

Action comedies provide humor and sentimentality

NEW YORK (CNS) — A mildly amusing comedy, "Short Time" (Fox) is about a Seattle police officer who, after being mistakenly told he has only weeks to live, sets out to be killed in the line of duty so his ex-wife can collect his insurance and his son can go to Harvard.

About to retire after 30 years, Burt Simpson (Dabney Coleman) must keep his more adventurous partner Ernie (Matt Frewer) under reins so his final eight days on the force will pass uneventfully.

The duo are forced into a chase when they spot a suspect wanted for hijacking a truckload of weapons duck into an apartment house. On the rooftop, Burt restrains Ernie from jumping to the adjacent building, thereby earning the captain's censure for his too cautious conduct.

Burt's whole approach to police work changes overnight when his medical test results are switched with those of a man dying of a terminal disease. Thinking he has only a couple of weeks to live, Burt discovers that the police insurance policy will pay only if he dies on duty.

He secures a double shift in the city's most dangerous neighborhood and abandons his revolver, bulletproof vest and startled partner to speed after two of the hijackers. In a wild and extended car-crunching sequence, neither machine-gun fire nor obscene gestures deter the now daredevil Burt. Much to his chagrin,

however, he survives and is cited for heroism.

With time running out, Burt's priorities change and he takes time to have fun with his young son and express the love he still feels for his former wife (Teri Garr). In other overly sentimental scenes, Burt bestows farewell gifts and a kiss on the disconcerted Ernie and plays on the emotions of a mad bomber to dissuade him from killing his hostages and himself.

By the time Ernie uncovers the medical mix-up, the action comedy is back on track with Burt having tracked down the master hijacker (Xander Berkeley) and facing certain death at his hands.

However, in a turned-upside-down ending, dying just doesn't seem to be Burt's forte, especially in light of his new lease on family life.

Directed by Gregg Champion, the one-joke comedy is a fitful melange of slapstick humor, melodramatic sentimentality and action knots. Its chief asset is Coleman, who knows how to get a good laugh from slim material.

Because of the theme, some hard-edged profanity, a bedroom scene and needless violence, the U.S.C.C. classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Gibson-Hawn feature is screwball thriller

A romantic comedy wrapped in a slambang chase thriller, "Bird on a Wire" (Universal) deals with a government witness and his one-time sweetheart running from two ruthless killers.

After fingering a drug ring, Rick (Mel Gibson) has been living under the federal witness protection program, changing names and locations whenever people ask too many questions about his bogus identity.

By chance Rick is sighted by Marianne (Goldie Hawn), his college sweetheart who had attended his faked funeral 15 years earlier. He puts her off with a phony story but still calls the feds to take him to another part of the country and a new identity.

An FBI agent who takes his call tips the drug lords to Rick's location and two thugs and for the rest of the movie, the two run, not only from the killers but also from police who mistakenly want Rick for murder and Marianne as his accomplice.

Their goal is to reach the now retired FBI operative (Jeff Corey) who set up Rick's previous identities so he can call off the police and nab the bad guys. Dodging bullets along the way, they visit friends from his past covers when he worked in a hairdressing salon, an animal hospital and, finally, a zoo — where the climactic showdown takes place in a spectacular tropical animal house.

Director John Badham maintains the air of a screwball romantic comedy throughout the desperate proceedings and special-effects violence — gun battles, explosions, demolition-derby car chases, on a ledge atop a skyscraper, pursuit by a helicopter gunship and a deadly game of hide-and-seek in the zoo.

Though the action never flags, Badham takes the time to flesh out the characterizations of the two fugitives so that viewers care about them.

Gibson is likable as the hunted man who has made an art out of being a devious oddball. Hawn reprises her familiar role as the dumb blonde with a heart of gold. Marianne is so outrageously inept in trying to help Rick in the zoo sequence that she may draw hisses from unamused feminists. The formula works well, however, as the battling odd couple are gradually drawn together by their near brushes with death

(David Carradine and Bill Duke) arrive to rub him out. He escapes in Marianne's car and eventually become lovers in a seedy motel scene that is played for laughs.

Violence is done more to objects than people, though there are several restrained shots of gore. Like Hitchcock, Badham knows that real menace and suspense come from what is imagined rather than from what is shown on screen.

If you're in the mood for a tense thriller with screwball comedy and slick, sentimental romance, "Bird on a Wire" is the ticket.

Because of much menace and demolition-derby violence, a bedroom scene and some sexually suggestive dialogue, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

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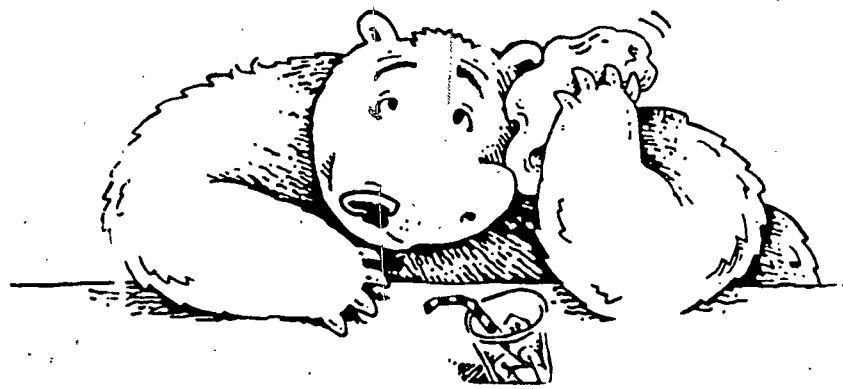
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Twentieth Century Fox Dabney Coleman is Burt Simpson, a cautious policeman who becomes a daredevil super-cop when he's handed the wrong medical diagnosis, and Matt Frewer (background) is his flabbergasted partner, Ernie, in the new comedy from Gladden Entertainment "Short Time."

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