

## ‘A Serious Man’ Plays as Masterfully Fictionalized Autobiography For Joel, Ethan Coen

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on October 11, 2009 - 11:55am

- [A Serious Man](#) [2]
- [Adam Fendelman](#) [3]
- [Alan Mandell](#) [4]
- [Ari Hoptman](#) [5]
- [Benjy Portnoe](#) [6]
- [Brent Braunschweig](#) [7]
- [David Kang](#) [8]
- [Ethan Coen](#) [9]
- [Fred Melamed](#) [10]
- [Jessica McManus](#) [11]
- [Joel Coen](#) [12]
- [Jon Kaminski Jr.](#) [13]
- [Michael Stuhlbarg](#) [14]
- [Movie Review](#) [15]
- [Peter Breitmayer](#) [16]
- [Richard Kind](#) [17]
- [Sari Lennick](#) [18]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “A Serious Man” isn’t the story of Joel and Ethan Coen’s lives. But you might not necessarily know it. While the brothers continue to turn their films into Hollywood gold, this 1967-set black comedy is among the more personal projects in their repertoire.

That gamut is growing into a *serious* catalog with “Burn After Reading,” 2007 best-picture Oscar winner “No Country for Old Men,” “The Ladykillers,” “O Brother, Where Art Thou?,” “The Big Lebowski,” “Fargo” and “Raising Arizona” now under their yamakas over the course of two decades.



Michael Stuhlbarg (left) stars as Larry Gopnik and Fred Melamed (right) stars as Sy Ableman in Joel and Ethan Coen’s “A Serious Man”.

*Photo credit: Wilson Webb*

While the yamaka is designed to signify deference to god, “A Serious Man” pays homage to the Coens’ culture in an authentically Jewish

way. But this is more than just one of the more Jewish films you’ve seen since “Schindler’s List”. “A Serious Man” is powered by a highly internal script and actors who externalize a series of very unfortunate events.

The film centers around one man in particular who you’ve likely never seen on screen before: Michael Stuhlbarg. The Coen brothers, who are referred to in the industry as the “two-headed director” and are often known by actors to receive the same response to a question from either brother, took a chance on this cast. Tony Award nominee Michael Stuhlbarg plays Larry Gopnik.



Richard Kind stars as Uncle Arthur in Joel and Ethan Coen’s “A Serious Man”.

*Photo credit: Wilson Webb*

Gopnik is a Midwestern professor who watches his life fall apart before his own eyes. His wife asks for a divorce, his inept brother won’t move out of the house, his kid steals his money for plastic surgery, blackmail is attempted by his student and an anonymous tipster attempts to defame his character and prevent him from being awarded tenure.

Stuhlbarg, who was as surprised to win the lead role as you may be to see him on screen for the first time, said at the Chicago screening for the film that he was challenged by building accurate emotional progression with his character. Because the sequences were shot out of order, he said he constantly had to remember at where his character’s emotional evolution left off.

Left to his own devices and without direction by the Coen brothers, Stuhlbarg said he found it difficult not to unleash an extrovert when in a given moment he was supposed to be an introvert. The transition from an emotionally internal to an aggressively external person is believable because such attention was paid to assuring an authentic buildup.





Writers and directors Joel Coen (left) and Ethan Coen (right) on the set of their new film “A Serious Man”.

*Photo credit: Wilson Webb*

Stuhlbarg also commented on the intensely personal nature this film played for the Coens and how much of themselves they injected into it. The names of the characters who ride the school bus with Larry Gopnik’s son, Danny (Aaron Wolff), are the names of the children the Coens were raised with.

Richard Kind, Fred Melamed, Sari Lennick, Jessica McManus, Peter Breitmayer, Brent Braunschweig, David Kang, Benjy Portnoe, Jon Kaminski Jr., Ari Hoptman and Alan Mandell as the omnipotent Rabbi Marshak round out a brilliantly cast crew of supporting actors without a single weak link.

The Coens made the conscious choice not to cast many of their regular choices (including Joel’s wife, Frances McDormand, who has starred in many of their films and is known for her “Fargo” role).

Following a fascinating and haunting initial Yiddish sequence that sets the stage for the film (where a potential “dybbuk” – or a dislocated soul of a dead person in Jewish folklore – is played by Fyvush Finkel), “A Serious Man” successfully explores intriguing questions about Judaism while challenging its faith, morality and family structure.



Amy Landecker stars as Mrs. Samsky in Joel and Ethan Coen's "A Serious Man".

*Photo credit: Wilson Webb*

While the pacing for the film is consistently melancholy, so does "A Serious Man" cast a potentially unfair impression of the common Jewish family.

Filmgoers need to remember that movies often take everyday situations to the extreme. The Coens aren't necessarily saying every Jewish family lives like this or experiences such unfortunate events. While the script certainly sticks with you long after you leave the theater and tends to bring about curiosities in your own life, you are also left with many unanswered questions.

#### RELATED READING



[Our interview with "A Serious Man" star Michael Stuhlbarg.](#) [19]



["A Serious Man" production begins.](#) [20]



[Coens adapting Michael Chabon's "Yiddish Policemen's Union".](#) [21]



[More film reviews from critic Adam Fendelman.](#) [3]

Though this is by Coen design, I find fault in the lack of a better back story. Why is Larry Gopnik so down on his luck in the first place? He seems like a good man. Are we to interpret from this that god (or "Hashem" in the Jewish faith) punishes good people? Why?

Larry Gopnik is mostly a third-party observer even to his own life. He's usually watching it happen before his own eyes rather than taking control of the changes or attempting to do much about them. Despite seeking counsel from various rabbis, he constantly seems surprised about everything that unravels.

Stuhlbarg said in Chicago he found intrigue with this aspect of his character and how blind Gopnik is to his own life and the people in it. Stuhlbarg promised he'd take this lesson away from the film and be present with family and friends rather than absent.



While some films tie up all their loose ends and deliver a climactic gift to you in a perfectly wrapped present, the Coens don't here.

Instead, their overarching goal is to encourage you to ask questions about yourself – no matter your faith or lack thereof – through an extreme example of how one man's life can go terribly wrong when he doesn't ask questions and take action.

*“A Serious Man” from writers and directors Joel Coen and Ethan Coen stars Michael Stuhlbarg , Richard Kind, Fred Melamed, Sari Lennick, Jessica McManus, Peter Breitmayer, Brent Braunschweig, David Kang, Benjy Portnoe, Jon Kaminski Jr., Ari Hoptman and Alan Mandell. The film opened everywhere on Oct. 9, 2009. “A Serious Man,” which has a running time of 105 minutes, is rated “R” for language, some sexuality and nudity and brief violence.*



[22]

By [ADAM FENDELMAN](#) [23]

Editor-in-Chief/Publisher

HollywoodChicago.com

[adam@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:adam@hollywoodchicago.com) [22]

© 2009 Adam Fendelman, HollywoodChicago.com LLC

**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 16 2024 - 1:37pm):**

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/8950/a-serious-man-masterfully-fictionalized-autobiography-joel-coen-ethan-coen>

#### Links:

[1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hollywoodchicagocom>

[2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/a-serious-man>

[3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/adam-fendelman>

[4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/alan-mandell>

[5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/ari-hoptman>

[6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/benjy-portnoe>

[7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/brent-braunschweig>

[8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/david-kang>

[9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/ethan-coen>

[10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/fred-melamed>

[11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jessica-mcmanus>

[12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/joel-coen>

[13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jon-kaminski-jr>

[14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/michael-stuhlbarg>

[15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>

[16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/peter-breitmayer>

[17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/richard-kind>

[18] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/sari-lennick>

[19] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/8906/interview-actor-michael-stuhlbarg-s-passion-in-coen-bros-a-serious-man>

[20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/forums/4125/production-begins-on-sept-8-2008-for-a-serious-man-from-joel-coen-ethan-coen>

[21] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/forums/1190/coens-adapting-chabons-yiddish-policemens-union>

[22] <mailto:adam@hollywoodchicago.com>

[23] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#ADAM>