

Ethan Coen's *Honey Don't!*: A private detective sets to work in “non-glamorous” California

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Honey Don't! is an “American neo-noir dark comedy detective film” directed by Ethan Coen. He and his brother Joel, after co-directing nearly 20 feature films over the course of four decades, have decided at least for the moment to work independently of one another.

A “neo-noir” film, we are told, is one that pays tribute to “the classic film noir genre [of the 1940s and 1950s], using similar visual styles and themes, but with updated content, techniques, and a contemporary sensibility.” Generally, such modern efforts have little of the urgency, social bite or purposefulness of the earlier films. And that certainly proves to be the case here.

Honey O'Donahue (Margaret Qualley) is a private detective in Bakersfield, California. A prospective client, Mia, turns up dead in an apparent car accident. Honey looks into the matter, however, and the trail leads her to the evangelical Four-Way Temple of the philandering and hypocritical Rev. Drew Devlin (Chris Evans). The church, in fact, is a front for a profitable drug-dealing operation. The foreign providers of the drugs begin to worry about the police looking into the deaths of Mia and others. Worse still, more deaths follow, as events spin out of control, and Rev. Devlin attempts to tie up loose ends.

Honey gets romantically involved with a restless and volatile policewoman MG [Mary Grace] Falcone (Aubrey Plaza), which provides her temporary solace. But complications pile up. Honey becomes concerned about her niece Corinne (Talia Ryder), who has an abusive boy-friend, while her long-lost and very estranged father (Kale Browne) suddenly decides to put in an appearance. Police detective Marty Metakawich (Charlie Day) is out of his depth in every way,

including in his recurring attempts to date Honey, who amiably tells him each time, “I like girls.”

Honey Don't! is brief and matter of fact, self-consciously so. The murder mystery or detective story, ostensibly at the center of things, is perfunctorily developed and solved. The dialogue is occasionally amusing and pointed but largely in connection with trivial matters. Religious cults and conventional moral values come in for a few glancing blows, but nothing that would cause lasting damage. War, inequality, the threat of fascism, contemporary American life and its vast, complex and painful realities. ... well, Coen and his co-screenwriter, Tricia Cooke, are oriented in another direction at present and, of course, not only they.

With people as “knowing” as Coen and Cooke, the deliberate eschewing of “big questions” is not innocent. As objective events take a more and more menacing or explosive turn, studiously directing one's attention to secondary or tertiary matters must be harmful to one's art. In any case, *Honey Don't!*, on the whole, is flat as a pancake.

Qualley is perfectly appealing but not a dynamic presence. She has most of the clever lines and sails through them practically without a hitch. The gifted Plaza has little to do. The supposed red-hot sensuality of the relationship between Honey and MG seems largely forced. We are *meant* to feel something intense rather than actually feeling much of anything. Virtually no critical piece of the drama has an adequate build-up and development. The filmmakers are so sure of themselves they feel no need to show or prove anything.

This all seems to be in keeping with the desire of Coen-Cooke to create a “noirish lesbian movie” and

“to change the gender norms in that genre [“neo-noir”] because it’s not something you see that much.” Is that really so these days?

Comments by the filmmakers suggest some of the problems at the film’s core.

When an interviewer suggested “that MG and Honey are both so unapologetic about their queerness. I love how the film others heteronormativity in some ways, by placing these queer characters at the centre of the story,” Cooke responded:

In most movies, the queer characters are marginalized, but with this world we wanted it to feel like they were at the centre of the universe, not marginalized in any way and that that was the norm.

Coen put in, “I don’t know what it means, but obviously the queer sex scenes are great and hot and the straight sex scenes are ridiculous.”

And Cooke added, “We wanted those scenes to feel comedic in a way that we didn’t want the lesbian scenes to feel comedic. ... But generally we wanted the queer sex scenes to feel much sexier and we didn’t want the straight sex scenes to feel sexy at all.”

But why? How does that help anyone or anything? To place emphasis on such matters under the present conditions seems misguided (and even childish) to the point of irresponsibility. That Coen and Cooke are obviously and sincerely convinced they have produced a sharply transgressive work by making “the queer sex scenes ... feel much sexier” sadly sums up the outlook and *output* of an entire artistic layer.

(Ironically, perhaps because *they are* the outcasts and “marginalized” here, Evans and Day—although both under-used—tend to be more energetic and forceful and intriguing than the characters we are supposed to approve of or be fascinated by.)

Coen elsewhere refers to *Honey Don’t!* in terms of “bare ass, working class, or lower, California.” The film, he says, is “about non-glamorous California.” But what do the filmmakers think of this “non-glamorous” side of California? Unsurprisingly, in keeping with their general concerns and perspectives, working class life here, in the form of the abusive boy-friend, the

family of Honey’s dead prospective client and the rest, is ignorant, violent and loutish.

The attitudes of the creators, expressed both in interviews and, more importantly, in the film itself, are terribly smug and supercilious. This is the complacent upper middle class portraying itself as tolerant and liberated and everyone else in America as backward and perpetually led by the nose. Unhappily, in other words, the filmmakers stand very high in their own opinion, like Dickens’ Mr. Podsnap, “who set a brilliant social example in being particularly well satisfied with most things, and, above all other things, with himself.” *Honey Don’t!* is slight, but what it reveals has some significance.

Without difficulty, virtually off the top of one’s head, it is possible to point to numerous darkly realistic, low-budget American films from the 1940s and early 1950s that are *truly* unpretentious—and also imperfect, but emotionally and often socially gripping. This is a small list of such films, intentionally avoiding works by more prominent directors:

Danger Signal, Jealousy, Club Paradise, The Mask of Dijon, Fear in the Night, Shadow of a Woman, Smooth as Silk, Desert Fury, The Web, The Devil Thumbs a Ride, The Guilty, The Arnelo Affair, Blind Spot, Backlash, Kiss the Blood Off My Hands, I Wouldn’t Be in Your Shoes, Strange Bargain, Manhandled, Highway 301, Woman in Hiding, Shakedown, Guilty Bystander, Unmasked, Cry Danger and Roadblock, to name only a few.



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