

THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE PRESENTS
Treasures *Screenests*



BARTON FINK

(Joel and Ethan Coen,
1991, 35mm, 116 min.)

Thursday, May 5, 7pm
HQ L01, the Alice Cinema

“I’ll show you the life of the mind!” The fourth feature film by Joel and Ethan Coen, *BARTON FINK* offers a searing, strange, and darkly funny look into the life of a New York playwright in the 1940s who moves to Hollywood, fights writer’s block, and struggles to maintain his allegiance to the common man in a world of demanding studio executives, jaded producers, and strange neighbors.

Independent filmmakers, critical darlings, and eventually even box office heavyweights, the Coens began their career with a series of takes on classic Hollywood genres: the film noir (*BLOOD SIMPLE*, 1984), the screwball comedy (*RAISING ARIZONA*, 1987), and the gangster film (*MILLER’S CROSSING*, 1990). With *BARTON FINK*, they took on Hollywood itself, specifically the golden age of the studio system, when New York writers made their way west, enticed by the lure of easy money and steady work. “Will you accept \$300 per week to work for Paramount Pictures. All expenses paid,” wrote future *CITIZEN KANE* scribe Herman Mankiewicz to New York journalist and playwright Ben Hecht in 1925. “Three hundred is peanuts. Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots. Don’t let this get around.” The story of the principled New York writer being broken down by the temptations of Hollywood is nearly as old as the movies themselves, and while Hecht took the opportunity and became the quintessential Hollywood screenwriter, Barton Fink (John Turturro), a social realist whose successful play *Bare Ruined Choirs* has drawn attention from the studios, finds the transition to Los Angeles more complicated.

The Coens wrote the part of Fink specifically for Turturro, and the character evoked the story of Clifford Odets, the Group Theatre playwright who, after initial success in the 1930s with plays such as *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!*, left New York for Hollywood. Physically, though, the Coens used the humorist, Marx Brothers writer, and director George S. Kaufman as inspiration for Fink, with his high wall of hair and circular glasses. Actor John Mahoney was cast for his physical resemblance to William Faulkner, another writer with a troubled relationship with Hollywood. Mahoney’s W.P. Mayhew, an alcoholic novelist who hasn’t actually written a screenplay in years, isn’t particularly helpful as a mentor to Fink, and unlike Faulkner, it’s clear Mayhew doesn’t eventually break free of Hollywood and win a Nobel Prize.

In 1989, the Coens found themselves in a particularly frustrating stretch as they wrote the script for their next film, *MILLER’S CROSSING*. Over the course of a three-week break in New York, they hammered out the script for *BARTON FINK*, which they then made immediately after *MILLER’S CROSSING* was finished. The film was awarded not only the Palme d’Or from the Cannes Film Festival that year, but also, in an unusual three-prize sweep, awards for Joel Coen as director and John Turturro as best actor. While the film was rapturously received by the Cannes jury and most film critics back in the United States, the response to the highly stylized production design and almost baroque camerawork (the film marked the first of twelve collaborations with cinematographer Roger Deakins) was not uniformly positive. Stanley Kauffmann, writing for *The New Republic*, called the film “gaseous fraudulence” and complained that the “arrogant and, ultimately, obtuse brothers” were the most overrated American filmmakers since Robert Altman. “The Coen brothers are Robert Altman rolled into two.”

We’ll leave the last word to Capitol Pictures head Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner), when he pitches Fink on the script he’s been hired to write. “The important thing is we all want it to have that Barton Fink feeling. We all have that feeling, but since you’re Barton Fink, I’m assuming you have it in spades.”

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