

arts and
entertainment

Director turns to Baton Rouge for time, new challenge

By Charlie Krig

John R. Wilson says it's strange no one has asked him why he is leaving. Ever since he announced his resignation as managing director of the Lincoln Community Playhouse the talk has concentrated on his 10 years in Lincoln: the success, the disappointments, the dreams and the nightmares.

But no one has asked why.

"I want to have more time with people. I want to leave time to do things with friends. Barb (his wife) and I don't belong to bowling leagues, don't go on dinner dates, don't get together with friends. It's not that we aren't invited to these things, it's just that we're too busy," Wilson explained.

profile

Wilson will be busy until mid-June. Rehearsal for his last show, *Camelot*, begins soon but he still is acting in the current Playhouse production, *The Good Doctor*.

When Wilson leaves the Playhouse he and his wife will go to Baton Rouge, La., to start a dinner theater in an equal, three-way partnership with Carol McVey, presently the administrative assistant to the Playhouse. They "reduced the risk of failure" by surveying successful American dinner theaters and found some common characteristics: the minimum population needed to support the business is 250,000, local colleges and state universities increase public acceptance of theater, and being a state capitol helps even more. Baton Rouge has all three.

"When we get there it will be much diff-

erent from the time I spent on work now. I work all day at administrative things at the playhouse, take a break for dinner and then come back for rehearsals from six to ten," he said. "While I've been here I've done everything from mop the floor to design sets and lights to building things, and when I get to Baton Rouge I'll be the lowest-level techie-janitor-director, you name it. But we will have time because we will share responsibilities and one person will be able to run the place while the others can have time off—even a week or more."

It's a big move for Wilson, but he's been in Lincoln three times longer than the national average for community playhouse directors. And he knows it will be a challenge.

"I know I can always feed and clothe and house my family in some way, even if this isn't an immediate success. Fortunately, I am rare to be married to a woman who's oriented toward theater and these things, too. We're not terribly 'thing-oriented' people. If there's a choice between something to do and some place to go, invariably we'll chose 'to do.'"

Conversation also invariably turns to the past. Between March 1968 and the present, Wilson accomplished several goals: a new theater building (the former synagogue at 18th and L streets was "built for the prevention of theater"), establishment of new programs including children's theatre and senior citizen classes ("We cover people almost from the cradle to the grave"), making the Playhouse "financially viable" and offering a variety of plays to suit a broad-based audience ("I've never cut a word or phrase or sentence for censorship. We advertise our questionable plays so that people know they're meant for adults but some people come anyway and they're more prone to express themselves in negatives rather than positive terms.")

On the other hand, there have been dis-

appointments. The Playhouse is not "financially independent" to be able to do shows without regard for sufficient sell-outs. Only three to four percent of the Lincoln population goes to the theater. Certain plays, such as *Equus*, were not available at selection time or were not suitable for the next season.

Through it all, Wilson said his relationships were good. He said he "mellowed" over the years so that he kept people happy but didn't run any "popularity contests for a director." He also said reviewers have been good except for those

who write in a "smart-assed way which irritates me. For these amateur actors it's an ego thing and they're very sensitive."

Wilson has some advice for his successor, too.

"He's going to have to find his own course and be an open-minded and receptive as possible. People will come up with terrible ideas and he'll have to approach them in a positive vein. He also should stay away from the advice of the people who think they know everything about the operation. He'll just have to work his butt off."

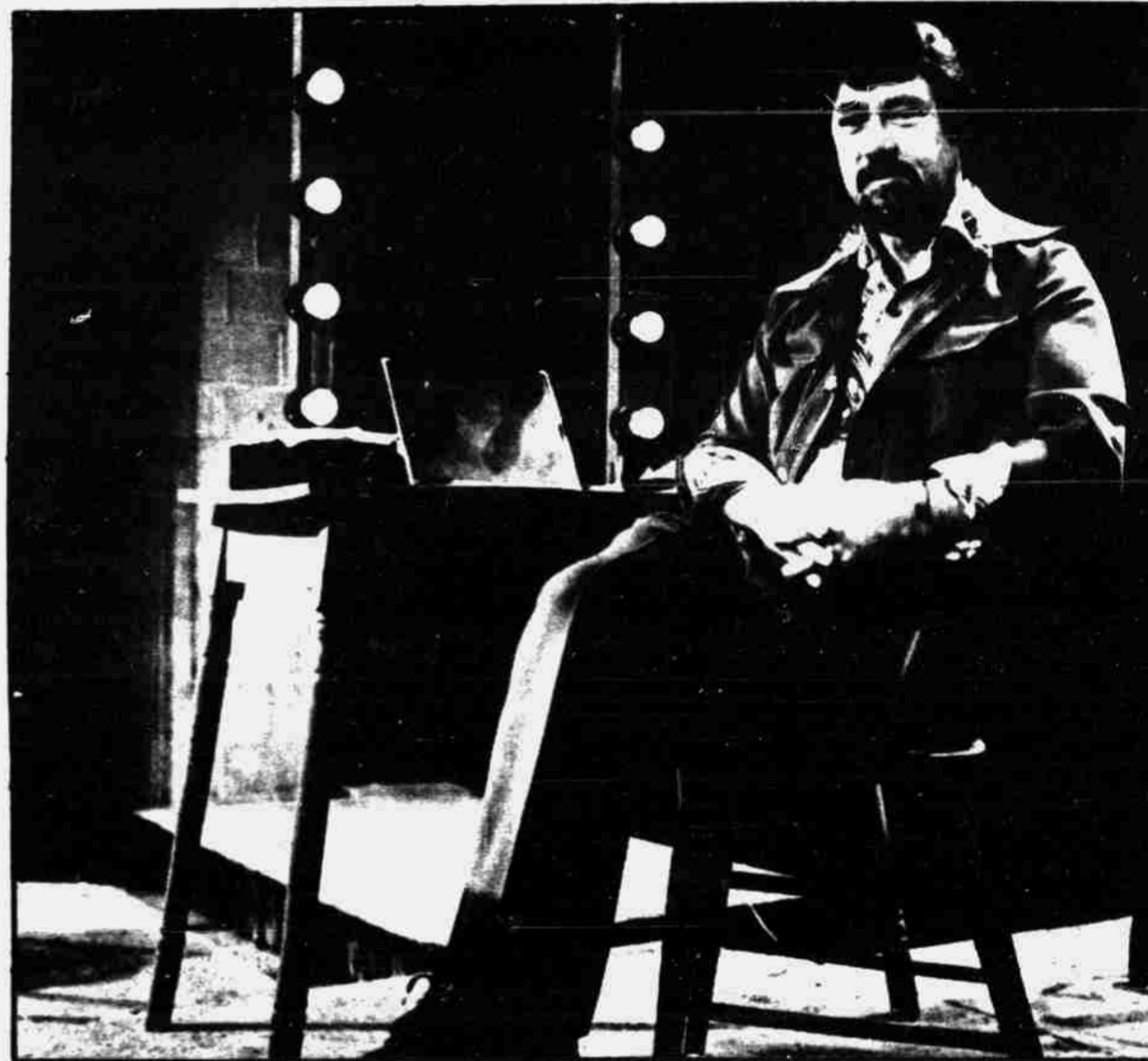


Photo by Bob Pearson

John R. Wilson on set of *The Good Doctor*.

Matthau's versatile humor doctors up 'House Calls'

By J. Marc Mushkin

As Walter Matthau grows older, his face more and more resembles a kind of latex mask he can manipulate in just about

any way he wants to. From sophisticated doctor to lovable basset hound, Matthau has a range of expression that can take the most pedestrian material and get a laugh. This is the kind of thing Matthau does in

House Calls.

Matthau plays a middle-aged doctor in a thoroughly mismanaged and inept hospital. Dr. Charley Nichols (Matthau) has just lost his wife and sets out to make up years of lost ground in chasing women. Sound familiar? Well, the story is a bit tired, and it seems to get increasingly contrived as Dr.

brows remind you of that feeling and gives a twist of humor to each line he delivers.

Glenda Jackson and Art Carney don't come off nearly as well; just how many examples of Dr. Willoughby's (Carney) senility are we expected to sit through? But *House Calls* manages to be mildly entertaining with some good laughs and a very nice surprise in the middle. The surprise: how often do you get to hear a Beatles song in a non-Beatles production? George Harrison's "Something" accompanies a rather corny falling-in-love montage of Matthau and Jackson. What a treat.

House Calls is showing at the Cooper/Lincoln.

Straight Time pits Dustin Hoffman against society. It's a bit of a mismatch. But the funny thing is Hoffman, as Max Dembo, a two-bit crook, doesn't exactly win, but he does get away.

Alvin Sargent, Edward Bunker, and Jeffrey Boam wrote this Ulu Groshard film. Sargent also wrote last year's *Bobby Deerfield*, a dreadful bore, and *Straight Time* is suffering from some of the same problems, but Hoffman's performance and a great robbery scene lift the movie to a modest level of interest.

Hoffman seems to be struggling to put some life into the dead lines he's given. He plays a character who tries to make it in society as an ex-con but can't—mainly because of the abuse of his probation officer. His jobs and relationships seem to be crippled by his past, and only a sympathetic employment agency secretary (Theresa Russell, only 20 and in her second movie) gives him any concern or caring.

The problem is that as much as I like Dustin Hoffman (I saw *Straight Time* in a double feature with *Straw Dogs*) it is painful to see him in this straight-jacket of a role. The point of the film seems to be that nobody cares, and I'm afraid that could also be said about the film itself.

movie review

Nichols gets involved with a patient, Ann Atkinson (Glenda Jackson).

But Matthau and Richard Benjamin, playing Nichols' sidekick, Dr. Norman Solomon, inject new life into what at first seems to be a pale *Odd Couple* routine. As a matter of fact, the whole concept of the film seems to be patterned after Neil Simon's comedies.

Glenda Jackson's role is more than faintly reminiscent of Marsha Mason's in *The Goodbye Girl* and countless other Simon female characters. And Art Carney's character, a senile doctor hanging on to his position as chief of staff, owes a great deal to Simon's *The Sunshine Boys*.

I guess what really reminds me of a Neil Simon movie is Matthau's presence. Matthau made a big impression on me way-back-when as Oscar Madison in *The Odd Couple* and I've liked him ever since.

He's just as likable as ever in this movie. His range of voices and that incredible face makes him a wonderfully versatile comedian. Less versatile, but another favorite of mine is Richard Benjamin. There is a kind of controlled frustration lurking in every expression he makes the kind of frustration you feel when you've lost your car keys for the third time in a week. Every angle of his animated eye-



Photo courtesy of Warner Bros.

Dustin Hoffman stars in *Straight Time*.