

## The Man Who Wasn't There

The Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan (the first directs, the second produces; they both write their screenplays), fall somewhere between mainstream movie making and the independent film crowd. They started small (with *Blood Simple* in 1984) and, though they eventually made films with bigger names which won critics' praise, their projects were never widely seen. That changed with *Fargo* (1996), a film that garnered two Academy Awards and widespread audiences. Their mainstream acceptance has been solidified since with *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and last year's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

While their oeuvre includes contemporary stories (typically of dark comedy), the Coens also seem to be taking on America in period chunks, with *Miller's Crossing* (1990) having a 1920s flavor, *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) taking on the 1950s, and *Barton Fink* (1991) and *O, Brother* being set in the Thirties. Well, now it's time for the 1940s and the Coens' homage to *film noir* (Hollywood's great urban crime movies of that epoch) with the new release *The Man Who Wasn't There*.

*The Man Who Wasn't There* is one Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton), laconic barber and resident dullard of Santa Rosa, California, circa 1949. He has a disaffected wife Doris (Frances McDormand) who is making eyes at her hustling boss Big Dave (James Gandolfini), and a garrulous brother-in-law Frank Guzzi (Michael Badalucco) who owns the barber shop. Ed's life is going nowhere, s-l-o-w-l-y. Enter a jolly guy with a grotesque toupee named Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito) and a sure-fire money-making scheme (in dry cleaning!). Ed's interest in the scheme spurs a rare sense of initiative, and he decides to raise \$10,000 by blackmailing Big Dave about his affair with Crane's wife. In this sleepy town of not-so-bright folk, nothing goes right. Ed comes to confront Big Dave and accidentally kills him, but Doris, the company's accountant who has cooked the books, is accused of the murder. Frank goes round the bend once his sister is jailed, and, of course, Tolliver skips town with the cash.

Ed cannot tell the truth of what has happened to save Doris, but he does get the best defense lawyer in the area, the snazzy Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shaloub), bouncing down from Sacramento. He also takes over the barber shop and finds some consolation in listening to the classical piano playing of the teenager Birdy (Scarlett Johansson), the daughter of his lawyer. Ed may be off scot-free...but it is not to be. This is *film noir*, after all, where a sour end is certain.

Does this contemporary re-creation of an old style come off? In one way, definitely: in its look and feel. British cinematographer Roger Deakins, working with the Coens for the sixth time, crafts a luscious period feel with exquisite black-and-white photography (printed off denser colored negative). It evokes all those dark night streets--as well as those squint-eyed California days--in the films of Bogie, John Garfield, Robert Mitchum, and Alan Ladd. This is one of the handsomest pictures of the year.

And the story? The elements of cynicism and sordid behavior are abundantly present, as in classic *film noir*, as is the convoluted, shifting story line, wryly concocted by the brothers. But what is fundamentally lacking is any wit or flair among the characters. *Film noir*'s original figures may have been nasty and corrupt, but they had style or panache, especially the femmes fatales (think of Barbara Stanwyck in *Double*

*Indemnity* or Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*). Ed Crane, the protagonist, is openly identified as a cipher by the very name of the picture, but no one else shows any brains or gumption either. Doris is a humdrum housefrau, passionate about bingo and little else. Big Dave is a mug, and Frank is an irritating motor mouth. Even fast Freddy, meant to be flashy, is more a flash in the pan. These--and most of the people in the film--are simply the butt of jokes rather than the intriguing figures of a nether world.

The trouble is that the Coens here again, as they do in almost all their pictures, *condescend* to their characters. The figures in *The Man Who Wasn't There* are more dreary nonentities than animators of action, and we observe them like the proverbial bugs pinned on a board. There is no one to sympathize with, nor even anyone whom you want to see get their comeuppance. A single exception is young Scarlett Johansson (*The Horse Whisperer*) as Birdy. This actress's utterly natural look, beginning with her serene, inquiring face, makes her the one fully human presence in the film, and an appropriate focus for Ed Crane's attentions. Through her, a spark of life, rather than ongoing ennui, seems possible.

(*The film is rated "R" for mature language and themes.*)

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