

# Preston Sturges & The Marx Bros.

by  
Richard von Busack

“Somebody said that all I needed for success in American life was a bass voice and a muscular handshake, so I seized producers with a powerful grip, looked piercingly into their eyes and asked them in my deepest tones if they doubted for a second if I could direct. “When they said, ‘no’, and I said, “Then when do I start,’ they said, “As soon as you’ve directed for anybody else.”

Such was Preston Sturges’ dilemma in the late 1930s. He was one of the best-paid writers in Hollywood, where, as the saying went, you never saw so many unhappy people earning \$100,000 a year. He had worked for Goldwyn, MGM and Universal, had written dialogue for kings and drum majorettes alike, and he was burning to direct.

It was during this time that a script of Sturges’ titled “The Vagrant” was being prepared for filming. Sturges offered his services as director for the sum of \$1. Paramount producer William LeBaron accepted the deal for \$10 to make it more official. The script was retitled “The Great McGinty.” In parting, LeBaron warned the novice director that he’d be happier as a writer: “Shoemaker, stick to your last!” “You show me a man who sticks to his last, and I’ll show you a shoemaker,” Sturges thought to himself, on the staircase out of the office.

So began the directing career of Preston Sturges. In a startlingly short rush of creative fervor, which chronologically paralleled the US’s most desperate years during World War II, Sturges directed seven peerless comedies. Sturges blasted Hollywood’s production code into cobwebs with innuendo, composed some of the most ringing comic dialogue in the American cinema’s history, and led a troop of the most unlikely actors into comedic Valhalla.

Sturges was to adult comedy what Hitchcock was to thrillers and what Welles was to, well, Welles. Sturges pushed for complete artistic control in an era when films were assembled piecemeal, like the factory goods they were. Indeed, the chief reason for his rapid fall from grace was, like Welles, because of Sturges’ insistence on control when the numbers weren’t with him.

But this boy wonder was 42 when he began directing. And in one capacity or another he worked on some 50 films between 1929 and his death in 1959. If his last decade was

full of projects that evaporated, he hadn't yet lost his skills. In the late 1950s he wrote a film treatment for Shaw's *The Millionairess* that excited such stars as Katherine Hepburn and Alec Guinness. Meanwhile, Hollywood was still remaking his scripts as vehicles for George Gobel and Jerry Lewis. In 1955, during the making of his last film *Les Carnets du Major Thompson* (released here as *The French They Are a Funny Race*) Sturges faced a mess: a studio he rented turned out to be empty—a big box with a roof on it. For lack of anything better, his crew counterweighted the camera boom with manhole covers and cast extras by pulling over cabs and asking the hacks if they knew how to act.

If there are no second acts in American lives, you might get another shot in Paris. Sturges himself always maintained that when his luck ran out, he'd buy a dime notepad and a pencil, sit out on the curb and start all over again. He died waiting for his last hit, but he possessed the faith of a lifelong gambler: one whose losing streaks had been interminable, but who had tasted more than a few enormous wins. He had been Howard Hughes' business partner, and the IRS once identified him as the third highest-paid executive in the country.

Sturges was raised mostly by his mother, a woman who could drive a man crazy. Mary Deste Dempsey, or "D'este" as she styled herself, must have been remarkable judging from the portrait of her in Sturges' unfinished memoir, which had the working title *The Events Leading Up to My Death*, and which was later collected as *Preston Sturges by Preston Sturges*.

Preston was an only child, a memento of his mother's first marriage to a man named Biden, a collection agent last heard of trying to put the touch on his now-famous son. "Mr. Biden never sounded like much of a husband to me, but it must be remembered that he was one of mother's very first ones, and like the celebrated Mrs. Simpson [The Duchess of Windsor], she did better later." Before marriage, Dempsey had been a medical student, or at least a nurse. "She regaled me ... with gay anecdotes about the autopsy room and the jolly pranks the students used to play in them. The delicious, 'I offer you my hand and heart,' with these items presented in an accompanying shoebox, always convulsed me."

Mary took, as her second husband, a stockbroker named Solomon Sturges, who gave her a similar deal to what Persephone got: she was allowed to spend six months of the year in Europe. Abroad, Dempsey was free to pursue her interests. These included studying for a while with none other than Alistair Crowley and hanging around with her dear friend Isadora Duncan.

When World War I broke out, Preston became a more permanent resident of the US, training for the army air force, and later running the family business stateside for his mother. Preston toyed with a number of careers, inventing a vertical take-off plane and marketing Deste's Red Red Rouge, an allegedly kiss-proof lipstick that would last 24 hours without smudging. It was an attack of appendicitis that led him to consider playwriting as a means of coining fast money.

He began with a few flops: *Hotbed*, *Recapture* and *The Well of Romance*, but then made his name just before the crash with *Strictly Dishonorable* (1929). After a few follow-ups failed, Sturges decided to try his luck in Hollywood. His screenplay for *The Power and The Glory* (1933) is often described as a model for the flashbacked story telling Welles used in *Citizen Kane*, though there are other examples in literature. It was so well regarded that Sturges was offered a percentage as well as his salary—an unheard-of deal for the time.

Mostly, Sturges worked on other people's projects. These included a screenplay for a film version of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, and adaptation of Fanny Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1934); he was a scriptwriter on a fairly divine romantic comedy *The Good Fairy* (1934) sourced from a Hungarian farce: Sturges, the inventor, must have been the one who came up with that wonder fabric Genuine Foxine Fur.

Then came his streak of successes as a triple threat—a streak broken only by his *The Great Moment*, a comedy/drama about the invention of anesthesia. Flushed with success, Sturges wanted more power of his own work; when he left Paramount in 1944 it was over the studio's refusal to negotiate the right to demand a limit on the cutting of his films.

He formed a corporation with Howard Hughes, but California Pictures was an experiment that failed because of Hughes' interferences and absences. Sturges' comeback vehicle for Harold Lloyd, *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (aka *Mad Wednesday*) has its admirers, but subsequent films tend to be for completionists only, give or take *Unfaithfully Yours*—a comedy understandably filed under film noir. Sturges drank heavily, but he never really lost his way; at the time of his death under contract to produce two plays and a screenplay.

Describing his method is like trying to explain a tornado. Despite his European travels, Sturges more or less considered himself a Chicagoan, just as Saul Bellow defined citizenship in that city: "first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent." Sturges' comedies are about enterprise and the Wheel of Fortune, about dumb luck and chance. The scripts are a scrambling mix: a New Yorker cartoon jest precedes a deft put-down (Claudette Colbert describing the unfortunate type of woman having "short little legs like an alligator"). Male pomposity undone by the chemical force of women, as well as the machinations of an unparalleled gallery of types, Sturges' stock company. William Demarest, the Sultan of Snarl, a gun-powdery Jersey-raised vaudevillian and World War I vet was a regular. Demarest got the role of his life in Sturges' *Hail the Conquering Hero*; he's also a voice of experience, a kind of male Thelma Ritter, in *The Lady Eve*. There was Eddie Bracken, champion wimp—gateway to Don Knotts or Steve Buscemi after him. There was Eugene Pallette, heavyweight representative of the nouveau riche; nasal-voiced attorney Al Bridge...

Like the Marx Brothers films with which Sturges' classics are being double-billed, the comedy mixes American breeziness with European swank. There are comedy directors

to whom Sturges can be compared—Capra when he’s not being sentimental, Lubitsch when he’s being erudite...Woody Allen, is maybe the closest of them, with Sturges anticipating Allen’s high-low mix of Borscht belt gag and Ingmar Bergman ponderings. It’s Mark Twain who Sturges resembles most, and people have been noting that as far as Manny Farber’s appreciative essay on Sturges back in 1954. In Twain, we see a love-hate relationship with European culture, the equal passions to swoon or jeer. Twain and Sturges specialize in a democratic comedy that doesn’t insist on an oppressed little guy. In Sturges, as Farber put it, “everyone down to the cross-eyed bit player gets a chance to try out his oratorical ability.”

Compare quite two similar character actors in small parts in Sturges two best films, *The Lady Eve* and *The Palm Beach Story*. In the latter, Sig Arno is a non-Anglophonic refugee from Albania or something: “Neetz, Toto!” scolds his patron, Mary Astor. In the former, Torben Meyer is the ship’s suave purser who regretfully is forced to pass on the news that there are known card sharps about his boat and that he might have pictures... “Ya talk like a law school,” says William Demarest’s Muggsy, cutting to the chase. Arno is a low-comedy foreigner, speaking a kind of pigeon-Esperanto. Meyer is a poignant regretful Frenchman—the type usually given gesticulation parts in American movies of the 1930s and ’40s. Sturges—a gifted caricaturist with pen and ink... and I mean halfway-to-Hirschfield gifted...was always able to outline salient features on his cast, with more speed than any of his contemporaries.

Nowhere does Sturges’ assurance in the power of comedy show better than in the last scenes of his *Candide* story, *Sullivan’s Travels*. The beaten, defeated and chain-ganged movie director (Joel McCrea)—having arrived in hell following the path of good intentions—is taken to a movie at a local church. Sullivan hoped to prod the social conscience of America with his story of capital versus labor *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In a mob with the suffering prisoners, Sullivan learns to laugh over a trifle—a cartoon dog stuck on a piece of flypaper, from the Disney short “Playful Pluto.” I just saw this famous scene given an uncredited restage in TV’s *Orange is the New Black*, where the inmates of a woman’s prison are laughing themselves sick over Adam Sandler.

“Shout and bellow with uplifted hand,” wrote Quintilian, a Roman critic of 100 AD, “paint, wag your head, smite your hands together, slap your thigh, your breast, your forehead, and you will go straight to the hearts of the dingier members of your audience.” Sturges does this—the physical comedy is still stunning, and Demarest is one of the deftest pratfallers of the sound era.

But it’s the plot complications of Sturges’ films that amaze now. They’re seemingly unthinkable, given the censorship of the time. An extreme example is *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*, which has yet to take its place as one of the five or six essential Christmas movies. The pregnant Trudy seeks out a lawyer (Bridge) whose oratory shows the dazzling contrast between a family attorney in Sturgesland and a more typical retainer in, say, an Andy Hardy movie:

“The responsibility for recording a marriage has always been up to the woman. Wasn’t for her, marriage would have disappeared long since. No man is going to jeopardize his present or poison his future with a lot of little brats hollering around the house, ’less he forced to. It’s up to the woman to knock him down, hogtie him and drag him in front of two witnesses immediately if not sooner. Any time after that is too late.”

Likewise the ear-nibbling scenes in *The Lady Eve* defy the censors as only the dialogue-interrupted clinch in Hitchcock’s *Notorious* would a few years later. The Code decreed that a kiss could last only a prescribed amount of time, and no couple could be seen on a bed together unless one of the pair had his or her feet on the ground. In the scene, Henry Fonda is cuddled by the predatory Barbara Stanwyck.

She’s on a chaise, and he’s lying next to her. She’s holding him very close indeed, but never actually kissing him—and it’s one of the sexiest, wittiest scenes ever shot. Stanwyck’s purring seduction of the hapless Hopsy ends as she describes, pretty much to the point of climax, what it is she likes in a man. The poor Pike is paralytic from stirrings he’s never felt before. “You’d better go to bed...I think I can sleep easily now.” He croaks, “That’s easy for you to say.”

As a dame says about a fish at a banquet, Stanwyck is a poem: that level, uncoy gaze, that Brooklyn rasp filtered through layers of hard-bought breeding. She was the most versatile of all Hollywood leading ladies, here in one of her best parts. Stanwyck’s Eve has kind of a significant name, given the Fall of Man, and she disguises herself as an upper-class British Lilith to get her revenge: “I need him like an axe needs a turkey”—there’s a similarly carnivorous comment in Diana Lynn’s summing up of Eddie Bracken in Morgan’s Creek. He “fits the plan like the skin on a wienie. ... He was made for it, like the ox was made to eat and the grape was made to drink.”

Sturges’ angle on the men/women struggle gives all the power to the women, but it’s not a misogynist view. In hindsight, this women-on-top principle may have linked his best work to the WW II years, when women were temporarily freed from the kitchen and the nursery.

In other films, women died for their sins; Stanwyck in *Lady Eve*, and Colbert in *Palm Beach Story* prosper for theirs. Name a woman character wiler than Veronica Lake’s tough working girl in 1941’s *Sullivan’s Travels*, more confident than Barbara Stanwyck’s confidence woman Eve “Harrington,” more coolly out-for-herself than Claudette Colbert in 1942’s *The Palm Beach Story*.

And they’re forgiven by their husbands who learn Sturges’ prime directive, as spoken by Stanwyck’s Eugenia to Fonda’s Pike: “You see, you don’t know about girls...the best ones aren’t as good as you probably think they are...and the bad ones aren’t as bad...not nearly as bad.” (Sturges’ biographer Diane Jacobs calls this much-quoted line a dedication, “unmistakably to Preston’s unconventional mom.”) Sturges was reported to be rather a chauvinist in his personal life. But there is something proved by the appearance

of the smiling top-hatted and tuxed cartoon serpent that appears in the credits of *Eve* (animated by Leon Schlesinger's Termite Terrace cartoonists, Sturges' fellow-travelers in pungent wartime humor). Sturges wasn't sorry the snake made it into the garden. And his films indicate that even if women drove him crazy, he always liked them.

Sturges is commonly seen as an Icarus figure: a phenomenon that swept through Hollywood like a storm, and blew himself out at the end, through overwork, and drink. Historian Leslie Halliwell quotes scriptwriter Earl Felton, credited on one of Sturges' last and least pictures *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*:

"He was too large for this smelly resort and the big studios were scared to death of him. A man who was a triple threat [i.e., a writer/director/producer] kept them awake nights, and I'm positive they were waiting for him to fall on his face so they could pounce and devour this terrible threat to their stingy talents. They pounced, and they got him, good. But he knew the great days when his can [butt] glowed like a port light from their kissing it."

Thinking of a prettier eulogy for Sturges, one considers the soliloquy of the Texas Weenie King in *The Palm Beach Story*, a slightly morose millionaire cheered up by the sight of a pajama clad Colbert. He cocks his wizened, deaf head, and recites something he must have heard in a schoolroom when Rutherford B. Hayes was president: "Cold are the hands of time that creep along relentlessly, destroying slowly, but without pity, that which yesterday was young. Alone our memories resist this disintegration and grow more lovely with the passing years."

What do Sturges and the Marx Brothers have in common? A debt to silent comedy, to begin with; a particularly good Harpo routine, the broken-mirror pantomime in *Duck Soup* is performed to utter silence, even in a movie made five years after the advent of sound film. Actors cross over between Sturges and the Marxes, likely because they were contract players at Paramount—Robert Greig, the obese Australian born butler type who plays "Burrows" in *The Lady Eve* and "Burroughs" in *Sullivan's Travels*, is also Groucho's foil "Hives" the Butler. Edgar Kennedy of slow-burn fame is an ornament in both the Marxes and Sturges.

Contrast the wordplay: Groucho demonstrating his healing skills, "Either this man is dead or my watch is stopped," can be compared and contrasted with Stanwyck's Jeanne in *The Lady Eve* summing up a bad wager during her day at the races: "Whaddya expect, betting on a goat called 'After You'?"

In *The Biographical Dictionary of Film*, David Thomson is unusually wise on the subject of the Pirandelloesqueness of the Brothers' situation—vaudevillians who recycled their stage-tested material into films. As late as their film *A Day at the Races*, the Marxes were still testing their routines with a live audience, passing out cards to see which of the gags had gone over. They performed with an eye to the audience, during their many

schleps across America's most remote vaudeville stages: stages they might never have mounted if it wasn't for their stage-crazed mother Minnie. She was certain that her boys could have some of the success of her own brother, the noted comedian Al Shean of Gallagher and Shean. Their father was a tailor of ESL pronouncements. ("Let me borrow your ducks," he told Chico once when they were in Hollywood. "My tux? Why?" "I've got tickets to a previous.")

The brothers—let's ignore their real names in favor of the stage ones they adopted—weren't from the desperate side of the tracks, but they knew criminals. The bland, smooth-faced Zeppo claimed that if he hadn't been drafted into the family act, he almost would have almost certainly been arrested as an accessory to a self-defense murder. The palming skills Chico and Harpo display? They worked in real life to augment the bad money they made on stage. ("I can't imagine what's keeping that coffee pot.")

Wigs and shtick aside, these are players who always know they're in a play. The brothers are potential breakers of the fourth wall, as in the time Groucho warns the audience off from the mandatory harp-break in *Horse Feathers*: "I have to stay here but there's no reason why you folks shouldn't go out into the lobby until this thing blows over." Like Chico's Fats Wallersish piano solos, Harpo's harp solos lent the show some kind of class, and one can judge that Harpo anticipated Liberace—if not as a clothes-horse, at least as the kind of musician who'd segue Chopin into "Three Little Fishies."

I can take or leave a malapropism, but Chico Marx's cod-Italian is as good as they get—always best used as a magician's indirection to throw off a figure of authority. In *Duck Soup* the "Saturday/Shadowday" gag serves to baffle Louis Calhern so much that he's unable to rage at how his agent Chicolini ditched a job of surveillance to go watch some baseball.

The Marx Brothers' films stand or fall because of Groucho Marx. He called himself a mangy lover. He was a crouching scuttler, masked and mustached with greasepaint, vulgar yet debonair, and oddly sensitive, like most sarcasm-mongers. Stefan Kanfer, one of Groucho's biographers, notes that his co-star Maureen O'Sullivan thought Groucho was "well-built." He is what they used to call clean-limbed, and you'll note he enjoyed displaying his legs. A sworn enemy to boredom, this hustler's hustler is usually routed from his privacy and lassitude by the call of money. It's work, churlish work, that forces Groucho into action. He ends up enduring the company of bearded dullards who can neither be driven away by insult or indifference, as Groucho playing jacks while the cabinet of Fredonia sits, fumes and waits to hear his agenda.

A credited scriptwriter was the feuilletonist S. J. Perelman, with whom Groucho had a respectful but troubled friendship—they were too much alike to click, and Perelman never forgave the way Groucho treated him in Hollywood. Like Perelman, Groucho delighted in exploding clichés so thoroughly that there was nothing left of them. Hence the problem with watching the Marxes in 2013: today a novice may not know what he's talking about. The Peru, Indiana barber who Groucho supposedly sought to amuse

wouldn't get the German puns Perelman tried to inject into his scripts for *Monkey Business* and *Horse Feathers*—Perelman noted that a line in *Horse Feathers* parodying *The Merry Widow* (“Come, Kappelmeister...”) was proof that he'd gotten at least one line he'd written into a script—not that the Marxes cared for scripts. But transcribe a Marx Brothers film, and the lines are so clearly Groucho's own that they once upon a time sold paperbacks of the scripts, and they were almost as funny as the films themselves. Groucho's DNA is contained in those prankish yet acid words.

What did the Marxes honor? Was it the noble dead of the wars, who Groucho called “suckers”? Was it patriotism, when even the image of Washington Crossing the Delaware was a mere illustration for a tattooed lady? Was it, ultimately, the family itself? The Three Stooges flee in the same direction when they're routed, with brother in arms Larry Fine bringing up the middle. When trouble brews, however, the Marxes scatter. They have that unofficial motto of large families: every man for himself.

But in nine films Groucho twines around Margaret Dumont, who is, like Groucho, better looking than you remembered. She's certainly on to his routines, a participant no matter what was rumored at the time about how she never got the jokes. And as Thomson notes, Groucho flees from the movie babes of the time (Thelma Todd or the satin-wrapped, Lupe Velez-like Raquel Torres), always back to Dumont's open arms. “How late do you stay open?” It's a maternal attraction that custom cannot stale or Groucho's dire wordplay cannot dishonor. One could read into it some Freudian megillah: Kanfer claims that Minnie didn't like Groucho best ... unlike almost every other fan of her children.

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