



FILM: **SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS**

FDG RATING: 3.7 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Preston Sturges: *director/writer*  
Joel McCrea: *actor, John Sullivan*  
Veronica Lake: *actress, the girl*

DATE: June 14, 2020

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS**

Sullivan's Travels is a depression-era 1941 American comedy film written and directed by Preston Sturges. It is a satire about Hollywood's top director of comedies, played by Joel McCrea, who after a string of somewhat meaningless successful comedies, longs to make a socially relevant, serious drama about the suffering of the poor, unemployed, "down trodden" based on the (fake) novel by Sinclair Beckstein (a combination of Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck) titled "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" (also the title of a 2000 Coen brothers film in homage to Sturges), but eventually, through a series of misadventures and self discovery, learns that creating laughter is his greatest contribution to society.

According to one of our resident reviewers, "Sullivan's Travels is a great movie that somehow combines humor and serious observations on the rich and the poor, and what to do with one's talent. Snappy dialog, ingenious plot. A successful comedy director wants to make a movie about suffering, which, as a prep school and college grad, he knows nothing. With help from the studio costume department, he disguises himself as a hobo and hits the road. In several adventures, he somehow ends up back in Hollywood, as if there's a force that's telling him that's where he belongs. Finally, a Mickey Mouse cartoon screened for poor African-Americans and prisoners, is his epiphany." One discussion participant observed that the film captured the feeling of hopelessness for the impoverished and then, for a moment, the cartoon offered a moment of escape as we see the laughter. In one of Sullivan's final lines he says, "There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much, but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan."

The film features one of Veronica Lake's first leading roles. A frail, young, out of work aspiring actress, she comments when first meeting Sullivan (in disguise) in a diner and he mentions he knows a director and maybe he could help her get a role in film, "there's always a girl" which underscores her character in Sullivan's Travels: she is only identified as playing "the girl" in the credits. She is fed up with Hollywood and Sullivan reluctantly agrees that she can join him on the road. Along the way, he becomes a victim of crime, violence, and amnesia and is almost imprisoned for his own murder, all the while accompanied by "the girl" who is disguised as a boy. As one published critic noted, "The banter between the two typifies the fast-talking and metaphor-rich dialogue in classic screwball comedies, in which the male protagonist and "unruly woman" match wits and fall in love." Which they eventually do. What guy could resist the girl's long blond peek-a-boo hair style? (when not in disguise.) It's also humorous to see the director's crew, diligently following his every move while trying to stay hidden. Sullivan's butler was not at all supportive of his plan to roam the underbelly as a hobo. Interestingly, the butler has one of the most significant lines in the film arguing that "If you'll permit me to say so sir: the subject is not an interesting one. The poor know all about poverty and only the morbid rich would find the topic glamorous."

An enthusiastic discussion participant described the film as bursting with comedy, romance, and social commentary. In 1941 The New York Times described it as "the most brilliant picture yet this year", praising Sturges's mix of escapist fun with underlying significance, and ranked it as one of the ten best films of 1941, but the Hollywood Reporter said that it lacked the "down to earth quality and sincerity which made Sturges's other three pictures of 1941 – The Great McGinty, The Lady Eve, and Christmas in July – "a joy to behold". Many film historians consider it to be his masterpiece. Media historian Hal Erickson classified it as a "classic", "one of the finest movies about movies ever made". In 1990, it was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" and it is Included among the American Film Institute's 1998 list of the 400 movies nominated for the Top 100 Greatest American Movies.

In the midst of our current covid 19 pandemic, our discussion participants seem to be seeking out films that can make us relax and laugh so we completely related to the film's opening dedication (which was originally to be the epilogue), "To the memory of those who made us laugh: the motley mountebanks, the clowns, the buffoons, in all times and nations, whose efforts have lightened our burden a little, this picture is affectionately dedicated."

Most of our discussion participants agreed with the accolades the film received, finding the physical comedy hilarious and enjoying the satirical subversive elements as well as the underlying message, gave it high marks while others appreciated its historical significance and message but comparing it to more current impactful films, couldn't give it the high marks they would have. One discussion participant's 105 year old father who joined by cell phone, had seen the film at least 20 time but didn't think it was one of Sturges' best and gave it a low ball score of 2. A few low scores ravaged the majority of rich 4s and 4.5s resulting in a not too shabby 3.7 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

See you at the movies!

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