



Paul Newman plays a lawyer struggling for personal salvation through a court case he takes on in "The Verdict."

the movies
Louise Snider

External gimmicks make up character of boozing lawyer

A boozing, ambulance-chasing lawyer (Paul Newman) gets a juicy medical malpractice case tossed his way by friend and ex-associate (Jack Warden).

The circumstances are such that the defendants — the doctors and the Catholic hospital where they practice — are ready to make a large out-of-court settlement.

If the lawyer accepts, he pockets a fast and fat fee, his working-class clients get a tidy sum, and the case is quietly closed. If he refuses the offer and goes to trial, he has the opportunity to pull himself up from the garbage pit of his career, expose the malpractice which left a young woman in a permanent coma and win a larger award for his client.

But he also faces the strong possibility of losing. He will be pitting himself and his meager resources against the money, prestige and power of the establishment: a church-owned hospital, two renowned doctors on its staff and the prominent law firm representing them.

THAT'S THE CONFLICT posed in "The Verdict" (R). Paul Newman is Frank Galvin, the alcoholic lawyer who sees the malpractice case as a final chance for personal salvation. Courtroom drama is meshed with a story of redemption and of the underdog fighting back.

"The Verdict" should be a knockout, especially since it was directed by Sidney Lumet, whose credits include such powerful dramas as "Prince of the City," "Network" and "Twelve Angry Men."

But "The Verdict" is not a knockout. It's more like a split decision. It's a good movie but not a great one. An interesting movie but not a powerful one. It never attains the eloquence, the emotional force or the dramatic strength of which it seems capable.

The pace is slow, the editing nondescript, at best, and the courtroom fireworks a long time in coming. The movie runs more than two hours, yet the script is so spare that the characters are never fully fleshed out. This is a major weakness in a movie whose theme is redemption. (The courtroom struggle is simply the means for achieving that redemption.)

Even the leading character, Galvin, seems to be just a collection of external gimmicks: the drops in the eyes for getting rid of the bloodshot appearance; the belch after downing a beer with egg in it; the rapid, shallow breathing to indicate fright.

GALVIN is a departure from the cool types and bravado types that Newman usually portrays. Galvin is weak. He's a loser, and when he tries to pull himself together, he is a frightened man.

What Newman gives us is a very smart performance, not an insightful one. We never get inside the character's psyche as we did, for example, with Treat Williams, who played the cop-turned-informer in Lumet's "Prince of the City."

In supporting roles, Lindsay Crouse makes a brief and strong appearance as a nurse giving testimony; Jack Warden is down-to-earth as Galvin's friend; and James Mason is a superb choice as the smooth, debonair lawyer opposing Galvin.

"The Verdict" is at its best when it zeroes in on the management and strategies of a high-powered law firm. It's at its worst in dealing with the character of Laura, Galvin's lover. The role appears to have been added as an afterthought and that's the way Charlotte Rampling plays it.

The character is so sketchy and her involvement so artificial, the effort would be more worthy of a soap opera than a script by one of our most respected playwrights, David Mamet.



Galvin examines his expert witness, Dr. Thompson (Joe Seneca).

Spirited comedy opening

Sally Field plays Kay Villano, a sophisticated New York widow whose late husband re-materializes for a final fling one week before her impending nuptials, in "Kiss Me Goodbye." The comedy opens Wednesday at Detroit-area theaters.



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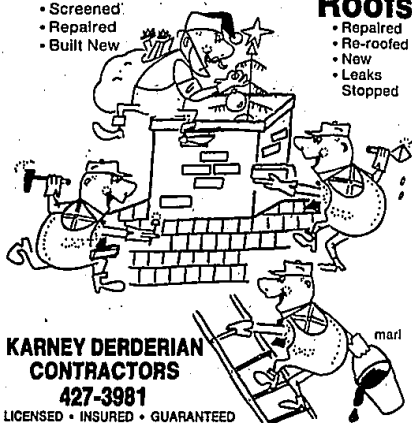
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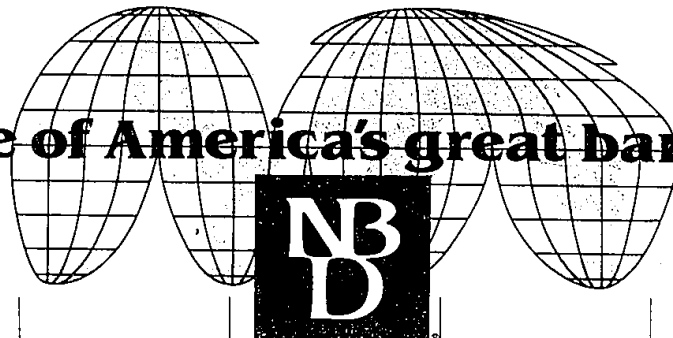
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