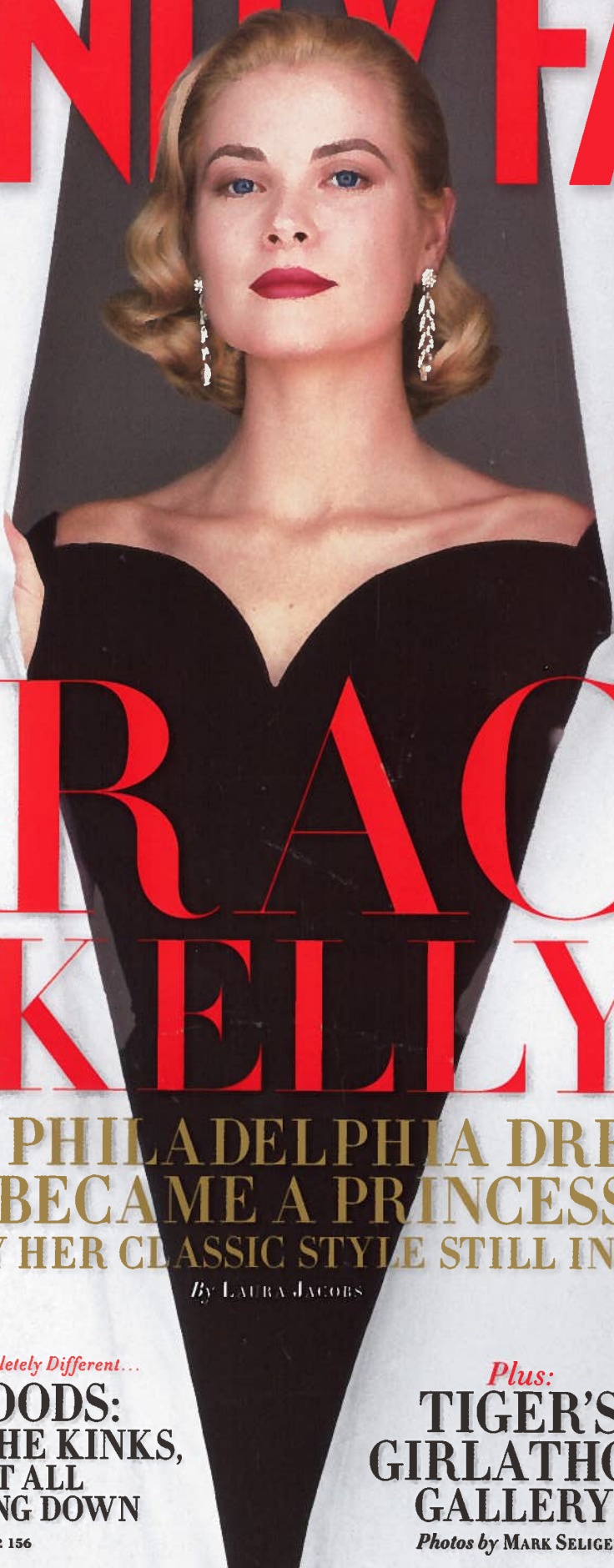


AMERICA'S TOP GUN IN THE MIDDLE EAST BY MARK BOWDEN P. 148

# VANITY FAIR



*"The innocent and  
the beautiful / Have no  
enemy but time."*  
-W. B. YEATS

# GRACE KELLY

HOW A PHILADELPHIA DREAMER  
BECAME A PRINCESS  
AND WHY HER CLASSIC STYLE STILL INSPIRES P. 182

*By* LAURA JACOBS

*And Now for Something Completely Different...*

**TIGER WOODS:  
THE WOMEN, THE KINKS,  
AND HOW IT ALL  
CAME CRASHING DOWN**

*By* MARK SEAL P. 156

*Plus:*

**TIGER'S  
GIRLATHON  
GALLERY!**

*Photos by* MARK SELIGER

No. 597

May 2010

[www.vanityfair.com](http://www.vanityfair.com)

\$4.99US \$5.99FOR



# THE SEVEN WONDERS OF PRESTON STURGES

In just four years, 1940-44, Preston Sturges wrote and directed seven classics reflecting the America he loved and laughed at—a fast-talking, unpredictable melting pot that seems more real than the visions of Frank Capra or John Ford. Then his luck ran out

BY DOUGLAS McGRATH



**PRIMAL STURGES**  
Preston Sturges  
circa 1941.

**O**f all the stupid vanities in a business that specializes in stupid vanities, the possessory credit takes the cake. That credit is the one that appears at the top of a film saying, “A film by \_\_\_\_\_,” the blank then implausibly being filled by the name of a single person, the director.

Let’s not get into how many other people—starting with the writer and continuing in essential ways through the cast, cinematographer, editor, and composer—influence the quality of a film. (Try to imagine the original choice of Shirley Temple instead of Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* or Mae West rather than Gloria Swanson as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* to understand how dependent a film’s tone is on the contributions of all its elements.)

The possessory credit is silly for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is that it’s redundant: we’ll see whom the film is by when we get to the other credits. But if anyone deserves this credit, it would have to be someone who has created a world in which the speech and actions and people, in which the tone and tenor of events, are as obviously the creation of one artist as a passage of Twain’s is obviously a passage of Twain’s and not of Charlotte Brontë’s, as a Renoir is never confused with a Picasso.

It is safe to say that no one ever mistook a film by Preston Sturges for a film by anyone else. This is not something you can say of most directors, including many fine ones: George Cukor, William Wyler, John Huston. While one might expect that it was George

Cukor who directed *Roman Holiday* instead of William Wyler, one could never imagine anyone but Sturges behind any of the manic yet buttery pictures that bear his name.

Though the events in his films often border on the unreal, ironically his world resembles ours more than most movies do,

FROM THE EVERETT COLLECTION



**STURGES'S TRAVELS**  
Above, Veronica Lake on Joel McCrea's lap in a scene from *Sullivan's Travels*, 1941; right, Lake and Sturges on the film's set



because the Sturges universe is so ungentrified. The characters in a Sturges film are slickers and hicks, frantic, contemplative, melancholy, literate, sub-intelligent, vain, self-doubting, sentimental, cynical, hushed, and shouting. A hallmark of most artists is the consistency of their world—one thinks of the delicacy in René Clair's work, the droll, intoxicating understatement of Lubitsch, the painful clamor of Jerry Lewis. But the Sturges world seems the product of a multiple-personality disorder. (Sturges used to dictate his scripts aloud to a secretary as he wrote them, and when he did, he convinc-

could be the title of a Sturges movie. It also aptly calls up the conflicting elements at work in his films: the effervescent and the feverish.

He did not come to Hollywood the way people come to Hollywood today, fresh out of film school, eager to crib shots they like from other movies. According to his biographer Diane Jacobs, he'd been a stage manager, a flier in the air service, a songwriter, and the manager of

of a businessman or the desperation of a writer: he sold Paramount his script of *The Vagrant* for \$10 with the stipulation that he direct it.

The film became *The Great McGinty*, a more positive title than *The Vagrant*, until you see the movie and learn the irony of it. It launched Sturges's remarkable run of seven pictures in four years, the others being: *Christmas in July*, *The Lady Eve*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *The Palm Beach Story*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, and *Hail the Conquering Hero*. (There was a flop in there, too, something called *The Great Moment*, about the discovery of anesthesia. It sounds like the kind of serious picture Sullivan wants to make in *Sullivan's Travels*.)

These are the touchstones of the Sturges reputation, and if you watch them close together, as I did recently, you may be struck by something I'd never noticed when I saw the pictures in isolation. His films, with all their excesses (possibly *because of* their excesses), offer a truer idea of American life than the films of any other director of his time. Each of the seven films stands as an insouciant rebuke to the mythic America of John Ford, the inspirational America of Frank Capra, and the cozy America of MGM's Andy Hardy series. If those movies were a warm hug to

## STURGES CHARACTERS ARE SLICKERS AND HICKS, FRANTIC, VAIN, AND CYNICAL.

ingly played all the parts.) I can think of no other artist who keeps the delicate and the explosive so close together.

This collision of tones perhaps took its cue from his life. He was born in Chicago at the end of the 19th century. His mother, Mary, divorced Preston's father when Preston was not quite three and moved with her son to Paris. On her first day there she met the celebrated dancer Isadora Duncan. Though Sturges would at times resent his mother's fast friendship with Duncan, he owed the Duncan family an enormous debt. Almost as soon as they arrived in Paris, Sturges, always susceptible to respiratory trouble, came down with a pneumonia that no doctor could tame. Isadora Duncan's mother arrived with a bottle of champagne, from which she fed him lifesaving spoonfuls until he was restored. "Champagne and Pneumonia"—it

his mother's cosmetics concern, where he invented a highly successful kissproof lipstick. ("Kissproof" also sounds like a Sturges title.) He'd written a Broadway hit, *Strictly Dishonorable*, followed by three flops. By the time he came to Hollywood, in the 30s, he had a good sense of himself and was quickly under contract as a writer at Universal, making a thousand dollars a week. One of his films, *The Power and the Glory*, had a structure and subject that were reproduced a few years later by Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*. (If you had to have your ideas lifted, there was no finer pickpocket than Orson Welles.) It may have been his success in business, or his age, or the example of independence set by his mother, but by the end of the 30s he had gotten himself a job directing his own script, becoming one of the first credited writer-directors of the talking age. He did this with either the shrewdness

their audience, the Sturges pictures were a jab in the ribs, a sexy joke whispered in church—a wink, a kiss, and a hiccup. His pictures of life in this country are a lot like life in this country: messy, noisy, sometimes tough to take, sometimes hard to beat.

While he does examine issues that are important to what it means to be an American—giving comic (and other) consideration to questions of ambition, money, heroism, and morality—he examines them with a flashing wit and a poet's gift for slang that offers American English at its most entertaining.

Not only is his dialogue spoken, as Henry Higgins says so nicely in *My Fair Lady*, with the speed of summer lightning, but, under his direction, the actors weave in and out of each other's lines with such fluid ease that the spoken word achieves

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, FROM PHOTOFEST; RIGHT, FROM THE EVERETT COLLECTION; DIGITAL COLORIZATION BY ORNA CLARK

BOTH FROM PHOTOFEST; DIGITAL COLORIZATION BY ORNA CLARK

H  
the  
Girl  
Hec  
Pag  
sort  
His  
the  
Stur  
refle  
S  
terr  
pare  
ever  
er, s  
abo  
caus  
abo  
it is  
mak  
back  
T  
apr  
film  
Phil  
easi  
by V  
the!  
our  
may  
Am  
was  
mak  
ly W  
of th  
anc  
can  
to f  
eith  
pric  
May  
perl  
Con  
Ma  
faul  
livan  
of s  
only  
T  
wri  
of t  
ater  
"N  
wor  
say  
Pal  
in t  
play  
cac  
full  
to a  
the

the euphonious quality of the sung. *His Girl Friday*—Howard Hawks's film of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page*—is often cited as the nonpareil of this sort of rapid overtalking. But the speed of *His Girl Friday* is dictated by the events of the story, a hyper newspaper comedy. In Sturges's world, it seems to be merely a reflection of human nature: husbands in-

that the men who are most in need of beating up are always enormous."

Sometimes the jokes are not delicate but are funny instead for their bluntness, as when an exasperated William Demarest says to his teenage daughter (wryly played by Diana Lynn) in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, "Listen, zipper-puss! Some day they're just gonna find your hair-ribbon and an axe

filled not merely with Hollywood's idea of ethnic characters—the black cook and the English butler—but with people from every corner of the world, including Jews who do the unheard-of thing and sound like Jews. The range of accents in his films sounds like the dining room at the U.N. Without ever directly preaching the glories of American values, Sturges offers us a screen full

## STURGES WAS AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL, WHICH IS A DANGEROUS THING TO BE.

interrupt their wives, children talk over their parents, secretaries sass their bosses, and every workingperson—cabdriver, bartender, switchboard operator—has an opinion about what's going on, and they say it. Because the Sturges films are not sentimental about America, free speech is dealt with as it is in real American life: people ignore it, make fun of it, or talk over it, and then get back to trying to make a buck.

The dialogue, with its melting pot of malapropisms, slang, and pretension, links the films inextricably with America. While *The Philadelphia Story*, for example, could just as easily have been set in London and played by Vivien Leigh and David Niven, none of the Sturges Seven could be imagined beyond our borders. Having lived abroad, Sturges may have had a sharper ear for what makes American English unique, but because he was American he didn't have to sweat to make it work. Unlike émigré writers like Billy Wilder, where the effort to avoid any tinge of the foreign led to a heavy reliance on contemporary American slang, Sturges wasn't afraid to have his characters sound either comically grandiose—the priceless Raymond Walburn as Mayor Everett D. Noble (that perfectly placed *D!*) in *Hail the Conquering Hero* or earlier as Dr. Maxford in *Christmas in July*—or faux poetic (Joel McCrea in *Sullivan's Travels*). There is ample use of slang in his pictures, but it's only one arrow in his quiver.

Though he had been a playwright, his scripts have none of the speechy dust of the theater. He could be epigrammatic: "Nothing is permanent in this world, except Roosevelt," says Mary Astor in *The Palm Beach Story*. Later in the movie, her brother, played with endearing delicacy by Rudy Vallee, ruefully states a fact known to all meek men: "One of the tragedies of this life [is]

someplace." In *Sullivan's Travels* there is this exchange between Sullivan, the movie director, and a studio executive, who is urging him to think of the moviegoer in Pittsburgh as he contemplates his choice of material:

SULLIVAN: Aw, what do they know in Pittsburgh...

EXECUTIVE: They know what they like.

SULLIVAN: If they knew what they liked, they wouldn't live in Pittsburgh!

But more than the language, the most persuasively American quality of his movies is his use of foreigners. His leads were played by stars who would have fit in any number of mainstream Hollywood movies: Henry Fonda, Claudette Colbert, Barbara Stanwyck, Joel McCrea. But he created a unique stock company of supporting players who proved what is so often said but little shown about America: that we are a country of immigrants. His stories are

of Jews and Germans, English and Irish, Russians and Italians, bantering, flirting, sniping or swiping at each other; this said something about America that beat the message of any war-bond rally.

But his America is no shining city on a hill, no chorus of dissonant voices who find harmony when singing as one. It is shown for what we know it to be: a carnival of bull and glory, with a bag full of money or a broken neck waiting just around the corner. Virtue is punished (*The Great McGinty*) as often as it is rewarded (*Hail the Conquering Hero*), and a passionate belief in one's ideas (*Christmas in July*) doesn't help as much as blind good luck.

Amazingly, he presented this satiric idea of an imperfect America at what may have been the peak of the nation's patriotism. Other movies of the era made buffoonish Germans, Italians, or Japanese the butt of their jokes. But at a time when the free world was under the gravest assault and America stood apart as a saving hope, Sturges made fun of the major American institutions of the day: the press, politics, and the military. American audiences, no doubt



### HAIL THE CONQUERING FILMMAKER

Sturges on the set with Claudette Colbert (*The Palm Beach Story*, 1941) and Betty Hutton (*The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, 1943).

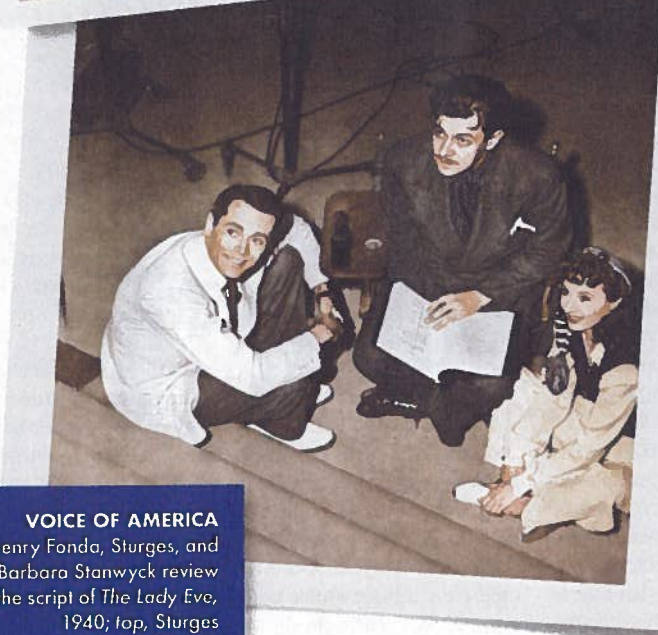


grateful to a filmmaker who knew that laughing at their country didn't preclude loving it, lapped the films up.

Was the popularity of this counter-thinking an astute reading of the national mood or, like many a Sturges plot turn, just a bit of sunny luck? Whatever it was, it didn't hold. By turns manic and morose himself, Sturges could be contemptuous of people he deemed less gifted than himself—this largely involved the executive ranks, but he could take down actors too. He could be imperious and autocratic on the set. He would, if he had to, reduce his actors to tears until he achieved what he wanted. At one point, he so aggravated Eddie Bracken, who despite his screen image as a nebbish was an accomplished amateur boxer, that Bracken almost attacked him. (Sturges relented.) But the actors, as a rule, admired and forgave him. For all their reputations as temperamental and needy, actors are glad to be pushed if the results show up on the screen.

Studio executives, for all their reputations as cold-blooded businessmen, can be infinitely more thin-skinned and vain than their stars. They nurse their grudges and remember every slight. Those were, after all, the years of the Dream Factory, and we know how factory owners treat their workers. And for all his success, to the bosses at Paramount, Sturges was just another man on the assembly line. He chafed under their constant stream of memos and suggestions. There were endless complaints about cost and arguments over casting, and the films were sometimes recut against his wishes.

His main adversary was the executive Buddy DeSylva. DeSylva may have felt even more entitled than the normal executive to challenge Sturges's creative decisions because DeSylva himself was a writer: he had been a highly successful songwriter in the 20s and 30s. *Good News*, the quintessential 20s show, was his, and he wrote several hit songs like "You're the Cream in My Coffee" and "Button Up Your Overcoat." With Johnny Mercer and Glenn Wallicks, he co-founded Capital Records. He questioned Sturges's every instinct. When Sturges wanted Veronica Lake for *Sullivan's Travels*, DeSylva was against it. (Sturges fought him and won; Lake has never been



**VOICE OF AMERICA**  
Henry Fonda, Sturges, and Barbara Stanwyck review the script of *The Lady Eve*, 1940; top, Sturges in his roadster, 1945.

better.) When Sturges wanted Rudy Vallee for

*The Palm Beach Story*, DeSylva said no. (Sturges fought him and won; Vallee gives a performance of imperishable charm.) So when Sturges wanted to cast the nearly unknown Ella Raines in *Hail the Conquering Hero*, once again DeSylva said no. Given DeSylva's track record, this almost served as proof of Ella Raines's talent.

Yet, for once it seemed Sturges's instinct had failed him: the early footage of Raines, by all accounts including her own, was worrying. She was stiff and ill at ease. She later confessed that she just froze. Sturges didn't lose faith, but DeSylva pounced.

This time, however, DeSylva didn't do the dirty work himself. He sent an executive named Henry Ginsberg, known, according to Diane Jacobs, as Paramount's "hatchet man," though, even with the economies of wartime, I can't believe Paramount limited itself to just one. Either way, on the fourth day of shooting, Mr. Ginsberg told Sturges that Ella Raines was being replaced by a contract player.

As usual, Sturges fought, and as usual, he won—Raines remained in the picture. Her performance, if not star-making, has a winning quality of quiet confusion, warmed with a humorous intelligence. But this time

being right didn't make matters right. "Whatever [Sturges] said that day [during their fight] was so traumatic that it in effect ended Preston's career at Paramount," Jacobs writes. The executives resented what they saw as his ungracious intransigence, and he represented their undermining lack of faith.

It was a Mutual Aggravation Society. So at the height of his success, Sturges left Paramount, in search of a freer and more welcoming home base.

He never found it. Whatever combination of alchemy, talent, and luck had existed to make those years so fruitful, the next 16 would be a series of humiliating setbacks. His public fell off and the critics found valleys where once they'd seen only peaks. His confidence was shaken. And a style like his cannot survive self-doubt: the success of the work is tied to his ability to sustain a tone, so much trickier than

merely sustaining a plot.

And sustaining a tone was difficult for him even at the top of his game. It must be said that even the seven wonders of the Sturges canon have their problems, and the problems can always be traced to an instability of tone. Not one of these movies is a perfect picture, the way *The Shop Around the Corner* is perfect, or *The Wizard of Oz* or *Zelig* or *The Godfather* is perfect. Each of those films clears its throat and sings its song, and there is never a moment when you tilt your head and wonder, What was that?

But there is always that moment in a Sturges movie. It comes when the champagne of his dialogue is flattened by the pneumonia of his slapstick.

Sometimes his slapstick doesn't work because of poor execution or a lack of convincing motivation (Joel McCrea and Veronica Lake and then the butlers falling into the pool in *Sullivan's Travels*). Sometimes the heavy-handed way he frames and shoots these sequences, often at odds with his otherwise flowing and graceful photography, kills the fun. Other times, our laughter dies from a sense that the slapstick isn't true: there are times when someone falls too fast, as if the film is sped up (Henry Fonda going over the couch in *The Lady Eve*). His

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP BY BOB LANDR/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM, FROM PHOTOFEST; DIGITAL COLORIZATION BY TORNA CLARK

**BRING BREE**  
Whether it's  
Labrador R.  
Eukanuba's

www.Euk