



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

A Serious Man

A Serious Man

Directed by: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen

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Focus Features presents in association with
StudioCanal and Relativity Media
a Working Title production

Executive Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner,
Robert Graf

Produced by: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen

Chief Operating Officer for Working Title:
Angela Morrison

Executive in Charge of Production for Working Title:
Michelle Wright

Production Supervisor: Karen Ruth Getchell

Production Accountant: Cheryl Kurk

Post-production Accountant: Trevanna Post, Inc.

Production Co-ordinator: Rachael Lin Gallagher

Unit Production Manager: Robert Graf

Location Manager: Tyson Bidner

Post-production Supervisor: Catherine Farrell

1st Assistant Director: Betsy Magruder

2nd Assistant Director: Bac DeLorme

Script Supervisor: Thomas Johnston

Casting by: Ellen Chenoweth, Rachel Tenner

Casting Associate: Amelia Rasche

Extras Casting: Debbie DeLisi

Extras Casting Assistants: Kati Batchelder,
Aaron Greenwood

Voice Casting: Sondra James

Screenplay: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen

Director of Photography: Roger Deakins

Camera Operator: Roger Deakins

1st Assistant Camera: Andy Harris

2nd Assistant Camera: Michael Lindquist

Camera Loader: Cole Koehler

Key Grip: Mitch Lillian

Still Photographer: Wilson Webb

Visual Effects by: Luma Pictures

Special Effects Co-ordinator: Larz Anderson

Special Effects Foreman: Paul Deely

Graphic Designer: Gregory Hill

Edited by: Roderick Jaynes

Associate Editor: Katharine McQuerrey

1st Assistant Editor: Emma Gaffney

Production Designer: Jess Gonchor

Art Director: Deborah Jensen

Assistant Art Director: Jeff Schoen

Art Department Co-ordinator: Jarrette Moats

Set Designer: Maria Baker

Set Decorator: Nancy Haigh

Lead Dresser: Scott Troha

On-set Dresser: Scott Nordhausen

Buyer: Jill Broadfoot

Lead Scenic Artist: Anne Hyvarinen

Property Master: Keith Walters

Construction Co-ordinator: Steve Anderson

Costume Designer: Mary Zophres

Assistant Costume Designer: Jenny Eagan

Key Costumer: Corrine Larson

Key Set Costumer: Jane Williams

Set Costumers: Nikki Fallenstein, Melissa Seitzer

Make-up Design/Department Head: Jean A. Black

Make-up Co-department Head: Mary K. Flaa

Assistant Make-up Artist: Carrie Messina

Age/Effects Make-up: Christien Tinsley

Hair Department Head: Frida S. Aradóttir

Assistant Hair Stylist: Deanna L. Johnson

Titles Designer: Randy Balsmeyer

Titles Sequences: Big Film Design

Digital Intermediate/Dailies by: EFilm

Post-production Facility: Post Factory

Opticals by: PlethoraFX

Edited on: Final Cut Pro

In 25 years of filmmaking, Joel and Ethan Coen have established themselves as a major international voice, a postmodern sensibility overcome with cosmic jokiness. If *No Country for Old Men*, in all of its Oscar-winning graveness, was the Coen brothers movie for those who don't like Coen brothers movies, then *A Serious Man* may alienate the newfound viewer base all over again. It is simultaneously their most personal film – almost autobiographical in its details – and their most muddled, caught like a hairball in the throat (a frustrated simile they'd appreciate) between earnestness and mockery. For perhaps the first time in a Coen film outside *No Country* we are asked to authentically empathise with a realistic character in a realistic setting, and yet he and the landscape around him suffer the same lampooning slings and sardonic tone as the characters of *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Barton Fink* (1991), *Fargo* (1995) and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). It's an old complaint about the Coens, that they cruelly observe their hapless characters as they would pratfalling ants in an ant farm. But I've always thought their comic spirit, for better or worse, has been consistent and sharply observed, allowing melancholy and sensitivity to sneak in naturally like the back flavours of strong red wine. And now comes *A Serious Man*, a sincerely sympathetic portrait of an American family man in crisis – even as it insults its characters and derides their culture.

What seem like Coen-esque cheap shots to some viewers have always been read as zesty absurdism by others. Perhaps the reason *A Serious Man* chafes is because it is centred in such familiar territory: 1960s American suburbia, where lawn-mowing and wage-earner-and-homemaker domestic routine were the preoccupations, masking a secret battlefield of betrayal, frustration, sexual alternatives and – of course – doubts about one's own empty materialism. We've seen mayhem play out in this arena many times before, from *Blue Velvet* to *American Beauty*, *Revolutionary Road* and TV's *Mad Men*, and if you're a suburbanite it's easy to see the condescension coming at you in spadefuls. The Coens have reincarnated the Minnesota suburbs of their youth and focused on the milieu's Jewish contingent, but like the two Sam Mendes films mentioned above, *A Serious Man* caricatures nearly every aspect of suburban life, leaving us to wonder whether we should be laughing at how Jews slurp soup or how teenage girls do nothing but wash their hair or how fat people walk even as we reluctantly chuckle.

The film's Jewishness is the main course offered for digestion – the Job-like descent into lucklessness of Larry Gopnik, the beleaguered physics-prof hero, beginning with his irritable wife's demand for a divorce. Larry embarks on a series of consultations with rabbis, looking for 'the answer' to life's mysteries. As expressly Torah-informed as Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, but without that film's genuine ethical gravity, *A Serious Man* is formed around the contest between the reasonless chaos of life and our traditional cultures' desire to see order in it; but there's not much real discourse on hand, and no larger metaphysical idea. The Coens have only occasionally stumbled into a fascinating world-view (for all of its genre irony, 1990's *Miller's Crossing* gets my vote), because they are instead masters of minutiae. Their new film is (again, typically) chin-deep in cultural details; the brothers get every little thing absolutely right, however broadly, from the Jewish American style of marital bickering to the different rabbis' wise-yet-clueless solicitousness, to the

Cameras by: Otto Nemenz
 Music by: Carter Burwell
 Conducted and Orchestrated by: Carter Burwell
 Orchestra Contractor: Sandra Park
 Music Editor: Todd Kasow
 Music Scoring Mixer: Michael Farrow
 Sound Designer: Craig Berkey
 Production Sound Mixer: Peter F. Kurland
 Boom Operator: Randy Johnson
 Utility Sound: Chris Benson
 Additional Utility Sound: Peter Zimbicki
 Re-recording Mixers: Skip Lievsay, Craig Berkey
 Greg Orloff
 Re-recorded at: Sony Pictures Studios
 Supervising Sound Editor: Skip Lievsay
 Dialogue Editors: Byron Wilson, James Morioka
 ADR Editor: Kenton Jakub
 Foley Artist: Marko A. Costanzo
 Foley Mixer: George A. Lara
 Foley Editor: Joel Dougherty
 Subtitles: Big Film Design
 Stunt Co-ordinator: Jerry Hewitt
 Yiddish Translations: Wendy Zierler,
 Allen Rickman
 Unit Publicist: Claudia Gray
 Cast:
 Michael Stuhlbarg (*Larry Gopnik*)
 Richard Kind (*Uncle Arthur*)
 Fred Melamed (*Sy Ableman*)
 Sari Lennick (*Judith Gopnik*)
 Aaron Wolff (*Danny Gopnik*)
 Jessica McManus (*Sarah Gopnik*)
 Peter Breitmayer (*Mr Brandt*)
 Brent Braunschweig (*Mitch Brandt*)
 David Kang (*Clive Park*)
 Benjamin Portnoe (*Danny's reefer buddy*)
 Jack Swiler (*boy on bus*)
 Andrew S. Lentz (*cursing boy on bus*)
 Jon Kaminski Jr (*Mike Fagle*)
 Ari Hoptman (*Arlen Finkle*)
 Alan Mandell (*Rabbi Marshak*)
 Amy Landecker (*Mrs Samsky*)
 George Wyner (*Rabbi Nachtner*)
 Michael Tezla (*Dr Sussman*)
 Katherine Borowitz (*friend at the picnic*)
 Stephen Park (*Clive's father*)
 Allen Lewis Rickman (*shtetl husband*)
 Yelena Shmulenson (*shtetl wife*)
 Fyvush Finkel (*dybbuk*)
 Ronald Schultz (*Hebrew school teacher*)
 Raye Birk (*Dr Shapiro*)
 Jane Hammill (*Larry's secretary*)
 Claudia Wilkens (*Marshak's secretary*)
 Simon Helberg (*Rabbi Scott*)
 Adam Arkin (*divorce lawyer*)
 James Cada (*cop 1*)
 Michael Lerner (*Solomon Schlutz*)
 Charles Brin (*Hebrew school principal*)
 Michael Engel (*Torah blesser*)
 Tyson Bidner (*Magbiah*)
 Phyllis Harris (*Hebrew school tea lady*)
 Piper Sigel Bruse (*D'vorah*)
 Hannah Nemer (*Sarah's friend*)
 Rita Vassallo (*law firm secretary*)
 Warren David Keith (*Dick Dutton*)
 Neil Newman (*cantor*)
 Tim Russell (*detective 1*)
 Jim Lichtscheidl (*detective 2*)
 Wayne Evenson (*Russell Krauss*)
 Scott Baker (*sci-fi movie hero*)
 UK/USA/France 2009©
 106 mins
 Digital 4K

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Hebrew school boredom. Knowing a little Hebrew helps, but is not essential; the milieu is articulated with care but for sport, just as the Minnesotans were (gently) chided in *Fargo* and East Coast narcissism was ripped apart in *Burn after Reading*.

Other period details are inspired and unarguable: the slightly-off uncle sleeping on the couch and forever draining an abscess on his neck with a plug-in machine; the Korean student who tries ineptly to insist his F should get changed to a passing grade; the way Larry is bulldozed and silenced by the soothing rabbi-like arguments of his wife's new lover; the dogged harassment of an agent of the Columbia Record Club; even the aluminium 'G' in the Gopniks' front screen door. But nailing down the day and age is one thing; the fact remains that Larry's son (whose bar mitzvah climaxes the film) is little more than a complaining joint-sneaker, his wife merely an inscrutable harridan, and so on. Amy Landecker's hotpants neighbour's wife Mrs Samsky, Peter Breitmayer's bullet-head bigot Mr Brandt, the various synagogue employees we meet, all are similarly reduced to stark and laughable types.

This not only works against the nature of Larry's tragic story – caused as it is not by human foil but by a confluence of unrelated bad things (only beginning with his family and his income) – but also against the moral questions the screenplay puts in his mouth. Is there much point in speculating about the justice of the universe and the purpose of 'a good life' if the movie you're in defines everything and everyone around you as a shallow hoot?

Argue if you like that this movie's philosophical inquiries are answered by the Coens' ridicule – that life, like the film, is merely a thin joke by a cruel God or gods. What respect could the cosmos have for Larry (masterfully played by Michael Stuhlbarg in a perpetual reactive sputter) and his world if the filmmakers have little or none? The tonal inhospitality is a pity, because the movie is in the enjoyable Coen paradigm constructed like a clock that's just on the verge of throwing gears, full of inventive nonsense and restlessly devoted to favouring eccentric texture over lockstep narrative, contrary to the manner of most American films.

Though there are no acting epiphanies here to rival Tony Shalhoub's in *Barton Fink* or Jennifer Jason Leigh's in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *A Serious Man* doesn't have a single dull or merely functional performance; even bit players have their pregnant comic moments. Still, the spectre of Richard Kind's Uncle Arthur may be the movie's conceptual triumph. Half-hidden in the bathroom for the first part of the film, he emerges as a profound mystery. Homeless and strange, he appears to us (via a thick notebook of obsessive scribbles) as a shut-in Charles Crumb figure, but then he is stalked by the police for playing illegal cards, and then for sodomy. When did he even leave the house? By the time Arthur succumbs to a breakdown, declaring his envy for Larry's good fortune, neither we nor Larry know what to make of him. He may be the only character in the film who slips the noose of the filmmakers' single-minded derision and he does it magnificently.

Michael Atkinson, *Sight and Sound*, December 2009