

tickets please

**John Monaghan**

# Coens create a vivid 'Fink'

Barton Fink has writers' block. The fledgling scriptwriter stares blankly at the paper in his typewriter. He pecks out vague establishing details about cramped tenement apartments and the call of fish-mongers, but can get no further.

Joel and Ethan Coen, the writer-director brother team, could relate. The basic premise for "Barton Fink" came about during the difficult writing of another film, "Miller's Crossing."

Their new film, which has an exclusive run at the Maple Theatre, sparkles with the quirky blend of lively writing, genre hopping, and wacky visuals the brothers have become famous for.

Barton (John Turturro), a naive young writer in the early 1940s, talks passionately about the common man. When his first big play becomes a critical success on Broadway, he allows himself to be wooed by a Hollywood contract. Studio heads want "that Barton Fink feeling" on the screen and add him to their stable of writers.

Barton checks into the decaying Hotel Earle far away from the glitter of Hollywood and prepares to write his first script — a wrestling picture for Wallace Beery. He knows little about making movies and even less about wrestling.

AT FIRST glance, it might seem that the Coens are merely mucking about in David Lynch land. The flattered wallpaper in the hotel peels off the walls, revealing milky white paste behind it. An ancient elevator

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operator pauses for what seems like hours before announcing the next floor.

Barton's cone of curly black hair has more to a passing resemblance to the main character's in "Eraserhead."

It took a complete second viewing to see just how unique "Barton Fink" really is. In interviews, the filmmakers have been typically evasive in providing clearcut answers about the film's content. They do admit that the relationship between Barton and Charlie Meadows, the insurance salesman who lives next door, was their main reason for making the film.

As Charlie, John Goodman brings a dark edge to the chubby good old boys he usually plays. Charlie has learned plenty about life and has even wrestled. Barton, so engrossed in rambling on about the common man, doesn't listen to the stories that could save his script.

As visual stylists, the Coens drop in plenty of memorable shots. Rough-edged, typewritten words blaze across the screen with the rat-



John Turturro (right) is Barton Fink, a screenwriter with a bad case of writer's block, and John Goodman is his talkative next-door neighbor, Charlie Meadows, in "Barton Fink."

a-tat speed of a tommy gun. You think Barton has finally broken through until you realize that this is a form letter typed by a studio secretary.

THE FILMMAKERS take a biting and funny look at Hollywood during the height of the studio system, when well-known novelists and playwrights were put on contract to bring respect to the company. Their work was often too thoughtful, "too fruity," to ever see the screen.

So it's not surprising who the writer Barton turns to for advice. W.P. Mayhew, looks a lot like William Faulkner. You might not recognize character actor John Mahoney behind the Southern drawl and alcohol-lantrums.

Judy Davis, so impressive as George Sand in "Impromptu," plays Mayhew's much-too devoted personal secretary.

Turturro, meanwhile, brings a Kafkaesque quality to the lead role. You understand his frustration in a foreign land and realize that as soon as he secures an oozing patch of wallpaper with thumb tacks another piece will peel down. You also want to strangle him for being so naive and self-centered.

Turturro took the best actor award at the Cannes Festival this spring. In fact, "Barton Fink" enjoys the distinction of being the only film in the 44-year history of Cannes to ever sweep the best actor, director and picture awards.

## SCREEN SCENE

**BLACK CINEMA GALLERY.** Concept East II Gallery, 1144 Pingree, Detroit. Call 973-1030 for information. (14 adults; \$3 students and seniors citizens; \$1 children 12 and under)

"Dorothy Dandridge: Everything and Nothing," Sept. 20-22. A film retrospective and exhibition pays tribute to the popular black actress. Opening night reception 7 p.m. Sept. 20 with screenings at 3 and 7 p.m. Sept. 21 and 3 p.m. Sept. 22. Call for specific film titles.

**DETROIT FILM THEATRE.** Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 537-2730 for more information. (15)

"Breathless" (France — 1960), 7 and 9:30 p.m. Sept. 20-21; 8, 7 p.m. Sept. 22. A small-time hood (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and his casually amoral American girlfriend (Jean Seberg) spend life on the edge in Paris. Jean-Luc Godard's free-wheeling feature debut influenced an entire generation of filmmakers. Shown here in a new print.

**LIVONIA MALL.** Seven Mile and Middlebelt roads, Livonia. Call 476-1164 for information. (Free)

"Cabaret" (USA — 1972), 10 a.m. Sept. 17. Bob Fosse's stylish musical stars Liza Minnelli as an American singer at the Kit Kat Club in prewar Nazi Berlin. Shown as part of a monthlong tribute to leading ladies.

**MAGIC BAG THEATRE CAFE.** 22918 Woodward Ave., Ferndale. Call 540-0860 for information. (14)

"Chinatown" (USA — 1974), 8 p.m. Sept. 17. Jack Nicholson plays a cynical private eye in 1930s Los Angeles whose routine investigation into a husband's infidelity leads to murder and corruption. The Roman Polanski classic only looks better with age, shown here in a new print. With Faye Dunaway.

**MICHIGAN THEATRE.** 16301 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Call 963-8690 for information. (15, \$3.50 students and senior citizens)

"Paris Is Burning" (USA — 1991), through Sept. 30 (call for show times). A documentary look at gay black and hispanic men who compete in Harlem drag balls. First-time director Jenni Livingston spent three years filming the often grueling competition of "voguing," which combines dance with gymnastics and fashion poses.

The 23rd International Tournee of Animation" through Sept. 30 (call for show times). From paper puppets to clay to traditional cel animation, this annual presentation of international animated shorts features nearly 30 new films from a dozen countries. Not as good as previous installments, but still a treat, with highlights including "Ode to G.I. Joe," "Oral Hygiene" and an inspired bit of animation via the Xerox machine.

"Rashomon" (Japan — 1951), 7 p.m. Sept. 16-17. In medieval Japan, four people are witnesses to a violent rape-murder. Akira Kurosawa's landmark film tells the story from four different points of view, each with its own twist on human nature.

"Chameleon Street" (USA — 1950), 7 p.m. Sept. 18 and 7:20 p.m. Sept. 19. Flint-born filmmaker Wendell Harris plots the rise and fall of professional impostor Doug Street, who talks his way into jobs as a lawyer, reporter and surgeon. Harris wrote, directed, and starred in this flawed but fascinating character study.

**REDFORD THEATRE.** 17360 Lahar, Detroit. Call 537-1133 for more information. (12.50)

"Cabaret" (USA — 1972), 10 a.m. Sept. 17. Bob Fosse's stylish musical stars Liza Minnelli as an American singer at the Kit Kat Club in prewar Nazi Berlin.

**WINDSOR FILM THEATRE.** 2125 Wyandotte W., Windsor. Call 519-324-FILM. (14.25)

The 3rd Animation Celebration," Sept. 17-22 (call for show times). A 90-minute program featuring premieres of 20 cartoons from nine countries.

"My Father's Glory" (France — 1991), Sept. 17-22 (call for show times). Based on the autobiography of French filmmaker Marcel Pagnol (he wrote "Jean de Florette"), this is the story of a young boy growing up in the French countryside. The sequel, "My Mother's Castle," will play at the Detroit Film Theatre Oct. 4-6.

— John Monaghan

# DINING & ENTERTAINMENT

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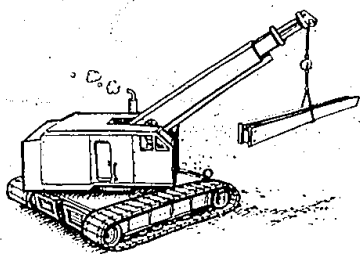
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