

What's in the Box

by Richard T. Jameson

What's terrific about *Barton Fink* has been terrific about Joel and Ethan Coen's work since the last sequence of *Blood Simple*, when Frances McDormand did everything she could to keep a wall or a door between her and M. Emmet Walsh's implacably murderous private dick as he menaced her in a dark apartment. In the new film, the principal space is the hotel room where Barton (John Turturro), social-conscious New York playwright drafted to knock out genre scripts in 1941 Hollywood, struggles to get past FADE IN. Confronted with an epic sweep of blank page and the whining mosquito of doubt that he has anything to offer as either a spokesman for "the masses" or a proficient hack, he is opportunely diverted by garbled laughter/weeping/moaning coming through the wall from next-door. Into his life steps Charlie Meadows (John Goodman), hail-fellow insurance salesman, homely personification of the Common Man, and sentimental simulacrum of the Wallace Beery for whom Barton is supposed to be writing "a wrestling picture." Charlie, as he gladhandingly remarks several times, "could tell you stories," but Barton, who can't tell a story, doesn't listen. So stories come after him.

The Coens, unlike Barton Fink, know that space is a story. They map Barton's room, and Barton in it, from every conceivable angle. They know, too, that all space is interior space, and that Hollywood movies dream of worlds from inside boxes. Nicely thrown-away visual joke in a producer's outer office: Secretary sits typing under a wall-sized blowup from a desert adventure movie—a "window" on a realm of spectacle and romance—while to her left is a porthole of opaque glass holding the California sun at bay. Piquantly harrowing visual joke punctuating the entire movie: Over Barton's writing desk hangs a framed, hotel-furnished image of a young woman in a two-piece swimsuit sitting on a beach staring out to sea. The photo is small, her back is turned, the flesh she



presents to us is but a pastel wash. Yet she is California, "the pictures," Life and Art, unreality and the only reality. You cannot touch her; you cannot let go of the dream of her.

Barton Fink is mesmerizingly authoritative as long as it stays within its own imaginative projection of "the life of the mind." Outside that, the movie goes askew. Not cagy-askew—like the surreal nuttiness of its deadpan proposition that there ever was such a genre as the wrestling picture—but simply off, ill-considered, wrong. One of the things the Coens get wrong is the movies themselves—their history and lore, and the accidental/inevitable conjunction of art and zeitgeist. Michael Lerner fulminates hilariously as Capitol Pictures boss Jack Lipnick, a zany conflation of Harry Cohn's brute vulgarity with Louis B. Mayer's obscene unctuousness (Tony Shaloub and Jon Polito are equally fine at catching, respectively, the manic desperation and damp acquiescence of two second-echelon execs); but Capitol, which would make sense as a version of Cohn's Columbia in the early Thirties

("We don't make B pictures here, let's put a stop to *that* rumor right now!"), bears no resemblance to Columbia or MGM or any other studio that could have had Wallace Beery under contract in 1941. John Mahoney's courtly, julep-voiced novelist-screenwriter W.P. Mayhew is the spitting image of William Faulkner (who did work on a script, the 1932 *Flesh*, featuring a wrestler role for Wallace Beery), but Mayhew, written as artist-sellout foil to Fink, is such a careless mélange of Faulkner-bio minutiae and libelous distortion that this comparatively minor character provokes major doubts about the Coens' sense of fealty to their art and forebears.

The 1941 time-frame is also at least half a decade too late to accommodate the aesthetic, political, or professional trajectory of a Barton Fink, even if Fink weren't modeled so conspicuously on *echt*-Thirties figure Clifford Odets (John Turturro uncannily succeeds in looking simultaneously like Odets and Ethan Coen and Joel Coen at any given moment). Unfortunately, the Coens appear to have hit upon '41 because it positions them, on the eve of World War II, to hazard some supremely silly historical allegory, up to and including a mind-boggling dropping of the name Hitler and a figurative Holocaust. The holocaust, small-*h*, is superb on its intrinsic terms, the consumption of the known world by the rampant solipsism of a madman—or a writer. It's also arguably a tip of the hat to Nathanael West's "burning of Los Angeles" (West is *Barton Fink*'s literary godfather as Hammett was *Miller's Crossing*'s, though *Fink* is closer to West's *The Dream Life of Balzo Snell* than to *Day of the Locust*). But it illuminates the impending historic immolation not at all, and the Coens were feckless in even momentarily implying that it should.

Barton Fink doesn't need History to lend it scale. The only scale that matters is the awful disparity between the smudge of blood from a swatted mosquito and the surge of gore that washes Barton and the movie into madness.

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it is the sine qua non. The Coens cannot avoid self-consciousness, since there are two of them. One is always watching the other. As one associate pointed out, "In the end the only person Joel has to please is Ethan, and vice versa." In their films self-absorbed thinker heroes are always contrasted with their un-self-conscious, natural counterparts: Leo in *Miller's Crossing* and Charlie Meadows (John Goodman) in *Barton Fink*, both natural men, warm, gregarious, and easygoing, both killers. ("I'll show you the life of the mind!" Charlie bellows. "Heil Hitler!")

POLANSKI, ROMAN (b. 1933) Diminutive Polish-born genius. (see **quid pro quo**)

PULP The Coens are usually regarded as movie babies whose primary influences are other movies, in the manner of Spielberg and Lucas. In fact, their source material is primarily literary, in particular the plot-laden, language-besotted novels of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and their lesser contemporaries. Cain inspired *Blood Simple* but the title came from Hammett, as did most of *Miller's Crossing*, whose plot and characters are largely lifted from *The Glass Key* with a few smidgeons of *Red Harvest* thrown in for good measure.

QUID PRO QUO Several years ago, Joel Coen was quoted thus: "Roman **Polanski** is a favorite, he's terrific. *Knife in the Water*, *Repulsion*, *The Tenant*, *Chinatown*, *Rosemary's Baby*—I love them all." *Barton Fink* is, on one level, a love letter to Polanski, drawing heavily on the imagery and angst of *Repulsion* and *The Tenant*. In 1991 *Barton Fink* was awarded an unprecedented three awards at the Cannes Film Festival. The president of the jury was Roman Polanski.

RAIMI, SAM Born in 1959 in Royal Oak, Michigan; raised in Detroit. Director of *Evil Dead* (83), *Crimewave* (85), *Evil Dead II: Dead by Dawn* (87), *Darkman* (90), and the forthcoming *Evil Dead III: Army of Darkness*. (see **doppelgänger**)

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Unless, of course, they were there from the start. The film begins with an in-joke that's really a joke on in-ness, a slow-descending crane shot backstage at a New York theater as John Turturro's voice declaims passionate (and accurately parodied) Odets-speak; the shot eventually arrives at a closeup of Turturro—as playwright Fink (the anonymous player who exits past him had ostensibly been speaking the dialogue we heard). Everything we see and hear from then on is arguably Inside Barton Fink—projections of his paranoia and his pride, his doubts and desires, his self-inflation and self-rebuke.

Not that his various "secret sharers" are to be denied their stature. Charlie Meadows, the jolly fat man and loyal neighbor who traffics in "peace of mind . . . human contact," is also a monster named Karl Mundt who severs heads all over the U.S.A.; one of them may be in the box he gives Barton to keep for him.

John Goodman's performance is twinkling, towering. Meadows comes into existence at the moment Barton needs him—something to distract him from the script he can't write. Mundt becomes a concept just in time to galvanize Fink into performing.

Someone else also leads Barton to perform. Audrey, the keeper of Bill Mayhew's writerly legend, enters Barton's bed just in time to become a blood sacrifice to his art. Judy Davis is resplendent in the role, the epitome of that neuroathenic Southern womanhood that is its own perfect parody. We can believe that Audrey writes Mayhew's (if not Faulkner's) books; Davis visibly *tastes* language as it issues from lips drawn by weariness and wit in equal measure, tastes the words and savors every alternative meaning with a decorous sexual thrill. Her Audrey is the color of the girl in the picture. She comes into the movie pre-bled.

And leaves it shockingly too soon.

REPRESSED, RETURN OF THE Chaos and violence are unhealthy and terrifying. Order and control are good. (see **anal**) Sweep that bad stuff under the rug, flush it down the toilet, wash it down the drain. Sometimes, though, it doesn't work. In *Blood Simple* Ray (John Getz) tries to kill Marty (Dan Hedaya)—he buries him alive—but Marty keeps trying to dig himself back out of the grave as Ray is trying to cover him up. Barton Fink fancies himself a liberated radical, a man of the people, the creator of a New Theater for the masses, but inside he's a repressed, pompous, pointy-headed snob who couldn't smell the coffee if he were soaking in it. Charlie is Barton's secret nightmare come true; he's unrepressed reality, meaningless and chaotic, living right next door. Every artist, to some extent, has the Barton Fink nightmare, that he can't make meaningful order out of the insane chaos of life, and naturally, since Barton is Barton, he gets it in spades. (see **doppelgänger**)

SEX Closely associated with the body, generally more trouble than it's worth. (see **geometry**)

UNREALIZED PROJECTS *Crimewave*, directed by Sam **Raimi** and written by Raimi and the Coens, was disavowed by all three, saying their original conception was butchered by the distributor before release. Another Raimi-Coen project, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, remains unproduced. (see **J.J. Hunsecker**)

WORDSWORTH, WILLIAM (1770–1850) Romantic poet. The only Coen film that qualifies for the epithet "Wordsworthian" is *Raising Arizona*, the duo's sweet ode to reconciliation, a film about the two conflicting dreams beating within the male breast: domestic bliss versus the outlaw road. We all know the feeling. Whereas the other three films end on notes of loneliness and alienation, *Raising Arizona* concludes with a blissful coming-to-the-table, a dream of family harmony. "The Child is father of the Man; and I could wish my days to be bound each to each by natural piety." ☸

An enigma hangs over the last reel of *Barton Fink*. Barton has come up against sweat-and-blood real life and been moved to write after all (a photo of Meadows/Mundt having been fitted into the corner of the beach girl's frame above his typewriter). The boorish Lipnick rejects his script and his pretensions—"You think the whole world revolves and rattles inside that little kike head of yours"—and it's the cream of at least one Coen jest that Lipnick may be right. Has Barton written "the best thing I've ever done," or merely reduced his own brief (implicitly dubious) legend to hack formula, and unsalable formula at that? The Coens rather fudge that one, but at the end of the movie Barton has the box Charlie gave him, and it may have become his. He's found the beach and the girl. "Are you in pictures?" he asks. Is he? We don't know whether he should look in the box. We don't know whether, if he does or doesn't, he could tell us stories. ☸