

cinematic spectrum, from Federico ("8½") Fellini to George ("The Road Warrior") Miller. Above all else, they love storytellers, whether Akira ("The Seven Samurai") Kurosawa or slashmaster Sam ("The Evil Dead") Raimi. But they have their limits: Ingmar Bergman, for example. Bergman's characters, says Ethan, "have got anxieties and stuff, but I keep waiting for one of them to get kidnapped or murdered," he says. "I'm usually disappointed."

The blue-jeaned *auteurs* grew up in suburban Minneapolis; both parents taught college. Growing up they had no specific or even joint career plans, but they did agree that doing something *not in Minneapolis*, away from the brutal winters, was a major consideration. "Our mother would be telling us to go out and play," Ethan says, "and it would be 30 below and your spit freezes before it hits the ground and we had to enjoy ourselves."

Low budget: In their teens they took to making Super-8 films, casting the neighborhood kids. Later, when Joel was editing low-budget horror films in New York after graduating from NYU film school and Ethan was getting a philosophy degree at Princeton, they decided to bluff their way into moviemaking. ("All the heads of major studios want to see if you have that sheepskin from Princeton," quips Ethan, "especially when they hear it's a degree in philosophy, because they're all perplexed.") They raised \$800,000 and shot "Blood Simple" in eight weeks, later telling potential distributors it cost \$1.5 million so they would take it seriously.

In the credits Joel is the director and Ethan the producer, but that is less a true division of labor than a screen convention. "We were both sort of codirector/producers," says Joel, drawing another Camel Light from their common pack. "The line between them was very fuzzy." Their writing reflects the same attitude: rather than dividing the work, they write through each scene together. "If it makes us laugh we write it down," Ethan says, "and if it doesn't we throw it out." The two have not begun writing their next film but have no plans to work separately in the future, being "too lazy for that," says Joel.

Not so lazy, however, that they won't take on the big-time studio that is distributing "Raising Arizona." In mid-February they flew from New York City, where they now live, to California to set the marketing department of Twentieth Century-Fox straight. Fox's admen, schooled in "high-concept," describe-it-in-a-phrase promotion, didn't know quite what to do with the labyrinthine "Arizona" plot. They wanted a poster of Hi and Ed wearing Pampers as bandito-style masks. But the Coens overcame. And, knowing these guys, they got a few laughs out of it all.

JOHN SCHWARTZ

Back to Baltimore

The writer/director of 'Diner' goes home again

Barry Levinson remembers it all so well. Baltimore, the early '60s. The Hilltop Diner on Reisterstown Road. Night. Turn left just inside the door, and there they sat: Breeze and Jinx, Jake the Fake and Marty from the Party. Their business cards said they were aluminum-siding salesmen. To each other they were "Tin Men." Mostly they were hustlers. Selling, gambling, chasing women, driving Cadillacs—the Tin Men were dashing, romantic figures, Levinson remembers, like gunslingers, and he was just a kid. So he'd turn right at the door, walk to the other end of the diner and join his friends: Chip Silverman, Boogie Weinglass and the rest, killing time over cigarettes and Cokes. He'd slide into the booth and the night would unwind in front of him.

In 1982 Levinson wrote and directed "Diner," a loving evocation of those long teenage nights on the right side of the Hilltop. Almost shelved by M-G-M, it turned out to be the sleeper hit of the year. But even as Levinson was making it, "I started to remember a lot of the stuff about the Tin Men. *Salesmen*," he says incredulously. "They're really something. Guys that can come knock on your door and sell you \$2,500 worth of stuff you weren't even thinking about buying. Salesmen. And they were great dreamers, real romantics. Their time was their own, they could go to the track, hang out.... They figured they could have the world." Last year Levinson decided to go back to the diner one more time. And this time he turned left.

The result is "Tin Men," the second of what Levinson calls his "Baltimore sto-

ries." It details a bitter rivalry between two siding salesmen, BB (Richard Dreyfuss) and Tilley (Danny DeVito), who hate each other the instant their Cadillacs collide. (BB's is newer than new; the accident takes place as he rolls it out of the showroom. "I'd get rid of that car," a fellow Tin Man tells him soberly; "\$600 worth of damage on it, it'll never run right. You probably dented the frame.") BB and Tilley suffer through what may be the longest slow burn in movie history, a gradually escalating fandango of revenge and retribution, until in a wonderful conclusion their destinies interlock. The new film isn't a "Diner" sequel—the cast is almost entirely different, and the action is set four years later, in 1963. Still, fans of "Diner" will recognize a lot: the way music is used unerringly to bolster mood (listen for Frank Sinatra's "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning"), the period-perfect sharp clothes and tailfinned cars.

But "Tin Men" carries "Diner's" nostalgic appeal one step further. More an elegy than a reminiscence, its thousand small details pack a hidden emotional punch. The diner itself, for example: look sharp for the masons off in the background starting to brick the place up—Levinson's way of saying that he won't be back there in future



Nostalgic: Levinson

Instant hatred: 'Tin Men' Richard Dreyfuss, Danny DeVito get acquainted

PHOTOS BY LOREY SEBASTIAN

