

# "PIC"

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## PRODIGAL PRESTON

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**Mr. Sturges makes funny pictures for Paramount. Customers make a bee-line for the box-office. Sturges and Paramount make money. Everybody's happy**

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**I**T has been said of Preston Sturges that if you call him a genius, he'll call you nuts. Informed people in Hollywood usually do not apply the "genius" title to Sturges, but classify him matter-of-factly as one of the few top-notch producer-director-writers in the business.

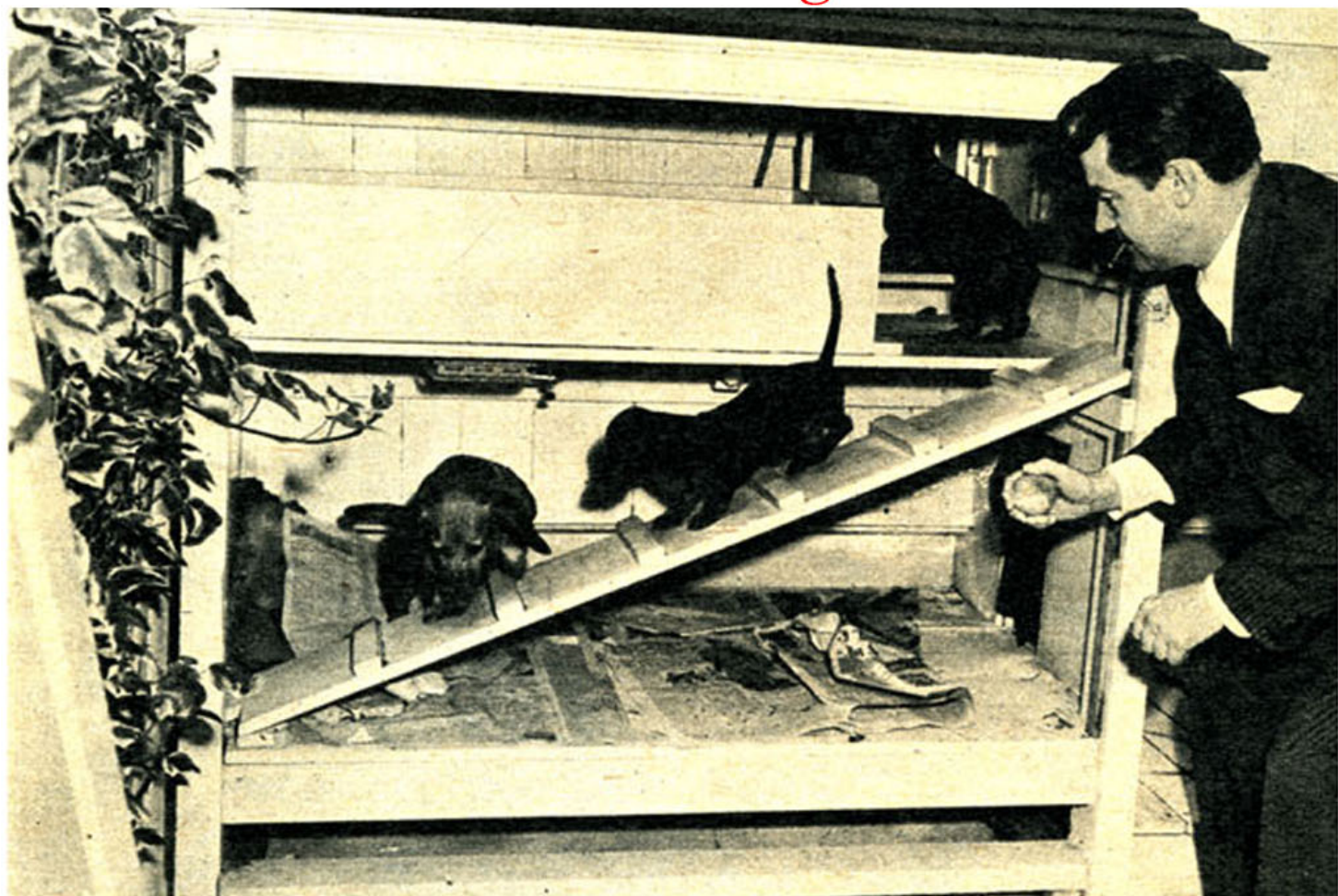
Preston Sturges has one of the most satisfactory contracts in the movie business. First, it is satisfactory to Sturges because he writes his own movies and sees to it that they reach the screen with every little touch of casting and direction that he wants them to have. No second cousins or other relatives of the front office have a hand in his pictures: they are pure Sturges. He begins with a nebulous idea and bit by bit expands it into a story. Then he transforms the story into a screenplay; and finally he makes the screenplay into a motion picture. What makes this process a satisfactory deal for Paramount Pictures is the fact that his motion pictures are good. So the cash customers plunk it down at the box-office and spend an enjoyable evening. The pictures make money. Paramount makes money. Sturges makes money. The customers are happy and look forward eagerly to the next Sturges picture.

This tidy state of affairs has not always existed. There are elements in the life story of Sturges that make him resemble one of the turbulent characters he has created for the screen. He was born August 29, 1898, in Chicago, the son of Solomon Sturges, a broker, and Mary Desti, long-time companion and biographer of the late Isadora Duncan. Young Preston was taken on the first of 45 voyages to Paris at the age of two. His mother owned a cosmetic firm in Paris, and he lived there half of each year, returning to Chicago each spring. He studied in Chicago, France, Switzerland, and, until he was sixteen, in Germany. After an indifferent interlude in the cosmetic business, the young voyager invaded Wall Street's citadels of high finance—in the low capacity of messenger. At the start of the first World War, he enlisted in the American Air Corps, and served until the Armistice.

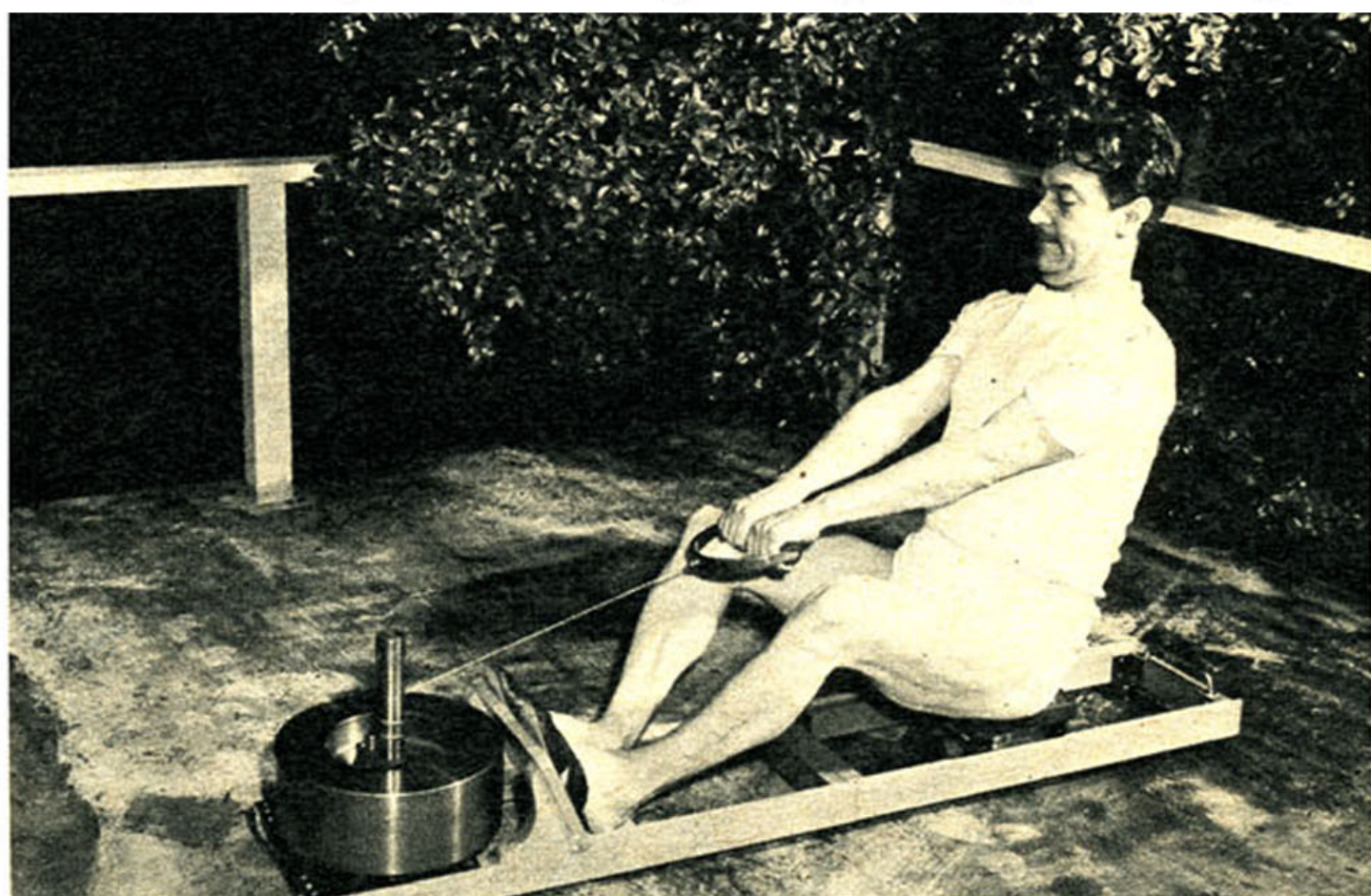
Sturges got his first taste of the theatre when he was given an assistant stage manager's job, through Isadora Duncan, for the New York presentation of "Oedipus Rex" at the Century Theatre.

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## Preston Sturges



**THE INVENTIVENESS** that Sturges puts into his pictures also is shown in such things as a two-story dog house, allowing the pups to enter the house at kitchen level along a ramp leading from the garden.



**WRITER-DIRECTOR STURGES** invented this exercise machine based on the "Yo-Yo" principle, with a wheel from a dismantled boat. He has built a nursery for his first child, with provision for watching it bathe.

Shortly after, in Chicago, the noted producer Al Woods gave him an assistant's job for the staging of "Frankie and Johnny." Sturges quit the show before it opened because Woods wouldn't pay him the amount he considered proper. Thanks to public apathy and one thing and another, the play soon closed. Today Sturges says, "Woods should have known he couldn't get along without me."

After a brief fling at acting, Sturges decided that perhaps he was meant to be a playwright. So he bought a book on the technique of the drama and went to work. His first play, "The Guinea Pig," was no smash hit, but it did run for 16 weeks on Broadway. The same year, 1929, his second effort, "Strictly Dishonorable," opened to a run of over a year and was produced as a movie by Universal. This touch of Hollywood gold tasted like more, and in the early 30's Sturges began his movie-writing career with the script for "The Big Pond," starring Maurice Chevalier. The picture was a success and Sturges was established in the \$1,000-a-week bracket.

As other scripts and other years rolled by, and the same old \$1,000 a week kept rolling in, Sturges felt that he was getting in a rut. A little quick thinking showed him the way out of it. He noted that better pictures were made when the writer and director were in complete agreement. The easiest way to achieve this accord, it seemed to him, was to make writer and director the same man. He didn't bring this about by a mere flick of the wrist. Contrary to general belief, Sturges' rise has not been meteoric. As a writer, he had a

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*Preston Sturges*

series of fine hits before "The Great McGinty" brought him to public attention. When the Academy Awards were discontinued for the year 1934, the Hollywood Reporter gave him its award for "The Power and the Glory." In 1940, "McGinty" brought him the Academy Oscar for the best original screenplay.

The movie also marked his emergence as writer-director. "McGinty" was a story that Paramount wanted badly, but Sturges wouldn't sell. He offered a packet deal—the story free if he could direct it. William LeBaron, then head of Paramount, finally saw that it might be good arithmetic to get the story for nothing, the director for very little, and to put little or no money into it with a "no name" cast. "McGinty" startled Hollywood with its excellence. It firmly established Sturges as a director-writer and paved the way for his "The Lady Eve," which netted Paramount around a half-million profit. Today his touch is known to millions of movie-goers who don't ordinarily pay much attention to the names of movie writers or producers. These pictures show him at work and at play.