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## entertainment

### 'Front Page' - press has stopped

Despite a host of reservations, I am convinced that Billy Wilder's new film, *The Front Page*, is not a complete waste of time. It works well on some levels (it is, at times, a very funny, though slow-witted movie) and fails pathetically at others. This Jack Lemmon-Walter Matthau teamup in a classic relic of '30s Hollywood playwriting by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur was eagerly anticipated. Yet as disappointing as the picture is, it's easy to want to defend it in view of some of the other movie debris that's been hurled down on us (literally) as of late.

The plot revolves around a cynical, blustery, big-city newspaper editor named Walter Burns (Walter Matthau) who is trying to hang onto the services of his star reporter, Hildy Johnson (Jack Lemmon). Hildy wants to get married and is about to wash his hands of the whole reporting business.

The story occurs on the eve of the hanging of a harmless little, runny-nosed runt (Austin Pendleton) who has somehow scared the paranoid, Chicago authorities into thinking he's a

### greg lukow key grip

dangerous Communist agitator. Carol Burnett completes the list of principal characters, playing a floozy prostitute who is revered by the runt and ridiculed by the reporters (and the audience, since Burnett pathetically overhams her part into a best forgotten embarrassment).

The play's been done on film twice before, most notably in Howard Hawks' wonderful *His Girl Friday* (1940). That version starred Cary Grant (as Walter) and Rosalind Russell as Hildy, and is, along with Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), one of the greatest screwball comedies ever made. (This Grant-Russell match-up is a perfect example of what Molly Haskell was talking about this past weekend when she mentioned the now extinct, balanced comradery of male-female teams in that bygone era.

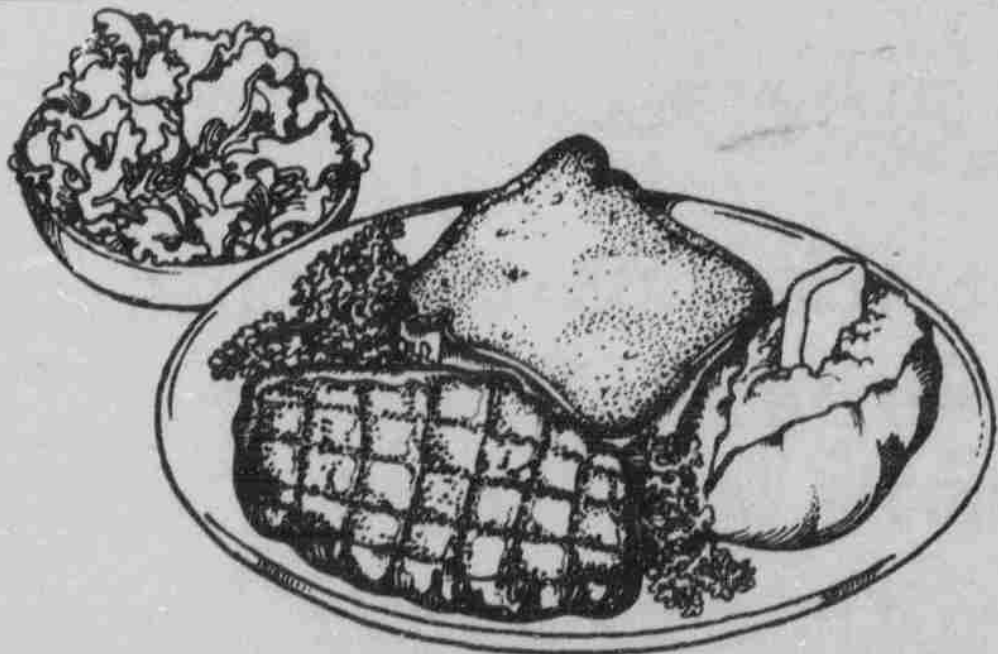
Among the admittedly overstocked tableau of what are considered all-time great movies, at least a small handful of them, located somewhere on the outer fringe, belong to director Wilder.

His reputation is that of the great Hollywood comic-cynic. He is a master at inserting underlying bitterness, satire and muted grotesqueness in the personality of his films. Yet it is worthwhile to note the inconsistency of how this cynicism manifests itself. Two of Wilder's pantheon films, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Stalag 17* (1953) are great because of it. The Oscar winning *The Apartment* (1960) comes out ahead in spite of it, and *Some Like it Hot* (1959) is a just-right combination of ingredients that gloriously transcend it.

Film critic Andrew Sarris aptly described Wilder as a man too cynical to believe his own cynicism. He cites the example of William Holden's loner figure in *Stalag 17*, when he "bids a properly cynical adieu to his prison-camp buddies...ducks into the escape tunnel for a second, then quickly pops up, out of character, with a boyish smile and a friendly wave and then ducks down for good. Holden's sentimental motion in a tensely timed melodrama demonstrates the cancellation principle in Wilder's cinema."

In *The Front Page*, Wilder disastrously tries to contemporize that cynicism through unwarranted, forced vulgarity. And with the Carol Burnett character, he has also replaced his stabs at the bittersweet with moments of downright cruelty. Critic Sarris also commented, some years ago, that Wilder was enjoying a fruitful period of movie making in the mid-'60s "not so much because of the films themselves, but rather because Wilder had chosen to remain himself while almost everyone else has been straining to go mod."

Now, however, Billy Wilder has tried and failed to catch up with this, the most cynical of ages. Matthau's performance (he's been incredibly hot property the last few years) and what's left of the original play (including, for the first time on screen, the famous last line) are the only highlights in *The Front Page*. I appreciate it for being somewhat in the right place at the right time, but I suspect that Wilder, now pushing 70 years of age, has just about served out his time.



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