

Sullivan travels again

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

There was an innocent spirit in the movies that Preston Sturges made during World War II. His comedy was broad and his wit could be cutting, but at their core his films recall a time when we thought we had reason to be optimistic about the innate goodness of the human spirit. Sturges's style did not survive the cynical realism of the postwar era. But while it lasted, his films dominated the industry. From 1939 through 1943, he wrote and directed *The Great McGinty*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Christmas in July*, *The Lady Eve*, *Hail the Conquering Hero*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *The Palm Beach Story*. Four of his films are listed by the American Film Academy among the top 100 comedies of the 20th century.

Sturges had disappeared into the shadows of film history until the appearance of Joel and Ethan Coen's film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* At this year's March 25 Academy Award ceremonies, the film industry will have a chance to consider only two Oscars for the film—Best Screenplay Adaptation and Best Cinematography. (*Fargo*, an earlier Coen film, was named Best Picture by the Academy in 1996.) The Academy Awards press office told me that the screenplay for *O Brother* was nominated as an adapted rather than an original screenplay because it took its inspiration from Homer's *Odyssey*. But since the film's title comes from a key plot element in the 1941 film *Sullivan Travels*, I decided to check out the original to see if there might be more Sturges than Homer in the film.

It was worth the effort. Not only did the Coens lift their title from *Sullivan's Travels*, but they chose to follow Sturges's style, mixing comedy with an innocence bordering on sentimentality. The Coens included a bombastic politician who is frustrated over the ineptness of his adult son during a campaign. Both characters are lifted from 1944's patriotic *Hail the Conquering Hero*. Of course, the Coens didn't try to re-create the societal innocence of the 1930s and '40s. That prewar era has been exposed for its failure to confront racial, class and gender repression.

The gospel and folk musical forms used by the Coens in *O Brother* transcend the hidden darkness of pre-World War society, while the dialogue and plot are in

keeping with the Sturges style, with the film's characters blissfully unaware of the harsh reality that surrounds them. The humorous take on a brutal penal system is so much in the Sturges tradition that *O Brother* could be viewed as a spiritual successor to *Sullivan's Travels*.

When Sturges began production of his picture early in 1941, most people assumed the U.S. would stay out of the war. By the time the picture was released, however, Pearl Harbor had ended that hope. *Sullivan's Travels* was a commercial success and, together with other Sturges films, a favorite of military units overseas. (Dwight Eisenhower was said to be a fan. He made sure the director's films got to the front lines.)

In the opening scene of *Sullivan's Travels*, movie director John Sullivan (played by Joel McCrea) informs his studio bosses that he no longer wants to make comedies; in view of the troubles caused by the Depression, he tells them, it is time to make a film about people suffering from poverty. He will call his drama, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

The bosses are horrified. Sullivan's comedies made money. To humor him, they agree to let him go through with his idea so that he'll get it out of his system. Sullivan insists that he must go among the poor people, dressed in rags, and learn what their lives are like. His butler knows better:

Butler: If you'll permit me to say so, sir . . . The poor know all about poverty and only the morbid rich would find the topic glamorous.

Sullivan (exasperated): But I'm doing it for the poor.

Butler: I doubt that they would appreciate it, sir. . . . You see, sir, rich people and theorists, who are usually rich people, think of poverty in the negative . . . as the lack of riches . . . as disease might be called the lack of health . . . but it isn't, sir. Poverty is not the lack of anything, but a positive plague, virulent in itself, contagious as cholera, with filth, criminality, vice and despair as only a few of its symptoms. It is to be stayed away from, even for purposes of study . . . It is to be shunned.

Sullivan: Well, you seem to have made quite a study of it.

Butler (dryly): Quite unwillingly, sir. Will that be all, sir?

As the film proceeds through comedic scenes and a dramatic encounter with poverty, Sullivan discovers that the butler is right. For many people, especially the poor, laughter is all they have. He returns to Hollywood and continues to make comedies. Now the Coens have made *O Brother*, but they retain Sturges's conclusion: comedy is restorative and people deserve to laugh. In another homage to Sturges, the Coens' film includes a version of a major scene in *Sullivan's Travels*. Prisoners are brought, chained together, into a church sanctuary to see a movie. *O Brother* places the scene in a movie theater.

Sturges won the first Academy Award given for an original screenplay (for *The Great McGinty*). It would be a fitting tribute to one of Hollywood's greatest director-writers if this year's Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay is awarded to the Coens for their upbeat homage to Sturges.