

Preston Sturges

Depression-era writer/director of sophisticated, bold, witty and funny movies. To his credit are four Broadway plays, over 30 produced screenplays, and more than 15 films (that he directed). Some Sturges works: *The Lady Eve*, *The Palm Beach Story*, *Hail the Conquering Hero*, and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*.

"I have no success formula. If I have attained any, it's an act of God. What I learned I picked up from sets. I just kept my eyes opened and learned, as my Filipino chauffeur learned to drive an auto. For five years he rode on seats near the bus driver and watched the driver. Then he went out and started driving." ~~ Preston Sturges, 1940

Exactly...

Despite the fact that he was a man of many talents, a man who challenged many undisputed 'rules' of Hollywood and a man whose films were loved when they were made and critically adored now, he has been largely forgotten and ignored by the larger modern public. When one glances through a filmography and only finds a half a dozen (successful) movies made over just a few years it may not seem that impressive, but when one sees what he accomplished, his cult and critical status will seem to be well deserved.

-- The beginnings --

The 28th of August, 1898 - almost the turn of a century and Mary Biden gives birth to young boy named Edmund Preston Biden. By the time Edmund was only 2, Mary had grown tired of his father and was in search of some excitement. So in 1900 she took her son (whom everyone just called Preston) and headed off to France. Less than a year later she returned to America and fell in love with a rich, Chicago stock-broker. It wasn't long before they were married and Solomon Sturges adopted Preston as a legal son. They never told him that he was adopted and Preston believed Solomon to be his biological father with whom he shared a very close relationship. This happiness was not to last for too long, as Mary was again growing tired of this husband and in 1907 she decided that she was moving back to France. She told Preston that it was up to him to decide where he would stay - assuming that he would naturally want to stay with her, his mother - but he chose Solomon. Not wanting the decision to be based on false information Solomon told him that he was not his real father.

"I remember their telling me. I cried for a week, undoubtedly in exaggeration, but I know the kind of crying it was because I've seen my own little boys that way when they are broken-hearted, and after awhile, the intake of breath makes a gasping, hollow sound more distressing than the crying itself." ~~ Preston Sturges in an interview with James Curtis

Fed-up with both Preston and his 'favourite father' she took him with her anyway and placed him in a French [boarding school](#). His mother divorced and began a series of short-lived marriages, each one moving Preston to a new school - an English one in [Normandy](#), another Parisian boarding school, a prestigious school in [Switzerland](#). Throughout this time Mary had been cultivating [an artistic life-style and the friends to go with it](#), as she wished for this to be part of Preston's education. When Preston was young he was rather taken with all this - for his first day of school he and his mother made a fantastic [classical Greek](#) outfit for him to wear - it must be remembered though that the sight of a young boy turning up at school in a tunic and sandals did not go down well in down-town [Chicago](#) and Preston soon became the neighbourhood bullies favourite victim. His father eventually persuaded him that dressing-up was not the best way to make friends. As Mary's husbands multiplied and her friends grew more [outrageous and flamboyant](#), so Preston became more and more conservative and expressed a strong desire to go back to Chicago and live with Solomon, the only person he knew who seemed to be sane and stable.

By 1913 Mary had managed to gather enough sponsorship from wealthy lovers and famous friends to do what she had always wanted - start her own cosmetics company ([Maison Desti](#)). Also by this time, Preston was tall, handsome, multi-lingual and the perfect face for his mothers' new enterprise. She took him out of school so that he could manage the company while she went and married a [Turk](#). Preston and the company were a huge success (he invented the first '[kiss-proof lipstick](#)') and he mingled with all the wealth and fame in the European world - all who assumed him to be much older than just 16. However in 1914 [the war](#) broke out, and since Mary was now married to a Turk she was suddenly an enemy alien. In a panic she sent Preston and a trunk of [Secret Of The Harem](#) youth lotion back to America hoping he would enlist for the war and she could come back later and use what she had sent with him as the basis of the [Manhattan](#) branch of Maison Desti.

-- What came next --

Predictably, the first thing he did when he landed was go and look for Solomon. After much discussion with his father, Preston decided to enlist in the Aviation Section of the [US Signal Corps](#). He qualified with honours as a [pilot officer](#), but by that time, the war was over. He watched all the young men of his age rush off to [post-war Europe](#) in search of the high-life, but he had had enough of that and wanted nothing more than to be in America and try his best [to become that which he so admired](#) - the dependable, wealthy and stable business man. Solomon suggested to him that he head for Hollywood where the ever expanding - yet still young - motion picture industry was sure to offer him many such opportunities. He refused though - he wanted to make his mark in the cosmetics industry.

Forming branches of his mothers company in America, Preston grew the business and within a few years it had become stable and prosperous. Then,

without warning, his mother sold it. It seemed for a moment that Preston was to follow the same trail as his mother as he embarked on a series of doomed and short-lived relationships and marriages. He decided to try his hand at song-writing, but didn't find what he was looking for and needed. It took a life-threatening [appendicitis](#) case to bring him closer to his destiny. While recovering from the operation in hospital Preston spent a lot of time thinking about his life and decided that [the only way to make sense of anything](#) was to see the irony, to see life as one long comedy and to never complain about it. This sparked '[Speaking Of Operations](#)', his first written work. When he tried to get it published he came to realize that it wasn't quite as hilarious as it had seemed under the influence of [morphine](#) - none-the-less he had found his calling.

He was now living with [Estelle Godfrey](#), his rich wife, whom the house belonged to. Preston spent all day inventing things on paper and then convincing himself that they would never work and filing them all away. These ranged from leaf-spring suspension for cars to ideas for practical [helicopters](#), ways to improve [off-set printing](#) and the [stationary exercise bicycle](#) - all of which would have been new and revolutionary in 1924. But all his detailed plans and drawings never left the apartment - and neither did he. One day his wife came home and announced that she no longer loved him, in fact, she never had. [She was just using him](#) as a character study for a play she was writing. Doing what he believed was right and honourable he moved out and went to his mother. He was 30, aimless and depressed. He began to panic that he had not become successful at anything, and it seemed to be this, rather than some [artistic need](#), that drove him to try and complete a play.

-- Exercises in creative writing --

Still stung by what had happened with Estelle (although she was lying, he did not know this) he sat down and wrote a play called [The Guinea Pig](#), in which a young woman is secretly writing a play and using her unsuspecting boyfriend as comic material. The play was snapped up by producers and ran on [Broadway](#) for a month with very respectable reviews. Preston decided he was a [playwright](#). Flushed with success, he announced to Solomon that his next play would be even better and that he would finish it in thirty days. It turned out to be finished in nine days and called [Strictly Dishonourable](#). It opened in the Autumn of 1929 and was a smash hit. In fact, it did so well that it was produced in [London](#), [Rome](#) and [Berlin](#) and the [film rights](#) were bought. The success made Sturges rich and happy, and to add to it all it also made him Hollywood's most wanted man, despite the fact that his next three plays flopped.

For 1930 on, he was busy with [script-doctoring](#) assignments from major studios like [Fox](#), [Paramount](#), [Universal](#) and [Goldwyn](#). He was adding dialog to other writers' scripts and hand-tailoring dialog for the likes of [Maurice Chevalier](#) and [Cary Grant](#). During this time he also married [Eleanor Hutton](#) (the grand-daughter of tycoon [C.W Post](#)). Although when he was a playwright he had had a fairly

lowly image of the motion picture industry, he had now begun to warm to it and was enjoying the opportunities it afforded him. Thus he didn't seem too upset when his second marriage ended in 1932, as at the same time he was offered a full-time job at Universal. His first job was adapting H.G Wells' *The Invisible Man*, but in the end his work was not used.

"As far as I can make out, Junior Laemmle and the powers that be want something in the picture which they cannot describe but which they insist upon having." -- Preston Sturges on Universal executives

His contract was not renewed. Refusing to sulk, Sturges stayed there for the next three weeks (unpaid) to finish the revisions he had started on another film - this boded well for him as word around town was that he likable and pleasant - values that he believed would get him further than artistic temperament. However what he did next was seen as being nothing short of stupid - he locked himself up at home and spent all his time writing a screenplay that nobody was paying for and that he would not discuss anything about until it was finished. This screenplay was *The Power and the Glory*, a story inspired by his fascination with *railroad tycoons* and the meteoric rise of certain business men. The *screenplay* was rather unusual in some respects though, it used the narrative devices of *flashback*, flash forward and *voice-over* (this was well before *Citizen Kane*) to tell the story. Fox executives were so excited when they finally saw the script that they made Sturges a completely unprecedented offer. No other writers would work on the script, no changes would be made without his permission and he would receive *a share of the profits*.

"The only thing Preston Sturges ever did for writers is make them all jealous." -- Hal Kantor

It would be an understatement to say that this deal caused a fuss. Naturally writers were thrilled with the landmark deal, but many studio chiefs and producers were up in arms, saying the deal 'would give writers an exaggerated idea of their importance.' When the film went into production it was the first time the actors had ever seen a writer on set, and Sturges made sure he was there every day, and *the talk didn't die down for ages* - by which time he had a new idea.

*"When I first went to Hollywood I discovered that directors were treated like Princes Of The Blood, whereas writers worked in teams of six, like piano movers. In the beginning I tried to prove that writers were easily as important as directors, then one day I realized that it was easier to become a Prince Of The Blood myself than to change a whole *social order*." -- Preston Sturges*

Though Sturges said this, he always believed the writer to be of utmost importance and it was a long time yet before he would direct himself. During the 30's Sturges wrote about 30 screenplays, started an engineering company, opened a restaurant, bought a yacht, bred *Dachshunds* and threw lavish parties at his Spanish-style home with his *secretary/mistress* Bianca. He spent money like water and almost got himself into serious trouble. Although it seemed he had a good deal once, the whole idea of an important writer had made producers

nervous and no one was rushing to hire him. Wanting to work on his own scripts in his own time but not having much money left lead him to finally get an agent and do the studio rounds.

In 1936 he was finally hired full time, this time by Paramount. Two years later Paramount was desperate to hang onto him, everything he had written had turned to gold ([If I Were King](#), [Remember The Night](#)) and he was doing fantastically, having just [fallen in love all over again](#). The women was his friends wife, but deciding that he simply had to try, he dressed himself up and arrived at his friends' office where he formally asked him for his wife's hand in marriage. The man said yes. On a roll, Sturges decided to try his luck one more time. He had a pet script he had been harbouring for some time and wanted to offer it to Paramount. He offered the script to them for \$1, on the condition that they would let him direct.

-- The Great Director --

They gave him \$10 and that was it. Sturges brought the film in under-budget, ahead of schedule and full of originality. What had become called [The Great McGinty](#) became a critical and [commercial success](#) and gave Sturges the honour of being the first person in Hollywood to have a [Written & Directed by](#) credit in the titles. The fact that the film was a [political satire](#) meant the success was even more of a surprise considering [the current climate](#). The film was dark, cynical and satirical while at the same time managing to contain his trademark dialog as well as masterful camera work, [physical comedy](#) and an exaggerated sense of irony.

It seemed he was unstoppable, in the next 4 years he turned out 6 of the era's most classic films. First up was [Christmas In July](#) - the follow up to his debut which proved an even bigger hit. Then [The Lady Eve](#) which is usually considered his best work, this was followed by [Sullivan's Travels](#) - the favourite among fans as not only is a great film but it tells the story of a [wannabe successful film-maker](#), something very close to home. [The Palm Beach Story](#) was his fifth film in just two years and was the purest blend of all his favourite tricks - including doing well at the [box-office](#).

And then, [The Miracle Of Morgan's Creek](#) which proved to be rather controversial. It was the story of a small town girl who got so drunk at a ['kiss-the-boys-goodbye'](#) party that she couldn't remember anything in the morning - except that she may have married a soldier. She then finds out that she's pregnant and gives birth to [sextuplets](#) all while her boy-friend is going to such lengths to protect her reputation that he ends up in jail. The films release was delayed for 6 months while [The Production Code](#) enforcers tried to decide what to do with it. They were convinced the story was 'dirty' but it took place at such a frantic pace and with such an air of [farce](#) which was so unlike any other films they had seen that they simply decided he was rather crazy and passed the film. Next was [Hail The Conquering Hero](#) which was also held up at the [Breen Office](#) because they were

convinced it was offensive to [the war effort](#) and the military. They were wrong - all over America is became a smash hit and along with his previous effort, became a firm favourite among the military men, even [General Eisenhower](#) could be counted on for a word of praise for Sturges. Preston himself describing it later as "the one with the least wrong with it."

At this time, not only was he the highest paid writer in America but simply one of the highest paid anybody's in the whole country. And then, in [1944](#) he left Paramount after the disaster that was [The Great Moment](#). He had filmed it in [1942](#) but the executives had delayed the release and then proceeded to re-title and re-edit it without Sturges knowledge and later without his approval. When the picture was released he proclaimed that it was only [over his dead body](#), and as such it turned out to be the first faltering step.

Having left, he had another project he had been hiding since then because after the previous sour experience he wanted to release it with total control - how would he get that? - simple, start his own company. A few months later, in [1945](#), Sturges formed [California Pictures](#) along with [Howard Hughes](#) - the idea being for Hughes to make [airplanes](#) and Sturges to make movies. But only one movie turned out to be made - [The Sin Of Harold Diddlebock](#). It turned out to be no better, it was made amongst a flurry of [creative differences](#) between the two and was eventually re-titled and re-cut by Hughes and so again Preston found himself out of control of his own movie. It was a flop on release. Hughes decided to dissolve the company and buy [RKO](#) instead, so long as he had nothing more to do with Sturges.

However not everyone had given up, and Fox were keen to have him. Not for long though - he only made two movies there, [Unfaithfully Yours](#) (an excellent [pitch black comedy](#) which never-the-less disappeared without trace) and a star vehicle for [Betty Grable](#), [The Beautiful Blonde From Bashful Bend](#) which was nothing short of a disaster on opening.

-- And so, his story and an era, comes to an end --

But with the films he had made, Sturges had redefined the boundaries and style of on-screen comedy and brought a [witty and sophisticated 'writers-view'](#) of the world into the realm of film, making sure that writers would not seem quite so unimportant to the film-making process from now on. He finally got [America](#), [the movie-business](#) and even [the military](#) to laugh at itself and changed how the film-going audience saw irony and wit. Being the first person to have a Written & Directed by credit encouraged many other writers to make the move into the upper-ranks of the 'Princes Of The Blood' until it became [the norm it is today](#) for artists to be part of many aspects of the work involved in making a film.

"He was truly a [Renaissance figure](#). There were very few that came down the pike with his vision. If he had a little luck - and financing - it was there on the screen. A new voice that spoke with wit. Incisively. Daringly. Compared with the

ninety percent of drivel that went on the screen, there was thought. There was a man of intellect, of size. A man who wrote literature." -- Billy Wilder on Preston Sturges

What follows has become [Hollywood folk-lore](#). It's always said and been well known that he sunk into obscurity, frustration and ill-health but what is less known is that it was at that time that he had his fourth and only [happy marriage](#), which included the birth of his sons. In the years leading up to 1950, Sturges spent all his days at [The Players](#) (a club he owned) and became totally smitten with a young-girl who walked past there on her way home from work every evening. [One day he plucked up the courage to go and speak to her](#) - he introduced himself to her and found that his name means nothing. Her name is [Sandy](#) and she's never seen any of his movies. The next day Sturges is waiting for her again, as she tried to hurry along Sturges shows her his entry in a copy of [Who's Who](#). "I didn't want you to think I'm a total bum...." Shortly after that they were married.

Even by this time he had not lost his spark, he was always dreaming and always had a plan. It didn't matter if they all worked out, so long as he was busy and trying. In the early 50's he spent a few years in Paris, [just for old times sake](#) and it was here that he made his last movie [The French, They Are A Funny Race](#). The movie sank without trace, and in an effort to escape the [depression](#) which had been hanging over him, he moved back to [New York](#) with his wife. It was with this in mind that he decided to write an [auto-biography](#) with the apt and fitting title of [The Events Leading Up To My Death](#). So one day in 1959, at the age of 60, Preston sits down to write. After a little while he writes what were to be his final words - "I feel a little indigestion coming on, I shall go and lie down, stretch out, and hope to God I don't croak". Just a few minutes later he died of a heart-attack.

His death seemed to bring many [old friends](#) and admirers out of the wood-work and produced many fine [epitaphs](#), his book was eventually completed and edited by his widow with the title [Preston Sturges on Preston Sturges](#). None may be so fitting however as the one that he wrote for himself...

*Now I've laid me down to die
I pray my neighbours not to pry
Too deeply into sins that I
Not only cannot here deny
But much enjoyed as life flew by*

The Complete Works of Preston Sturges...

... as an actor

Paris Holiday (1958) - Serge Vitry

Sullivan's Travels (1941) - Studio Director

Christmas in July (1940) - Man at Shoeshine Stand

... as writer

Rock-A-Bye Baby (1958) - based on his work of The Miracle of Morgan's Creek

The Birds and Bees (1955) - Co-writer

Letters From My Windmill (1954) - English sub-titles

Strictly Dishonourable (1951) - based on his play of the same name

I'll Be Yours (1947)

Safeguarding Military Intelligence (1941) - war effort propaganda short

Remember the Night (1940)

Never Say Die (1939) - Co-writer

If I Were King (1938)

College Swing (1937) - uncredited work on the screen-play

Port of Seven Seas (1937)

Easy Living (1937)

Next Time We Love (1935) - uncredited work on the screen-play

The Gay Deception (1935) - Including the song "Paris in the Evening"

Diamond Jim (1935)

The Good Fairy (1935)

We Live Again (1934)

Thirty Day Princess (1934)

Imitation of Life (1934) - adaptation of the novel

The Power and the Glory (1933)

They Just Had To Get Married (1932) - uncredited work on the screen-play

Child of Manhattan (1932) - based on his play

Strictly Dishonourable (1931) - based on his play of the same name

Fast and Loose (1930) - dialog

The Big Pond (1929) - dialog

... as writer & director

The French, They Are A Funny Race (1955)

Mad Wednesday (1951)

The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend (1949)

Unfaithfully Yours (1948)

Vendetta (1946) - uncredited production, direction and writing

The Sin of Harold Diddlebock (1946)

The Great Moment (1944)

Hail the Conquering Hero (1944)

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek (1944)

The Palm Beach Story (1942)

Sullivan's Travels (1942)

New York Town (1941) - uncredited

The Lady Eve (1941)

Sullivan's Travels (1941)

Christmas in July (1940)

The Great McGinty (1940)

... as producer

The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend (1949)

Unfaithfully Yours (1948)

The Sin of Harold Diddlebock (1946)

Hail the Conquering Hero (1944)

I Married a Witch (1942)

Sullivan's Travels (1942)

Those who thought him worthy...

The Academy Of Motion Picture Arts And Sciences

1944

Best Original Screenplay

Hail the Conquering Hero

Nominated

1944

Best Original Screenplay

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek

Nominated

1940

Best Original Screenplay

The Great McGinty

Win

Cannes International Film Festival

1951

The Sin of Harold Diddlebock

Nominated

New York Film Critics Circle

1944

Best Direction

Hail the Conquering Hero

Nominated

1944

Best Direction
The Miracle of Morgan's Creek
Nominated

1944
Best Film
Hail the Conquering Hero
Nominated

1942
Best Direction
Sullivan's Travels
Nominated

1941
Best Direction
The Lady Eve
Nominated

1941
Best Film
The Lady Eve
Nominated