

## ‘Hail, Caesar!’ is Coen Bros. Excellence for Movie Lovers

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 5, 2016 - 11:12am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Writer/directors Joel and Ethan Coen love the movies, and that love is magnificently played out in “Hail, Caesar!” As they riff on religion, geopolitics and 1950s morality, while wonderfully celebrating and spoofing an era in movies that will never be again, the Coens abide and deliver.

This film is a celebration, couched in references to other studio-era stars, the communist scare of McCarthyism (the Coens do it better than the film “Trumbo,” which was directly about that witch hunt), and the odd personalities that people once had, as celebrity culture was something still being invented. Josh Brolin is in the middle of the madness, as a over-scheduled studio head whose days spent as a “fixer” are hilarious as they are defining. The film works on all levels – as comedy, social commentary and allegory – but it never is pretentious, and prefers a light touch over any other type of narrative.

Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin) is head of Capitol Pictures in 1951, in an era where big movie studios still held a fraying cultural sway against the juggernaut of the new invention called television. He has several problems at once – his New York City boss wants to put cowboy star Hobie Doyle (Alden Ehrenreich) in a sophisticated society film, aquatic film diva DeeAnna Moran (Scarlett Johansson) has just found out she’s pregnant and oh yes, matinee idol Baird Whitlock (George Clooney) has just been kidnapped off the set of “Hail, Caesar.”



Baird Whitlock (George Clooney) is a Bit Confused in ‘Hail, Caesar!’

*Photo credit: Universal Pictures*

This leads everyone down the rabbit hole of the shadowy and closeted 1950s, as Mannix needs to fix everything, while under the watchful eyes of sister gossip columnists (both portrayed by Tilda Swinton). In the meantime, Lawrence Laurentz (Ralph Fiennes), the director who is saddled with the cowboy star, is hopping mad, and the only production that is going smoothly is a jaunty sailor musical starring song-and-dance man Burt Gurney (Channing Tatum).

Yes, the Coen Bros. are able to rein all this in, while still filtering the antics through their distinctive point of view. What is most striking is how they recreated the environment of a 1950s MGM-type studio, without really drawing that much attention to it – the story simply lives in the truth of this time and place. And the way they wink at their themes – religion through Eddie Mannix, the communism scare through a group called “The Future,” and the overall naivete of a more innocent (and patriarchal) America – is breathtakingly superb.

All of the ensemble players in this scenario are having a ball. George Clooney is unusually different, he made choices that were sophisticatedly absurd. Relative newcomer Alden Ehrenreich is the breakout as Hobie Doyle, with an aw-shucks innocence and impeccable comic timing in a scene with the harried director Laurentz, trying to get a line of dialog correct. Scarlett Johansson continues her ascent as an Esther Williams knock-off (think silly water musicals), but with the fast patter of tough talking authenticity.

But the MVPs were Josh Brolin, Tilda Swinton and Channing Tatum. Brolin was the glue and the energy in the eye of the hurricane, and confronts Clooney near the end with a perfect hammer. Swinton portrays both Thora and Thessaly Thacker, as if studio-era gossips Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons were sisters. All of her scenes are highlights, especially as she appears in the overstated clothing of the time, one scene after another as different people, which Mannix (among others) can’t help but mix up.





Burt Gurney (Channing Tatum) Steps Out in ‘Hail, Caesar!’

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

And it was Channing Tatum who also rose highest to his character. He’s a Gene Kelly style dancer – yes, there is an extended musical number – who happens to have a double life (wink wink). He kills the dance number, and goes on to have one of the funniest bits in the film. What he did in this film is what he couldn’t do in “The Hateful Eight,” which is use his deadpan character style to a useful comic end. He’s off on the road to an Oscar, it’s just the right character away.

This will most likely be a film critic’s darling, but it can also can resonate with all the movie lovers, dreamers and cynical soothsayers. I spend a lot of my time awash in film, and the brothers Coen always make it worthwhile.

*“Hail, Caesar!” opens nationwide on February 5th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring George Clooney, Josh Brolin, Alden Ehrenreich, Ralph Fiennes, Scarlett Johansson, Tilda Swinton, Frances McDormand, Channing Tatum, Frances McDormand and Jonah Hill. Written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. Rated “PG-13”*



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