And Now for Something Almost Completely Live-Action

Welcome to a very special guest post, the likes of which you're unlikely to see again, seeing as it's only tangentially about cartoons and crying. But hey, at least it's great!

John Maher

May 22nd 2021 14 min read

This here free weekly newsletter is usually by John Maher and about cartoons and crying, with a few odds and ends thrown in. This week, it's by Emma Kantor, who's smarter and funnier and better cultured than John, and about old movies that will make you laugh—plus a couple of nods to cartoons to placate certain screwy rascals. Follow @johnhmaher and @tearsfortoons on Twitter if you're a stinker and @emmakantor if you're a smartie. And if you haven't yet, please sign up for future missives.

Screwball, Ain't It?

By Emma Kantor

“All you need to start an asylum is an empty room and the right kind of people.”—*My Man Godfrey* (1936)

In addition to Zoom therapy sessions and a daily regimen of anti-anxiety meds, the ritual that’s kept my head screwed on during the past 14+ months is rewatching old movies. If the Twitter chatter of Turner Classic Movie fans is any indication, I’m not the only one seeking asylum in Golden Age classics, a silver-screened world away from pandemic pandemonium. Lately, I’m gravitating toward screwball comedies of the 1930s and ’40s: fast-paced, banter-filled tales in which boy meets girl—or rather girl crashes into boy—and uproarious hijinks ensue. The emphasis is less on the couple’s courtship and more on the accompanying slapstick, innuendo, mistaken identities, and other mishegas. These are the live-action equivalents of early cartoons, and in my case, they’re exactly what the Doc ordered.

Why does madcap comedy steady me in this *Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*? At the risk of poking the proverbial dead frog, I bring you an anatomy of some of my favorites in the screwball genre, along with their cartoon siblings. Each of them has offered me the chance to laugh till I cry in the safety of their controlled chaos.

First, a bit of history to set the scene. Both screwball comedies and cartoons have their roots in silent film. Relatable everyman heroes and sight-gags galore are their shared birthright. Just take a look at the timing: stone-faced Buster Keaton’s *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* premiered in May 1928, a mere six months before Mickey Mouse debuted in the similarly titled short *Steamboat Willie*. Coincidence, you say? Not so fast. Walt Disney was a known admirer of silent comedians, including Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Charlie Chaplin (particularly his Little Tramp persona). In an interview with the *American Magazine* in 1931, Disney said of his future mascot, “We wanted something appealing and we thought of a tiny bit of a mouse that would have something of the wistfulness of Chaplin… a little fellow trying to do the best he could.”

Harold Lloyd, Mickey Mouse, and Charlie Chaplin in 'Mickey’s Gala Premier' (1933).

Both Mickey and Charlie went on to attain top billing as two of the most internationally recognizable icons of the early 20th century. During a fraught period of industrialization, economic depression, and world war, the characters' ability to conjure laughter and pathos with the slightest gesture was emblematic of, well, *Modern Times*. Nearly a century later, still wading through our own manifold crises, I can see the appeal of these little fellows trying their darndest.

With the refinement of synchronized sound in the late '20s and in the subsequent decade came screwball's crowning feature: razor-sharp dialogue. The lone figure of the silent comedian evolved into the verbally sparring male-female duo. In a bona fide screwball romcom, the dialogue between hero and heroine—featuring just enough sexual tension to arouse the audience without provoking the censors—becomes foreplay. As someone whose quarantine dating activity has been limited almost entirely to texting and the occasional video chat, I can assure you that good repartee is everything—and I have yet to find it.

Preston Sturges fills that void, and then some, with *The Lady Eve* (1941), his third turn as writer-director. The animated title sequence lets us know we're in for a rather Looney take on the fall of man: three large apples bearing the titular words bounce into view as a maraca-shaking snake in a top hat corkscrews down a tree trunk as if to say, "temptation ahead." Sure enough, we're introduced to Barbara Stanwyck's temptress, Jean, on the deck of a ship as she's taking the last bite of an apple before dropping it over the railing. You can almost hear the "boing" when the core lands on the head of Henry Fonda's Charles.

From here on out, Jean exerts her gravitational force on the handsome but woman-shy Charles (an ale tycoon and snake specialist, wouldn't cha know?) until he's pratfalling putty in her hands. One after another, Sturges serves up cartoony gags and scenarios, including Jean's disguise as British aristocrat Lady Eve Sidwich in the second half of the movie. Her transformation is not quite

as convincing as Bugs Bunny in drag, but *Fudd*y-duddy Charles is too busy faceplanting and seeing stars to see through the con. One could almost cry for the poor dweeb if Stanwyck hadn't seduced her audience along with the leading man.

But this year, the film that truly hit me like an ACME anvil is *Sullivan's Travels*. Likewise released in 1941 by Sturges, it's something of a different beast: a screwball comedy that marries slapstick, satire, social documentary, and melodrama. As emblazoned on the opening title card, this movie-about-movies is a tribute "to the memory of those who made us laugh: the motley mountebanks, the clowns, the buffoons, in all times and in all nations, whose efforts have lightened our burden a little." It comes as a shock, then, when Hollywood director John L. Sullivan, played by the affable Joel McCrea, tells a room full of studio execs that he's through making crowd-pleasing comedies such as *Hey, Hey in the Hayloft* and *Ants in Your Plants of 1939*. His next picture, he says, will be a lofty drama based on the (fictional) novel *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, befitting their age of war and Depression.

> **Sullivan**: I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. Stark realism. The problems that confront the average man!... How can you talk about musicals at a time like this? With the world committing suicide, with corpses piling up in the street, with grim death gargling at you from every corner, with people slaughtered like sheep!
>
> **Studio Honcho**: Maybe they'd like to forget that.

"Yes, please!" I agree. (Like many in isolation, I've started talking back to the screen.) But Sullivan won't budge. Realizing that he doesn't know the first thing about human suffering, the director sets out on the road to find "trouble." And so, against the warnings of his production team and faithful servants, he dresses up, or rather down, as a hobo à la Charlie Chaplin, with nothing but a bindle on his shoulder and 10 cents in his pocket. Oh, and a fully equipped trailer with staff following behind to ensure his safety.

The movie starts like a hokey odyssey inspired by *Gulliver's Travels*, the 18th-century satirical novel by Jonathan Swift. (The novel, incidentally, was adapted into a full-length animated feature in 1939 by Walt Disney's considerably punchier rival, Max Fleischer.) Through Sullivan's self-described "experiment," Sturges skewers those auteurs of his time who exploited the trauma of marginalized communities for box-office returns. But as Sullivan and his beautiful down-on-her-luck sidekick—played by Veronica Lake, Jessica Rabbit 1.0—come to witness and experience genuine strife, the very language of the film shifts from the steady clip of screwball antics to the slow, methodical montage of neorealism. We see closeups of gaunt faces and tired bodies gathering for food and warmth in a soup kitchen. Snappy dialogue is replaced by sentimental music. And one night, while he's sleeping in a homeless shelter, Sullivan's shoes are stolen by a migrant who swaps them with his own disintegrating pair. The director goes from playing dress-up to literally walking in another man's shoes.

A twist of fate, i.e. screenplay, lands an amnesiac Sullivan on a chain gang after he's pushed to commit a violent act. Once again, we're watching a different kind of film. In a moving metafictional sequence, the members of a Black church welcome Sullivan and his fellow prisoners for a movie night. The downtrodden men enter the building in shackles and take their

seats while the congregation sings “Go Down, Moses,” evoking the journeys of Jews and African Americans from slavery to emancipation. Rewatching the movie just weeks before Passover, the second one to take place during the pandemic, and after a year of Black Lives Matter protests, the score took on extra resonance for me. Sacred and secular merge as church lights dim, the projector hums, and a jaunty ragtime tune begins to play.

The movie being screened is the Disney comedy short *Playful Pluto*, starring Mickey and his dog pal. (The story goes that Sturges had wanted to use a clip from a Charlie Chaplin film, but Chaplin turned him down.) A bit involving Pluto getting stuck to flypaper has members of the onscreen audience erupting into side-splitting laughter, tears streaming down their faces. In a striking inversion of the earlier scene at the homeless shelter, Sturges presents closeups of the elated expressions on the audience’s faces. To Sullivan’s surprise, he finds himself joining in the hysterics. “Hey,” he turns to his neighbor. “Am I laughing?” Maybe this comedy thing isn’t such a cheap racket, Sullivan thinks. Tragedy tomorrow; comedy tonight.

After he’s ultimately rescued from the chain gang and reunited with his team, Sullivan announces that he no longer wants to direct *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Paging the Coen Brothers.) He wants to return to comedy. “There’s a lot to be said for making people laugh,” he tells the studio heads. “Did you know that’s all some people have? It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan.” Amen, brother. Amen.

During a 1964 interview, Disney looked back on the inspiration behind his small but mighty mouse and said, “Charlie [Chaplin] taught me that in the best comedy, you’ve got to feel sorry for your

main character. Before you laugh with him, you've got to shed a tear for him." The most powerful humor evokes and invokes our humanity.

One small part of the everyday tragedy of the pandemic has been our inability to flock to local movie theaters for 90 minutes or so of collective distraction, like many folks did during the Great Depression and World War II. Even a laugh or a sigh of relief could spread disease. For months, I've huddled in front of my TV or laptop, cocooned in a private asylum: the silver screen as silver lining. Rewatching in solitude these classic comedies that first played to packed houses has allowed me to appreciate them on a more intimate level. They aren't merely escapist romps or celluloid panaceas, although that would be accomplishment enough. They're also subversive social critiques and tragedies in disguise. In short, they're masterpieces.

Theaters are finally reopening at varying capacities but, whether due to reasonable precaution or residual paranoia, I'm not yet ready to return. I look forward to sitting safely beside my fellow film lovers in the dark one day soon. In the meantime, I leave you with another quote from screwball triumph *My Man Godfrey* (Gregory La Cava, 1936):

> **Godfrey**: Prosperity is just around the corner.
>
> **Mike Flaherty**: Yeah, it's been there a long time. I wish I knew which corner.

But Wait! That's Not All, Folks!

Enjoy these screwball comedy/classic cartoon pairings.

Ball of Fire **(Howard Hawks, 1941)**

This screwball gem plays fast and loose with the tale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which was adapted to the screen by Disney just a few years prior in the world's first full-length animated film. The same year she was dropping forbidden fruit on unsuspecting men in *The Lady Eve*, here, Barbara Stanwyck portrays both damsel in distress and shiny red apple in her performance as a nightclub performer/gangster moll hiding from the law among a group of dowdy professors.

The players:

- Before becoming a leading man, Gary Cooper worked briefly as a cartoonist for his hometown newspaper in Helena, Montana.
- Richard Haydn later lent his voice to the stoner Caterpillar in Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (1951).
- Allen Jenkins voiced Officer Charlie Dibble in the Hanna-Barbera sitcom *Top Cat* (1961–1962).

The perfect pairing:

Fractured Fairy Tales from *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* (1959–1964), narrated by prolific character actor Edward Everett Horton.

The Palm Beach Story **(Preston Sturges, 1942)**

Sturges's screwball comedy of remarriage, featuring one of the zaniest opening sequences in film history, centers on a warring couple, aptly named Tom and Gerry.

The players:

- Joel McCrea teamed up again with Sturges after *Sullivan's Travels*.
- Claudette Colbert also starred in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), which many consider the first and finest example of the screwball genre.

The perfect pairing:

Hanna-Barbera's Tom & Jerry shorts, of course. Then, go ahead and skip the 2021 reboot and instead watch frenemies Tina Fey and Amy Poehler squabble like cat and mouse in *Baby Mama* (Michael McCullers, 2008).

***What's Up, Doc?* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1972)**

Bogdanovich crafts a post-modern love letter to Golden Age Hollywood romcoms and, in case you couldn't tell from the title, Looney Tunes. Wreaking gleeful havoc wherever she traipses, Barbra Streisand steals the show as the brilliant and beguiling Judy Maxwell—except when Madeline Kahn (in her film debut) steals it back. Ryan O'Neal doesn't stand a chance, although he does a commendable job parodying his perennial leading man image. (Cough… *Love Story*… cough.)

The players:

- You may recognize Kenneth Mars, who played the outlandish Nazi playwright in *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1967). Mars was also a voice actor in *The Little Mermaid*, *The Land Before Time*, *Thumbelina*, *Animaniacs*, *Freakazoid!*, and more.
- Mabel Albertson is perhaps best remembered as Phyllis Stephens in screwball sitcom *Bewitched* (1964–1972).

The perfect pairing:

When asked to think up a movie vehicle for Streisand, Bogdanovich pitched "kind of a screwball comedy, something like *Bringing Up Baby*: daffy girl, square professor, everything works out all right." After watching Hawks's 1938 flick, cue up Bugs Bunny shorts and *Wacky Races* (1968) for good measure.

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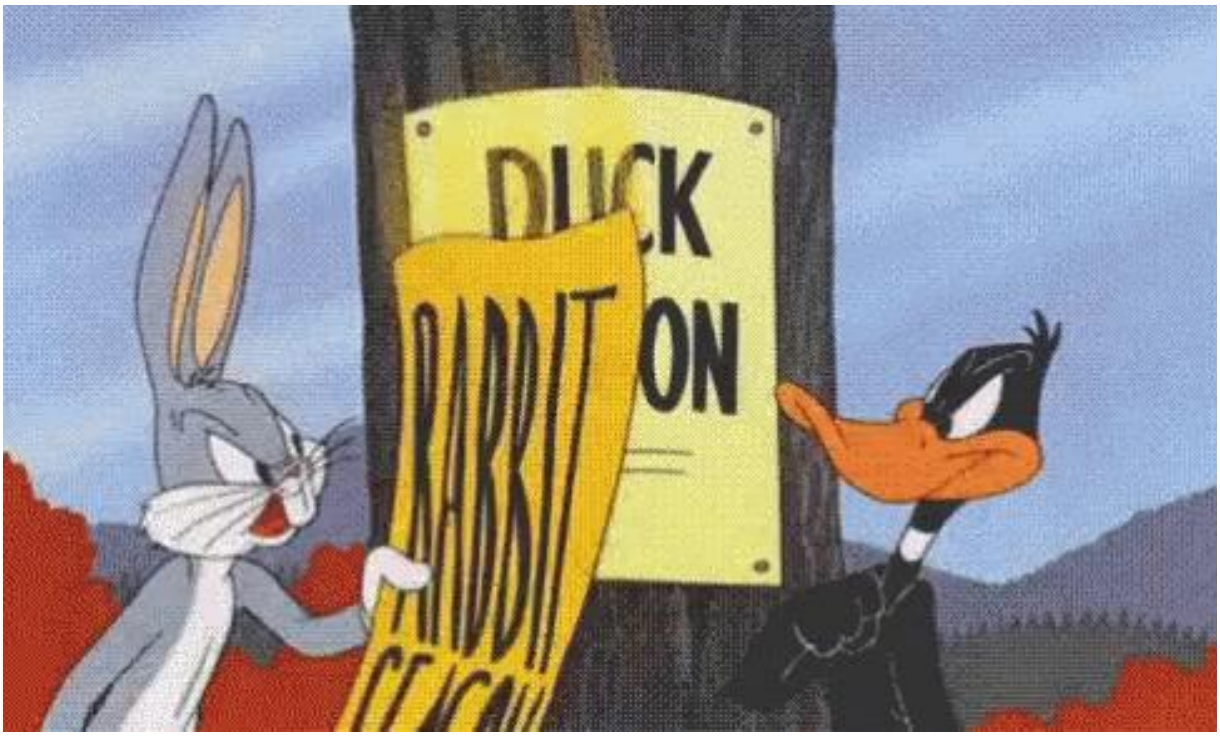
Cartoon GIF of the Week

Like a newspaper cartoon, but animated.



On the left, people who enjoyed Emma's excellent essay about funny movies and want more enjoyable content in this newsletter on a regular basis. On the right, me, of course.

Thanks for reading!

Oh, and if you haven't? Uh, hi. Please...
