Introduction

"Laughter Is All Some People Have"

> Directing was easy for me because I was a writer director and did all my directing when I wrote the screenplay.
>
> PRESTON STURGES

Preston Sturges remains one of the most memorable American screenwriters for his particular ironic comic vision that wins us over and often catches us by surprise. No matter how many times one sees his films or reads his scripts, his work continues to delight and instruct.

At the end of a comedy seminar I taught several years ago I asked each participant to come up with his or her own "comic epitaph." We had a lot of fun going around the group hearing witty and sometimes touching "final words." When the group asked me what I wanted on my tombstone, there was no question. It had to be a line from Preston Sturges's *Hail the Conquering Hero,* with only the verb tense altered: "Everything was perfect except for a few details." On the last day of the seminar I asked the members of the group to name the one comedy they had most enjoyed seeing, from among films featuring Mae West and Whoopi Goldberg, Buster Keaton and Woody Allen, and from European examples such as the Oscar-winning *Mediterraneo* to Jean Renoir's splendid works. The overwhelming majority voted for *Sullivan's Travels,* Sturges's timeless send-up of Hollywood and celebration of the spirit of film comedy. They particularly remembered the final line of Sullivan (Joel McCrea) when he turns down the chance to make the serious social drama *O Brother Where Art Thou?*—"Laughter is all some people have in this cockeyed caravan."

It is encouraging that Sturges has recently begun to receive the recognition he deserves after several decades of almost complete neglect following his death in 1959. For instance, Diane Jacobs has written a fine critical biography, *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges,* and we have Sturges's own unfinished autobiography, which was adapted and edited by his wife, Sandy Sturges, to mention but two works.[1] Clearly Sturges is now appreciated for his multiple accomplishments. As Geoffrey O'Brien notes, Sturges wrote "the most consistently lively dialogue that any American has written for stage or screen."[2]

Vincent Canby comments further that, "aside from Lubitsch, Sturges had no equal in Hollywood at the time he was in residence there. He was our premiere *satirist.*"[3] And David Thomson remarks that Sturges emerges as "the organizer of a convincingly cheerful comedy of the ridiculous that is rare in American comedy."[4] Furthermore, thanks to the active support of Sturges's youngest son, Tom, the careful editing and detailed film scholarship of Brian Henderson, and the production skills of the University of California Press, two volumes of scripts written and directed by Sturges have already been published to high praise.[5]

This volume marks the third and final collection in this University of California Press series of Sturges's works, and one that takes a different direction from the first two. Assembled here for the first time are three scripts Sturges wrote *but did not direct: The Power and the Glory* (1933), an epic drama of the American dream-cum-nightmare, which had a profound impact on other films, including *Citizen Kane,* both in content and in narrative approach; *Easy Living* (1937), an exemplar of the screwball romantic comedy at its brightest and nuttiest; and *Remember the Night* (1939), an unusual Sturges original that blends romantic comedy and courtroom drama.

This volume thus allows the reader the pleasure of savoring and observing Sturges's talent in formation before he began directing his own screenplays in 1940 with *The Great McGinty.* In fact, the focus of this introduction will be on Sturges the screenwriter. I will discuss both his craft and the major themes and patterns he explored during the 1930s as he moved from his success as a Broadway playwright to his new role as a sought-after screenwriter, in a decade when the "screenplay" was still a fluid element as "talkies" gained a foothold in Hollywood.

There is an additional pleasure for me in exploring these examples of Sturges's early screen work, for I am a practicing feature screenwriter and teacher of screenwriting with a particular leaning toward comedy in all its flavors. My hope is that the following discussion will be of interest not only to Sturges's fans, students of comedy and American cinema and culture, but to screenwriters generally, who can learn much from reading and re-reading, viewing and re-viewing these continually fresh works.

Sturges did not "officially" direct any of these three projects. But as his words in the chapter epigraph make clear, even before he gained the title of "director" he had learned a valuable Hollywood lesson: directing is best done through the writing of the script. He was a self-taught playwright and screenwriter who never took a screenwriting class or seminar, for no such courses existed in this infant industry. He mentions one book, however, that did have an influence on him: Professor Brander Matthews's *A Study of the Drama.*[6] Matthews's book is still a good survey of the elements of drama, treating not only examples from world drama including Aristotle, Sophocles, and Aristophanes down to Ibsen, but also topics such as the actor, the audience, the theater, dramatic characterization, dramatic definitions, dramatic analysis, and the three unities of time, place, and action.

We should note at the outset a point that Sandy Sturges rightly emphasizes about the way he "wrote" his scripts: he dictated them. "He almost literally became the characters he was creating as he paced around the office, speaking as they would speak, moving as they would move." He would laugh at particularly good lines and cry at the more emotional moments.[7] I would suggest, therefore, that in reading these scripts we should also imagine the "performance art" dimension of Sturges's creativity. Sturges obviously possessed a powerful ability to "see" his films before him even as he spoke—and well before they were recorded and edited into the movie we would see on the screen.

Thus, part of our interest in these early works lies in seeing what skills of the dramatic and movie trade he absorbed, experimented with, revised, and refined. We will pay close attention to how Sturges managed to profit from and at times avoid the pitfalls of being a hired writer in the complicated business of filmmaking, where the screenwriter is always being told what to do, how to do it, and when. John Gregory Dunne does a good job of articulating the tough role screenwriters play in Hollywood:

> Beating up on screenwriters is a Hollywood blood sport; everyone in the business thinks he or she can write, if only time could be found. That writers find the time is evidence of their inferior position on the food chain. In the Industry, they are regarded as chronic malcontents, overpaid and undertalented, the Hollywood version of Hessians, measuring their worth in dollars, since ownership of their words belongs to those who hire and fire them.[8]

Given that filmmaking is a team effort and always an uneasy bonding of craft and commerce, with an emphasis on the latter, how does a writer not only survive but also develop and thrive? These three scripts help us answer this question as we chart Sturges's remarkable development through the 1930s.

Most of the attention paid to Sturges to date has naturally focused on the films he directed. But let us remember that all together he worked on at least twenty-eight films, including credited and uncredited writing, complete screenplays as well as dialogue only. He embraced a full spectrum of genres and approaches, ranging from an adaptation of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (*Never Say Die,* 1939) to songs written for *The Gay Deception* (1935) and *One Rainy Afternoon* (1936), and from biting satire of the movie industry (years before *Sullivan's Travels*) with the unproduced script *Song of Joy* (1935) to both serious (*The Power and the Glory*) and comic (*Diamond Jim,* 1935) studies of the rise and fall of tycoons. Once again, the three scripts in this volume allow us to better understand the many "voices" that add up to the carnival we call Preston Sturges.

Sturges the Man

Sturges's life has been thoroughly documented elsewhere. We should nevertheless keep in mind the great diversity of lifestyles and cultures he was exposed

Preston Sturges. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art.

to during his life. Critical to his perceptions was his exhilarating and painful boyhood, living throughout Europe with his free-spirited avant-garde mother, Mary Desti, friend of Isadora Duncan and wife or lover to an array of men from countries as different as Turkey and Mexico. On the other hand, we cannot fail to note Sturges's admiration for the man who adopted him, Solomon Sturges, the conservative Chicago businessman who clearly gave Preston more love and

attention than his mother ever did. As Diane Jacobs puts it, "The country where Preston *belonged,* where he would write his plays and films and conceive his comic vision, was no single place."[9] Sturges himself said, "At best my efforts have been a French sense of humor filtered through an American vocabulary."[10]

I have stated in my book *Writing the Character-Centered Screenplay* that we are all a feast of contradictions and that we can never completely fulfill Socrates' directive to "know thyself."[11] Thus we never completely know anyone else either. This is certainly true of Sturges. Even so, without delving deeply into psychoanalytic theory, we can see from the biographies and his own autobiography that he in fact occupied a middle ground between all the elements in his life: between European culture and American capitalistic society with its often puritanical small-town values; between the pain of being ignored by his mother and his ability to gain attention through his storytelling; between moments of depression and periods of joyful exuberance; between the pull of creativity and that of puttering with inventions, heading up an engineering company, racing boats, running a restaurant, and more. The tension between these disparate impulses fueled his life and his art. Although much of Sturges's laughter is genuine, flat-out fun, the distinctive ironic flavor of his work may well come from sources deep below the surface of his whirlwind activity, perhaps unacknowledged by Sturges himself.

Before turning to Sturges the storyteller and screenwriter, we should consider the volcano of interests and projects that he indulged in beyond those related to writing and the silver screen. We are not speaking of a single-minded, focused writer who gave all to his craft. For there is Sturges the businessman who helped run his mother's perfume industry, who made investments in other businesses, and who later started up and ran the famous Hollywood restaurant The Players. There is also Sturges the inventor who delighted in devising new gizmos of all kinds. Listed in his archives at UCLA are patents registered for new planes, cars, a helicopter, a laugh meter (1934), and exercise machines, among more than thirty inventions. He even claimed to have introduced the club sandwich to Germany.[12] As a screenwriter myself, I marvel at how Sturges both thrived and managed to survive as a writer in the midst of so many interests and demands on his time and energy.

Sturges as American Storyteller

> By the very nature of his art, which depends on invention and innovation, *a story teller* must depart from the beaten track and, having done so, occasionally startle and disagree with some of his associates. Healthy disagreement we must have.
>
> PRESTON STURGES

Before discussing Sturges the screenwriter, let us view him in the larger role of an original American storyteller. For Sturges told stories in endless conver-

sations, in plays written for the stage, in scripts written for the screen, and he absorbed stories wherever he went, from whomever he met. In fact, he often described himself as an American humorist working in film, thus foregrounding story over medium. Donald Spoto, in his biography of Sturges, says much the same thing: "He never developed a self-consciousness or snobbery about his work. . . . He was simply a genial entertainer who was the first to enjoy his own stories."[13]

Storytellers, after all, must by definition be good listeners—and just imagine the stories Sturges heard in his life, in Europe, in New York, in Hollywood. His ear for dialogue could only develop from *listening* to what he heard around him on several continents. His mother's multinational husbands and lovers were fuel for satirical tales and sources of lines. He tells us, for instance, that the Mexican millionaire Gabriel Elizaga once told the young Sturges, "Your mother is really a superior person, and I am not such a much."[14] So it comes as no surprise that Sturges delighted in creating minor "ethnic" characters. Here is Louis Louis, the owner of the failing Hotel Louis, talking to our comic heroine, Mary Smith, early in *Easy Living:*

LOUIS LOUIS

(interrupting)

Miss Smit, I'm a man like dis! I don't beat around de bush to come in de back door. I tell you dis is vere you belong and dis is vere you got to be.

Invention, innovation, and "healthy disagreement" are the key ingredients Sturges recognizes in a master storyteller's art. The first two are obvious: no storyteller worth his or her salt will simply repeat a story. You need to make the story pass through your imagination and come out stamped with your own embellishments, concerns, characteristics. Most of Homer's tales in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad,* for instance, can be traced back to earlier sources; what made them "epic" was the particular spin and shape Homer gave them.

But Sturges asks us to consider the storyteller on that third level as well, the level of healthy disagreement. This notion of entering into dialogue with a tradition or a culture suggests a dimension of comedy that has been with us at least since Aristophanes, whose comedies, in condemning war-oriented cultures, offered his fellow Greeks a healthy and cathartic counter-view of the major politics of the day.

Any storytelling can be simultaneously a celebration and a critique of a particular culture. Aristophanes took this dual task seriously: in the *parabasis* of many of his comedies, he would drop the comic mask and identify himself as a *komodidaskelos,* a comic teacher and critic. Although Sturges, working within a comic tradition that did not allow for so direct a dialogue with the audience, never called himself a "comic moralist" or a "teacher through humor," we can still view each of his scripts as a storytelling crossroads in which innovation,

invention, and healthy disagreement both celebrated and critiqued the codes, formulas, conventions, and even the morality of American culture.

Sturges was a storyteller, not a moral philosopher or preacher. But he certainly created an edge to his material. As Geoffrey O'Brien notes, "What lingers finally from his movies is not their wildness, but their unsentimental rigor."[15] This "unsentimental rigor" is immediately apparent when we compare Sturges to Frank Capra, who in film after film, from *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) to *Meet John Doe* (1941) and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), glorified a simplistic populist doctrine of American virtues in which little guys win out against evil capitalists and democratic small-town heroes take on and beat the crooked politicos. Sturges's stories are the opposite of Capra's sentimental tales. In fact, David Thomson could easily be quoting Sturges when he writes: "Deeds and Smith admonish indolent or cynical government assemblies with a soulful list of clichés that Capra persuades himself is libertarian poetry rather than a call for unadventurous conformity."[16]

Sturges would have none of that, and this volume is testimony to the bard's healthy disagreement with American culture—beginning with our recognition that his very serious script *The Power and the Glory* was written before his famous film comedies. The story of the rise and fall of a tycoon, viewed unsentimentally through the eyes of his best friend and assistant, suggests Sturges's lifelong concern with a system that could create at once so much wealth and happiness and such poverty and suffering. "Sucker sapien" is the term used to describe the average guy or gal in *The Lady Eve* (1941), a film that, like so many of Sturges's stories, builds a romance between a trickster female character and a "sucker sapien" male (though sometimes the reverse occurs). This ironic take on romance—and culture—is seen time and again in Sturges's early scripts, most especially in this exchange in *Remember the Night* as Lee, a clever female thief whose trial has been postponed, winds up with Jack Sargent, an innocent assistant district attorney, for Christmas. Attraction builds as exact opposites attempt to understand each other:

SARGENT

(Hopefully)

I mean maybe you're a kleptomaniac.

LEE

(Placidly)

No, they tried that. You see, to be a kleptomaniac you can't sell any of the stuff afterwards . . . or you lose your amateur standing.

SARGENT

I don't understand it. First you think it's environment and then . . . Whitney goes to jail. Then you think it's heredity . . . and you get some bird with seven generations of clergymen behind him.

LEE

I don't think you ever could understand because your mind is different. Right or wrong is the same for everybody, you see, but the rights and the wrongs aren't the same. Like in China they eat dogs.

SARGENT

That's a lot of piffle.

LEE

They do eat dogs.

SARGENT

I mean your theory.

LEE

Try it like this: suppose you were starving to death . . .

SARGENT

Yes.

LEE

. . . and you didn't have any food and you didn't have any money and you didn't have any place to get anything.

SARGENT

Yes.

LEE

And there were some loaves of bread out in front of a market, and you were starving to death and the man's back was turned . . . would you swipe one?

SARGENT

(Vehemently)

You bet I would!

LEE

(Smiling with pleasure)

That's because you're honest. You see, I'd have a six-course dinner at the table d'hote across the street and then say I'd forgotten my purse.

As Sargent looks at her goggle-eyed she concludes sweetly:

LEE

You get the difference?

Unsentimental rigor, and great fun—not to mention the beginning of a healthy romance built on disagreement. "Cynical, Sturges explosively, joyously, is neither nihilist nor dogmatic," remarks Raymond Durgnat. "He appeals to no ideology, no perfectionism, no despair, but rather to intuitive decencies and horse sense."[17]

Sturges the Screenwriter

> At the risk of sounding pontifical, I believe the success or failure of any writing depends upon the *residual.* By this I mean what the reader has left in his mind after closing the book; what the spectator takes home with him after leaving the theater or movie palace.
>
> PRESTON STURGES

The residuals from reading these three scripts are long lasting and numerous. Volumes One and Two of Sturges's screenplays reveal Sturges the director-writer. Once more we emphasize that this collection shows us the screenwriter, pure and simple, yet at the same time it reveals how that screenwriter was preparing to take on the role of director so as to protect, nurture, and realize his original screen visions as far as is possible in the collision of business and art called "Hollywood."

We will discuss Sturges's craft from a variety of viewpoints in the individual introductions. For now, let us examine six particularly notable aspects of Sturges's screenwriting, ones that contribute to the strong residual impressions left by these scripts.

This Cockeyed Caravan: Sturges's Carnivalesque Humor and Vision

Sturges's writing embraces a very wide view of comedy. We can easily find influences from silent film as well as from smart Broadway comedy, from vaudeville and also from French and Italian farce, from Molière (whom he deeply loved and admired and often saw staged in France), Aristophanes, and Shakespeare as well as from the characters Sturges met in his own life.

All of this "cockeyed caravan," as Sullivan calls life at the end of *Sullivan's Travels,* adds up to truly a carnivalesque vision of humor and comedy. As Mikhail Bakhtin explains, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit."[18]

Easy Living turns New York and the high ranks of American capitalism into a romantic comic romp, a fairy tale "subject only to" the laws "of its own freedom." Meanwhile, *Remember the Night* hovers between comedy and drama, in an uneasy balance that continually threatens to break down. Finally, *The Power and the Glory,* Sturges's earliest work here, is an example of the carnival gone wrong, for in the rise and fall of Thomas Garner we see a realistic world in which the freedom and celebration of true festivity can be neither established nor maintained.

Consider, too, that the carnivalesque embraces all forms of comedy, from pure slapstick farce to parody and satire, from joking to romantic and sexual coupling, and you begin to appreciate more fully the broad range Sturges worked within. In fact, the comments of Brander Matthews, Sturges's admired author-

Preston Sturges in the director's chair, a screenplay in hand. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art.

ity on drama, could apply to Sturges and his comic worldview as easily as to his actual subject: "The comedy of Aristophanes was a medley of boisterous comic-opera and of lofty lyric poetry, of vulgar ballet and of patriotic oratory, of indecent farce and of pungent political satire, of acrobatic pantomime and of brilliant literary criticism, of cheap burlesque and of daringly imaginative fantasy."[19] Like the ancient Greek comic poet, Sturges is not afraid to include an

always surprising variety of elements between FADE IN and THE END in each script.

We can be even more specific in suggesting that Sturges managed to fuse the two most important comic traditions in American film, "anarchistic" comedy and the romantic or "screwball" tradition.[20] According to Henry Jenkins, for a while in the early 1930s, when sound was being introduced in Hollywood, it was far from certain what the dominant comic genre would be. Romantic comedy came to Hollywood with sound as a Broadway import; indeed, Sturges, with such stage successes as *Strictly Dishonorable* (1929) on his résumé, was a prime practitioner in the genre. Classic romantic comedy, as in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night,* is by definition pro-social; it aims in its "happy ending" at reconciliation of opposites in a socially viable manner that will help the "community" survive and thrive. In the very early days of sound, however, an "anarchistic" comedy that had grown out of vaudeville was also a going concern. Anarchistic-comedy films, Jenkins explains, are "characterized by a subordination of visual and aural style, narrative structure and character development to foregrounded comic performance; they are marked by a general questioning of social norms."[21] Sturges's comic vision embraced both traditions simultaneously. Thus *Sullivan's Travels* has a romantic thread, with Sullivan falling for "the girl," yet the whole film is episodic, as each segment subverts the others. Similarly, while romance blooms in *Easy Living,* the scene in the automat restaurant is pure vaudeville and Mack Sennett combined.

I would argue that the healthy anarchistic streak in Sturges helps to explain the "edge" his comedies have. When, at the beginning of *The Palm Beach Story,* we see a wedding and the words "And they lived happily ever after . . . or did they?" we know we are in the hands of a major ironist who will treat no tradition as sacred. This vision, this talent, finally, epitomizes the Mardi Gras spirit that Sturges acknowledged in the closing pages of his autobiography. He speaks of himself, a man in his sixties waiting for a plane, in the third person: "While waiting, he thinks back on his life and to him it seems to have been a Mardi Gras, a street parade of masked, drunken, hysterical, laughing, disguised, travestied, carnal, innocent, and perspiring humanity of all sexes, wandering aimlessly, but always in circles, in search of that of which it is a part: life."[22] Carnival, then, is not a genre for Sturges, but life itself.

Pushing the Envelope: Experimentation with Narrative and Genres

> It was actually the enormous risks I took with my pictures, skating right up to the edge of non-acceptance, that paid off so handsomely.
>
> PRESTON STURGES

According to Sandy Sturges, Sturges usually began a project having the "ending in mind" but almost always being unsure of how to get there.[23] This tension

between the known and the unknown, I suspect, helped Sturges experiment with characters and narrative in the same spirit of playful freedom with which he experimented in his noncinematic inventions and projects.

Beginning with his invention in *The Power and the Glory* of a new form of storytelling, which the publicity department coined "narratage," Sturges never seemed satisfied with imitating others or telling a story simply. He played with narrative structure, with genre boundaries; he pushed scenes as far as they could go and then some, and blended pathos and comedy in unusual combinations. *Remember the Night,* for instance, has some absolutely classic screwball romantic moments, but then Sturges throws all the rules—especially as written by the likes of Frank Capra—out the window when, in a harshly touching scene, the naive assistant D.A., Jack Sargent, takes the streetwise thief, Lee, back to her Indiana home to confront the mother she has not seen since she ran away. We are suddenly in a very different world of straight-on melodrama shaded by film noir. The family home has "junk in the yard," and a dog barks. With no word of welcome, the mother jumps into a list of condemnations about Lee. She concludes:

THE MOTHER

A fine lot of work you ever did!

(She turns to Sargent)

The great lady! We weren't good enough for her here . . . A Christian home, a hard working father and mother.

LEE

Nobody said you weren't, Mama.

THE MOTHER

(To Sargent)

With a crook for a daughter . . . so the neighbors can read about it in the paper . . . and pity me . . . and wait for her sister to turn out the same.

LEE

How is she?

THE MOTHER

She's gone too.

It's a turning point in Sturges's script in a number of ways. Most important, the relationship between Lee and Jack now begins to take on much deeper meaning as, at the home of Jack's mother and aunt, Lee next comes to know the good side of small-town midwestern American values. But Sturges is definitely pushing the envelope and mixing his genres for his own purposes here—and getting away with it. This will become apparent in the ending, which is not a simple fade-out on an embrace following difficulties overcome, but a question mark: we really do not know what will happen next, though we are sure of the protagonists' affection for one another.

We will look for this experimental, risk-taking side of Sturges in each of the three screenplays printed here.

Dialogue with a Hook

> The hook is a word or an idea spoken by one character which gives the next character something to hook onto when he responds, or like a trapeze artist, gives him something to swing from on his way to another point of view.
>
> PRESTON STURGES

Whenever I teach a screenwriting class I turn to clips from Sturges's scripts and films to illustrate what crackling fine dialogue can be. We have already seen several fine examples in this introduction, but allow me the pleasure of another to more clearly establish what Sturges does with a "hook." Early in *Easy Living,* a fur coat lands on the head of clueless Mary Smith as she rides an open-air bus down Park Avenue. The coat belongs to the wife of J. B. Ball, the "Bull of Broad Street," one of the richest men in America. When she tries to return the coat to him, he tells her to keep it and then drives her in his limo to get a hat to replace the one destroyed by the falling sable coat. The hook in this scene is the word *boys,* which is part of the title of the magazine for which Mary works, *The Boys' Constant Companion.* They are inside J.B.'s Lincoln:

J.B.

The Boys' what?

MARY

The Boys' Constant Companion. It's a magazine . . . for boys.

J.B.

I never heard of it.

MARY

(A little crossly)

It's got a million readers.

J.B.

(With satisfaction)

It hasn't got me.

He looks at her a moment, then lifts the speaking tube.

J.B.

Stop at a hat shop.

MARY

(Nervously)

It's terribly sweet of you but I really haven't the time and the coat more than makes up for . . . for . . .

J.B.
(With inward amusement)

Listen: If I can keep waiting what's waiting for me, the Boys' Constant Reminder can wait a few minutes also.

MARY
Companion . . . Boys' Constant Companion.

J.B.
Companion.

A less experienced or less talented writer of comedy would surely add much more in terms of description or direction that would clog up the flow of the scene, the speed of the exchanges, and the pure fun with which these lines (and thus the characters) "hook" into each other.

Comic Density and a Bevy of Minor Characters

Every Sturges film, in addition to one-on-one scenes, has moments when the frame simply bursts with multiple pursuits, actions at cross-purposes, and a bevy of minor characters. In *Hail the Conquering Hero,* for instance, it seems that half of small-town America is inside Mama's home when Woodrow returns a "hero." And think of the feisty parade that breaks out on the Palm Beach express train as the Ale and Quail Club cuts loose in *The Palm Beach Story.* Turning to our scripts, by the time the food starts flying in the automat in *Easy Living,* a large sampling of New Yorkers are involved in throwing and grabbing, stealing and eating the abundance of free food that rains down on them. At work here is Sturges's love of silent screen comedy as well as his delight in writing for a host of great character actors, including William Demarest, Franklin Pangborn, Sig Arno, Robert Dudley, Roscoe Ates, Dewey Robinson, Chester Conklin, Robert Warwick, Robert Greig, and many more.

Never do these scenes suggest a dangerous world. Rather, they are testimony to life as a ceaseless parade of fascinating and, yes, silly characters who are all part of the same show. Sturges's world is not the darkly humorous (or should we say, humorously dark) universe of Quentin Tarantino or the edgy assortment of quirky characters in the Coen Brothers' *Fargo* or even *Raising Arizona.* The small-town Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrants in *Remember the Night* are all affable folk, halfway between cartoonlike caricatures and drawn-from-life figures in the spirit of, say, Charles Dickens. Only in *The Power and the Glory,* and in *Remember the Night* in the scene with Lee's mother, does Sturges dare to venture outside the realm of comedy to look at a harsher, colder world of human failure and failings.

We treasure the gallery of minor characters Sturges has conjured up. *Easy Living* sparkles not just in the witty exchanges between Mary, J.B., and Johnny, but also in the nutty cross-purposes of characters such as Louis Louis with his broken English, whose hotel J.B. now "owns" unless the hapless Louis can come

up with some fast cash to pay off his long-overdue loans. Consider this exchange between Louis and J.B.:

LOUIS

Gimme six weeks.

J.B.

(Reluctantly)

I'll give you a week.

LOUIS

(With fire)

What good is a week?

J.B.—OVER LOUIS

J.B.

(Roaring)

All right I WON'T GIVE YOU a week!

LOUIS—OVER J.B.

LOUIS

(Desperately)

All right, I'll TAKE a week! . . . Goodbye, I got to hurry.

He puts on his derby.

J.B.

(Puzzled)

What're you going to do?

LOUIS

(Scatter-brained)

I don't know, but I only got a week to do it in.

Look, first of all, at the sheer fun of this exchange. J.B. is a tough businessman who has acceded to a one-week deadline, which Louis is forced to accept. The hotelier's sudden move to leave surprises J.B., who obviously enjoys the cat-and-mouse game-playing that finances involve. Thus his question, "What're you going to do?" Louis's answer is, as Sturges notes, scatter-brained, but his lack of command of the English language makes it all the more hilarious: "I don't know, but I only got a week to do it in." Although our main focus in *Easy Living* is on Mary Smith and J.B., the proceedings gain much from the offbeat characters such as Louis Louis, who only add to the comic confusion Sturges thrives upon.

Adaptation: The Art of Borrowing Well, Stealing, and Transforming

Of the three scripts reproduced here, *Easy Living* is an adaptation. I have written elsewhere about adaptation as a "lively and creative art,"[24] and Sturges proves this point in his own work. In fact, "adaptation" is perhaps too limiting a term for what Sturges accomplishes with original material written by others. It would be much more accurate to describe his rewrites as "based on ideas" he found in other stories and plays.

Easy Living, according to documents in the UCLA Special Film Collection, was originally a thirty-five-page "screen story" by Vera Caspary, dated May 1, 1935. The tale begins in a Manhattan blizzard as "a girl," Mary Winslow, makes her way to the Park Avenue home of a rich woman, "Madame," to give her her regular massage. As the story unfolds, Madame "loans" Mary a mink coat, with payment to follow when Mary can afford it. An argument ensues, however, and Mary is fired. As she leaves, she manages to steal the mink. Caspary tags the end of her tale with a clear punch line: "This is the story of a girl who stole a fur coat . . . Pure and simple"; and finally, "Easy living is often uneasily maintained."[25]

Sturges turned this tale around 180 degrees. Instead of the coat being stolen, it becomes an instrument of pure accident when Mr. Ball, the "Bull of Broad Street," heaves it off his Park Avenue balcony during an argument with his wife and it lands on the head—or, more precisely, the hat—of Mary Smith as she rides on the open-air upper level of a double-decker bus. Suddenly it's the story of chance (accident) as a naive young woman is thrown with full comic force into a world of wealth and capital. And it's also now a very funny story as opposed to a somber tale of a fallen girl in the city.

Adaptation? Only in the most remote sense. A highly original work inspired by a spark in another tale? Yes!

Polishing and Rewriting: The "Well-Directed" Script

Any screenwriter knows that the heart of writing is in rewriting. Linda Seger and Edward Jay Whetmore remark that it is with the first draft completed that "the collaborative nature of filmmaking begins to come into play."[26] Publishing a Sturges script with its handwritten notes and crossed-out segments—as we do here with *The Power and the Glory*—allows the reader to see the writer at work. Such versions give us a lot of insight into Sturges's constant revisions, for a script is never finished until it's on the screen.

On Reading Sturges's Scripts

Sturges's scripts bring us a multitude of pleasures, not the least of which is the frequent urge to call friends up and read whole segments out loud. He has that kind of effect on us. Such urges, of course, are wholly desirable and should be encouraged.

In this section I would like to suggest some of the themes that appear in these early scripts, themes that Sturges developed even more fully in the later works he directed as well as wrote. Four of the most striking are the development of strong female characters; a fascination with rags-to-riches or fish-out-of-water stories; a love of "good-fairy" tales, with all their comic and ironic implications; and a delight in food as well as its opposite, hunger.

A brief consideration of these themes will illuminate not only Sturges's personal interests but also some of the social realities and dreams within American culture of the 1930s. For certainly the Great Depression gave a new perspective to the "rags-to-riches" stories and myths within American society and the tension between the millions who went to bed hungry and those with great wealth. Given such times, who wouldn't dream of a "good fairy" who would swiftly turn a dull life of drudgery into the stuff of living fairy tales.

Strong Female Characters

Many film scholars and critics have commented on the inadequacy of roles for women in American cinema in recent years, especially compared to the feisty, independent women seen in screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. This seems particularly true when we think of Sturges's comic heroines. Who can forget Barbara Stanwyck in *The Lady Eve* or Claudette Colbert in *The Palm Beach Story,* whose blend of street smarts, flirtatious cunning, and solid intelligence puts them miles ahead of their men. The early scripts we will be examining here show Sturges developing these "prototypes" with verve and obvious pleasure.

Barbara Stanwyck's high-class thief Lee in *Remember the Night,* for instance, was clearly a warmup for Eve in almost every sense. Then there is Jean Arthur's Mary in *Easy Living,* who exhibits that rare quality in American film comedy: a balance between complete innocence and a native intelligence that sees immediately to the heart of an issue, a moment, a person. Finally, although *The Power and the Glory* is a tragic drama, Colleen Moore's Sally is set up as the brains behind Spencer Tracy's Tom Garner, as well as a love interest who becomes a forceful wife. That her strength as a character spills over into greed and finally suicide suggests Sturges's interest in what can happen when ambition outstrips love and contentment. We do not have to dwell long on the probable influence of Sturges's strong-willed and independent mother in the formation of these memorable women.

Rags-to-Riches Narratives

All three of our scripts explore sudden transitions in socioeconomic status: the "fish-out-of-water" narrative model. *The Power and the Glory* captures the joy and then tragedy of Tom's swift rise to wealth; *Easy Living* catapults Mary out of her scraping-by workaday life into J. B. Ball's sphere of luxury and extravagance; and *Remember the Night* sends Lee from the "rags" of the street into the "riches" of a loving and supportive family that Jack has known and

wishes to share with her—*after* she has served her time. In a sense, the rags-to-riches theme is the American dream. But when it crosses boundaries with the fish-out-of-water motif, Sturges's particular brand of irony and critique kicks in. Irony always involves a double vision—an awareness of multiple realities—and in comedy as practiced by Sturges this translates to double laughter. We can laugh both at and with Mary in *Easy Living* as she tries to make sense of the rich and famous who mistakenly think that she is "somebody" too. Such intertwined narrative strands offer endless comic possibilities.

Good-Fairy Narratives

The good-fairy motif is also important to Sturges's scripts. We see this in *Remember the Night,* where Jack rescues Lee from a life of meaningless crime, and in *Easy Living,* where J. B. Ball introduces Mary to a new, exciting world. Sally is Tom's good fairy at first in *The Power and the Glory,* and later he becomes a good fairy for both his mistress, Eve, by agreeing to marry her, and his son, by supporting him even though he has done nothing to deserve it. That these good deeds are misplaced and ultimately backfire tragically leads to the vastly different tone and impact of this work of drama.

Food and Famine Motifs

Sturges's use of food and hunger motifs provides the culinary equivalent to the rags-to-riches schema. Certainly this man, who ran two restaurants during his career, both thought about and enjoyed good food, and all that it suggests: a shared community of kindred souls, festive times, and a general sense of well-being and happiness. Who can forget the automat scene in *Easy Living,* when the homeless and the wealthy alike become a classless society feasting on free food. In *Remember the Night* many important dialogues occur over meals, including the beginning of romance between Jack and Lee as they eat in a fancy New York restaurant. And *The Power and the Glory* is narrated from Henry's kitchen toward the end of the evening meal. Likewise, the lack of food helps define characters and create comedy as when, in *Remember the Night,* Jack has cause to be grateful when he remembers that his butler has prepared sandwiches to go, after he and Lee find themselves stranded in the middle of a field. A far cry from the custard pies of silent comedy, food in Sturges's scripts is, as a symbol of love, friendship, and community, merely part and parcel of what the Mardi Gras of life is all about.

A Final Take

Sturges endures. The three scripts gathered here help us understand better how and why this is so. The reasons have to do with more than mere laughter or entertainment. Dana F. Sutton ends *The Catharsis of Comedy* with these

words: "Almost like prophets and shamans . . . comic writers and comic actors become privileged members of the community."[27] Preston Sturges might well have scoffed at such a remark, but his scripts, his films, and his career suggest otherwise. Certainly part of Sturges's status as a privileged member of the Hollywood community was that he could turn rewriting and alteration into a positive activity that led to an even better final artistic product. As he put it, "The crafts of the tailor and the storyteller are not dissimilar, . . . for out of a mass of unrelated material, each contrives to fashion a complete and well-balanced unit. Many stories are too heavy in the shoulders and too short in the pants, with the design of the material running upside-down."[28] *The Power and the Glory, Easy Living,* and *Remember the Night* stand as well-tailored works, complete and perfectly balanced, that will not go out of fashion or style.

NOTES

1. Diane Jacobs, *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and *Preston Sturges by Preston Sturges,* adapted and edited by Sandy Sturges (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990).

2. Geoffrey O'Brien, "The Sturges Style," *New York Review of Books,* December 20, 1990, 6.

3. Vincent Canby, "The Pragmatic and Falling-Down-Funny Films of Preston Sturges," *New York Times,* January 14, 1983, 16.

4. David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film,* 3d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 725.

5. *Five Screenplays by Preston Sturges,* edited with an introduction by Brian Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and *Four More Screenplays by Preston Sturges,* edited with an introduction by Brian Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

6. Brander Matthews, *A Study of the Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910).

7. Sandy Sturges, interview, July 5, 1997.

8. John Gregory Dunne, *Monster: Living Off the Big Screen* (New York: Random House, 1997), 7.

9. Jacobs, *Christmas in July,* 43.

10. Quoted ibid.

11. Andrew Horton, *Writing the Character-Centered Screenplay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 5.

12. *Preston Sturges,* 64.

13. Donald Spoto, *Madcap: The Life of Preston Sturges* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 147.

14. *Preston Sturges,* 82.

15. O'Brien, "Sturges Style," 9.

16. Thomson, *Biographical Dictionary,* 107.

17. Raymond Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror* (New York: Horizon, 1969), 120.

18. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* translated by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), 7.

19. Brander Matthews, *The Development of the Drama* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 90.

20. Andrew Horton, ed., *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 10–12.

21. Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 22.

22. *Preston Sturges,* 339.

23. Sandy Sturges interview.

24. Andrew Horton, *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), 1.

25. Vera Caspary, "Easy Living: An Original Screen Story," May 1, 1935, UCLA Special Film Collection, 34–35.

26. Linda Seger and Edward Jay Whetmore, *From Script to Screen: The Collaborative Art of Filmmaking* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 38.

27. Dana F. Sutton, *The Catharsis of Comedy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 118.

28. *Preston Sturges,* 268.