

# There's no joy in Tinseltown

**The Slugger's Wife**  
Columbia Pictures  
Principal Plaza

review by Dean Bennett

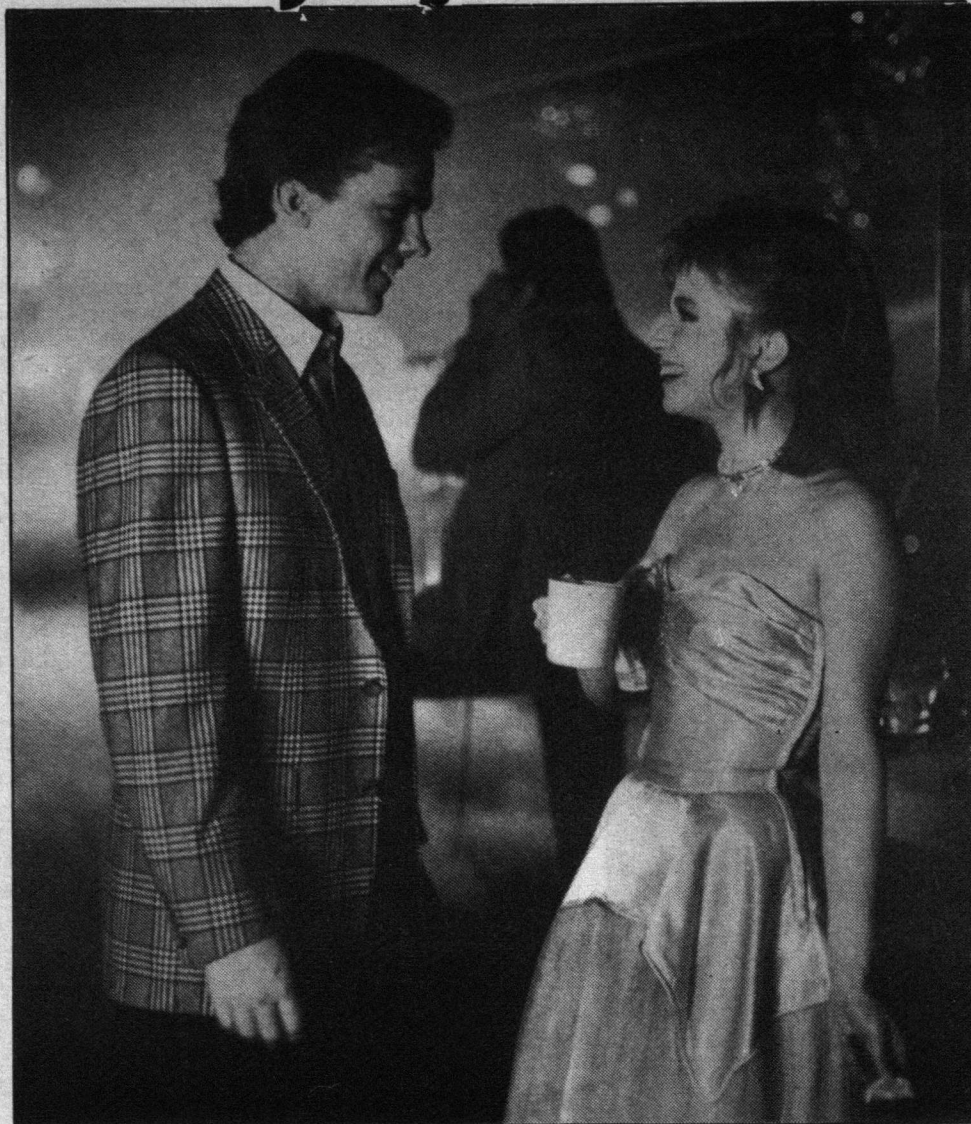
When reviewing baseball films, it's often hard to not use the clichés of the sport to compliment the picture. Sayings like "this film is a home run" or "this film is like pitching a perfect game" can be irresistible. Fortunately, in Columbia Pictures' *The Slugger's Wife*, the snare is easily avoided because this film is like going 0 for 5; it's an unforced fielding error, a called third strike, a pop foul to the catcher, an outfield collision, a balk, a walk to the pitcher with the bases loaded, a...

Michael O'Keefe stars as Atlanta Braves outfielder Darryl Palmer. Darryl has a problem: he's a slugger who can't hit to save his life. But fortunately, along comes a rock singer named Debby (Rebecca De Mornay). Darryl and Debby fall in love and eventually get married and Darryl's happiness is reflected in his hitting stats. Home-runs start flying over the fences at an incredible rate and soon Darryl is chasing Roger Maris' single season home run record of 61.

Debby is Darryl's inspiration. Darryl can't make magic with the horsehide unless she's around. Debby, however, can't handle being the slugger's wife. Darryl wants her to travel with him and be at all the games, but she wants to pursue her singing career. Darryl can't understand her attitude and she ends up leaving him. Darryl subsequently becomes massively depressed; his home-run totals and the Braves' pennant hopes fall accordingly.

Darryl, however, eventually learns to hit without Debby by his side. He breaks the home-run record and she gets her record contract and the two exit via different sunsets. They part as friends, victims of their career goals.

The plot of this film is silly. Screenwriter Neil Simon really stretches the believability of his characters and their situations.



Michael O'Keefe and Rebecca DeMornay in *The Slugger's Wife*: stretching the realm of believability.

First of all, we are supposed to understand how Debby, who has worked long and hard on her singing career, would quickly give it

up to live with Darryl only to quickly want it all back again (all of this, incidentally, takes place in only a few scenes). It's hard to believe her character would give up so easily to begin with.

Darryl, who seems like a malleable easy-going guy suddenly, upon marriage, begins making irrational demands on his wife — insisting that she give up her freedom and become his personal good luck charm; and when Debby does leave home we find Darryl can be a slovenly drunk, capable of destroying restaurants and roughing up stadium attendants. Scenes like this don't go far in making Darryl a consistent, let alone likeable, character.

The manager of the Braves, Burly De Vito (played by Martin Ritt) is the film's designated stereotype. He portrays the aged, cussing, people smart, win-at-all-costs manager.

One example of De Vito's insatiable desire for victory comes after Debby has left Darryl. In an attempt to get the mind of his star player off her and on baseball, he instructs two Braves players — Moose Granger and

Manny Alvarado (played by Randy Quaid and Cleavant Derricks, respectively) to take Darryl out and "get him laid." The following scene of sexual hi-jinks is so camp and tedious that it couldn't get past the cutting room floor of a *Porky's* movie.

Simon also "bobbles the ball" in the movie's penultimate scene — the last game of the season.

Darryl is going after a high profile and difficult record. When Maris hit 61 home runs in 1961 the media deluge played havoc with his personal and professional life. The press coverage on Darryl is, by comparison, nonexistent; and Darryl, the man who destroys cafes when he has family trouble, is supposedly strong enough to take the pressure of the run for the record in stride.

The scene where Darryl does set the record has problems because it is almost over before it begins. He strides to the plate, knocks the ball out and the crowd cheers. We don't even see the ball fly over the fence. The camera remains on Darryl as the announcer tells us how the ball found the cheap seats.

Darryl circles the bases and his teammates "high five" him at home plate. He has just become part of baseball history but it all seems like business as usual.

The second half of this scene, the game, is also over before the audience realizes what has happened. Atlanta needs to beat the Houston Astros this day to win their division. But all of a sudden, the score is flashed on the screen and Manny and Darryl quickly get on base only to watch Moose agonizingly fly out to right field. The Braves' season is over. The team came close but failed in the course of scant seconds. Where's the tension? Where's the build-up?

On the acting side, both O'Keefe and De Mornay are disappointments. O'Keefe's biggest downfall, as mentioned earlier is his unbelievable mood swings; also he plays the part of the maudlin, self-pitying drunk to its stereotypical perfection.

De Mornay simply walks through her role. In scenes of great anger or tender emotion she delivers her lines like there's a teleprompter on Darryl's head. She is certainly not living up to the promise she showed when she played the hooker-cum-debutante leading Tom Cruise to manhood in *Risky Business*.

On a higher note, the baseball scenes are first rate. A new camera device, called a Skycam, was used during filming. This radio-controlled device moved around Atlanta Fulton County Stadium on cables and brought interesting angles and a certain intimacy to the sequences.

It was interesting to watch former big leaguers like Mark Fidrych, Al Hrabosky, and Bucky Dent showing up as extras. But even these walking bits of 70's baseball trivia can't save this shallow script. Yes, there's certainly no joy in Tinseltown; mighty Simon has stunk out.



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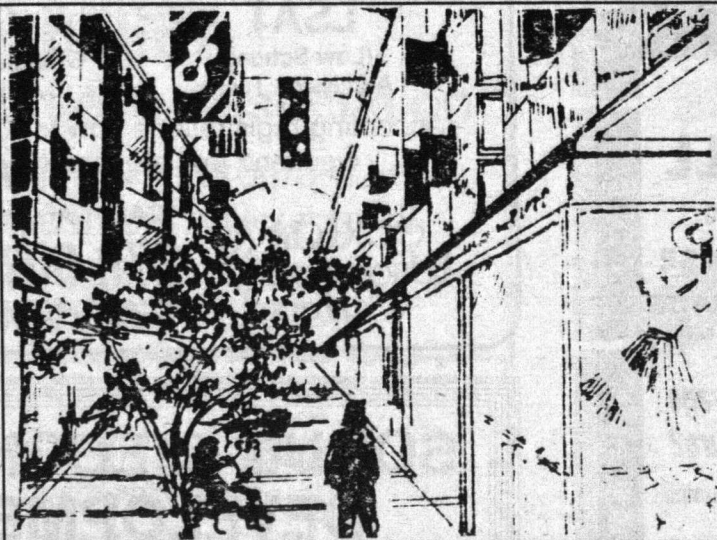
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