

With 'Congeniality 2,' Bullock swears off romantic comedies

By TODD LONGWELL

THE idea that Sandra Bullock would give up on romantic comedies sounds as preposterous as John Wayne giving up Westerns or Gene Kelly abandoning musicals.

She's the genre's go-to girl, the cute, klutzy gal who overcomes plane crashes ("Forces of Nature"), a coma ("While You Were Sleeping") and even rehab ("28 Days") to find true love.

But Bullock has had enough. She's sworn off romantic comedies — starting with her latest film, opening Thursday, "Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous."

Where the first "Congeniality" found Bullock falling into the arms of Benjamin Bratt, the 40-year-old actress wanted the sequel to have no male romantic lead.

"She knew that it was possible to have a movie without a love interest and still be entertaining," says co-star Regina King. "It was a fight with the studio, but she stuck to her guns, and she won that fight."

Instead, "She wanted to do a female buddy movie in which the girls get to kick ass," says the film's director, John Pasquin.

"Congeniality 2" ended up being a buddy film, with King playing an FBI agent assigned to guard Bullock's Gracie Hart as she hits the talk-show circuit as "the new face of the FBI."

Sparks (nasty ones, not romantic ones) fly between the two, but (duh) hate turns to respect as the bickering duo go undercover in Las Vegas to rescue a beauty pageant winner and emcee Stan Fields (William Shatner) from kidnapers.

Not that there's much difference with picking a love interest and selecting a comedic co-star, says Bullock, who also produced the film.

"We auditioned together like you would audition for a love story," she says. "We just went for it and it worked."

Bullock also went for it in a brief scene with Dolly Parton, whom Gracie chases down and tackles under the mistaken impression that she's a nefarious male Parton impersonator, only to discover it's the honest-to-goodness country music legend herself.

"We were lying on the floor in the middle of the Venetian Hotel



Sorry Hugh, no more flirting.

and I'm on top of her, and she goes, 'We are going to put the Madonna and Britney kiss to shame,'" laughs Bullock. "She just laid there and I was going doinga-doinga-doing," poking Parton's famously large breasts to make sure they were real.

As Bullock and screenwriter Marc Lawrence made room for more girl-on-girl action, the character of FBI agent Jeff Foreman (played by Enrique Murciano of CBS' "Without a Trace") went from potential boyfriend to comic relief.

"We were thinking about the possibility of having a romantic connection for Sandy," Pasquin explains, "then prior to principal photography we decided that we couldn't pay off that story."

Like its predecessor, "Miss Congeniality 2" gives Bullock ample opportunity to engage in broad physical comedy, from fumbling through a musical number at a Vegas drag club to impersonating an elderly wheelchair-bound Jewish woman.

"One of the most beautiful things about Sandra Bullock is that she's not afraid of making fun of herself," observes King, "and that's what makes all of us say, 'It's a Sandy Bullock movie. I want to go see it.'"

For a time, Bullock wasn't so sure

if she wanted to see herself in another movie. Prior to shooting "Miss Congeniality 2" she took a year and a half off to re-evaluate her life and her career.

At the moment, Bullock is happy to act. In the last year, she's also completed roles in the upcoming dramas "Loverboy" (directed by Kevin Bacon), and "Crash" (directed by "Million Dollar Baby" scribe Paul Haggis), and she's currently filming her role as "To Kill a Mockingbird" author Harper Lee in "Every Word Is True." Next, she's set to rejoin "Speed" co-star Keanu Reeves in the romantic drama "Il Mare."



Bullock made her new film a slapstick comedy.