

JOEL AND ETHAN GREW up in Minneapolis worshipping Hollywood movies and even making their own versions of films they'd seen on television (their two most successful remakes were *Advice and Consent* and *The Naked Prey*). In the mid-'70s, Joel enrolled at NYU Film School ("because none of the others would accept my late application"), while the more introspective Ethan studied philosophy at Princeton. In college they wrote a couple of scripts together which were unsuccessful, and after graduation Joel worked as an assistant editor on industrials, shorts and documentaries before signing on as an editing assistant for Sam Raimi on *The Evil Dead*.

Raimi recalls meeting Joel "when he was 24 and I was 20. He was very quiet, and assistants aren't supposed to talk to directors so it took a while to form a friendship. His brother Ethan would come by. He was a nebbish type of guy who had the stigma of working as a statistical accountant at Macy's. I began reading their scripts, which were really great. I think Joel decided that, 'If this 20-year-old punk can make pictures and I'm a whole lot smarter than he is, I can, too.'"

The Coens learned a lot from Raimi, including "their grab-the-camera-and-run-like-hell philosophy of shoestring shooting," according to critic David Chute. They also learned about the studios as a result of Raimi's unfortunate experience filming *The XYZ Murders*, which he co-wrote with the brothers. "That turned them off Hollywood," says Jim Jacks, *Raising Arizona*'s executive producer. "They saw Sam trying to do nice things and please everyone [at Embassy Pictures], while the movie went down the tubes."

Rather than follow Raimi to Hollywood, the Coens were inspired to follow his *Evil Dead* example by raising their own money for their first feature. After the film was finished (and the studios passed on it), the brothers searched for an independent distributor who would handle *Blood Simple* with care. They endured a lot of "weird meetings," says Joel, "with distributors who wanted us to cut sexy nude footage into the movie and stuff like that. We asked one guy about their accounting and he said, 'As far as that is concerned, everything is aboveboard and perfectly legitimate. We don't have time to screw you.' To which Sam Raimi said, 'If you go with this guy, a year later after he's robbed you blind, he'll say, 'I found the time.'"

Finally, right before the film's premiere at the New York Film Festival in October, 1984, Ben Barenholtz offered the Coens a distribution deal. The home-moviemaking children of Hollywood had finally become legitimate

filmmakers—without the benefit of Hollywood.

APPROXIMATELY ONE YEAR after the release of their first film, the Coens—and their resident filmmaking unit of NYU alumni (led by the superb cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld)—began production on their second. "We wanted this one to taste different," says Joel. "*Blood Simple* was slowly paced. This one starts off with a bang. It's bright and open, as opposed to dark and claustrophobic. In *Blood Simple* the characters were unsympathetic across the board. Here they're not."

Casting was crucial. "We hired people who we thought were going to be likable," says Joel. "And non-threatening as far as the baby was concerned." Even the mean and dimwitted Snopes Brothers, the escaped cons, were made sympathetic. John Goodman and Bill Forsythe happened to audition together for the roles, and a fortuitous moment occurred. "Bill looked like he was studying to be John," Joel recalls. "And they both had these faces—they looked like grown-up babies. We just decided on the spot to continue the baby theme."

But the most important active part in *Raising Arizona* went to T.J. Kuhn as Nathan Jr. To find him, a New York baby wrangler organized a huge audition with 150 infants: the ones who didn't cry when their mothers left the room became finalists. Fast crawlers had an edge over the competition. (One toddler learned to walk and was fired.) The Coens fell for T.J. on the set, and the entire crew became the child's surrogate family, cooing with abandon. Through all the mayhem, T.J. was calm.

Fortunately, so were Joel and Ethan. For one thing, no one was looking over their shoulders. "It's not a question of fear of Hollywood or not liking Hollywood," says Joel. "It's just a question of keeping the aggravation factor down and making the movie. You want to protect what you get on the screen. And the best way to protect it is to make sure that there aren't too many people who can do it real damage. That way, if you screw up, it's your mistake."

INTERIOR—DARKENED SOUNDSTAGE

We follow the assistant director, Deborah, who wears a walkie-talkie on her hip. She moves toward the middle of the stage, where a beat-up blue Chevy, lit up on the inside, floats a few feet off the ground, its underbelly resting on a Lazy Susan rig. A 35mm camera is strapped tight onto the side of the car. Inside, T.J. Kuhn sits securely in a car seat, while Nicolas Cage, on the passenger side,

and driver Holly Hunter both fuss over him. Outside the car window, a woman in her thirties with a red pail on her head jumps up and down, waving yellow pom-poms at T.J., while a sound man adjusts microphones in the actors' clothing. At one end of the stage opposite the car is a row of little lights. Deborah confers with the director of photography, Barry, and the director, Joel, while Ethan looks through the camera lens. The huddle breaks up. The brothers sit down in two directors' chairs, put on headphones and look expectantly into a video monitor.

DEBORAH
Rolling!
SOUND MAN
Speed!
CAMERAMAN
Marker!
JOEL
Action!

Several stagehands bounce the car, while some others wave lights back and forth to simulate oncoming cars. Inside, Nick and Holly argue in thick Southern accents.

HOLLY
What kind of home life is this for a toddler? You're supposed to set an example.
NICK
Nathan Jr. accepts me for what I am and you had better, too. I'm o.k., you're o.k. That there is what it is.

As Holly turns the wheel, hard, the car swings with her and the lights reflecting on the car change. Joel and Ethan, watching the monitors, chuckle. Barry comes over.

JOEL
Cut!
BARRY
I have a small problem.
JOEL
Is that little streak of light going through the car at the right point?

The shot is reset. Joel leans into the car to confer with the actors. Ethan paces. Joel paces near him in the opposite direction. He pulls out a cigarette. Ethan, standing with his back to Joel, pulls out a lighter and looks at it quizzically. He turns to his brother.

DEBORAH
(observing this twin-like private preserve)
In the end the only person Joel has to please is Ethan. And vice versa. ★

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