

## Interview: Michael Stuhlbarg's Passion in Joel, Ethan Coen's 'A Serious Man'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 7, 2009 - 8:54am

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CHICAGO – In "A Serious Man," the remarkable new film by Joel and Ethan Coen, Michael Stuhlbarg carries the narrative weight through his amazing performance as Larry Gopnik, the put-upon victim of a series of odd and desperate circumstances.

Larry is a college physics professor in a 1967 Minnesota town. He lives with his wife and two children in a seemingly perfect middle class Jewish realm. But suddenly his wife wants to leave him, he can't throw his mooching brother out of house, and his son is too stoned to focus on his upcoming Bar Mitzvah. This Old Testament-like state of affairs might crush him, or might just make him stronger.

Michael Stuhlbarg sat down with HollywoodChicago.com, and in a comprehensive and philosophical interview talked about the particular universe of the Coen Brothers and his lead character within it.



Master of All He Surveys: Michael Stuhlbarg as Larry Gopnik in 'A Serious Man'  
Photo credit: Wilson Webb for Focus Features

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What do you feel your role and character had to do with the mystery of faith?

**Michael Stuhlbarg:** I would think that Larry Gopnik is a physical manifestation of the mystery of faith, if you're going to put that idea in a physical being. He starts out the film as someone who doesn't necessarily question anything in his life, and in the course of the movie he becomes a question himself.

If faith is all about trying to throw yourself into something without any recourse, that is sort of Larry. He goes to his spiritual leaders in his community and tries to embrace what is suppose to be the backbone of his religion, and comes out the other end with more questions. Pursuing one's faith is an eternal quest.

**HC:** What faith were you raised in?

**MS:** I was raised within a Reformed Jewish Synagogue in Long Beach, California. I went through most of the Reformed Jewish stuff that Reformed Jewish kids do, including Hebrew school and Bar Mitzvah. It was a big part of my life. Then when I got bit by the acting bug, that became the second half of my religion, and I became as devout a practitioner of performing.

What I lived through and what I learned as a child stays with me as I move through this life. There are so many beautiful things in religion, even though it influences people's lives in both a positive and negative way. Its original intent was about comfort, teaching and learning, and I tend to think of it that way, as a beautiful thing instead of something that separates people.

**HC:** Since you had little actual experience in the 1960s era, how did the Coen Brothers want to establish that mood and what was it like living in the 1967 for awhile?

**MS:** It was fantastic, and one of the things I love about being an actor, when they throw you into these different worlds. Every story you tell is a human story, it is just the boundaries that they set up that are different. In this case, it wasn't that I had to necessarily do anything different, but when they throw those bits of clothing at you it does all my work for me.

Our costume designer, Mary Zophres, gave me these pants that were a couple inches too high, a belt that was too tight and the glasses that Joel and Ethan wanted Larry to have. Then they surround you with people dressed in similar fashions and the cars of the era plus the decor of the houses, and you end up living in that timeframe.

You begin to understand the confines that these people felt, the social orders. When you are given these boundaries you start to behave as if you're living back then.

**HC:** How did you craft the character of Larry? Did you seek inspiration from other film characters?

**MS:** When I got the part, I wrote page after page of questions for Joel and Ethan, in a three and half page email. And they answered all the questions directly, and if they didn't have an answer, they said it was up to me.

That is the great thing with collaborating with them. They give you this structured order at you and then let you run with it. For example, they want you to say what they wrote down to the punctuation. However, within that structure you are free to bustle around.

As far as films, Joel suggested 'The Graduate' and 'La Dolce Vida,' because they were of that 1960s era and their central characters are thrown into their situations and banged about somewhat, in the circuitous paths they take and what happens to them.



Richard Kind as Uncle Arthur and Aaron Wolff as Danny in 'A Serious Man'  
Photo credit: Wilson Webb for Focus Features

**HC:** The Coen Brothers style creates a particular universe that is at once familiar and oddball. How did the brothers indoctrinate the child actors into that realm, both in the sense of the universe and the era that they were living in?

**MS:** It's our job as the actors in the film to let them do what they do so beautifully and to stay within the truth of the situation. I don't think it was as much 'indoctrinating' the kids on how to do a Coen Brothers movie, as it was just young actors fantastically grounded and talented.



Not only are they great actors but they're great people.

Aaron [Wolff] in particular, the young man who played my son Danny, is a cello prodigy. Both Aaron and Jessica [McManus, playing Larry's daughter] naturally captured the spirit of who these characters were, and the Coen Brothers guided us all with the rest. We live in it, and they see it and show it from their perspective.

**HC:** Do you see any personal connection between Danny and Larry, as far as searching for or seeking answers? Are they running from something?

**MS:** Danny goes on his own particular journey, for example I think he is forced to do his Bar Mitzvah. I don't think left to his own devices he would be doing the study. His mother probably insisted on it, and he takes it and runs with it.

He is also into the music scene, obviously. Maybe he'll grow up to make films about his Jewish boyhood in St. Louis Park (laughs). Who knows?

**HC:** The beginning, with the prologue fable, did the Coen Brothers have an interpretation for that or did you develop your own interpretation?

**MS:** The quote in the beginning, "Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you," that has a resonance with the beginning parable, and Larry's story as well.

The idea to accept what comes into your life with simplicity has resonance. I'm sure smarter persons than I will come up with why they subconsciously put these two stories together. It is the Coen Brothers, with a healthy dose of mischief.



Patrick McDonald and Michael Stuhlbarg in Chicago, October 1st, 2009.  
Photo credit: Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**HC:** Marijuana has an important role in the film. Was this particular form of self medication important for the characters that used it, especially in light of their reactions to it?

**MS:** I suppose you'd have to ask the characters (laughs). Danny and Mrs. Samsky are certainly drawn to that culture. At least in Mrs. Samsky's vision of the world, it is an important part of her life. I think it's something they practice to see things in a different way.

I wish we could sit down and talk to them about it (laughs).

**HC:** Finally, for the moment of the time within the film, Larry seemed to be the centerpiece of the universe in all cause and effect. Were you disappointed that he seemed to capitulate to the dire problems that had arisen, creating a whole resultant cause and effect before the ending?

**MS:** I don't think he does capitulate, I think he makes a bad decision. I can't even judge him for that, frankly, because I wasn't in his situation, I just lived through his situation. He makes a decision he thinks he can live with and there are consequences to that decision.

It's easy for us to judge him but until we're in his shoes we can't really do that.

*"A Serious Man" opens October 9th, 2009. Check locally for show times. Rated "R." Featuring Michael Stuhlbarg, Aaron Wolff, Richard Kind, Jessica McManus, Sari Lennick and Fred Melamed, Written, directed and produced by Joel and Ethan Coen.*



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