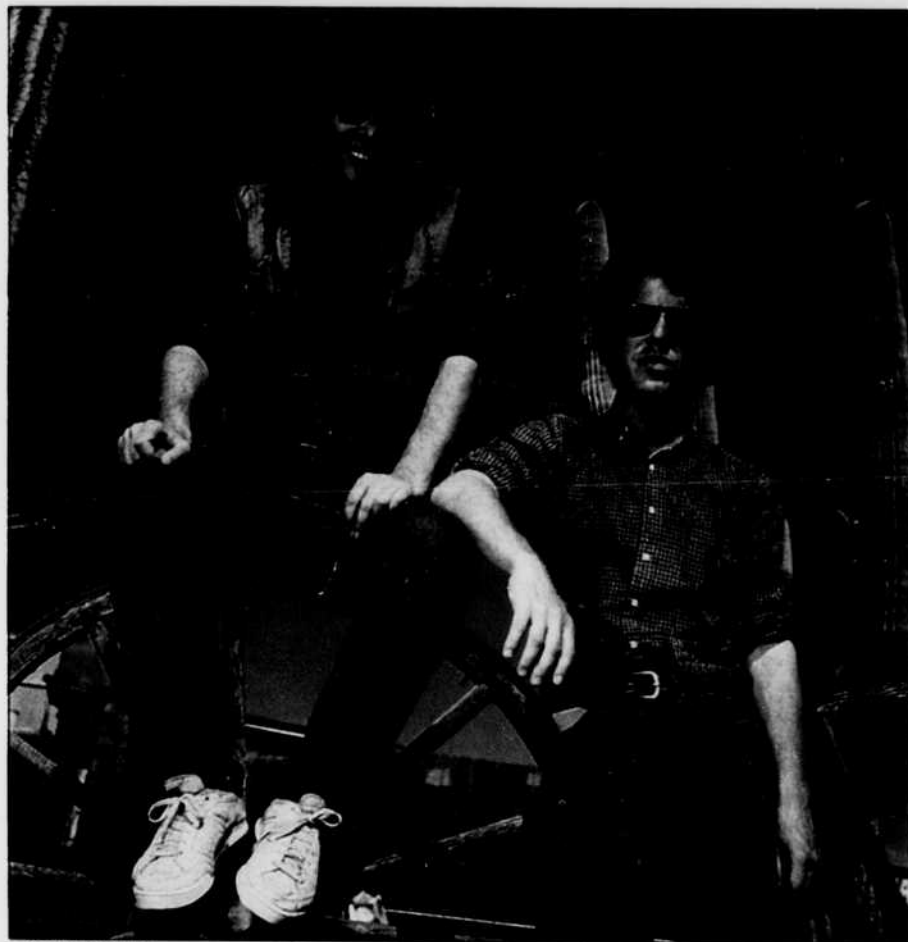


MOVIES

He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother

Critics loved the Coens' first film; No. 2 is better



BONNIE SCHIFFMAN

Made in the shades:
Filmmakers Joel (left) and
Ethan Coen out West

MELINDA SUE GORDON



Baby's first kidnapping: *Hi*
(Nicholas Cage) and *Ed*
(Holly Hunter) show the
just-heisted Nathan Jr.
around his new home

How well do the filmmaking Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan, work together? You can certainly judge by the two terrific movies they've produced: "Blood Simple," a sly 1984 reworking of '30s film noir, and "Raising Arizona," a brand-new dazzler of a screwball comedy. Or you can just ask them. "Joel starts throwing chairs," Ethan begins, "and I hold my breath until he decides to put the camera in another place..." "Ethan stamps his foot and holds his breath," interjects Joel. "We start pulling each other's hair," adds Ethan. "It gets kinda ugly... the crew is definitely embarrassed..." "...well, some of the crew," corrects Joel. "Most of them don't notice—they're too busy handicapping horses." As each speaks, the other falls back to chuckling, trading off on their mutual laugh track, until Joel admits that "I don't think that's ever happened."

You get the picture. Filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen laugh a lot. No, really. A lot. Joel, the elder at 32, the one with the long hair and the Joey Ramone good looks, has a deeper voice and chortle, huh-huh-huh-huh. Ethan, 29, is more given to fits of higher-pitched chuckling, with a slight croaking intake of breath, eh-heh-heh-heh. They crack each other up, escalating into sibling giggle-fits. You might be amused, too, if you could make films that combine not just technical virtuosity and engaging, *human* characters, but also the subtle partnership of comedy and tragedy.

Low-watt ex-con: Most people who amuse themselves bore others. The Coens are different. Their debut, "Blood Simple," a chilling, swirling concerto of infidelity, betrayal and murder à la James M. Cain, was also one of the funniest films of 1984. In one scene a hapless murderer buries his victim alive by night; daylight later reveals the clear tire tracks to the grave he's left across a freshly plowed field. Now in "Raising Arizona," they've created a broad comedy with tragic undertones that could bring them commercial success to match their critical reception. In it Nicholas Cage plays H. I. (Hi) McDonough, a low-watt ex-con with a penchant for knocking over convenience stores, who woos a pretty police officer, "Ed" for Edwina (Holly Hunter), as she books him for each of his stickups.

When they marry and find they can't conceive ("Hi, ah'm barren," she sobs), they plan to kidnap a newborn quintuplet from an unpainted-furniture millionaire named Nathan Arizona (Trey Wilson). Through the course of the movie this baby gets kidnapped twice more by other culprits, who successively refer to the babe as "Nathan Jr.," "Son," and "Gale Jr." "Raising Arizona" makes other comedies look peaked by comparison, while evoking dread and compassion.

The Coens love almost every hue in the