



No corporate bust, but no knockout either

by Glenn Walton

What is wrong with American film comedy nowadays? I do not propose to answer this sociologically pressing problem here, but only review the latest expression of its plight. Given the money and talent available to the producers at 20th Century Fox, the latest entry into the screen comedy sweepstakes, *9 to 5* (starring Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton) should have been a knockout. The film has a topical but 'safe' theme (woman's lib in the office) and three strong leads to attract box office. Add to this the curiosity value of Dolly Parton's screen debut, guaranteed to be an eye-filler. While not exactly a corporate bust, the office comedy *9 to 5* does not exactly corner the market on laughs either.

For those who don't know yet, the film concerns the revenge of three oppressed secretaries on their smarmy boss, an action which involves rat poison, chains and the stealing of the wrong body from a hospital morgue. It is a plot in the best tradition of the screwball comedy with a requisite Happy Ending and justice for all. As in other recent attempts to revive the screwball form, a funny thing happened on the way to the big screen: concerned with capturing a broad audience, 20th Century Fox has given us a shallow comedy.

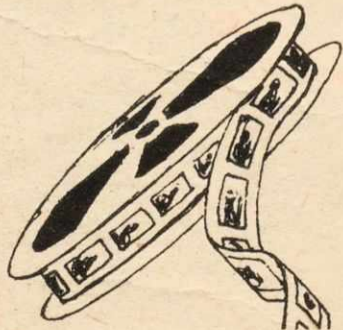
The problem seems to lie less with the stars than with the sluggish and uninspired direction of Colin Higgins. After a promising, upbeat start, where we see hundreds of harried secretaries rushing to work in the big city while Parton sings the title song over the credits, the film slows

down. In a sentence: Higgins plays it safe, no doubt aware of the unpredictable movie market of today. Given an acceptably amusing, if unfocused script, he does nothing to improve on it: each set piece (such as Fonda, the hyper novice, grappling with a Xerox machine with a mind of its own) depends entirely on the respective actress's talent or presence, which is always adequate and sure to amuse any bored housewife from Des Moines out for a rare evening of movie viewing. The director knows his mass audience and *9 to 5* rolls along pleasantly enough, never challenging, in all its sympathy for the secretaries' plight, the business ethic, or generating any sustained comic momentum. It remains farcical, despite the occasional ascent into social comment, and its characters are all types. That is Ok, as long as the farce is kept at a spanking pace; unfortunately *9 to 5*'s momentum is more like a series of light pats (at one point Parton actually explains a previous joke in one of her lines, so that we will all get it). The upshot is comedy that is mildly good but certainly not high despite the 9,347th joint-smoking scene in an American comedy since the mid Sixties. Fonda, Tomlin and Parton have a rollicking time getting stoned and planning their boss's demise, but it is a shame they couldn't have shared the joint that induced all the hilarity with the audience.

Under these conditions, one is left to enjoy the separate performances. Fonda, a gifted dramatic actress, is good enough as the nervous Judy, newly divorced and badly in need of consciousness-raising,

but she is given precious little to do beyond react to events. Dolly Parton has screen presence and down home charm as Doralee, the screen's latest not-so-dumb blond, but little range other than physical, and will do well in light comic roles if she chooses to pursue her new film career. *9 to 5* is handily stolen by Lily Tomlin, who is handed a prune of a role and makes a plum out of it, squeezing for all the comic juice it can produce: her impishly intelligent face is a delight to watch. As the strong-willed and competent Violet, who is continually passed over by the patriarchal company system, it becomes apparent very early in the film that given good material she can be a first-rate comedienne. She should get a promotion; *9 to 5* itself is just work as usual.

This Week's Movies



9 to 5 continues at Scotia Square, and is also at Penhorn 1. *Change of Seasons* is still at Paramount 1 (good) while Clint Eastwood's *Any Which Way You Can* persists at Paramount 2. The Cove starts *Lovers and Liars*, as does Penhorn 3. Penhorn 2 keeps *First Family* (Newhart, Kahn, and Radner). At Downsview, the excellent *Popeye* is at 1,

The Mirror Cracked

by Frank McGinn

The Mirror Crack'd, the latest Agatha Christie book to be filmed starring many famous actors, is not a pure adaptation of the *Mistress of Mystery* and her milieu. There is too much bad language and bitchy wit, neither of which would the Dame of Detection have been caught poisoned, stabbed or shot employing. However it is also not a wholly impure and bastard edition. Angela Lansbury's pink-cheeked, placid Miss Maple is wonderfully accurate, the little village of St. Mary Mead was never more prettily rural and English-looking and the bare bones of the plot (murder-murderer) remain intact. Like the *Lady of Shalot's* mirror, the movie is cracked from side to side. And the curse is upon anyone who wants to see it whole.

The two-tone of the film, partly put-on and partly straight, is set by the opening sequence. In a bleak country manor, in a thunderstorm and in black-and-white, all the suspects are gathered in the library. They fidget in a highly suspicious manner while the Detective, identified by his herring-bone jacket and moustache, is admitted by the darkly sinister butler. "I'd like you to remain with us, Carruthers," says the detective in a meaningful way. Carruthers blanches. The Detective then goes into his spiel; he knows who killed Lord Bramly and the killer is sitting in this very room tonight. Pan around the guilty faces, gasps from the women, feeble cries of outrage from the men. The Detective draws himself to his full height and is announcing "The murderer is..." when the film breaks. It has been the vicar showing movies in the church basement and, while he desperately scrabbles to repair the film, Miss Marple finishes solving the case for the anxious villagers.

The satiric nature of this scene, the use of every stereotype from traditional detective fiction, is meant to tell

us not to take the movie too seriously. The makers assume that the modern audience is too jaded to sit still for a straight mystery and so they invite us to laugh at, not with, the form. At the same time, the formidable deductive powers of Miss Marple are presented for our sincere admiration. If we were going to do a real murder story, the makers seem to be wheedling, wouldn't it be nice if this mild-mannered, keen-witted old lady were to be the detective?

The movie then proceeds to vacillate between these conflicting desires for knowing laughter and good, old-fashioned trickery. The murder is committed among some Hollywood types filming a historical extravaganza amidst the quiet English countryside and thus the lines are clearly drawn. The show biz people, a crass, noisy, brawling lot, get all the nasty lines never written by Agatha Christie. And the simple, English folk, primarily Miss Marple and Edward Fox as the detective from the Yard, although the other villagers form a convincing background, solve the crime. Very neatly cracked, indeed.

There is nothing fatal about this cover-your-bets approach to making mystery movies. Any honest Agatha Christie scholar (ahem! ahem!) will admit that the *Duchess of Deception* was not the writer of the world's sprightliest dialogue. Her characters spoke to drop clues and advance the plot, fine when you are reading and just want to get to the denouncement but a little dead up on the big screen. Some of the grafted lines prove quite amusing. (Elizabeth Taylor, to her mirror: "Bags, bags go away! Come again on Doris Day.") And the ritual unmasking is suitably suspenseful.

It just, unfortunately, happens that in this case the mutation doesn't quite live. Too much of the plot has been stripped down, too many of the clues have been replaced by mere scenes, and the mystery lags. There is far too little to occupy the mind between murders, and far too much tantrum-throwing, abuse-screaming and other sure signs of the artistic temperament. The host of stars play their cardboard characters with enjoyment and flair, but only Angela Lansbury is worth watching purely for her acting. And only then if you have always hated the way Margaret Rutherford butchered Miss Marple's image in old movies.

To be scrupulously fair, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* was not among the *Empress of Illusions'* top forty hits. The movie version could have been a little better but it could have been a lot worse. To quote the original Great Detective, a rather straightforward story but not without its singular points of interest.

Any Which Way You Can at 2, and *Flash Gordon* at 3.

Stir Crazy (good) remains at the Hyland, and *Seems Like Old Times* (very good) is held over at the Oxford, and the Casino holds *The Mirror Cracked*.

The Cohn is showing *Bed and Board* on Sunday. Wormwood is showing Shakespeare films at 4:30. *King Lear* is featured on Friday, and *Richard III* shows on Wednesday and Thursday. Friday-Sunday evening they are showing *My Brilliant Career*, and Wednesday evening they have an *Introduction to the Winnipeg Film Group*. The Art Gallery is showing films on Rene Magritte and on the Dada movement on Tuesday.