

THE PALM BEACH STORY

Program Notes by Kimberley Jones

“During the time it takes the average American to figure out how to save \$3 on his income tax, Sturges is liable to have invented ‘a vibrationless Diesel engine,’ a ‘home exerciser,’ the ‘first nonsmear lipstick,’ opened up a new-style eatery, written a Broadway musical, given one of his discouraged actors his special lecture on happiness, and figured out a new way to increase his own superhuman productiveness and efficiency.”

– “Preston Sturges: Success in the Movies,” Manny Farber (with W.S. Poster), 1954

If you were coming to Preston Sturges cold, with no foreknowledge of his more-or-less invention of the writer/director role as we now know it or of the astonishing – we’re talking jaw-dropping – run of pictures he made from 1940 to 1944, including *THE GREAT MCGINTY*, *THE LADY EVE*, *SULLIVAN’S TRAVELS*, and *THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN’S CREEK* (I’ve left a few out, and they’re all titles most writer/directors would kill to list on their CV) or of his alchemic blend of cynicism and reluctant but real sentiment, then the first five minutes of *THE PALM BEACH STORY* are as good a place as any to start.

Using a soundtrack that dices the William Tell Overture with Mendelssohn’s wedding pomp into a giddy, dizzy hash, Sturges stages a wordless sequence at breakneck pace: There is a church awaiting impatiently a wedding ceremony; a bride (Claudette Colbert) shackled in a closet and kicking at the door; her look-alike shimmying into the bridal garb; a fainting maid; and a groom (Joel McCrea) scrabbling for a cab. Bride and groom do indeed make it to the church on time – they hoof it down the aisle like there’s fire licking at their heels – and Sturges punctuates the “I dos” with a heart framing their faces and a title card that reads: “And they all lived happily ever after...” The postscript that shoots a metaphorical arrow straight through said heart: “...Or did they?” And that’s just the first five minutes.

Upon the film’s release in 1942, Manny Farber called Sturges “the most progressively experimental worker in Hollywood (aside from the cartoon-makers) since the early days.” The cartoon-makers were good company: Though largely celebrated for his verbal derring-do, Sturges was a great visual wit, too, and under the seeming broad strokes of his slapstick were layers of satire and Production Code nose-thumbing. There are also the names he chose for his man and wife – Tom and Gerry – two years after Hanna Barbera debuted the cartoon cat and mouse antics of Tom and Jerry. I’ve yet to stumble on any textual evidence Sturges intended an homage, but I like the analogy – the blustering, single-minded cat chasing his witty, wily mouse all the way down to Florida.

After the manic frenzy of *THE PALM BEACH STORY*’s overture, the film slows its pacing to something slightly less than breathless – but not by much. Five years have passed, and matrimony, it appears, is not all bliss. Tom’s attempts to make a name for himself as an inventor have gone nowhere. (Notably, Sturges had his own sidelong career as an inventor; when working for his mother’s makeup company, he reportedly conceived of that first kissproof lipstick – a tidbit so apropos the punchline pretty much writes itself.) They are deep in debt and facing eviction. The first dialogue scene of the film introduces the Wienie King, a near-deaf sausage magnate from Texas, and his wife touring Tom and Gerry’s apartment. When he stumbles into Gerry (she’s hiding in the shower), he’s smitten. When he hears of her plight, he gifts her \$100 bills like lollipops, which, after a very slight hesitation, she gratefully accepts. Gerry is a realist, after all, and she knows there’s little chance her husband the dreamer can produce their rent money.

When Tom hears of the Wienie King’s largesse, he’s incensed. Jealous and pride-pricked, he’s certain his wife did something unseemly for the cash. Her retort aptly sums up Gerry’s philosophy on life: “You have no idea what a long-legged gal can do without doing anything.” Indeed, when she flees her marriage the next day for a quickie divorce in Palm Beach, her only plan is to see how far those long legs will take her.

Pretty far, it turns out: In quick succession, Gerry finds male champions who ease her along each leg of her journey: a pedestrian cop, a train official, the drunken disorderlies of the Ale and Quail Club (played by Sturges' stock troupe, those "irresistible fizzogs," the film critic David Cairns calls them), and, finally, Rudy Vallee's John D. Hackensacker III, whose priggishness is counterbalanced by his buckets of money. Gerry, it seems, has stumbled onto her second husband.

In his memoir *PRESTON STURGES BY PRESTON STURGES: HIS LIFE IN HIS WORDS* (adapted and edited by Sturges' wife, Sandy, after his death), the filmmaker wrote this of an early heartbreak: "I learned for the first time how completely through with a man a woman is, when she is through with a man. ... She is as businesslike and impersonal as a slaughterhouse employee, scratching the calf's ears at one moment and taking its sweetbreads home for lunch shortly thereafter." It's tempting to take a cynical view of Gerry's calculated exit from her marriage: She zeroes out their debts, calmly explains she requires a certain standard of living Tom can't provide, enjoys one last night with him (they still get each other's motors running), and then abandons their still-warm marital bed in search of a man who *can* bankroll the kind of lifestyle she feels she deserves.

But look a little closer, and her true motivation comes into focus. Yes, Gerry likes shiny baubles and nice new party dresses and regular trips to the beauty parlor (who can blame her?), but she also wants very much for her husband to succeed, and she has determined (rightly, it seems) that she's holding him back. Even as she's plotting her second marriage, she is still endeavoring to push Tom toward success, first by soliciting a payoff to him, then by convincing Hackensacker to fund Tom's latest invention.

Still, when Tom follows Gerry to Palm Beach, her pragmatism falters – he still gets that motor running, remember? – and the film tips in its last minutes from farce to outright fantasy. Hackensacker and his sister, the Princess Centimillia (Mary Astor), who'd taken a liking to Tom, hold no grudges against the deceiving couple, and the film ends in a double marriage, with Tom and Gerry's conveniently produced twin siblings married off to the super-rich Hackensackers. The film codas with the same title card that opened the picture: "And they all lived happily ever after... Or did they?"

The British critic David Thomson (*THE BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF FILM*) calls the ending a "flagrant trick ... as if to say only movie's fraud can keep the ending happy." He sees a more cynical, less romantic film, pointing to the "lovers who are like brother and sister" and finally, most damningly: "You can begin to get hints of how the dream of being Preston Sturges faded."

Sturges still had some great successes to come, but that extraordinary stretch of buoyancy wouldn't last much longer. The usual suspects – studio interference, a chronic lack of money, an excess of alcohol, and the shifting sands of audience tastes – conspired against him, and Sturges' later pictures were met with significantly less acclaim. In 1954, the great critic Manny Farber wrote an assessment of Sturges that could be read as something of an unintentional eulogy for the artist, who had only one more film, the poorly received foreign production *THE FRENCH, THEY ARE A FUNNY RACE* (1955), left in him:

"Sturges may not be the greatest director of the last two decades; in fact, it can be argued that a certain thinness in his work – his lack of a fully formed, solid, orthodox moviemaker's technique – prevents him from being included in the first few. He is, however, the most original movie talent produced in recent years: the most complex and puzzling."

SOURCES:

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Have You Seen ...?: A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films by David Thomson (Knopf, 2008)

Preston Sturges by Preston Sturges: His Life in His Words by Preston Sturges, adapted and edited by Sandy Sturges (Touchstone, 1991)

Romantic Comedy in Hollywood: From Lubitsch to Sturges by James Harvey (De Capo Press, 1998)