

Lemmon-Matthau muckrake

Do anything for the almighty scoop, and hang the ethics.

That's just what happens, to the misfortune of all involved, in Billy Wilder's entertaining version of "The Front Page," a clever period piece about the yellow journalism of the 1920s.

It's the third time on the screen for the Ben Hecht-Charles McArthur play, but it's a story worth retelling. Hildy Johnson (Jack Lemmon) is the best reporter that editor Walter Burns (Walter Matthau) has on his Chicago Express, one of a host of unscrupulous Windy City papers which are currently jockeying for the inside story on the political hanging of one Earl Williams. But on the evening before Williams' execution, Hildy quits, telling the irate Burns that he is going to marry Peggy Grant (Susan Sarandon), who sings along with those bouncing-ball songs at a local theatre, and move to Pittsburgh that very night.

Or so he thinks. Thanks to fate and Burns' heartless determination to keep his ace reporter, front page stories just keep falling into Hildy's lap, and Peggy is stuck in Chicago with a fate worse than death: marrying a newspaperman.

This is all very fast-paced, and a lot of fun, with some terrific, hard-biting dialogue. This is the newspaper world as the J-school never taught it, the world of the scoop and deadline frenzy and the what-you-don't-cover-you-make-up mentality. Character assassination is the rule. The technique of the guys in the

press room in "The Front Page" would even make the "National Enquirer" blanch, and should delight audiences of our gentler era.

But although the pace is fast, it is not crisp enough. The movement is not quite sharp, too often allowing the mind a split-second

cinema
by Mike McFee
"The Front Page" starring Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon. Written by Ben Hecht and Charles McArthur. Directed by William Wilder.

lag, like the pause between finger and a typewriter key. We can attribute this slight but major inconsistency to director Wilder. His presence in the film is otherwise minimal, like a copy editor without a pencil, although he does tend to evoke the undertones of nostalgia which are dangerously reminiscent of "The Sting."

Even the publicity poster, with Matthau and Lemmon over a typewriter, borders on a Newman-Redford-George Roy Hill cuteness, if you squint. But the acting doesn't; it makes the whole film worth it. As the hard-nosed Walter Burns, Matthau certainly has the right nose, even if the mouth sometimes doesn't fit. He delivers lines, which I'm sure Cary Grant would have minced in "His Girl Friday," like his mouth is full of newsprint. But this ponderous approach works, and works wonderfully, in

his characterization of the callous editor. Lemmon is likewise appealing as the dandy Hildy. All he has to do is appear affable, come over as shallow to Peggy, and type at an impossible speed with two fingers, which he does, and more. It is Lemmon who actually carries the film.

The fellows in the press room, since they are all stereotypes anyway—the college greenhorn, the "sensitive" veteran, the mindless legmen—are correctly overplayed. And Carol Burnett has a passable serious role, as the red-haired, red-gartered "madonna of the pavement" Molly Malloy, who is the only one to feel compassion for poor little goony Earl Williams (Austin Pendleton).

I don't know how "The Front Page" compares with earlier movie versions, and perhaps that is just as well. It is entertainment enough in itself. With the funniest closing biographical titles since "American Graffiti" started that regrettable practice, I left laughing and doubting that anything has really changed about journalism in 50 years.

Nobody reads the second paragraph. And people still wrap the front page around dead mackerels.

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Formerly the head of the Guitar Department at the Brooklyn Music School, and a professor at the National Conservatory of Music and the University of

Mexico, Silva now teaches at the School of the Arts in Winston-Salem.

The concert is sponsored by the Department of Political Science and the Dialectic and Philanthropic Literary Societies. Proceeds from the concert go to the Canadian Peace Research Institute for the preservation of the Grindstone Island Peace Research Center.

The Canadian Peace Research Institute is a non-profit research organization which specializes in writing about the causes of war and the methods of bringing about peace in the world.

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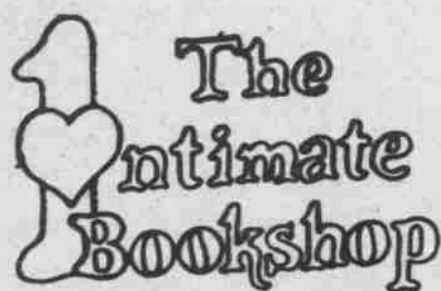
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