

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An independent film club based in Chelmsford

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Hail Caesar

Dirs: Ethan and Joel Coen – 2016 – USA – 106 mins.

Cast: Josh Brolin; George Clooney; Tilda Swinton; Channing Tatum; Ralph Fiennes; Scarlett Johansson; Alden Ehrenreich; Veronica Osorio; Michael Gambon (Voice of Narrator).

Over a year ago, when planning this season's programme, we took a chance that the 'rumoured' new film from the Coen brothers would actually materialise and so, playing safe, put it as the last film of the season – like the films of Woody Allen, the Club has always had a soft spot for the Coens! The film did get made, and was released to some mixed reviews, but I think it is fair to say that it has won over the hearts and minds of most audiences. I thoroughly enjoyed watching it and consider it a perfect movie to end the Club's 28th season!

Hail Caesar can be seen as a nostalgic celebration of, or tribute to, the Hollywood studio system, which developed after the Second World War and lasted, arguably, up to the making of *The Graduate* in 1967. And so it is, but also much more: underneath the cameo roles and the laughs there is a serious undercurrent, just glimpses of the 'Coen edge', detectable in an early movie like the comedy *Raising Arizona* and developed much more fully in *Fargo*.

For instance, when the aging actor Baird Whitlock is abducted by a couple of unlikely looking studio extras and whisked away to a luxurious cliff-top house, complete with pool, the 'gang' behind this dastardly plan is depicted as a group of harmless intellectuals, 'blacklisted' as writers by the studios as a result of the McCarthy witch-hunt of so-called communist sympathisers, and simply wanting a ransom to compensate for their lack of earnings. The Coens seem to be saying: 'so what was all the fuss about? Were these guys really a threat to the American way of life'. Amongst the benign 'gang' is even a character called Professor Marcuse, a lone, isolated and grumpy pipe smoker. Marcuse himself may not have been blacklisted, being a Jew who fled the Nazis in 1932 and becoming an American citizen, but he is noted for critiquing the 'popular entertainment culture' as a form of social control – a little Coen joke? Some of us may remember, and been influenced by, *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964)? During this sequence I was reminded of another take on the McCarthy HUAC blacklisting era, Martin Ritt's (himself blacklisted) somewhat underrated *The Front* (1976), featuring a very funny/sad performance from Woody Allen and a larger than life one from Zero Mostel, almost playing himself. Here was humour, but also tragedy for many of the actors, writers, teachers and intellectuals who could not leave the USA, as did Charlie Chaplin and Paul Robeson, to pursue a career elsewhere.

George Clooney is marvellous as aging matinee idol Baird Whitlock, a synthesis of John Wayne, Kirk Douglas and Errol Flynn, completely ingenuous, seeing the purpose of life in eating, drinking and "getting layed". Oh, and acting, which, to be fair, he can do very well. His speech for the finale of 'Hail Caesar', the 'Greatest Story Ever Told' biblical epic ("This truly was the son of God!") he is supposed to be working on, is quite gripping and effective, and the Coens do not subvert it. When he is abducted he is in full Roman centurion uniform, which adds to the absurdity of seeing him surrounded by the tweed-jacketed, dialectically challenged 'commies' and being fascinated by the new philosophy they introduce him to. Later he will get his face slapped, several times, when he tries to convert Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin) to this revelatory new idea: socialism!

And Eddie Mannix, the only real-life character in the film, makes up what might be described as the other, main plot. As a 'fixer', keeping the actors in line and solving their professional and personal problems, feeding the gossip columnists tit-bits of news and being completely loyal to The Studio – Capitol Pictures – he thoroughly enjoys his work. He happens to be a devout Catholic and in the confessional we await the revelation of the 'terrible sin' he needs to confess: "father, I have sinned... I've lied to my wife about... giving up smoking. I have one occasionally at work." His conscience is also troubled because he is being headhunted by another organisation which can offer him more money and time to spend with his family: 'should he stay or should he go' gives this tough-guy more head-aches than any other issue in his life, an issue not resolved until the very end of the film when he decides to "do what's right".

Ralph Fiennes turns in a lovely cameo as a Laurence Olivier-type English director, complete with cravat and cigarette holder, patiently attempting to get the actors to act. And one who needs a lot of coaching is Hobie Doyle (do we detect elements of James Dean here?), played by Alden Ehrenreich (what a name!) who has been 'discovered' singing cowboy songs and doing lassoing tricks and is now somewhat out of his depth, forced into the young, romantic lead. A memorably comic scene is when he takes the Carmen Miranda character, Carlota Valdez (Veronica Osorio) out to dinner and makes her laugh by doing the lassoing trick with a strand of spaghetti: "That's why I don't have tomato sauce with it"!

Tilda Swinton is wonderful as two characters: the identical gossip columnist twins Thora and Thessaly, who Mannix can play off, one against the other. But, for me, the most enjoyable and 'nostalgic' scene is the re-enactment of a typical Hollywood musical dance sequence such as we might see in *Singing in the Rain* or *On the Town*, led by Channing Tatum in a Gene Kelly role. As it progresses, the Coen 'edge' is revealed in the implied gayness of the lead dancer and, by association, the homosexuality of other Hollywood actors, something Eddie Mannix and his ilk will be 'managing' for the studios?

So I do hope you will enjoy the film, our last of the season, as much as I did. So many members have taken the trouble to let me know how much they have enjoyed the season and how interesting and diverse the films have been: that has been highly gratifying and welcomed by all the Committee. Of course, I know some movies have tested our patience and endurance just a little!

But this season has proved to be a turning point for the Club. Our current membership numbers and the increasing costs of hiring the Cramphorn Theatre - £834, at least, now added for VAT charges thanks to the HMRC ruling – coupled with the license fees for showing the films, means that our subscription of £50 will not meet the costs of running the programme for the coming season. The Club cannot run into debt! **To address this, we have calculated that we can afford to show 16 films if the subscription for members is £60 and the membership stays at 121, which it has been this season.** And there's the rub! We do need at least 121 members, again, to make the Club viable for another season. Therefore, so that we might have a clearer picture as to where we are going, **it would be a great help to those of us who organise the programme if you could renew your membership as soon as possible or, alternatively, let us know as soon as you can if you are NOT going to join again.** More than 121 members would be great, and might result in a small, healthy surplus. The more members, the more films we can show. We have been optimistic, would love to take the Club to even a 30th year (!!) but depend on current members joining again, bringing guests along (the guest ticket remains at £6) and bringing in some new members: friends, family and neighbours! Spread the word!

Do have an enjoyable summer. The Committee looks forward to seeing you all for the new 2016/17 season of Chelmsford Film Club, starting in late September.

Peter Bunyan
(Chairperson)