



GEORGE CLOONEY AND JOSH BROLIN IN *HAIL, CAESAR!*

CAESAR SALAD

Coen brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* is a toss up of funny antics and B-rate storytelling

First impressions can be deceptive. Take, for instance, Joel and Ethan Coen, whose movies seem distinctly built to not be watched but re-watched. Usually, for me, the initial pass through a Coen brothers film proves a strangely tepid affair — *The Big Lebowski* and *Brother, Where Art Thou?* felt flat and disjointed the first time around — and it's not until I return for a second and third look that things start to resonate and deepen. It is only upon multiple viewings, for instance, that movies like *No Country for Old Men*, *Fargo* and especially *Miller's Crossing* have revealed themselves as modern masterpieces — rich, durable and endlessly rewarding.

A couple of Jewish movie geeks who came of age in the Midwest during '60s and '70s, when Hollywood experienced a wild florescence of auteur filmmaking, it makes sense that the Coens create their films with exquisite intentionality and a fanboy attention to detail and narrative filigree. Like Spielberg and, more recently, Tarantino, Coen movies are

preoccupied with movies themselves; with a sly wink and a peek over their shoulder, the brothers are continuously commenting on and critiquing their chosen art form, constructing great cinematic myths and then, often in the same gesture, deconstructing those myths by giving us a glimpse behind the curtain.

Hail, Caesar! is being regarded by many critics as a "slight" Coen brothers movie — by which is meant, I think, that it's the sort of half-assed packing material great filmmakers toss out between more heavyweight efforts. And, I'll admit, the film does seem to wander around disconnectedly, grabbing higgledy-piggledy at narrative threads that it strews around the movie like so much silly string. Is it messy? Yes. Is it funny? Yes. Is there a point to all the crazy escapades? Yes.

At the antic center of *Hail, Caesar!* is Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin), a studio "fixer" in the 1950s whose job it is to clean up the sort of shameful Hollywood messes we now take for granted. Over the course of the film, Mannix, a decent family man, is compelled to: find George Clooney who, as the dunderheaded movie star Baird Whitlock, is kidnapped by communists from the set of an epic called *Hail, Caesar! A Story of the Christ*; deal with the unwed pregnancy of starlet DeeAnna Moran (Scarlett Johansson); and, finally, convince director Laurence Laurentz (Ralph Fiennes) to cast a hayseed (Alden Ehrenreich) in a hoity-toity period drama.

First impressions, then: The movie is fun and frantic but loose-limbed and unfocused, like a compendium of B-sides from a mid-career musician who may or may not have peaked. As a combined tribute to and goosing of studio-era Hollywood, it's full of tender yearning, especially evident during the fantastic Gene Kelly-style dance sequence that features Channing Tatum and a bar full of hunky sailors. The in-jokes and smart references pour forth throughout the movie in a cavalcade of familiar Coen cleverness, all of it shot through with a halting, self-conscious hilarity that may or may not equal joy — the complicated joy of making, and watching, movies.

I suspect that, upon re-watching this film, I will keep a closer eye on Brolin, who is the tie that binds all the zaniness together. As one of the most understated, underrated actors in Hollywood, Brolin himself is a deceptive presence: solid, rock-steady, but always with something going on behind that stony exterior. As Mannix, he moves through *Hail, Caesar!* as a kind of spiritual seeker in a world gone mad, and as such, he's the only person that truly changes over the course of the film, arriving at a moment of reckoning that affirms a paradox that is classic Coen brothers: We love the movies, even if they don't love us. (*Regal Cinemas and Cinemark 17*)

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10:50, 4:30, 10:10
DADDY'S HOME (DIG) (PG-13)
11:40, 2:30, 5:00, 7:40, 10:10
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10:35, 11:45, 12:25, 1:20, 2:25, 3:10, 4:05, 5:05, 5:55, 6:50, 7:45, 8:40, 9:35, 10:25
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