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Hayward Field
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C I N E M A

'Blood Simple' clever tale



Blood-simple
(American
slang, first us-
ed by Dashiell
Hammett) 1.
state of fear
and confusion

that follows the commission of murder; "He's gone blood simple."

"**Blood Simple**" (first feature by Minneapolis film makers Joel and Ethan Coen) 1. Gripping invitation to grisly suspense and wickedly inventive plotting in form of modern film noir. 2. Stylish, self-assured directoral debut rooted in classic Hollywood thrillers and the American detective fiction tradition, yet as visually inventive and original as the best of those classics; "Have you seen 'Blood Simple'?" It's the best American film of the year to date."

This is high praise for a low-budget effort like this, but it is oh so richly deserved. Made in Texas for just more than \$1 million, Messrs. Coen and Coen put such Hollywood pastiches as "Body Heat" to shame with their riveting tale of deceit, corruption and murder.

"Blood Simple" is more than simply a homage to great noir thrillers of the '40s and '50s. This is an effective mixture of the sleazy tales of James Cain with the amorality of Dashiell Hammett's detectives and characters, told with the flair and brutal intensity of "Kiss Me Deadly" or "The Big Heat."

The plot is too good to give away, but the premise should be sufficient. We open up in the back of a car going down the highway, the occasional headlight flashing into the camera. Two characters, Ray (John Getz) and Abby (Frances McDormand) are in the front. Ray is a bartender working for Abby's husband, Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya), a Northern fellow drastically out of place in this Texan locale.

Abby doesn't like her violent husband; she likes the soft-spoken Ray. Ray likes Abby,



Courtesy Photo

A patron-filled tavern is one setting in "Blood Simple."

but he also likes his job. Marty used to like both of them, but finds out, through the efforts of a sleazy divorce detective, Visser (M. Emmet Walsh), that they redefined their priorities in a hotel room one night.

Visser is the crux of the film, the monkey wrench thrown into the traditional love triangle. Walsh is brilliant in his portrayal of a man who truly enjoys his slimy assignments.

With flies perpetually buzzing around his face, his sick laugh as he recounts the seedy details concerning Ray and Abby's bout of lovemaking and an attitude that gives amorality a good name, Walsh epitomizes the depth of sleaze the Coens reach. Only Walsh's drawling, sloppy character could believably accept Marty's new proposition — \$10,000 to eliminate the lovers.

From there on nothing is as it seems. The intricate tale envelopes all four characters in a way none of them would have guessed and pulls in the only real innocent bystander of the story, Marty's other bartender Maurice (Samm-Art Williams). None of the characters are in the least bit aware of what the others are up to; rash decisions are made and deadly consequences are

the result.

Director Joel and producer Ethan, who together wrote the screenplay, have captured the classic elements of American film noir effectively in a modern setting. The claustrophobic settings, high-contrast lighting, striking visual motifs and exciting camerawork are all here, but they are in the faithful service of Joel's brutal, black-humored vision.

Yes, this is richly funny in a grisly way. The attention given to detail pays off in marvelous touches — a set of freshly caught fish slowly rot on a desk top over the few days the film covers, a motif of ceiling fans leads to some very clever transitions and in the finale a series of bullet holes through an apartment wall creates one of the most strangely beautiful images of the film as tiny beams of light split the darkness of another room.

You're not going to find a more intense, inventive 96 minutes for your money than "Blood Simple." The Coen brothers have treated us to the best original film noir in years, and once and for all have proven that bigger is not always better, especially if it refers to film budgets.

Sean Axmaker

in person

JOAN RIVERS
and friends



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