

HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO
A Preston Sturges Comedy for a War-Weary Audience

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A wartime movie that pokes fun at American politics, small-town life, the sanctity of motherhood, and America's fascination with glorifying its war heroes? Preston Sturges' popular 1944 comedy, *Hail the Conquering Hero*, did all that – and went on to earn glowing reviews for its writer-director, along with an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay. *Newsweek* gushed that before Sturges left Paramount Studios that year to partner with Howard Hughes as an independent producer, he had “paid off with a comedy that does Paramount proud and will do its public – whether uniformed or civilian – no end of good.”¹ This widespread acceptance of a movie poking fun at some of America's most cherished national institutions was driven by two contributing factors – the movie-going public's expectation that a Preston Sturges film would provide both laughs and satire, along with a war-weary need for just such entertainment.

Sturges' personal mastery of satire disguised as slapstick began in 1940 with *The Great McGinty* – the first movie he both wrote and directed and for which he won his only Academy Award (Best Original Screenplay). *The Great McGinty* dealt with political deceit around the turn of the century. Paramount initially balked at the screenplay until Sturges offered to sell it to them for \$10 – but only if he directed.² From the beginning of his career as a director in Hollywood, his timing and choice of subject was unconventional. According to Diane Jacobs in *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges*, a satire on American politics was “truly an audacious venture in December 1939, with Europe at war and fascism very much a reality.”³

Yet, as Ted Sennett writes in *Lunatics and Lovers: A Tribute to the Giddy and Glittering Era of the Screen's "Screwball" and Romantic Comedies*, after *The Great McGinty* opened in August 1940, Sturges “immediately attracted the attention of every critic who thirsted for originality in films.”⁴ He goes on to describe glowing reviews in the *New York Times*,

¹ Review of *Hail the Conquering Hero*, *Newsweek's* Movie Column, 7 August 1944, 98-99.

² Ted Sennett, *Lunatics and Lovers: A Tribute to the Giddy and Glittering Era of the Screen's "Screwball" and Romantic Comedies* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1973), 229.

³ Diane Jacobs, *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 201.

⁴ Ted Sennett, 232.

the *New Yorker*, and *Newsweek*. Jacobs also acknowledges the public recognition given to Sturges personally, noting that the movie created an “instant celebrity.”⁵

The Sturges style, an entertaining blend of slapstick and satire, began to be recognized by audiences and critics alike. *The Great McGinty* was soon followed by two other comedies, each, according to Sennett, with an “ample number of Sturgesian turns of phrase.”⁶ The first was *Christmas in July* (1940), which lampooned America’s mania for contests of all kinds. Next came *The Lady Eve* (1941), described by Sennett as a romantic comedy featuring a revenge-seeking Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda as a typical Sturges hero, a “well-meaning but cotton-headed oaf who finds himself in dilemmas not of his own making.”⁷ Both movies were well received, adding to Sturges’ growing reputation during the early 1940s.

Although Sturges found himself “in his heyday, beloved at Paramount,” Jacobs notes he had begun to question his own good fortune and the seriousness of his films.⁸ Sennett, too, attributed Sturges with a need to “justify his preoccupation with frivolous and lighthearted matters in his comedies” during the dark days of the war – along with an irritation with “film producers who insisted on investing their films with what they considered ‘significance’ and ‘stark realism.’”⁹

Whatever the motivation, Sturges’ next films exhibited a darker side beneath the slapstick comedy, a darkness that would find its way into other Hollywood wartime and postwar movies of the 1940s and was later identified by French critics as *film noir*.¹⁰ According to Emanuel Levy in *Small-Town America in Film: The Decline and Fall of Community*, “Sturges’ comedies, beginning with *Sullivan’s Travels* (1942), reflected the thematic and stylistic influence of *film noir* on every genre at the time, including screwball comedies.”¹¹ He argues that, along with films made by other directors during the 1940s including Billy Wilder, Sturges’ comedies “embody a cynical view, exposing the downbeat side of ‘normal’ American life.” In *Movie-Made America*, Robert Sklar also argues that even pictures quite different from *film noir* can share in its feelings of

⁵ Diane Jacobs, 213.

⁶ Ted Sennett, 233.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

⁸ Diane Jacobs, 248.

⁹ Ted Sennett, 237.

¹⁰ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage Books, A division of Random House, 1975, 1994), 253.

claustrophobia and entrapment, noting that two of Sturges' wartime comedies, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (both 1944), are about "men trapped in false situations not of their own making."¹²

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek, a satire on matrimony and motherhood, follows a young girl – pregnant and unmarried after a night of drinking and partying with a group of soldiers – together with her 4-F, would-be boyfriend, through their frantic attempts to make her an honest woman. *Miracle* was written and produced in 1942 and '43 but it wasn't released for distribution until January 1944 because of censorship problems.¹³ The popular film, according to Alan Dale in *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*, "plays off the expectations of propagandists like Elbridge Gerry that girls be pure and boys be valiant, expectations that were often jacked up in patriotic wartime melodramas."¹⁴

The widespread acceptance of *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* by American audiences and critics set the scene for the release in August 1944 of *Hail the Conquering Hero*. It was a contradictory wartime film, mocking motherhood, politics, small-town Americana, and America's penchant for deifying its heroes, yet it ended with a moving "mea culpa" speech by its phony hero to the townspeople he has deceived. Like *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, it was well received by the public and critics alike, perhaps in part because of the audience's anticipation that a Preston Sturges film would generate welcome laughs even – or perhaps especially – at the expense of traditional American institutions.

As Philip T. Hartung wrote in a column entitled, "Hail the Conquering Sturges" in the *Commonweal*, the film "shows off the Sturges technique in its best style."¹⁵ It begins in a nightclub as the "hero," Woodrow Lafayette Pershing Truesmith (Eddie Bracken) meets six Marines recently home from battle and tells them his sad story. The son of a Marine hero, "Hinky Dinky" Truesmith who was killed in WWI on the day Woodrow was born, Woodrow was unfortunately dismissed from the Marines because of his hayfever. He has had someone mailing letters back to his Mother (Georgia Caine) from

¹¹ Emanuel Levy, *Small-Town America in Film: The Decline and Fall of Community* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1991), 96.

¹² Robert Sklar, 253.

¹³ Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 170.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

overseas to spare her the humiliation of her son's less-than-heroic rejection. Bugsy (Freddie Steele) – an orphaned Marine with a huge mother complex that plays for many laughs during the film – calls Woodrow's Mother and tells her that her son will be returning home, having distinguished himself in battle at Guadalcanal.

The six Marines hijack Woodrow, loan him a uniform complete with medals and drag him on a train back to his small hometown of Oakridge, California, for a quiet reunion with his Mother. They are shocked when they are greeted at the train station with a massive, frenzied reception for the hometown "hero" that includes four marching bands, the Mayor (Raymond Walburn) and practically every citizen in Oakridge. From there, the hapless – and phony – hero is propelled into two days of wildly growing hero worship. Woodrow's fate is relentlessly propelled forward by the townspeople's unwarranted, yet increasingly fervent worship for their "hero." This leads to the burning of his Mother's mortgage in church, then to the commissioning of a heroic father-son monument to be built in their honor, and finally to the nomination of Woodrow for Mayor.

Ultimately, the unhappy Woodrow decides to unburden himself of the deception and reveal the truth. He gives a moving speech, telling the townspeople that this is "the bitterest day" of his life, and that, "The coward is at last cured of his fear." Believing he will be an outcast among his lifelong friends, Woodrow prepares to leave Oakridge. In the meantime, the Marine sergeant explains to everyone that Woodrow only lied to spare his widowed Mother's feelings. An excited mob of townspeople surges around Woodrow again as he is getting ready to board the train leaving town, this time to urge him to stay and run for Mayor – ironically as a truly "honest" politician. As one character notes, "Politics is a very peculiar thing, Woodrow. If they want you, they want you. They don't need reasons anymore, they find their own reasons." In the film's closing shot, the real Marines board the train and leave Oakridge behind as Woodrow silently mouths the Marine's motto: "Semper Fidelis."

Hail the Conquering Hero opened to extremely favorable reviews for Sturges. *Time Magazine's* review began, "*Hail the Conquering Hero*, the newest cinematic caprice from Preston Sturges, beats a satirical tattoo on the American small town. But it tells a story so touching, so chock-full of human frailties and so rich in homely detail that it achieves

¹⁵ Philip T. Hartung, "Hail the Conquering Sturges," *Commonweal* 25 August, 1944, 446-447.

a reality transcending the limitations of its familiar slapstick.”¹⁶ In describing Preston Sturges as “The Cinema’s Top-Notch Satirist” in a *New York Times* headline, Bosley Crowther raves, “A Hollywood Voltaire is budding.”¹⁷

Yet other critics writing for less mainstream publications such as Manny Farber in the *New Republic* and James Agee in *The Nation* were more ambivalent and less likely to lionize Sturges. Agee qualified his praise of the “remarkable” movie by repudiating Crowther’s comparison of Sturges to Voltaire.¹⁸ The disappointment of both these critics seems to stem from not from Sturges making fun of Mothers and heroes, but from his failure to follow through and commit to any of his satirical themes, as Farber writes of his frustration with Sturges’ “unwillingness to alienate anyone in his audience.”¹⁹

Regardless of its happy ending, the film nevertheless dared to go for laughs at the expense of cherished American institutions while the country was in the middle of a war. However – Sturges’ reputation for comic satire notwithstanding – it also was significant that *Hail the Conquering Hero* was released when America had already been at war for nearly three years. While patriotism for the war effort still ran high, Americans were becoming weary of the overwhelming calls to serve their country. In analyzing movie audiences’ failure to embrace the film *Wilson*, a heavy-handed movie extolling American virtues and also released in 1944, Colin Shindler writes in *Hollywood Goes to War*, “To them the war was a nuisance and the sooner it was over and the men were demobbed, the quicker everyone could concentrate on the crucial matters of life, namely the removal of wartime controls and the spending of all those wartime savings on consumer products like automobiles, steaks, and nylon stockings.”²⁰

Americans had begun to feel an uncertainty about the future as changing roles of family, gender, and race began to affect people’s beliefs about the “ideal” America. This edginess made its way into Hollywood pictures, and a less rosy view of America and its role in the world began to emerge, even if it wasn’t patriotic to acknowledge at the time. As Levy notes, “A darker, more ambiguous, portraiture of small towns marked the

¹⁶ Review of *Hail the Conquering Hero*, *Time*, 21 August, 1944, 94

¹⁷ Bosley Crowther, “The Cinema’s Top-Notch Satirist Shines With *Hail the Conquering Hero*,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1944.

¹⁸ James Agee, *The Nation*, 23 September 1944, 361.

¹⁹ Manny Farber, “To Be or Not to Be,” *New Republic*, August 1944, 220.

²⁰ Colin Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society 1939-1952* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 87-88.

films of the 1940s – despite the fact that the country was at war.²¹ This darker, underlying mood set the scene for films that painted less than glowing portraits of America, and it was into this setting that Preston Sturges brought stories to the screen that would have been unacceptable just two years before.

In 1944 America, a film such as *Hail the Conquering Hero* – which lampoons such cherished American institutions as Motherhood, small-town America, heroic fathers, and especially America's worship of returning heroes – was a film whose time had come. Preston Sturges' talent for making social satire entertaining to the general public was unequalled, and *Hail the Conquering Hero*, according to Frank N. Magill in *Magill's Survey of Cinema*, is thought by many to be his best film. It contains "all of the elements that his fans had come to expect: the usual cast of lovable bumbler and stuffed shirts, and an equal blend of sly wit with raucous slapstick."²² In addition to the popularity of Sturges' wit, there was also a growing disillusionment in a war-weary America with overly patriotic films, fueled by the belief that although the war was far from over, the tide had turned and America and its Allies would prevail. Thus, with the darkest days of the war behind them, the American public was receptive to a film poking fun at war heroes – "but in a nice way!" as Bosley Crowther noted in the *New York Times*.²³ *Hail the Conquering Hero* was a film that entertained and perhaps also reflected the audience's desire to look forward toward the time when all their "heroes" would return home.

²¹ Emanuel Levy, 256.

²² Frank N. Magill, *Magill's Survey of Cinema: English Language Films*, Second Series, Vol. II COB-HAL (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press, 1981), 963.

²³ Bosley Crowther, review in the *New York Times*, 10 August 1944.

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