



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Miller's Crossing

Miller's Crossing

Director: Joel Coen
Production Company: Circle Films
Executive Producer: Ben Barenholtz
Producer: Ethan Coen
Co-producer: Mark Silverman
Line Producer: Graham Place
Production Co-ordinator: Terri Clemens
Production Manager: Alma Kuttruff
Unit Manager: Ron Neter
Location Manager: Amy Ness
Post-production Supervisor: James DeMeaux
Key Production Assistants: David Riebel, Amelia Villero
Production Assistants: Richard Wentz, Kenny Creed, Paul Sanchez
Special Effects Production Assistants: David Schlesinger, David-Michael Goddard
Assistant Directors: Gary Marcus, C.C. Barnes, Greg Jacobs
Casting: Donna Isaacson, John Lyons
New Orleans Casting: Sandra D. Dawes
Screenplay: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
Director of Photography/Camera Operator: Barry Sonnenfeld
Steadicam Operator: Larry McConkey
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Peter Chesney
Special Effects: Image Engineering
Editor: Michael Miller
Production Designer: Dennis Gassner
Design Consultant: Bob Goldstein
Art Director: Leslie McDonald
Art Department Co-ordinator: Scott Plauché
Set Designer: Kathleen McKernin
Set Decorator: Nancy Haigh
Key Set Dresser: Claire Gaul
Set Dresser: Alice Baker
Lead Scenic Artist: Michael Daigle
Scenic Artist: Matt Flynn
Stand-by Scenic Artist: Eileen Winterkorn
Storyboard Artist: J. Todd Anderson
Costume Designer: Richard Hornung
Costumer: Barbara Baker
Wardrobe Supervisor: Bonney Langfitt
Make-up: Kathrine James
Title Design: Balsmeyer & Everett Inc
Opticals: R/Greenberg Associates
Music: Carter Burwell
Music Director: Paul Lustig Dunkel
Orchestrations: Sonny Kompanek, Larry Wilcox
Music Editor: Todd Kasow
Sound Recording: Allan Byer, Jean Marie Carroll
Sound Re-recording: Lee Dichter
Supervising Sound Editor: Skip Lievsay
Supervising Dialogue Editor: Philip Stockton
Dialogue Editor: Marissa Littlefield
ADR Editors: Gail Showalter, Nic Ratner
Foley Supervisor: Ron Bochar
Foley Editor: Bruce Pross
Dolby Stereo Consultant: Michael DiCosimo
Stunt Co-ordinator: Jerry Hewitt
Stunts: Gary Tacon, Norman Douglass, Nick Giangliulo, Kurt Bryant, Bill Anagnos, Roy Farfel
Animal Trainer: Karl Miller
Cast:
Gabriel Byrne (*Tom Reagan*)
Marcia Gay Harden (*Verna*)
John Turturro (*Bernie Bernbaum*)
Jon Polito (*Johnny Caspar*)
J.E. Freeman (*Eddie Dane*)

Contemporary reviews

Blood Simple, the first feature of Joel Coen (writer-director) and his brother Ethan (writer-producer), was widely seen as updating the protocols of the school of writing most readily associated with James M. Cain. Now, after the high-pitched comic detour of *Raising Arizona*, the Coens have turned for inspiration to a different area of crime writing, the novels of Dashiell Hammett. This time they have adhered to the period of the originals: the milieu of *Miller's Crossing* is an unspecified American city during Prohibition. The makers have spoken of echoing the 'dirty town' premise of *Red Harvest*, though in fact the narrative bears a more particular resemblance to *The Glass Key*.

The plot is of a complexity that would defy any brief synopsis, but turns in outline on the attempted overthrow of the city's Irish 'boss' (Albert Finney) by his Italian arch-rival—the former's Achilles heel being his infatuation with the sister (Marcia Gay Harden) of a double-dealing petty criminal (John Turturro) and on the thwarting of this design by Finney's chief lieutenant (Gabriel Byrne), who has also been Harden's lover and who feigns desertion to the opposition in order to repair his mentor's fortunes.

The manner in which the densely packed storyline is negotiated, moreover, is not the delirious modernism of *Blood Simple*, but rather that of neo-classicism. Restraint is the keynote, whether in the preponderance of frequently near-static medium and close shots, the 'invisible' editing, or the restricted palette of Barry Sonnenfeld's cinematography, with its emphasis on browns and greys. This restraint might, to begin with, risk seeming artificial. But as the movie progresses, its scale gradually opens out and violent action intermittently intrudes, most astonishingly so in the set-piece in which the strains of 'Danny Boy' from Finney's horn gramophone majestically counterpoint his bloody turning of tables on the would-be assassins who have infiltrated his mansion retreat.

Despite such interventions, however, and the pattern of repetitions (only properly discernible at a second viewing) which underpins its structure, *Miller's Crossing* is elucidated pre-eminently through interchange between characters. In the manner of a Howard Hawks movie – though thankfully there is no suggestion of direct reference – it erects an exact yet invisible dramatic scaffolding, around which the participants, no matter how far removed from 'real' life, can create an illusion of independent existence.

Here Gabriel Byrne's hard-bitten insouciance, admirably offset by the bluntness of Finney, easily transcends anything this actor has previously done on the screen. And although it might be invidious to single out anyone else from an exactly balanced ensemble, J. E. Freeman, as the rival's granitic enforcer, contrives a figure from the realms of nightmare: asked whether he wants to kill a potential victim, he replies, 'For starters'.

Throughout, indeed, the pungently idiomatic dialogue invites quotation, whether it be Byrne's dismissal of a third party as 'not a bad guy if looks, brains and personality don't count', or a bookie's comment on Byrne's lack of gambler's luck: 'If I were a horse, I'd be down on my fetlocks praying you don't bet on me'.

Yet for all its humour, *Miller's Crossing* contains a heart of darkness. The intimations of sado-masochistic emotion which insinuated themselves into *Blood Simple*, and were even perceptible (in a farcically distanced vein) in the no-hoper couple of *Raising Arizona*, here tend to hold sway. The punishment to which Byrne submits with something like complicity, in the cause of preserving Finney, becomes an expiation of his guilt at having been the older man's amorous betrayer, but also an expurgation of his feelings toward this ambiguously paternal protector. At the end, the grateful Finney's almost priest-like utterance of 'I forgive you' is met by his erstwhile protégé with, 'I didn't ask for that and I don't want it': the two men's mutual dependence is at an end. (Thematically, too, the film could be said to contain indirect echoes of Hawks.)

Albert Finney (*Leo*)
 Mike Starr (*Frankie*)
 Al Mancini (*Tic-Tac*)
 Richard Woods (*Mayor Dale Levander*)
 Thomas Toner (*O'Doole*)
 Steve Buscemi (*Mink*)
 Mario Todisco (*Clarence 'Drop' Johnson*)
 Olek Krupa (*Tad*)
 Michael Jeter (*Adolph*)
 Lanny Flaherty (*Terry*)
 Jeanette Kontomitrás (*Mrs Caspar*)
 Louis Charles Mounicou III (*Johnny Caspar Jr*)
 John McConnell (*Brian*)
 Danny Aiello III (*Delahanty*)
 Helen Jolly (*screaming lady*)
 Hilda McLean (*landlady*)
 Monte Starr, Don Picard
 (*gunmen in Leo's house*)
 Salvatore H. Tornabene (*Rug Daniels*)
 Kevin Dearie (*street urchin*)
 Michael Badalucco (*Caspar's driver*)
 Charles Ferrara (*Caspar's butler*)
 Esteban Fernandez, George Fernandez
 (*Caspar's cousins*)
 Charles Gunning (*hitman at Verna's*)
 Dave Drinkx (*2nd hitman*)
 David Darlow (*Lazarre's messenger*)
 Robert LaBrosse, Carl Rooney
 (*Lazarre's toughs*)
 Jack David Harris (*man with pipe bomb*)
 Jerry Hewitt (*son of Erin*)
 Sam Raimi (*snickering gunman*)
 John Schnauder Jr (*cop with bullhorn*)
 Zolly Levin (*rabbi*)
 Joey Ancona, Bill Raye (*boxers*)
 William Preston Robertson (*voice*)
 USA 1990
 115 mins

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Sawdust and Tinsel (Gycklanas afton)

Wed 2 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Tue 22 Aug 20:45

The Night of the Hunter Thu 3 Aug 20:50; Sat 26 Aug 18:10; Tue 29 Aug 20:50

The Bigamist Fri 4 Aug 20:45; Wed 9 Aug 18:00 (+ intro by Aga Baranowska, Events Programmer)

3 Women Sat 5 Aug 20:30; Sun 20 Aug 18:25

La Peau douce (Silken Skin)

Sun 6 Aug 18:30; Thu 24 Aug 20:45

In the Mood for Love (Huayang Nianhua)

Mon 7 Aug 18:10; Fri 18 Aug 20:45; Fri 25 Aug 18:20

Charulata (The Lonely Wife)

Tue 8 Aug 20:35; Wed 16 Aug 18:00 (+ intro by Professor Chandak Sengoopta, Birkbeck College, University of London)

Brief Encounter

Thu 10 Aug 18:30; Sun 20 Aug 13:20

Merrily We Go to Hell

Fri 11 Aug 18:20; Wed 23 Aug 18:15 (+ intro by author and film journalist Helen O'Hara)

Miller's Crossing

Sat 12 Aug 15:20; Mon 14 Aug 18:10

Love Is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon

Sat 12 Aug 20:40; Wed 30 Aug 18:10 (+ intro)

Mildred Pierce

Sun 13 Aug 15:40; Mon 21 Aug 20:45; Mon 28 Aug 15:10

Beau travail

Tue 15 Aug 20:45; Mon 28 Aug 18:30

Red River

Thu 17 Aug 20:20; Sun 27 Aug 15:20

Blue Velvet

Sat 19 Aug 17:45; Thu 24 Aug 18:10; Thu 31 Aug 20:35

By this time, the explication of the intrigue behind the conspiracy, however gripping in itself, has assumed a kind of irrelevance, so that the perversity of motivation is, as it were, absorbed into the very fabric of the narrative. In consequence, *Miller's Crossing* assumes a precision of correspondence between content and form which is all too rare in the cinema today; and the resolute effacement of any authorial 'signature', such as would detract from the telling of the tale, renders the film all the more clearly the product of a (double-headed) auteur.

Tim Pulleine, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1990-91

By choosing to make a Dashiell Hammett movie, albeit without officially adapting one of his books (much as they dealt with James M. Cain in *Blood Simple*), the Coens are returning to the roots of both areas, a move which gives their film a strange air of both self-consciousness and purity, a kind of knowing classicism. The film's particular strength derives from a sense that the filmmakers have tapped a kind of essence of Hammett, outside any specific theme or plot, and worked outwards from this, basing their own highly expressive visual and rhythmic style on solid generic foundations.

What is most Hammett-like here is anchored in the characterisation of Tom, and in Gabriel Byrne's quietly judged performance. When Bernie pleads for his life a second time, and again asks Tom to look into his heart, Tom merely asks 'What heart?' before shooting him. This has less to do with any clichéd idea of a cynical, hardboiled ethos than it does with Tom's inscrutable motivation. In the film's final scene, when Leo explains away Tom's defection to Caspar to suit his own purposes, Tom's only response is to query whether anyone ever knows why they do things. This is not so much rhetorical as a precise encapsulation of Hammett's style and method, whereby his protagonists and the world they inhabit effectively function independently of each other. His pared-down prose never turns places or events into an expressionist projection of his central character's state of mind, since the latter is always inexpressible. Which is why Hammett's relationship to film noir is crucial but also rather indirect.

By making Tom a kind of tragic cypher, furthering a pattern of events in relation to which he is always the outsider, the Coens give *Miller's Crossing* an almost abstract centre, emphasised paradoxically by the dark solidity of Byrne's look and persona. This cleverly highlights the tortuous complexity of the plotting in which Tom is caught up, in terms of relationships, allegiances, doublecrosses, etc., all too appropriate in a genre so concerned, particularly in its Mafia strand, with what Caspar describes as 'ethics'.

In this context, the fact that the Coens' visual stimulus for the film, according to the production notes, was an image of generic incongruity ('big guys in overcoats in the woods') makes perfect sense. *Miller's Crossing* consistently plays off visual solidity (perfectly iconographic hats, coats and faces; dark autumnal shades and colours; large wood-panelled rooms) against sudden eruptions of violence, hysteria and humour, with the latter elements often blended. The sense of pacing in certain scenes is quite uncanny, with extended moments of calm preceding and accentuating the physical grotesquerie and violence.

The film's credit sequence illustrates a dream of Tom's, which he later recounts to Verna, in which his hat is blown off by the wind while he is walking in some woods. Her keenness to interpret the imagery (did he chase the hat? did it turn into something else?) is countered by his simple insistence that it stayed a hat. In fact, the image is so strong and strange that it needs no interpretation, and much of the strength of *Miller's Crossing* springs from a Hammett-like sense of things as they are, combined with an unerring feel for the genuinely surreal twist. Caspar believes that ethics are important because without them there is only chaos and anarchy. Here the Coens convincingly demonstrate that he is right, and in so doing turn an exercise in genre reworking into something much more rich and strange.

Steve Jenkins, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1991