



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Sullivan's Travels

Sullivan's Travels

Director: Preston Sturges

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Associate Producer: Paul Jones

Screenplay: Preston Sturges

Director of Photography: John Seitz

Process Photography: Farciot Edouart

Editor: Stuart Gilmore

Costumes: Edith Head

Make-up Artist: Wally Westmore

Musical Score: Leo Shuken, Charles Bradshaw

Music Director: Sigmund Krungold

uncredited

Executive Producer: Buddy De Sylva

Unit Manager: Joseph C. Youngerman

Location Manager: Norman Lacey

1st Assistant Director: John H. Morse

Castings: Robert Mayo

Assistant Writer: Ernst Laemmle

2nd Camera: Otto Pierce

Art Directors: Hans Dreier, Earl Hedrick

Make-up: Hal Lierley

Hair Supervisor: Leonora Sabine

Sound Recording: Harry Mills, Walter Oberst

Cast:

Joel McCrea (*John Lloyd Sullivan*)

Veronica Lake (*the girl*)

Robert Warwick (*Mr LeBrand*)

William Demarest (*Mr Jones*)

Franklin Pangborn (*Mr Casalsis*)

Porter Hall (*Mr Hadrian*)

Byron Foulger (*Mr Valdelle*)

Margaret Hayes (*secretary*)

Robert Greig (*Burroughs, Sullivan's butler*)

Eric Blore (*Sullivan's valet*)

Torben Meyer (*the doctor*)

Victor Potel (*cameraman*)

Richard Webb (*radio man*)

Charles Moore (*chef*)

Almira Sessions (*Ursula*)

Esther Howard (*Miz Zeffie*)

Frank Moran (*tough chauffeur*)

Georges Renavent (*old tramp*)

Harry Rosenthal (*'The Trombenick'*)

Alan Bridge (*Jake, 'The Mister'*)

Jimmy Conlin (*trusty*)

Jan Buckingham (*Mrs Sullivan*)

Robert Winkler (*Bud*)

Chick Collins (*'Capital'*)

Jimmy Dundee (*'Labour'*)

uncredited

Preston Sturges (*director in film studio*)

USA 1941©

90 mins

Digital

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Sullivan's Travels is a difficult film to categorise. It is a comedy, yet darkly dramatic in its third act. It is a satire about Hollywood thinking and, at the same time, an apologia for same. Primarily it is a message picture whose message is that we don't need any more message pictures. It was the first script by Sturges, the writer, for Sturges, the director. As such, it was a very clean job: there was not much revision between the first draft and what finally appeared on screen. And it was never known by any title other than the one it carries. With *Sullivan's Travels*, Sturges created a character, posed a problem, and then allowed that character to carry the situation to its logical extreme. The character, an earnest young film director named John L. Sullivan, has made a fortune spinning confections like *The Big Broadcast of 1938* and *College Swing*. But these aren't enough for him. He is troubled by the fact that he is a maker of comedies – mere entertainment pictures. He aspires to loftier planes, pointing to socially significant productions like *Wild Boys of the Road* and *Grapes of Wrath* for his inspiration. He wants to make a film called *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and the studio bosses do all they can to talk him out of it. But all they succeed in doing is inspiring him further: he knows nothing of the misery he proposes to film, so he decides to hit the road – in a tramp's costume with ten cents in his pocket – to learn about the world first hand.

Sturges wrote *Sullivan's Travels* with a specific actor in mind: Joel McCrea. It was a story that demanded the kind of low-key sincerity in which McCrea specialised. Sturges liked the actor's blank, no-nonsense quality that made him a favourite with top directors like DeMille, Wyler, Frank Lloyd, Gregory La Cava, King Vidor, and Alfred Hitchcock. 'He knew he could mould me,' McCrea said. 'Most of the other male stars bring a certain thing; Cagney, for instance, would always be Cagney. But this guy was John L. Sullivan – he couldn't be a movie star. He could be Sturges, he could be me.'

Sturges also had a specific leading lady in mind. His admiration for Veronica Lake began when he saw her in the troubled *I Wanted Wings*. Sturges found a fascinating quality in the way she handled her lines, dominating virtually every scene. He approached her one day in the commissary and said, 'I saw some of your rushes this morning and I want you to know I think you're going places.' Buddy De Sylva [the executive producer] thought she was all wrong for *Sullivan's Travels*, that she was best suited for the husky vamp parts she later became known for. They suggested Ida Lupino, Lucille Ball, Claire Trevor, Frances Farmer, Betty Field, and Ruby Keeler. Sturges stood firm. He got Veronica Lake.

Sullivan's Travels commenced production on Wednesday, 7 May 1941, with Sullivan embarking on his journey with a gigantic Sturges-equipped land cruiser dogging his steps. Inside are PR people, a short-wave radio, a kitchen, and a complete support staff required by the studio. Sullivan tries to shake them by hitching a ride on a go-cart, but driver Frank Moran gives chase in a loud violent ride that ends with the land cruiser lodged in what is left of a farmer's hay wagon.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Apocalypse Now: The Final Cut

Sat 1 Jun 15:00; Sat 8 Jun 19:40; Sat 15 Jun 19:40;
Sun 23 Jun 19:20

The Wages of Fear Le Salaire de la peur

Sat 1 Jun 17:40; Tue 11 Jun 20:15; Wed 19 Jun
14:20; Sun 30 Jun 14:40

The General + Cops

Sat 1 Jun 18:40; Wed 12 Jun 12:10

Cléo from 5 to 7 Cléo de 5 à 7

Sat 1 Jun 20:50; Wed 5 Jun 18:10 (+ intro
programmer Jelena Milosavljevic); Fri 14 Jun 20:50;
Fri 21 Jun 12:10

It Happened One Night

Sun 2 Jun 13:00; Mon 17 Jun 12:10; Tue 25 Jun
20:30

Badlands

Sun 2 Jun 20:45; Mon 10 Jun 12:20; Wed 26 Jun
18:15 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme
and Acquisitions)

Sullivan's Travels

Mon 3 Jun 18:10; Mon 10 Jun 20:50; Fri 14 Jun
14:45; Mon 24 Jun 12:10

North by Northwest

Mon 3 Jun 20:20; Thu 6 Jun 14:30; Tue 18 Jun
14:30

Easy Rider

Tue 4 Jun 12:40; Fri 7 Jun 21:00; Sun 16 Jun 20:35;
Sat 22 Jun 13:20

The Searchers

Tue 4 Jun 20:30; Thu 20 Jun 12:10; Sat 29 Jun
15:20

Where Is the Friend's House? Khaneh-je Doost Kojast

Wed 5 Jun 12:45; Sat 8 Jun 15:40; Wed 19 Jun
18:15 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-
Large); Wed 26 Jun 21:00

Alice in the Cities Alice in den Städten

Sun 9 Jun 20:20; Thu 13 Jun 12:00; Fri 28 Jun
12:20

Gun Crazy

Wed 12 Jun 18:20 (+ intro by Josephine Botting,
BFI National Archive Curator); Mon 24 Jun 20:30;
Thu 27 Jun 12:20

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Filming moved smoothly until they returned to the studio on the twelfth and began work with Veronica Lake. For all of Sturges's faith and support, she proved to be true to her reputation. 'She wouldn't know her lines,' said McCrea. 'This great dialogue and we would go through about 15 takes while she was learning her lines. Then by the time she got it great, I was just going through the lines, kind of pooped out and tired. She was very unprofessional.' As if this weren't enough, Lake then announced that she was six months pregnant.

The film moves deftly from rowdy comedy to stark drama as the images of despair and loneliness and futility pass across the screen. Sullivan finally decides he's had enough and returns to his hotel room for a hot shower and a wad of five-dollar bills to pass around that evening. But that night Sullivan is robbed by an old tramp (Georges Renavent in a small but showy part) and is left for dead. Through a complex series of plot turns, Sullivan winds up on a prison farm with a six-year sentence for assault. Here, in the darkest segment of the film, he is brutalised, cut off from all but the swampland that surrounds him, his contacts in Hollywood believing him dead. Here Sturges set the stage for one of his most memorable scenes, where the chain gang is led – by their brutally magnanimous keeper (Alan Bridge) – to an old church for blacks to see a few minutes of comedy on a motion picture screen.

A Mickey Mouse cartoon flashes on the screen and every miserable, stinking man in line breaks into laughter. Sullivan stubbornly surveys the scene, refusing to believe what he is seeing. 'Hey, am I laughing?' he demands of Jimmy Conlin. But, finally, Sullivan too is caught up in the merriment. The camera pans the church as the viewers are lifted out of their lives and into the world on the screen. And Sullivan realises how precious is the gift of laughter.

Said Sturges, 'When I started writing it I had no idea what Sullivan was going to discover. Bit by bit I took everything away from him – health, fortune, name, pride, and liberty. When I got down to there I found he still had one thing left: the ability to laugh. The less he had of other things the more important became laughter. So, as a purveyor of laughs, he regained the dignity of his profession and returned to Hollywood to make laughter.'

But Sturges didn't necessarily accept the narrowness of such an interpretation. 'That was Sullivan's conclusion,' he said, 'not mine. I don't believe that now is the time for comedies or tragedies or spy pictures or pictures without spies or historical dramas or musicals or pictures without music. I believe that now is the time for all forms of art and that now is always with us. Art, Tolstoy said, is a medium for the transmission of emotions. Without them we exist. The theatre helps to make up for the emotional deficiency in most people's lives and as such is vastly useful.'

James Curtis, *Between Flops: A Biography of Preston Sturges* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982)