

Scoundrels as delightful as title is nasty-sounding

By Kathy Amen

Dirty Rotten Scoundrels. Directed by Frank Oz; written by Dale Launer, Stanley Shapiro, and Paul Henning; produced by Bernard Williams or Orion. Starring Michael Caine, Steve Martin and Glenn Headly. Rated PG.

Michael Caine has made a movie before with *almost* as many twists and turns of plot as this one. I'm referring to *Sleuth*, in 1973. But where the earlier movie dealt with decidedly unpleasant business, like murder, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* is devoted completely, and with great success, to comedy.

Telling too much of the story would spoil some of its delightful surprises. But I can say that Caine is Lawrence, a well-established, very sophisticated and wildly successful con man. Freddy (Martin) is a young interloper trying to make it big in the same game. He's even more of a scoundrel than Lawrence, besides being very uncouth and not particularly smart. But he has the advantage of youthful enthusiasm.

After a little initial sparring, the two rogues settle down to a serious contest: whoever can relieve

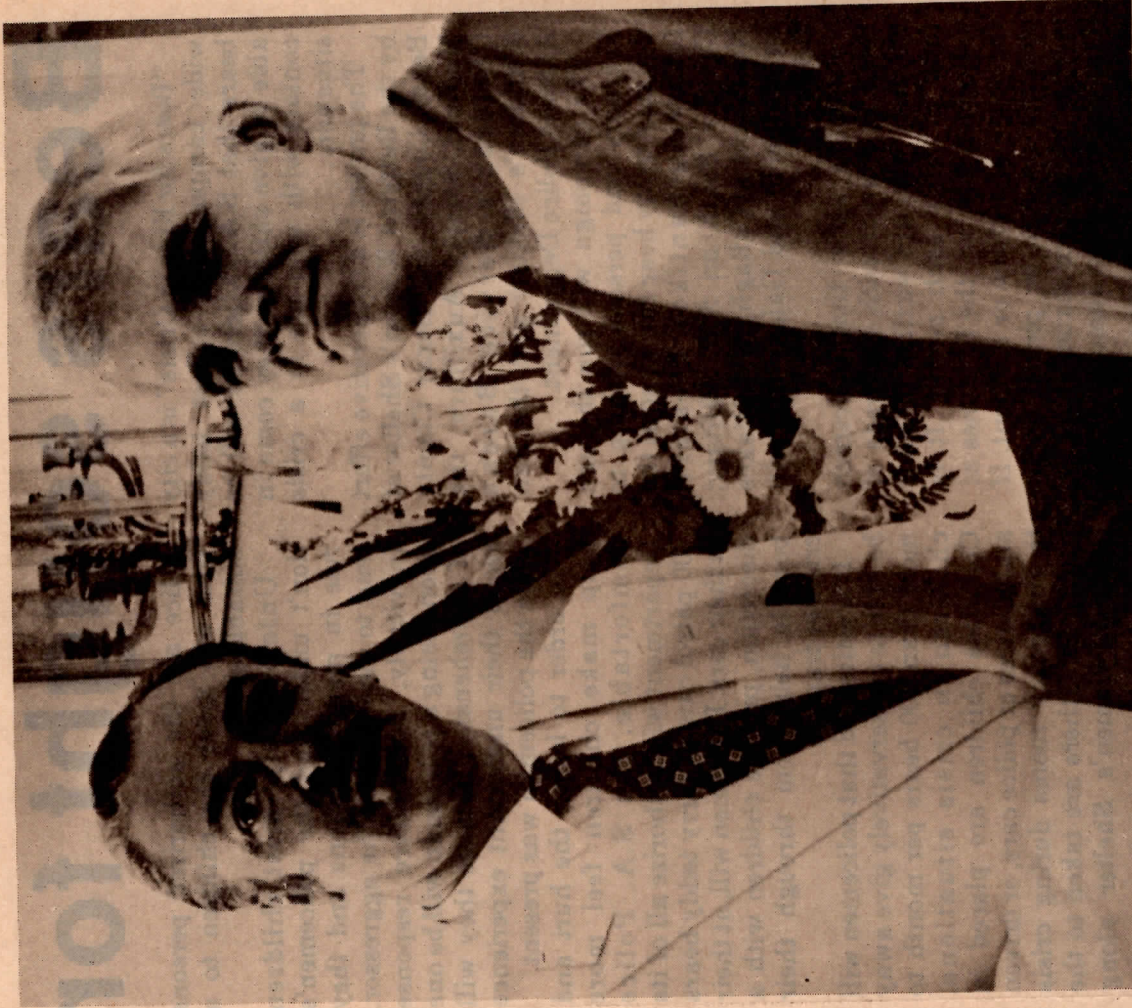
American "soap queen" Janet (Headly) of \$50,000 first gets to keep the fertile territory in the south of France. The loser has to set up shop elsewhere.

Although its pacing is leisurely, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* is full of so many marvelous little bits of expert comedy (as well as the aforementioned plot convolutions) that it never drags.

The comic styles of Caine and Martin don't always mesh together well. But they are excellent foils for each other, perhaps for that very reason. Just the simple visual contrast of Lawrence's well-dressed urbanity with Freddy's vulgar informality provides more than one good laugh.

Headly does more than just hold her own with these heavyweights. As the story progresses and her character becomes more important, she comes close to stealing the show from them.

Dirty Rotten Scoundrels is about as delightful as its title is nasty-sounding. It's a great way to start off the new movie year.



Lawrence (Michael Caine) and Freddy (Steve Martin) star in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. (Courtesy photo)