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James Garner and Carol Burnett play politics in 'Health'

Altman thinks crowd pulse-takers are proving poor for his 'Health'

By Bob Thomas
The Associated Press

HOLLYWOOD

CAN "Health" be saved? Robert Altman hopes so, although the film has been reported terminal even before its release.

Altman completed filming "Health" a year and a half ago, and a major release still has not been scheduled by 20th Century-Fox. After months of rumors that the company would allow the film to remain on the shelf, Fox finally announced a showing this month in a West Los Angeles theater. The results of the engagement may determine whether or not the rest of the nation will be afforded a view of "Health."

Altman, the controversial director of "M*A*S*H," "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," "Nashville," "3 Women" and "A Wedding," is naturally irate.

"I think it's terrible that companies don't want to back a movie until they are certain that it will succeed," he said. "Corporations no longer care about the human factor. There is no humanism left in the industry."

The burly director admitted that he had been in no hurry to see "Health" released.

Starring Carol Burnett, Glenda Jackson, James Garner and Lauren Bacall, it is a comedy-drama about the political infighting at a national health foods convention in St. Petersburg, Fla. Altman figured it would be a natural to release at the time of the national political conventions and during the presidential campaign.

Fox didn't see it his way.

The filmmaker returned from nine months of shooting "Popeye" in Malta to discover no plans had been announced for the "Health" release. Furthermore, he couldn't get an explanation from Norman Levy, president of 20th Century-Fox Entertainment Inc.

"I put in calls for him, and he didn't get back to me for seven weeks," Altman complained. "Finally through the intercession of Sherry Lansing (president, TCF Productions), Alan Hirschfield (vice chairman, chief operating officer) and my agent, I was able to get an audience with him."

Altman still got no satisfaction, although the company agreed to the local test run. Altman argues that "Health" was well received at the Montreal and Telluride film festivals and at sneak previews in Sacramento, San Francisco, Boston and Houston.

Reviews for the Los Angeles release, however, were dismal.

"The problem was with the preview cards," Altman claimed. "The people were asked questions like, 'Is this the best movie you've ever seen?' We got a 50-50 break in the cards, but that wasn't good enough for the studio. They sent us out with a loaded deck."

Altman admitted he has been having problems with his recent releases. "A Perfect Couple" suffered from poor distribution, he said, while the Paul Newman vehicle "Quintet" was "too dark, too heavy; the audience had trouble understanding it — 10 percent thought it was the best picture they'd ever seen and 90 percent said they couldn't stand it."

Whatever the outcome of "Health," Altman vows, "I'll keep on working in my own way." That means independently.