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The Films, by G.M.

## THE JOKE'S ON BOTH OF US

### SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS

(Paramount)

THE joke's on me, I suppose. Ridiculous and conceited as it may sound, it is almost as if, in *Sullivan's Travels*, Preston Sturges had deliberately set himself out to answer my complaint in these columns last week that too many films are of the escapist type, and my plea for greater social awareness in the cinema. He has done this with a slashing satire on those people who want pictures that Mean Something. Let's have pictures that amuse us and do nothing more, he seems to be saying: our greatest benefactors to-day are those movie-makers who week by week provide heaps of sand for the ostrich in us.

This is what he seems to be saying, and if it were the whole story it would be dangerous, reactionary talk, and my admiration of Sturges's technical ability would be considerably greater than my admiration of his intellect. At the best he would be merely a clever cynic. It is, however, possible to take quite honestly another and more generous viewpoint. This is that in *Sullivan's Travels*, Sturges is no more suggesting that all films should be frivolous than I was suggesting last week that all films should be serious: he is merely advocating that anybody who has the gift of making people forget their troubles in laughter is better employed going on doing that than in trying to make them weep for the woes of the world.

THAT, at any rate, seems to be the conclusion finally arrived at by the fictitious hero of Sturges's film—a young Hollywood director named John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) who has had a great success with such slapstick comedies as "So Long Sarong" and "Hey Hey in the Hayloft", but who feels the urge to produce a serious social "document" entitled "Brother, Where Art Thou?" To acquire the right background for this Message to Humanity, he sets out, disguised as a tramp, to experience some suffering for himself.

As travelling companion he has a spectacular blonde (Veronica Lake) who has failed to make good in Hollywood and is homeward bound. But since he is trailed by a caravan-load of managers, stenographers, publicity men, radio commentators, and other accessories, and has an anxious butler and valet, a luxurious house, and a large bank-account always within telephone call, it will be realised that there is a Haroun Al-Raschid touch to his tour of the Seamy Side of Life. Everything conspires, in fact, to make Sullivan and his travels seem ridiculous: he gets about as near to experiencing real suffering as does the average well-meaning social worker who goes "slumming". And then, all of a sudden, with the speed of an express train (literally, an express train), *Sullivan's Travels* stops being a satirical comedy and smacks straight into melodrama and tragedy. Unexpectedly, Sullivan finds what he has been pretending to seek: in a Southern chain-gang to which, under strange circumstances, he is sentenced to six years' penal servitude, he learns something of what it is to be down and out and kicked by society.

When he is finally restored to home, Hollywood, and beauty he does not stop to ponder the fact (though Sturges may intend the audience to) that there is one law for a rich Hollywood director and another for a friendless tramp; he is merely concerned to tell the world that he has quite lost his ambition to produce that sociological epic, "Brother Where Art Thou?" His job, he says, is to carry on making people laugh with comedies. He learnt that in the chain-gang.

THIS is Sullivan's message, and Sturges's too, I take it, and as far as it goes it's a pretty good one, though if you wanted to wade deeper into the waters of argument you could challenge the value of making people laugh to forget their misery instead of trying to remove the cause of the misery.

But as you can see, perhaps the most interesting thing about Sturges's picture is that it is itself such an extraordinary contradiction of the philosophy which he expresses in it. For here is obviously a comedy which makes you think as much as it makes you laugh (at least it has made me think, and from conversations I've had with others, I don't imagine that my reactions are unusual).

The joke, as I have said, may be on me, but is also on the absurd antics of Hollywood—its publicity methods, its ostentation, its crocodile tears. But just as much the joke is on Preston Sturges himself. Indeed, John L. Sullivan might be a projection of the very man who created him—an outstanding but erratic young genius who hasn't yet got his own attitude toward life quite straight, who doesn't yet know whether to treat the world seriously or make fun of it. So he does both. Sturges ridicules his hero because he wants to lead a crusade for realistic pictures that will arouse the public against social injustice: but he shows enough realistic examples of that

injustice to arouse the crusading instincts of all but the dullest audience. He cuts with the sharp sword of irony until, as it were, he realises that he is in danger of being hailed as a serious artist, and then he biffs you over the head with the bludgeon of slapstick. One minute he almost breaks your heart with pathos: the next he breaks the furniture and the crockery with all the gusto of a Mack Sennett comedy. He leads you, roaring with laughter, down the primrose path of escape, and then you sharply turn a corner and find yourself in a world of garbage cans, hunger, and cruelty. He warms you with chuckles and sentiment; and then he pushes you under a cold shower of melodrama.

PRESTON STURGES, in fact, is rather like a simpler edition of Orson (Citizen Kane) Welles—simpler in technique, that is, though not necessarily simpler in mind. He has discovered that he can make the cinema perform tricks, so he twists its tail and practically makes it sit up and beg. And I would say that he is also like Welles in this: that having discovered how easy and exhilarating it is for him to defy cinema convention, he is rather inclined to show off. His picture is disconcerting and provocative (which is a good thing) but undisciplined (which isn't). At the same time, although Preston Sturges gives an impression in *Sullivan's Travels* that he doesn't quite know where he is going, he is certainly going somewhere—which is more than can be said of most Hollywood directors. And he is going there fast: *Sullivan's Travels* is a motion picture with the accent on the "motion". As for the acting, I need only say that Joel McCrea, Veronica Lake, and the others are capable of all that Sturges asks of them.

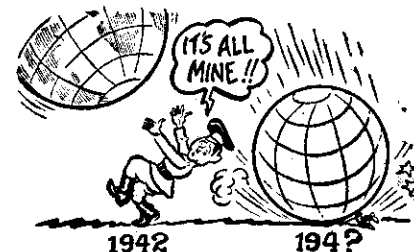
It is difficult to grade this film with accuracy: it is not absolutely first-class and yet it is better (certainly more exhilarating and often more uproariously funny) than the average good movie. However, since it would be undignified to depict our little man half out of his seat, we'll give the show the benefit of the doubt and bring him to his feet to applaud.

## LISTENINGS

(Perpetrated and illustrated by KEN ALEXANDER)

IN the present round, the Allies are taking a few on the chin. But, if we are not as happy as might be, Hitler and his colleagues haven't got the makings of such a splendid illuminated address to present to themselves. Success, like failure, is relative. If you determine to travel a hundred miles and reach only fifty, you haven't succeeded. If you proclaim that you are going to do the hundred yards in nine and three-fifths and then make out in only ten and one-fifth, you can hardly say that you are captain of your fate and master of your stop-watch. In warfare, especially, Success is the lady who holds the tape. A lot of things can happen before Hitler can take the world in his arms and shriek, "It's all mine."

He has to pull the cork out of the Caucasus. He has to get the oil to lubricate the squeaking Axis. He has to meet himself in Palestine and the Japs in India. In the meantime, he has to make Russia unfit for Russians to live



in. He has to ring Europe and square Germany. And then he would have the hardest part of all—to command loyalty, obedience, and affection by hate. No, no, Nanette! But, in the meantime, Allied prospects look somewhat blue in the face. But so they did in 1917. In fact, optimists were as rare as ten-course dinners in 1917. History doesn't always repeat itself; but neither do onions. If the present is our darkest hour before the dawn, it must be Hitler's lightest hour before the dark.