

Sullivan's Travels

By Julie Grossman

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Preston Sturges's "Sullivan's Travels" remains one of the great American film satires of Hollywood. With the nation still in the pre-war throes of the Great Depression, filmmaker John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) sets out to make a serious picture to be titled "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" about the suffering of the unemployed. Acclaimed for his comedies, such as "Hey, Hey in the Hay Loft" and "Ants in your Plants of 1939," Sullivan wants to document the trials of the downtrodden. Lessoned by his producers, however, that he knows nothing about the poor and oppressed and humored by them that he can make an important movie "but with a little sex in it," Sullivan insists on doing authentic research by going undercover as a hobo. Along his travels, he meets "The Girl" (Veronica Lake), a struggling actress fed up with Hollywood who joins Sullivan on the road. 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.

Sullivan's attempts to find "trouble" fail at first. While he and The Girl hop trains and eat and sleep at flophouses, a team of Hollywood handlers follows them in a trailer, obviating threats from the "real world." Eventually, Sullivan finds more trouble than he bargained for. He is robbed, mistaken for a violent indigent, and sent to a work camp, where he contests his imprisonment, telling Trusty, The Mister's assistant at the prison camp, "They don't sentence picture directors to a place like this for a little disagreement with a yard bull." Trusty replies, "Don't they?" Sullivan's privilege as an insider is mocked here, revealing Sturges's opposition to Hollywood glass-tower isolation from real life while purporting to "mirror" it in social-problem films like "The Grapes of Wrath," released a year before "Travels."

Sullivan's journey (at least the one he thinks he's on) appears to be quixotic and self-undermining, revealing the character's foolhardiness and affirming the role of comic art rather than high-toned "message pictures" in providing escapist entertainment for the common person. In the end, Sullivan comes to un-



Dressed as hoboes, Sullivan (Joel McCrea) and his female companion (Veronica Lake) are part of a crowd at a soup kitchen. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

derstand, like Dorothy Gale in "The Wizard of Oz," that there's no place like home, here defined in terms of the artistic practice Sullivan had sought to abandon. He should return to making silly comedies that will "lighten the burden" for film viewers assaulted in their "real" lives by a bleak Depression with "grim death gargling at you from every corner." Sturges stands instead with the "motley mountebanks, the clowns, the buffoons." Debunking contemporary filmmakers who "want to make an epic about misery" (as the studio executive Hadrian says to Sullivan), Sturges pokes fun at the social-problem strain of filmmaking in the 1930s and 40s, extending his critique of Hollywood's exploitations and hypocrisies.

And yet, while "Sullivan's Travels" is a tribute to film comedy as a release from the hardships of the real world, the film registers at the same time "the dramatic power of socially conscious cinema" (Jaeckle 14). Belying its seeming disavowal of its own seriousness as a film, "Sullivan's Travels" conveys its covert "message" about the social importance of film and art in a rather stunning montage of Depression-era poverty. As R. Barton Palmer observes, Sturges has a unique artistic vision in his "unharmonized mixture of tones" in "Travels" that includes a serious representation of "a very different America [that] exists outside the privileged environs of the Hollywood dream factory" (134). The singular tone of "Sullivan's Travels" also includes a distinct postmodernism "*avant la lettre*" (Kozloff 300). Sturges's film displays the delights of whimsy and imagination not only to entertain but also to engage viewers through irony. The film blurs the boundaries of made-up and real

worlds from its very beginning, as we are brought in medias res into a movie within a movie. We see a thrilling train scene of two men, representing Capital and Labor, fighting to the death, both finally falling from the train to their deaths in the river below. The lights come up, and we realize that Sullivan has been screening this film at the studio to make his initial case for directing "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Sturges thus defines Sullivan's "travels," his journey, as one that will explore what is actual and what is "projected."

The film's humor often relies on absurdist juxtaposition, as in the poster outside the theater where Sullivan and the Kornheiser sisters go to watch a film.

The poster reads,

3 FEATURES TONIGHT
BEYOND THESE TEARS
THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW
THE BUZZARD OF BERLIN
also
SWINGO

Another example is the scene in which a boy in his homemade tank engine (which has "USA Tank Coarse" emblazoned on its side) provides Sullivan with a high-speed getaway from the double-decker coach filled with the director's entourage. When the kid finally stops, he says, "I guess I better be getting to school now anyway." Sullivan tells him to "Drive carefully." At the home of the Kornheisers, we see another instance of Sturges's absurdist world-making—the facial expression of the portrait of "Dear Joseph" keeps changing as his widow tries to seduce Sullivan.

More broadly, "Sullivan's Travels" is governed by unstable and self-consciously contingent laws of fiction, such as the naming of Veronica Lake's character "The Girl." The police officer who has arrested the

couple asks, "How does the girl fit into this picture?" Sullivan replies, "There's always a girl in the picture." Later, in another metafictional moment, as he tries to figure out how to escape from the prison camp, Sullivan says, "If ever a plot needed a twist, this one does." It should be no surprise that the would-be fiction within the fiction of "Sullivan's Travels," "O Brother, Where Art Thou," inspired the Coen brothers to make their own film about music and art and the American landscape.

Works Cited

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