

Inside Entertainment

Wilder does film's second re-make

Front Page tailor made for Lemmon, Matthau

By WARREN CLEMENTS

The Front Page has always been an extremely funny story, and despite the fact that the hard-boiled reporters who populate it exist now mainly in history books, the piece retains its bite and relevance.

The only question is, why did Billy Wilder (Some it Hot, The Apartment) bother to re-make it?

While I've never seen the 1931 movie version of the Ben Hecht-Charles MacArthur stage play, the 1940 Howard Hawks re-make, with Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant, was about as good a version as anyone could hope for.

The new film, starring Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau, is almost note for note the same film, with Lemmon playing the Russell role of reporter Hildy Johnson (the original male part was switched to a female in Hawks' film). The story of a convicted cop-killer and the band of newsmen who gather to report his hanging still has the indispensable roll-top desk as a prop, and the same supporting characters, including the foppish senior reporter who owns the desk, Hildy Johnson's fiancée, and the hooker who tries to save the life of the cop-killer (who turns out to be a scared chipmunk with faintly anarchistic tendencies.)

PLUM ROLES

Wilder's new film appears to have been made both to cash in on a ready audience — after all, it's light entertainment at its best, in the same commercial league as The Sting — and to give Lemmon and Matthau the plum roles respectively of Johnson and gruff city editor Walter Burns.

As usual, Lemmon and Matthau work together with style, feeding off each other's lines and making the most of their patented double-takes. Lemmon prances, Matthau grouses, Lemmon whines, Matthau barks.

It's almost the same relationship they shared in Wilder's The Fortune Cookies, where Matthau played the shyster lawyer and Lemmon his

weak brother-in-law; the difference is that Lemmon isn't weak this time — he's a cynical reporter with a heart of gold.

STRONG SUPPORT

Fleshing out this farce are some great supporting actors. Austin Pendleton (the small, bespectacled awards panelist in What's Up, Doc) plays the meek and wounded cop-killer, whose sanity is tempered by a respectable amount of whimsy. And David Wayne plays the foppish elder statesman of the press, who writes sonnets about the hanging and carries around his personal roll of toilet paper to avoid any fraternization with the other plebeian journalists.

The one glaring fault with this Front Page is the casting of Carol Burnett as the hysterical hooker. Her performance is the acting equivalent of a concert given by a screaming rock star who's forgotten the song's tune but feels he has to keep singing. Granted, that particular role doesn't have much to offer any actress; but any potential it could have had was completely lost amid Burnett's histrionics.

Fortunately she is a somewhat minor character. The Front Page belongs beyond question to its decidedly major headliners, Lemmon and Matthau.

Newspaper notices of sneak previews are getting bolder. The recent preview ad for The Front Page revealed everything about the film except its title — a far cry from two years ago, when the "sneak preview" was described in such vague, mysterious terms as "a new



Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon in a scene from Billy Wilder's re-make of The Front Page.

comedy about a cat", or "a film to make your blood chill".

Obviously either the rules of the game have changed, or publicity agents are afraid that advertising the previews as "the tale of a boy and his dog" won't even draw the bats from the rafters.

(In passing, the feature with The Front Page was Airport '75, Hollywood's answer to the gossip column. Karen Black turned in a strong performance as the stewardess forced to fly a crippled 747, but the effect was undone when Charlton Heston took over and growled the equivalent of, "Nicely done, honey — now go back and sweep out the kitchen compartment.")

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