SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

‘The Great Race’ wins no trophies

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Having for some time been bombarded with boisterous radio commercials, the unwary moviegoer may find himself straying into the clutches of the Tower Theatre’s “The Great Race.”

If such an eventuality occurs, the recommended antidote is a long walk up the aisle.

Take the requisite amount of cash to buy the services of Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis, Natalie Wood, numerous expensive props and sets, and thousands of cheering extras. Okay, now try to make them all add up to zero. Difficult, perhaps, but possible:

“The Great Race” stands as testimonial. The critical factor in the whole mess of pottage is the script, which bombs out in fine style.

Old Hat

Acting on the theory that all the successful comedies ever made can’t be wrong, the script deftly solders together a patchwork of nearly every hackneyed sight gag in cinematic memory from Laurel and Hardy’s missteps to the Abbott and Costello matinee epics. The film’s writers seem unaware of the principle of the twice-told joke.

The plot has possibilities, but they aren’t exploited. Daredevil-wizard - humanists Professor Fate (swarthy Jack Lemmon) and the Great Leslie (snow-white Tony Curtis) are rivals, the only differences between them being that Prof. Fate plays dirty pool and is fumble-fingered, whereas the Great Leslie is cub-scout square, deft of hand, sure of eye, and a Valentino prototype.

Now then: escalate their competition from balloon ascents and boat races, and think up something really epic—an automobile race from New York to Paris, say. At this point, to bolster a yawning audience, let's add Natalie Wood, she can be a reporter, feminist, suffragette, and anything else that occurs to you, so long as it smacks of 1900 or so. On with the show.

World Affair

The inevitable (in the wake of Jules Verne) procession occurs: Wild West scenes, ice-bound Alaskan adventures, a confrontation with Siberian peasantry. In some European micro-polity, our innocents abroad involve themselves in the machinations of the local power structure, finding that Prof. Fate appears identical to the sot/fop crown prince (Jack Lemmon).

And finally, two and one-half hours after the first scene, we see the two cars in a neck-and-neck race through the Paris streets. The ending is so weak it defies painless retelling. Jack Lemmon tries to pull the plot out of the fire with three minutes of unrelieved shouting, but to no avail. Like the Great Leslie’s punctured balloon at the show’s opening, this film falters and sags from first to final reel.

If a million dollars can make a funny film, it does not follow that nine million dollars will make one nine times as funny. Director Blake Edwards seems to have been intent on making the funny/money relationship an inverse proportion.