

Clayburgh, Matthau shine in "First Monday"

★★★½ FIRST MONDAY IN OCTOBER

Written and Directed by Ronald Neame
Starring Walter Matthau and Jill Clayburgh

By Larry MacDonald

It's uncanny the way Hollywood producers can foresee the future. Remember back in 1979 when "The China Syndrome" was released, and less than a month later the disaster at Three Mile Island occurred?

Now Paramount Studios has given us a film adaptation of the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee play concerning the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The film was well into production before President Reagan announced the name of Sandra O'Connor, and has been hurriedly sent into release to undoubtedly cash in on the coincidence.

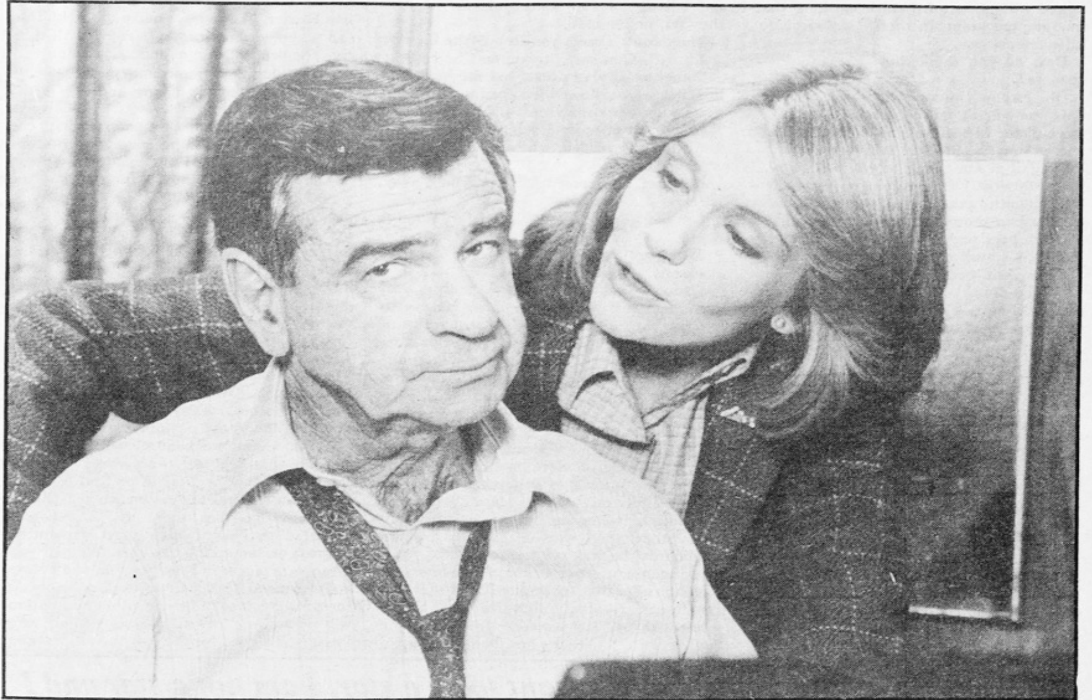
But never mind the film's timing, because it is an intelligent piece of work, crammed with more verbal wit and wisdom than have been displayed on screen all of this year so far. Veteran playwrights Lawrence and Lee (of "Auntie Mame" and "Inherit the Wind" fame) have wisely been retained to adapt their play, and director Ronald Neame ("The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie", "The Chalk Garden," "The Poseidon Adventure," etc.) has paced the proceedings in a lively enough manner to disguise the obvious stage origins of the dialogue.

Basically a two-character story, **First Monday** is dominated by the performance of its two stars. Matthau is brilliant as the crusty liberal and chief dissenter on the Supreme Court, Justice Dan Snow. He does everything but chew up the scenery every time he is onscreen. It's his best performance in years, on a par with anything he's ever done.

Clayburgh, as the young California conservative judge, Ruth Loomis, is also superior to most of her prior work. If her character calls for less flamboyance than that of Matthau, she more than compensates by her excellent timing. As a foil for her adversary's acerbic wit, Clayburgh handles herself superbly, with an aplomb that may yet elevate her to the ranks of one of the best comedienne working in films.

Beyond the individual performances is an even brighter revelation: the chemistry between these two hasn't been evident on screen since the heyday of the Tracy-Hepburn comedies.

Beside the stars, "First Monday" has several things going for it. First, it provides a unique opportunity to peer backstage at the Supreme Court and observe the ruffled feathers of nine separate and unique personalities. Further, it is fun to watch the eight men react to the news of the appointment. Then, too, the film attempts to portray each of the justices as human, with faults as well as virtues.



Walter Matthau and Jill Clayburgh in "First Monday in October"

"First Monday" attempts to instruct as well as entertain. If it strains a bit in the former area, especially in two extended scenes in which Matthau and Clayburgh assume other identities for the purpose of making a point through the medium of a mock trial, the film is always saved from tedium by the electricity generated by its stars. It winds up being more worthwhile than most of the other films currently in release, and should be a contender for Oscar consideration, especially for its two top-notch acting performances.

Strange tourist in East Proctor

★★ AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON

Directed by John Landis
Starring David Naughton and Jenny Agutter

If ever a title revealed the content of a film's plot, this elaborate cinematic exercise in schizophrenia surely does.

Two young Americans are on a summer vacation abroad. Out on the moors near the English town of East Proctor, after being warned by some very unfriendly folks at the local inn (called "The Slaughtered Lamb"), David (David Naughton) and Jack (Griffin Dunne) are accosted by a wild animal.

Jack is killed, but David, although injured, is saved by a rescue effort by the inn's inhabitants. David awakens in a London hospital and is tended by a nurse (Jenny Agutter). He starts having weird dreams and even weirder visitors. His dead friend Jack appears, with flesh hanging horribly from his face and chest, to warn David that he will become a werewolf on the next full moon, and that he must kill himself before more horrible murders occur. Not being able to distinguish between dream and reality, David thinks he's coming apart, and Jenny takes him in, to look after him (and for some romantic reasons, too).

There are few surprises. David and Jenny make love, and then, after she leaves for work (conveniently switched to the night shift so he could be left alone after dark), David's horrendous transformation begins. This is a highlight of the film, thanks to superior special effects work. After a night of carnage during which six people are killed, David awakens at the zoo (shades of "Altered States"). After snatching a woman's coat to cover himself with, he hops a bus and makes it back to his girlfriend's apartment. Pretty good considering he has no money and is a stranger in a strange town, clothed in a flaming red coat with a fur collar (and nothing else).

The rest of the film is predictable. Jack brings back more "undead" vic-

tims of David's lycanthropy, to urge him again to kill himself. Unable to do this, David becomes transformed again, this time going on a rampage in Piccadilly Circus.

Director Landis squeezes more stomach-churning gore out of this sequence than will be found in most horror films, but this isn't enough compensation for the general split personality which this film conveys. From the beginning music, a Bobby Vinton version of "Blue Moon," a succession of "moon songs" obtrudes periodically, with irritating impact. The songs are constantly at war with the lyrical scenes of the English countryside. Then there is the attempt at humor in the dialogue and certain situations. It's a very uneasy mixture, and doesn't work very well. The worst problem, however, is that, for all of its attempts to bring the werewolf genre of the 40s up to date, there is no really frightening monster, only a grey wolf with huge bloody fangs. If Landis really were trying to emulate the Lon Chaney monster, surely he could have done better than this.

A few scenes work reasonably well, thanks to Robert Paynter's excellent photography, the stars are attractive and perform capably, and the last scenes of the showdown in Piccadilly Circus are a gut-wrenching wonder, but the film just does not hang together, and I can't recommend it except as a curiosity item for die-hard horror movie addicts.

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