



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Fargo

‘We wrote the part of Carl specifically for Steve (as we wrote the parts of Marge for Fran, and Grim for Peter) because somehow it was appropriate that amongst all these second-generation Scandinavians we had a real Scandinavian. This is the fourth movie that we have done with Steve – unfortunately we have always just had little parts for him in the past.

We are aware of his [psychotic] persona in other movies and wanted to push that in a specific direction. We wanted to write something substantial because he is so good. We first cast him in *Miller’s Crossing* because we were looking for someone who could talk incredibly fast. Carl’s part is the most verbal in *Fargo* – he is the motormouth and maybe it is connected to that.’ (Joel Coen)

A quiet opening caption insists on the factual basis of *Fargo*, although it avoids prefacing the film with the most dispiriting rubric in the language: ‘based on a true story’. We are told that something very like this impossible, *Blood Simple*-ish story did in fact happen in the Coen Brothers’ home state of Minnesota in 1987. The first melancholy shot of one cat dragging another through a blinding white blizzard to a wonderful Carter Burwell arrangement of the hymn ‘The Lost Sheep’ is followed by our introduction to the rubber-faced sad sack that William H. Macy makes of the protagonist Jerry Lundegaard. These images signal just how different this film will be. It’s a departure, not only from the dreary parade of True Crime television movies released in the UK by Odyssey Video such as *The Amy Fisher Story*, but also from such comparable aren’t-folks-funny, talk-show dramatisations as *I Love You to Death*.

We are given only telling hints of the circumstances that have brought the likeable but clearly doomed Jerry to Fargo but everything is made heartbreakingly clear by his brief telephone conversations with a bank official who needs clarification of a form Jerry has deliberately fudged to clear a loan. Later, we see his dreams die during a couple of crushing meetings with his overbearing, wealthy and subtly bullying father-in-law, to whom he has brought an investment but who is unwilling to underwrite Jerry’s own involvement in the deal. ‘This would be a good thing for Jean and Scotty and me,’ Jerry claims, only to have the rich Wade snort, ‘Jean and Scotty never have to worry about money’. Jerry is a tragic figure but also a clown (with a mouth like Joe E. Lewis’).

Fargo is a further demonstration of Joel Coen’s remarkable ability to mix comedy with horror. The film operates a certain double standard in its characterisations. Jean, for instance, is relegated to the status of a joke, with her squeaky voice and the slapstick inflicted on her (blind-folded by the kidnappers, she runs around like a headless chicken in the snow). She winds up casually murdered off-screen. Meanwhile, the one-scene sub-plot character of Marge Gunderson’s nervy old flame, who has a disastrous reunion with the police chief in Minneapolis, segues from stooge to tragic figure when it is revealed that his story of recent widowerhood is all a fantasy.

Joel Coen has always – like his best known character Barton Fink – been open to charges of asking us to laugh at the disadvantaged provincials about whom he spins stories. He has spotlighted the redneck grunge of Texas in *Blood Simple* and the backwoods whininess of the locals in *Raising Arizona*. Here, on his home turf, he allows a great deal of regional humour, joking at the expense of ‘ya ya’ Scandiwegian locals who wander about with ear-flaps down through biting winds and acres of white snow.

The waddling Marge, played by Joel’s wife and long-time collaborator Frances McDormand, may be a maternal Columbo, whose ethnic and character quirks disguise a penetrating detective ability, but a great many other characters are amusingly dim-witted, peculiarly-accented and ‘funny looking’. These specimens range from the hooker who is cheerfully only able to remember of a client that ‘he wasn’t circumcised’ to the touchy kidnapper, Carl Showalter, who gets into a trivial and ultimately fatal argument about money just after he has squirrelled away a never-to-be-reclaimed million dollars in cash.

As with *Blood Simple*, the Coens prove themselves masters of orchestrating cross-purposes plots, with half-thought-out criminal schemes going awry in ways that are surprising and yet obvious, ironic and yet horrifying. Whereas the earlier film presented a quartet of corrupt characters whose double crosses are understood only by the audience and the dead, *Fargo* offers McDormand (incidentally, the sole survivor of *Blood Simple*’s plot) as a detective who through intuition, logic and luck does penetrate the backstory.

The real heart of the film is in Marge’s understated relationship with her slobbish artist husband, Norm Gunderson, whose last-reel compromised triumph is that he sells a bird painting to be reproduced on the three-cent stamp. His tepid triumph is wearying enough to maybe make her look up that old flame, but the relationship still provides a warmth that gives her a strength none of the other characters – whose homes are seen to be stifling or freezing – can manage. Snuggling with her husband, and cheering him up by pointing out that people need small change stamps whenever the mail prices go up, Marge finally admits that she can’t understand why the people whose trail she has followed have acted with such desperation. Here, with chilling but touching directness, Coen cuts his amusing but distanced comic approach and shows a heart that matches his undoubted skill.

Kim Newman, *Sight & Sound*, June 1996

FARGO

Director: Joel Coen
©: PolyGram Film Productions, BV
Production Companies: PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, Working Title Films
Executive Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner
Producer: Ethan Coen
Line Producer: John Cameron
Production Accountant: Mindy Sheldon
Production Co-ordinator: Karen Ruth Getchell
Working Title Head of Production: Jane Frazer
Working Title Head of Business Affairs: Angela Morrison
Unit Production Manager: Gilly Ruben
Location Manager: Robert J. Graf
Assistant Location Manager: Rachel L.T. Kapel
Post-production Supervisor: Margaret Hayes
1st Assistant Director: Michelangelo Csaba Bolla
Script Supervisor: T. Kukovinski
Casting: John Lyons
Casting Associate: Christine Sheaks
Location Casting: Jane Brody
Screenplay: Ethan Coen, Joel Coen
Director of Photography: Roger Deakins
Camera Operator: Robin Brown
1st Assistant Camera: Andy Harris
2nd Assistant Camera: Adam Gilmore
Key Grip: Mitch Lillian
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Paul Murphy
Editor: Roderick Jaynes
Associate Editor: Tricia Cooke
Production Designer: Rick Heinrichs
Art Director: Thomas P. Wilkins
Graphic Artist: Bradford Richardson
Set Decorator: Lauri Gaffin
Property Master: Dwight Benjamin-Creel
Construction Co-ordinator: Curtis W. Baruth
Costume Designer: Mary Zophres
Costume Supervisor: Sister Daniels
Key Make-up Artist: John Blake
Key Hairstylist: Daniel Curet
Titles Designer: Balsmeyer & Everett Inc
Opticals: John Alagna, Effects House
Music Composed/Orchestrated/Conducted by: Carter Burwell
Music Contractor: Emile Charlap
Music Editor: Todd Kassow
Associate Music Editor: Shari Schwartz
Music Scoring Mixer: Michael Farrow
Sound Mixer: Allan Byer
Boom Operators: Peter F. Kurland, Keenan Wyatt
Re-recording Mixers: Michael Barry, Skip Lievsay
Supervising Sound Editor: Skip Lievsay
Dialogue Editors: Magdaline Volaitis, Frederick Rosenberg
Negative Cutting: Nick DiBeneditto, N & D Film Service
Sound Effects Recordists: Ken Johnson, Ben Cheah
Sound Effects Editors: Eugene Gearty, Lewis Goldstein, Glenfield Payne

ADR Editor: Kenton Jakub
Foley Artist: Marko Costanzo
Foley Editors: Bruce Pross, Frank Kern, Steven Visscher
Foley Mixer: Ezra Dweck
Dolby Consultant: Bradford L. Hohle
Stunt Co-ordinator: Jery Hewitt
Dialect Coach: Elizabeth Himmelstein
Unit Publicist: Joe Everett

Cast

Frances McDormand (Marge Gunderson)
William H. Macy (Jerry Lundegaard)
Steve Buscemi (Carl Showalter)
Harve Presnell (Wade Gustafson)
Peter Stormare (Gaear Grimsrud)
Kristin Rudrüd (Jean Lundegaard)
Tony Denman (Scotty Lundegaard)
Gary Houston (irate customer)
Sally Wingert (irate customer’s wife)
Kurt Schweickhardt (car salesman)
Larissa Kokernot (hooker 1)
Melissa Peterman (hooker 2)
Steven Reevis (Shep Proudfoot)
Warren Keith (Reilly Diefenbach)
Steve Edelman (morning show host)
Sharon Anderson (morning show hostess)
Larry Brandenburg (Stan Grossman)
James Gaulke (state trooper)
J. Todd Anderson (man in snow)
Michelle Suzanne LeDoux (victim in car)
John Carroll Lynch (Norm Gunderson)
Bruce Bohne (Lou)
Petra Boden (cashier)
Steve Park (Mike Yanagita)
Wayne Evenson (customer)
Cliff Rakerd (Officer Olson)
Jessica Shepherd (hotel clerk)
Peter Schmitz (airport lot attendant)
Steve Shaefer (mechanic)
Michelle Hutchinson (escort)
David Lomax (man in hallway)
José Feliciano (himself)
Don William Skahill (night parking attendant)
Bain Boehlke (Mr Mohra)
Rose Stockton (Valerie)
Robert Ozasky (1st Bismarck cop)
John Bandemer (2nd Bismarck cop)
Bruce Campbell (guy on TV soap) *
Don Wescott (bark beetle narrator)

USA/UK 1995©
98 mins

* Uncredited

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