

The Coen Brothers' *Hail Caesar!*: The “Passion” of a film studio troubleshooter

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Hail Caesar!, directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, is a comedy about the film industry set in the early 1950s. The film is essentially a series of vignettes involving the efforts of fictional Capitol Pictures “fixer” Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin) to put out various fires at the studio.

Production on “Hail Caesar! A Tale of the Christ” (a film within a film), one of Capitol’s “prestige” pictures, is underway when the movie opens. It is a foolish *Ben-Hur*- or *Quo Vadis*- like epic starring Baird Whitlock (George Clooney) as Roman tribune Autolycus, who will ultimately have a sudden, epiphanous conversion to Christianity. (Narrator’s portentous voice: “A new wind is blowing from the dusty streets of Bethlehem!”) Whitlock is unceremoniously drugged and carried off by kidnappers.

Mannix also has to deal with the pregnant, unwed DeeAnna Moran (Scarlett Johansson), star of aquatic pictures (i.e., a nod to Esther Williams); acrobatic cowboy singing star Hobie Doyle (Alden Ehrenreich) who has landed unhappily in a brittle drawing-room melodrama; and aggressive gossip-columnist twin sisters, Thessaly and Thora Thacker (Tilda Swinton), eternally in search of dirt.

(The historical Eddie Mannix was the general manager and vice president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, who reported daily to studio head Louis B. Mayer and is famed for covering up the many misdeeds of film stars and other industry personalities. He was reputed to have spied on Mayer for MGM owner Nicholas Schenck in New York, whom the film turns into “Mr. Skank.”)

A devout Catholic, Mannix, who rather too frequently rushes off to confession where he admits to trivial offenses, receives a ransom note demanding \$100,000

for the return of Whitlock, in the name of “The Future.” It turns out the star is being held at a Malibu beach-house by a group of Communist Party screenwriters who try to win him to their cause. A “Professor Marcuse,” the venerable sage of the group, also makes an appearance.

Meanwhile, Mannix faces a major life-decision of his own: whether to leave the headaches of the film industry behind for a relative sinecure in the defense industry at aircraft manufacturer Lockheed.

Several confessions and a considerable amount of silliness later, things sort themselves out...

If truth be told, the Coen brothers are best at satire, especially at sending up certain middle class professions, relationships and settings. They are keen observers of social detail, even minutiae. *Raising Arizona*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Intolerable Cruelty* and *Burn After Reading*, along with the lighter moments in *Fargo*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *A Serious Man* make up their most memorable work.

However, the Coens bear the unmistakable marks of decades of artistic-intellectual stagnation and reaction. Whenever they give vent to their social views, the result is confused and misanthropic (*Miller’s Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, *Fargo* in part, *No Country for Old Men*, *A Serious Man*), or simply overwhelmed.

In *Hail Caesar!* both elements are present: the comic-satirical and the seriously confused.

The film enjoyably mocks Hollywood’s sanctimonious attitude toward its own products, including religious extravaganzas and their empty-headed stars (one is presumably meant to think of either Robert Taylor in *Quo Vadis* or Charlton Heston in *Ben-Hur*, or both)—although Clooney is a bit strained in the Whitlock role.

In one amusing scene, Mannix brings in Protestant,

Greek Orthodox, Jewish and Catholic clergy to vet the screenplay, and a theological debate breaks out over Christ's "parentage" and other related matters. (Rabbi: "God is a bachelor and very angry.") In another sequence, while Mannix is watching the daily rushes, the raw footage includes a title card that reads: "Divine presence to be shot." To their credit, the Coens also manage to ridicule Clooney's final penitent speech before Christ on the cross.

Along the way, they make a point as well (by casting a *single* black actor as an extra) about the insignificant presence of African Americans in mainstream Hollywood at the time.

The co-directors' special gifts are on display in their amiable quasi-recreation of the various film types or styles. Johansson, Ralph Fiennes as the effete Laurence Laurentz, Heather Goldenhersh as Mannix's super-efficient and earnest secretary Natalie, and Frances McDormand as the legendary but accident-prone editor C.C. Calhoun (based on a real figure at MGM), all hit exact notes in relatively small parts. Ehrenreich is rather sweet as the singing cowboy.

Mannix is the pivotal figure here, and Brodin, as usual, offers a remarkable, precise characterization. The semi-comic parallels between the studio "fixer" and the Son of God are fairly obvious. Like Christ, Mannix takes the sins of Capitol Pictures and its personnel on his shoulders. He is also "tempted by the devil," the Lockheed merchant of death, who proudly shows him a photo of the recently detonated H-bomb as an inducement—and offers him cigarettes (Eddie is desperately trying to quit!). And, in the end, Mannix too proves to be a "savior."

Where *Hail Caesar!* weakens considerably, or even falls down, is in its treatment—comic or otherwise—of the more substantive issues. The film is set in 1951 at the height of the Cold War and the anti-communist witch-hunts. (Baird makes an oblique reference to "naming names" at one point.) The Coens seem to be registering, in their own excessively mild and diffuse manner, a protest at the purges.

The group of Communist screenwriters is not presented as some sort of monstrous cabal, but, on the other hand, whatever points are being made about the rather ineffectual group are unclear or blunted. The writers bandy about phrases such as "the system," "the dialectic" and the "exploitation" of the masses. They

claim (and this is underlined as especially ludicrous) to have worked out a scientifically accurate and *certain* view of the future course of events.

But what is the attitude of the filmmakers toward all this? Are they simply ridiculing the "Marxist" terminology, half-agreeing with it or covertly sympathizing? An indication they are flying blind on these questions is the presence of a Herbert Marcuse stand-in, entirely inappropriate in this setting or crowd. All one senses in the final analysis is that while the Coens are hostile to the blacklist, their overall stance is non-committal and light-minded. And by "light-minded" we do not mean satirical or humorous, but shallow.

Hail Caesar! portrays the Hollywood studio set-up itself in too genial or amiable a fashion, an industry capable of extraordinary viciousness and darkness. The real Mannix, for instance, was alleged to have had underworld connections and covered up numerous violent crimes. There have also been claims that he was mixed up in the murder of actor George Reeves, his wife's former lover in 1959.

All in all, the Coens' *Hail Caesar!* is in its element when it is spoofing the film industry, religion and American institutions generally. The film is at its flabbiest when it turns its attention to Hollywood's blackest hour.



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