

# Laughter and larceny on the screen

by Michael McCarthy  
Movie Review: *Stir Crazy* and *Seems Like Old Times*

A "bag lady" in Manhattan rummages through a wastebasket on the sidewalk, finds a T-shirt, and holds it up to see if it's her size. When she notices that it is emblazoned with the slogan "I love New York", she blows her nose in it and throws it away.

This opening scene from *Stir Crazy* has little to do with the movie, but it does exemplify the kind of feeling which urges two friends to quit the Big Apple and head for the clear air and beautiful women of California. *Stir Crazy* is a very funny movie. Gene Wilder is his usual serene, sincere, sucker self, impervious to the harsh realities surrounding him and stark, staring mad in an innocent and unassuming way. He plays Skip, a white

big city loser who has a friend Harry, a black big city loser, played by Richard Pryor (before he "lost face"). Harry sees the harsh realities of the world all too clearly, and they scare him shitless. He stands by helplessly throughout the movie, watching his buddy wade brainlessly into potentially fatal situations in the quaint belief that people really have hearts inside. This leads to a number of funny moments, and what could be funnier than two losers blundering into (and out of) jail, right? Well, anyway, it is pretty funny.

Skip and Harry get a job promoting a bank by dressing up as Woodpeckers and doing a song and dance number for the customers ("Come on down to our branch, you little pecker, you") Two crooks use the costumes to get into the bank and rob it, and Skip and

Harry get blamed. The sentence which they receive (125 years) produces some interesting reactions from the pair, as does their entrance into prison. Wilder, oblivious to danger, swats a fly on the bald head of someone who looks like a murderer. Pryor, obsequiously trying to light a match for an enraged fellow prisoner, tries to strike it on his forehead and lips, and finally succeeds by ripping it across the angered man's chest.

Once "inside", Wilder is pressured by the warden to ride for the prison in a rodeo contest, on which he has a personal bet. Strong-arm methods fail to convince the intrepid Gene. Hanging from the ceiling by his wrists cures his back problem, and he is profuse in thanks. After release from the solidary "box", he pleads with the guard for

"just one more day, please, one more day". He finally relents when they put his pal into the hospital, where the surgeon has a habit of accidentally removing testicles during hernia operations.

Chase seeks help from his ex-wife (Goldie Hawn), a lawyer who specializes in getting young offenders of the hook and giving them jobs around her house so that they can remain out of jail. She is married to the D.A., who is not pleased that she tries to help Chevy, and hides him under their bed (leading to what you'd expect). The whole thing takes on an aspect of a situation comedy (which is probably will be by next year, knowing T.V. networks), with Chevy and several other lawbreakers defended by Miss Hawn wandering around the house, while the Governor of the state is being entertained for dinner. Six dogs spice up the action (Goldie also collects strays), and in fact, the real star of the show is a little dog who runs around and around with his collar-bell jingling, while the D.A. yells at his wife about her ex-husband, who is lying under the bed at the time, trying to free his hand which the D.A. is unknowingly standing on.

This movie quickly overcomes a slow start (which threatens to evolve into Doris Day's *Please Don't Eat The Daisies*) and burgeons into a hilarious non-stop comedy full of the wild situations and sharp, lively humorous dialogue that creator Neil Simon is justly famous for. Chevy Chase finally has found the right vehicle for his non-acting style of counter-point humour and slapstick, riding to the heights of "this-is-so-corny-it's-funny", tongue-in-cheek comicdom with lines like "Can you make it up the steps? —Any chance of sending them down?". After making a passionate farewell plea, he cries in frustration "Where's my horse? I'm supposed to jump on a horse". When Goldie complains, while in a speeding car, that due to Chevy "Disbarment and disgrace are all that lie ahead", he adds "That and a big green truck". He turns the act of falling and getting entangled in a garden hose into an art form, so much so that when another actor has to make a fall, Chase muses "Pretty good. Timing's a little off, but not bad."


Goldie Hawn provides excellent support with one of her more energetic and frantically funny performances, giving scenes of panic and hysteria worthy of her high-voiced days as a "Laugh-In" moppet. Charles Grodin is also on the mark as her second husband, who has to fight through a pile of dogs on the bed to get to his wife. The final courtroom scene, featuring all three lead characters in a masterpiece of confusion, complete with rampaging canines and crook-catching-cooks, is one of the funniest exploitations of incoherency I've ever seen. The ghost of Saturday Night Live still lives, and through Chevy Chase has permeated this movie, making a fine piece of comedy that really does "Seem Like Old Times".



Sidney Poitier's direction falters a bit in the latter part of the film, which deals with the escape from custody during the rodeo, and the ending focuses too strongly on a "cute" sub-plot which is anomalous, but the movie on the whole is a success. Wilder is in a class by himself when it comes to this type of hare-brained comedy, with a subtle, controlled dementedness which is guaranteed to sneak up on you and split your sides with laughter. Pryor is one of the great stand-up comics of our time, and his one-liners, hysterical contortions and paranoid outbursts are the perfect foil for Wilder's calm mania. Only they could get an axe-murderer sent to maul them involved in a game of cards, and only they could get away with making a movie which includes exchanges like "What are you in prison for?" "Well, we were doing this song and dance act..." "Gee, it must have been pretty bad."

Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor are very funny men, and *Stir Crazy* is a very funny movie.

On the other hand, *Seems Like Old Times* is a screamingly funny movie. Like *Stir Crazy*, the plot is secondary to the comic antics of star Chevy Chase, and like *Stir Crazy*, the star is unjustly accused of robbing a bank (during these inflationary times, I guess bank-robbing is the only affordable outlet for good-times). Poor Chevy is forced to rob a bank (believe me), and then falls all over himself (literally) for the rest of the movie, trying to prove his innocence. He trips over the rope marking the aisle in the bank, he falls out of a car, his leg gives out when he kicks a faulty vending machine (he gets his money's worth by pulling a gun on an attendant, and escapes by threatening to come back the next night if the man tries anything).

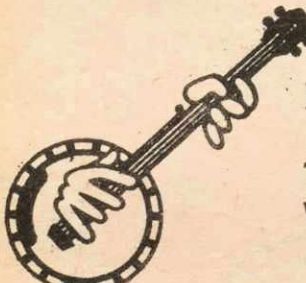


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