MOVIES

Piper Laurie makes 'The Grass Harp' sing



How rough were things on the set of "The Grass Harp?" Director Charles Matthau will cautiously tell you about the money pulling out several

times during the production. Co-star Joe Don

studio would fly in and cut the doughnuts in half.

'It was a difficult adaptation because I wanted the film to be poetic but not precious.

Charles Matthau 'Grass Harp' director

Two years after shooting, the movie has finally hit the screen. And while it fails on many levels, it boasts an ensemble east made in heaven: Walter Matthau, Jack Lemmon, Sissy Spacek, Mary Steenburgen, Nell Carter, Roddy

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said in Los Angeles recently, "I saw her as a literary character and not a real one and so most of my effort was devoted to not condescending to an audience and making her as real as possible."

Based on a novella by Truman Capote, "The Grass Harp" concerns a pair of sisters (Laurie and Sissy Spacek) who live together in a small Southern town in the 1940s. While elder sister Verena is controlling and business-minded, Dolly is more spiritual, earthy, and kindhearted, "more eccentric than ditzy," according to Laurie.

The movie offers one of Laurie's rare big screen performances, a busy contract player in the 1950s, the Detroit-born actress stayed off the screen between her groundbreaking performances in "The Hustler" (1961) and "Carrie" (1976). She has steered clear of most parts before filling in on "The Grass Harp" with only ten days notice. The part was originally slated for oan Plowright.

The movie reunites Laurie with Sissy Spacek, the famous mother-degister. Learn in "Carrie". "She didn't want to be rean to me in The Grass Harp," Laurie and in the famous mother-degister. Learn in "Carrie". "She didn't want to be rean to me in The Grass Harp, "Laurie and the work of the same in the Grass Harp," Laurie and in the Grass Harp, "Laurie and in the Grass Harp, "Laurie and in the Grass Harp," Laurie and in the Grass Harp, "Laurie and in the Grass Harp, "Laurie and in the Grass Harp," Laurie and in the Grass Harp, "Laurie and in the Grass Harp, "Laurie and in the Grass Harp, "Laurie and the work of the Grass Harp, "Laurie and the work of the Grass Harp, "Laurie and the work of the Market of the Market

When Verenn's bullying goes too far, Dolly, nephew Collin (Edward Furlong of Terminator 21') and housekeeper/friend Catherine (Nell Carter) heef of their favorite getaway: a tree house. They have callers, some friendly like white-haired Judge Cool (Walter Matthaut, some reluctantly bullying, like Joe Don Baker's chicken farmer sheriff.

sheriff.
Director Charlie Matthau Director Charlie Matthau secured rights to Capate's semi-autobiographical story shortly after graduating from film school at the University of Southern California. He hooked up with veteran screenwriter Stirling Silliphant, who served not only

Coming-of-age saga: Collin Fenwick (Edward Furlong),...
Dolly Talbo (Piper Laurie) and Judge Cool (Walter
Matthau) in "The Grass Harp."

"It was a difficult adaptation because I wanted the film to be poetic but not precious." Matthau noted. "I needed a delicate balance. The words are so beautiful, but a lot of that is in the narration and I didn't want too much narration in the film."

In some ways "The Grass Harp' succeeds. The music may swell a bit too much, the heart-strings might get tired from all that tugging, but John Alonzo's cinematography captures the atmosphere of lazy days and small Southern towns that Capate was so good at creating. Matthau personally scouted locations before ending up in a small town just below Montgomery, Ala. "We went to Monroeville where the story actually takes place, where Capote grew up, and it has become too modern," Matthau said.

The script stretches a bit to get

The script stretches a bit to get Jack Lemmon (as a fast-talking salesman) and Walter Matthau

in a scene together since they mever meet in the original story, He has them in a brief exchange in Roddy McDowall's barber shop just to rekindle that old." Odd Couple' chemistry.

Other changes in the story, seem better justified, cleaning up, what many see as 'a weak third, act, according to Matthau.

According to the story, the Grass Harp is the sound made by the souls that have left us as the wind whistles through the tall grass. While the movie's own power to resonate (or stny on screen) may be weak, Piper, Laurie's performance may still be heard around Oscar-time.

John Monaghan welcomes your calls and comments. You can lis-ten to him on Dave Dixon Radio Show AM 1270, 8 p.m. to mid, night Saturdays. To leave John a voice mail message, dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1866.

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