The Coen Brothers' A Serious Man: a suburban Job

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Written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen

"God has cursed us." A prologue set in a 19th century eastern Polish *shtetl*, or small Jewish community, about a *dybbuk*—a wandering ghost—sets the fatalistic tone for the black comedy, *A Serious Man*, by Joel and Ethan Coen.

The curse appears to have traveled through time and infected the life of a Jewish college physics professor living in 1967 in a Midwestern suburb. Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg) tries hard to follow all the social rules. Living in a house identical to the other white-box dwellings in his treeless neighborhood, Larry's biggest worry is his property line and its infringement by his redneck neighbor. That is, until his wife Judith (Sari Lennick) tells him she wants a divorce. "What have I done? I haven't done anything," he says plaintively.

While Larry was conscientiously sticking to his routine, Judith was falling in love (no "whoopsie-doopsie," she claims) with the "serious" Sy Ableman (Fred Melamed), a family friend and widower, who pompously offsets his betrayal with bear hugs and inanities ("Nobody is playing the blame game, Larry."). Demanding from the cuckolded husband a religiously sanctioned divorce, Sy further declares it logical that Larry move out of the house. Larry's relocation to the Jolly Roger motel involves leaving everything behind except his unemployable brother Arthur (Richard Kind) ("Hashem [God] didn't give me bupkis."). Sy and Judith proceed to empty Larry's bank account.

As for Larry's children, daughter Sarah (Jessica McManus) has been slipping money out of his wallet for a nose job and son Danny (Aaron Wolff) is a discipline problem who listens to rock and roll, shows up stoned on pot for his bar mitzvah, and has no trouble interrupting Larry on important occasions when the television antenna needs adjusting.

Professionally, Larry has an Asian student who is trying to extort a passing grade out of him and whose father threatens to sue for defamation in what he calls a case of "culture clash." And the college tenure board is receiving anonymous letters accusing Larry of moral turpitude, even though, again, he has done nothing and "doing nothing is not bad *ipso facto*."

In fact, the most pro-active part of Larry's life is his fantasizing about a seductive female neighbor, who tries to push him to "take advantage of the new freedoms." As things unravel, Larry seeks the advice of three rabbis, who serve up platitudes and stories, like the one about a dentist with a gentile patient whose teeth were inscribed with Hebrew letters that spelled out a desperate message. Paraphrasing the lyrics of a Jefferson Airplane song popular at the time, Rabbi Marshak preaches, "When the truth is found to be lies and all the hope within you dies, then what? … Be a good boy."

A Serious Man showcases the Coens' talent for structuring a moment. With hyperrealistic images, the film makes its points and creates its moods. Every detail of props, set and wardrobe has been carefully configured. Every gesture and mannerism in the remarkable performances have clearly been planned out by the directors. Having grown up in a Minneapolis suburb, the Coens aimed at something semi-autobiographical.

Says Ethan Coen in an interview: "[T]he whole incongruity of Jews in the Midwest … a subculture, and a feeling, that is different from Jewish communities in New York and Los Angeles." Adds Joel Coen: "What seems incongruous to us about it is the nature of the landscape, with Jews on it; it's funny. The whole shtetl thing, maybe this is part of why we put the little beginning story in there, to kind of frame it. The whole shtetl thing, you go, right, Jews in a shtetl, and than you look at the prairie, in Minnesota, and … we kind of think, with some

perspective, having moved out, what were we doing there? It just seems odd."

The Coens have made Larry an alien in his family, community and his own skin. Pushing the envelope on ethnic and religious stereotypes is part of their humor and their effort to heighten Larry's troubles. Though less mean-spirited and cynical than some of their other works, the film still tends to condescend toward its characters. "The fun of the story for us," assert the filmmakers in the production notes, "was inventing new ways to torture Larry." As the credits roll, we are told that "No Jews were harmed in the making of this motion picture."

Larry is clueless as to why his life is disintegrating. He has toed the line, but is nonetheless doomed. To a rabbi, he asks, "Why does Hashem make us feel questions if he does not give us answers?" He eventually concludes that the rabbis are telling him that "you can't know anything."

Even his scientific side gets trumped. The 'uncertainty principle' in physics, as he teaches with references to the paradox of "Schrödinger's cat" and to Heisenberg's famous principle, means for him that "we can't ever really know what's going on. So it shouldn't bother you. Not being able to figure anything out—although you will be responsible for this on the midterm."

In *A Serious Man*, as nearly in all their films, the Coen Brothers show they have something in their heads and demonstrate a genuine artistic sensibility. There is, however, a considerable disdain in the film for ordinary mortals and their travails. This nasty element emerges full-blown in *Barton Fink* (1991), a work in which the writer-directors make clear how they feel about any artist who concerns himself with the fate of the "common man." Contrary to the illusions of the film's central figure, a self-deluded left-wing writer in Hollywood in the 1940s (loosely based on Clifford Odets), the "common man" next door turns out to be a homicidal maniac.

The Coens have an intuitive sense about madness and violence in American life (*Fargo* [1996], for example), but with very unclear ideas about, or a lack of interest in, its social source—ultimately, the brutality of class relations in the US.

So, vagueness is their stated, conscious artistic program. They 'tease,' they suggest, they imply, they make a virtue out of amorphousness. This seems to be the *modus operandi* in their latest project, which contains much that is hard to pin down.

The Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love" features prominently and is one of the few indicators that *A Serious Man* is set in 1967. A good deal was going on in America and world at the time, including the US intervention in Vietnam and a mass anti-war protest movement, along with social explosions in Detroit and other US cities. Did none of this find even a faint echo in the suburbs of Minneapolis? It's hard to believe.

In any event, what comes across in the movie, in the end, is something more than simply the trade-mark haughtiness of the Coens, or their ambiguous feelings about growing up Jewish in the American Midwest. The spectator is obliged to conclude that the film is not simply about Larry Gopnick in 1967, but about us, our lives, in 2009.

Of course, the filmmakers set the tragedies and the Job-like angst off, distance them, because that is how they operate, almost always at second-hand, in parody, pastiche, but it seems possible that some of their own concern, even bewilderment, in the face of a present-day reality that may at times appear incomprehensible finds genuine expression here.

Perhaps they are trying to convey how difficult it is to lead a dignified, moral existence in a world that seems, in many ways, to be falling apart. Awful things happen—September 11, the war, US decline, poverty, disease and unfair things in one's personal life. These things have no apparent rhyme or reason. Without God to explain it all, how do we make sense of things? How is it possible to decently survive such a world?

The questions are legitimate, but the conclusion that *A Serious Man* reaches, as it seems to throw its hands up in despair, that nothing can be done to prevent disasters, is entirely inadequate.

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