

Chasing the Hat



Gabriel Byrne as Tom Reagan.

by Richard T. Jameson

Ice dropping into a heavy-bottomed glass: cold, hard, sensuous. The first image in *Miller's Crossing* hits our ears before it hits the screen, but it's nonetheless an image for that. Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne) has traveled the length of a room to build a drink. Not that we saw him in transit, not that we yet know he is Tom Reagan, and not that we see him clearly now as he turns and stalks back up the room, a silent, out-of-focus enigma at the edge of someone else's closeup. Yet he is a story walking, as his deliberate, tangential progress, from background to middle distance and then out the side of the frame, is also a story—draining authority from the close-up Johnny Caspar (Jon Polito) who's come to insist, ironically enough, on the recognition of his territorial rights.

The place is a story, too, which we read as the scene unfolds. A private office; not Caspar's, but not Reagan's either—it's city boss Liam "Leo" O'Bannion (Albert Finney) who sits behind the camera and his big desk, listening. An upstairs office, we know from the muted street traffic (without stopping to think about why we know). Night outside, but sunlight would never be welcome, or relevant, here. A masculine space, green lampshades amid the dark luster of wood, leather, whiskey. A remote train whistle sounds, functional and intrinsically forlorn; the distance from which it reaches us locates the office in space and in history. This room exists in a city big enough to support a multiplicity of criminal fiefdoms and a political machine that rules by maintaining the balance among them, yet it is still a town whose municipal core lies

within faint earshot of its outskirts. Urban dreams of empire have not entirely crowded out the memory of wilderness, of implacable places roads and railroads can't reach, even if one of them has been wishfully designated Miller's Crossing. Hence we are not entirely surprised (though the aesthetic shock is deeply satisfying) when the opening master-scene, with its magisterial interior setting and dialogue fragrant with cross purpose, gives way to a silent (save for mournful Irish melody) credit sequence in an empty forest. And then to a title card announcing, almost superfluously, "An Eastern city in the United States, toward the end of the 1920s."

It has always been one of the special pleasures of movies that they dream worlds and map them at the same time. *Miller's Crossing* dreams a beaut, no less so for the fact that Joel and Ethan Coen's film is a reverent, rigorous reimagining of the world of Dashiell Hammett, especially as limned in *The Glass Key* and *Red Harvest*. (A phrase from *Red Harvest* supplied the title of the Coens' film-making debut *Blood Simple*.) The look is right, from first frame to last—even the aural "look" of that ice: this is a movie that knows what drinking is about in Hammett, what it has to do with rumination and gravity, coolheadedness and rash error, and every coloration of brown study. The mood is instinct with the private pain that separates reticence from caring and conceals itself, with desperation and anger, in seeming not to care. Even the narrative spaces are true to Hammett. There is a man named "Rug" Daniels who enters the film dead, whose murder is the least insistent and finally least significant of the film's mysteries, offhandedly explained amid the backwash from gaudier mayhem ("I don't know, just a mixup"); the cast has to wonder—though the audience need not—why Daniels' corpse should be missing his eponymous toupee. Floyd Thursby might envy a death surrounded by such perplexity and pixilation.

The terrain is worthy of mapping. But more importantly, the mapping itself becomes cinematic terrain in *Miller's Crossing*, each adjustment of distance and perspective invested with exquisite sensibility. Sometimes the effect is startling, like the delayed revelation that the precariously politic dialogue between Leo and Caspar, with Tom kibbitzing, also involves a fourth man: The Dane (J.E. Freeman), Caspar's partner in crime, who, though standing directly behind Caspar the entire time, is never seen by the audience till his fierce visage towers in sudden closeup several minutes into the scene. That silent detonation is the most effective shock cut since Dennis Hopper in *Blue Velvet* offered to "fuck anything that moves." But one takes no less satisfaction when, a moment later, after Caspar and The Dane's angry departure, Tom Reagan leaves off lounging at the window ledge behind his friend and boss, moves to a couch along the wall, settles in, takes a deep drink, and says, "Bad play, Leo." Ninety-nine directors out of a hundred would have played that line in closeup. Joel Coen frames Tom within enough space that we feel both director and character have a judicious respect for patterns, for the ways in which moves and designs can go wrong, and for the crisis whose resolution is going to drive Tom and Leo forever apart.

When John Wayne noticed that Dean Martin, as the drunk in need of redemption, seemed to have the ripest part in *Rio Bravo*, he asked Howard Hawks what he ought to do to hold up his own end of the screen. Hawks replied, "You look at him like he's your friend." Tom Reagan is Leo O'Bannion's friend in *Miller's Crossing*, but he has the devil's own time looking out for the interests of both of them. Johnny Caspar starts out wanting only to send a red letter to "The Schmatte," Bernie Bernbaum (John Turturro), a bookmaker who's been screwing the play everytime Caspar fixes a prize-fight. Leo refuses to lift protection on Bernie, partly to insist on his own authority, but also because Bernie is the cherished brother of Verna (Marcia Gay Harden), whose dark beauty has stirred banked fires in his heart. Tom wishes his friend could keep his mind on business. He also wishes he knew what to do about the fact that he himself is secretly Verna's lover.

Reportedly, Albert Finney came late to the role of Leo, after Trey Wilson, the 43-year-old actor who played the father of the quintuplets in the Coens' *Raising Arizona*, died of a stroke. Finney's extra decade introduces an imbalance into the friendship between Tom and Leo and adjusts the nature of their rivalry for Verna; besides being a hefty powerbroker ill-made for romantic conquest, his Leo takes on the pathos of age and last options. But if Finney's Leo is less than equal on the field of love, he's more than equal as a figure of estimable regard. The screenplay obliges Leo to disappear for most of the last two-thirds of the movie; excellent player that he was, it's doubtful whether the late Wilson could have loomed so large in absentia as Finney's Leo does. The sense of rueful aspiration that drives Tom Reagan during his often mystifying maneuvers to set the cockeyed world of *Miller's Crossing* right finds expression mainly through the Irish music that marks his passage, and our memories of Leo—apart from his beefy authority and boyish candor—reverberate as a kind of music. Not only the playing of "Danny Boy" over the most audacious of the film's tour-de-force sequences (an exhilarating first-act high that would render the remainder of any other movie anticli-



matic), but also the mortally wounded sighs Leo emits after learning of Tom and Verna's affair. And the way Finney gets the history of a long day and Leo's life and his friendship with Tom into responding to the offer of a late-night drink—"I wouldn't mind."

That line reading is one of a thousand things to love about *Miller's Crossing*, along with a zephyr of smoke through waxed floorboards, the rubbing together of stark trees above a killing ground, the arrival of a small man to conduct the beating a giant couldn't manage, the way men



and guns fill up a nocturnal street like autumn leaves drifting. And one loves a screenplay with the fortitude to lay all its cards on the table in the first sequence and then demonstrate, with each succeeding scene, that there is still story to happen, there is still life and mystery in character, there is reason to sit patient and fascinated before a movie that loves and honors the rules of a game scarcely anyone else in Hollywood remembers anymore, let alone tries to play. Johnny Caspar is a brute posing as a philosopher, but he knows the word that fits the Coen brothers' moviemaking: "et'ics."

One of the Coens told a *New York Times* writer that *Miller's Crossing* had its genesis in the image of a black hat coming to rest in a forest clearing, then lifting to soar away down an avenue of trees. That image accompanies the main title, a talisman of the movie's respect for enigma and dedication to the irreducible integrity of style. It also crops up verbally as a dream Tom describes to Verna—the closest he gets to sharing a confidence. Yeah, says Verna, and then you chased the hat and it changed into something else. "No," Tom says immediately, "it stayed a hat. And I didn't chase it." But one way or another, this man in grim flight from his heart, who cannot, must not "look at him like he's your friend" till the last world-closing shot of the film, chases his hat all through *Miller's Crossing*. So do the Coens. And that it doesn't change into something else is the best news for the American cinema at the dawn of the Nineties.

Albert Finney as Leo O'Bannion.