

A "PERFECT" CAST

By Fred Hobbs

The tastes of movie lovers vary so widely that choosing a favored category, notwithstanding recommending an all-time fantastic film, is a satisfying, but not necessarily rewarding experience. You may agree to disagree on a choice. Commonly mentioned classics such as "Gone With The Wind", "The Wizard Of Oz", "All Quiet On The Western Front", and "Citizen Kane" certainly are worthy choices.

But, I nominate a 1940s delightful mixture of mirth, mayhem and murder titled "Arsenic and Old Lace." The film was directed by Frank Capra, whose credits include the perennial holiday favorite, "It's A Wonderful Life."

Cary Grant plays Mortimer Brewster, an author of several books describing marriage as an "old fashioned superstition." Cupid slings an arrow his way, however, and he falls in love with Elaine, who grew up next door to him in Brooklyn. They get married on Halloween Day. Immediately after the wedding, Mortimer visits the eccentric but loveable relatives who raised him who still live in the old family home. They include elderly aunts, Abby and Martha, and his brother who believes he is Theodore Roosevelt. Each time Teddy goes upstairs, he yells "Charge!" and ascends the stairs on a run, mimicking Roosevelt's famous charge up San Juan Hill.

By accident, Mortimer finds a corpse hidden in a window seat. He assumes Teddy, who is clearly delusional, is responsible, but the aunts explain, quite innocently, that "no, no, he is one of our gentlemen." (Lonely old bachelors seeking to rent a room.) Out of sympathy for their "suffering," the ladies serve them elderberry wine spiked with arsenic, strychnine and "just a pinch of cyanide." Teddy buries the bodies in the basement; he believes he is digging locks for the Panama Canal and burying yellow fever victims.

With all of this is happening, who should show up, but Mortimer's evil brother, Jonathan, a serial murderer trying to escape from the police and find a place for his latest victim. He's accompanied by an alcoholic plastic surgeon, Dr. Herman Einstein who has botched an operation attempting to alter Jonathon's face, making it look like Boris Karloff in his make-up as Frankenstein's monster.

While his bride waits next door, Mortimer makes frantic attempts to alert the bumbling local cops to the dangers of Jonathan's presence, to have Teddy declared insane and to prevent his aunts from producing any more victims.

If a perfect cast for a movie exists, "Arsenic and Old Lace" surely had one. Although Frank Capra is an excellent director, he was fortunate to have chosen Cary Grant in the starring role. Supposedly, he had first wanted Bob Hope and also had considered Jack Benny and Ronald Reagan. Grant provided just the right balance of believability, physicality and his special brand of charm, looks and "Cary Grant-ness" to make the perfect Mortimer. Pricilla Lane, a gorgeous blonde with a beautiful smile, was just right as the innocent, sweet, but slightly annoyed new bride caught in the middle of the mayhem. The character actors, many of whom also performed in the stage play that preceded the movie, were well suited for their roles. Raymond Massey as Jonathan proved an excellent substitute for Boris Karloff who had other commitments at the time of filming.

Because it is a comedy, you can assume the plot resolves all the complications satisfactorily. Rent a copy or watch for it on Cable TV's *Turner Classic Movies* and, if you don't know already, see how Mortimer finds out if he, too, is insane like the rest of the Brewster family.

As Mortimer explained: "Insanity runs in my family; in fact, it practically gallops!"