock company approach, as does Wes Anderson, Quentin Tarantino, and Woody Allen.
21. Sturges amount of control he'd taken with his films, including his casting choices, led to friction with producers at Paramount. He was being seen as a temperamental and uncontrollable diva and, with studios changing priorities after WWII, Preston left the studio. He attempted to work with Howard Hughs for a couple of years but this ended in some failures. He attempted to develop a number of television projects but none of these were ever made. Faced with tax problems, Sturges went to France where he made one more feature.

Again, things to observe in this film: length of a shot without cutting, shifting genres, absurdity, and cultural allusions.

Bibliography

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Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preston_Sturges