

The Power and the Glory

By Aubrey Solomon

After the coming of sound in 1927, studio executives were forced to rely heavily on dialogue writers. Actors could no longer improvise lines with minimal guidance from a script. Established playwrights were the most obvious choices to hire because of their command of dialogue and story structure. But those writers were accustomed to personal ownership of a script's contents, and were suddenly thrown into the Hollywood screenwriting stables because producers believed that the best and most efficiently written scripts resulted from group efforts.

Preston Sturges was a New York playwright lured to Hollywood. He was also one of the first writers (if not the first) of an original screenplay in the sound era to break the mold of round-robin writing.

Sturges was initially hired by Universal to rewrite an already troubled screenplay for H.G. Wells' "The Invisible Man." Not able to please studio head Carl Laemmle, Jr. any more than previous writers on the project, his contract was terminated. While unemployed, he decided to work on his own original story, hoping to make a studio sale. He was fascinated by his second wife's maternal grandfather, C.W. Post, who built a packaged cereal empire, but whose tragic personal life ended in suicide. Since Sturges had heard anecdotal pieces of Post's life in disjointed snippets, he decided to structure his story in a similar fashion.

Following a non-chronological arc, Sturges told the story of railroad tycoon Tom Garner, beginning with his funeral then touching on key moments in his life all tied together through narration by Garner's friend and long-time assistant. Along the hard-scrabble road from trackwalker to railroad president, Garner married, had a son, fell in love with a much younger woman and re-married. After his own wife's suicide, his second wife gave birth to a child fathered by his now adult son. This led to Garner's own suicide. The story crystallized Sturges' ambivalence toward financial success in America, a theme which would run through his entire career and personal life.

Sturges met with Jesse Lasky in November, 1932 at the Fox Studios in Westwood. Lasky, one of the founding partners of Paramount Pictures, had set up



Sally Garner (Colleen Moore) embraces her ambitious husband Tom (Spencer Tracy). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

an independent unit at Fox, a studio in the throes of political turmoil caused by a power struggle for executive control.

After hearing a verbal "pitch" of the story, Lasky wanted Sturges to follow studio protocol and write a screen treatment. Instead, Sturges presented the entire screenplay three months later. Lasky was astounded and thought it was "the most perfect script" he had ever seen.

Lasky, because of his independence, was also willing to strike a previously unheard-of deal for a screenplay; \$17,500 as an advance against future royalties of 3 ½ percent of profits. This was when studios paid salaried writers \$50 to \$300 weekly and generally considered them menial employees. More outrageous to Hollywood's studio executives was a contractual agreement that Sturges could attend story conferences and offer his opinions as well as be on the set. This was his opportunity to learn about directing since his stint at Universal proved that the real control of a motion picture lay with producers and directors.

Sturges' non-linear story structure was given the newly minted term, "narratage." Shifting constantly from past to present was, at the time, a daring way to tell a story for audiences accustomed to chronological presentations. It also meant that an actor playing Tom Garner would have to be convincing at ages 20 through 60.

Fox, in the early 1930s, had an anemic stable of contract stars for a major studio. One star, in particular, Spencer Tracy, under contract since 1930, had

already acted in a dozen features for the studio with little critical or financial success. He also had several suspensions for inebriation and a reputation for being unreliable. But Jesse Lasky recognized that Tracy had genuine talent. Director William K. Howard was also convinced Tracy, at age 33, could play the age range and, because of his craggy face, not need much make-up. Colleen Moore, a top comedy star of the silent era who had not been seen on screen since 1929, was borrowed from MGM to play Tracy's wife.

Production of "The Power and the Glory" took place in Los Angeles between March 23 and May 5, 1933 with Director of Photography James Wong Howe taking advantage of light and shadows on a new, more sensitive film stock. Lasky's unit was given the rare privilege at Fox of exceeding the maximum budget limit of \$240,000 since his mandate was for quality films. When reshoots were needed, Lasky asked for and received an additional \$25,000 from Fox, bringing the total negative cost to \$319,119.

A New York premiere of the film on August 16, 1933 resulted in sterling reviews. Its general release began on October 6, 1933. Tracy received the best notices of any of his Fox roles before and after "The Power and the Glory." Lasky had delivered a critically acclaimed motion picture but would audiences be intrigued or confused by its unusual structure? As it turned out, as optimistic as expectations were from its initial reviews, the downbeat nature of the story during the height of the Great Depression resulted in world rentals of only \$558,220. The domestic market contributed the larger share of \$362,210. The resulting loss was \$52,118.

After Tracy became a top star at MGM in the mid-1930s, the incest sub-plot denied the film a reissue because of censorship impositions by the 1934 Motion Picture Code.

Like many of Fox's films of this period, the negative and printing materials were destroyed in a storage facility fire in 1937. Until recently, the only existing master copy was a much-spliced studio print with clipped dialogue and ruined scene transitions. The lack of proper prints prevented the movie from being released to television.

"The Power and the Glory" is unique in the sense that it's one of the few films in which writing is more prominently remembered than direction. The "narratage" story-telling of "The Power and the Glory" is also considered to have influenced Herman Mankiewicz's script structure of Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane" less than a decade later.

Following "The Power and the Glory," Sturges continued writing scripts and directed some of Hollywood's best-known screwball comedies, including "Sullivan's Travels," "The Lady Eve," and "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek."

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Aubrey Solomon has published three books on the Fox Film Corporation and 20th Century Fox. He has also produced documentary specials, written for many episodic television series and several feature films. His most recent story credit is for "Ice Age: Collision Course."