



FILM: **HAIL CAESAR, A Tale of Christ**

FDG RATING: 2.92 ☺☺☺○○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Joel and Ethan Coen: *Directors*
Josh Brolin: *Actor: Eddie Mannix*
George Clooney: *Actor: Baird Whitlock*
Scarlett Johansson: *Actress DeeDee Moran*
Plus many, many more

DATE: March 20, 2016

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **HAIL CAESAR, A Tale of Christ**

Hail Caesar! A Tale of Christ, is a film time capsule explosion; cleverly weaving elements of the great films and film genres of the 20th century into a comedic tale about the disappearance of the lead actor in an epic biblical movie reminiscent of Ben Hur. The title tells us that the Coen brothers will be playing with themes of religion, spirituality, imperial power, and societal inequality. But that's not all.

Taking place in the early 1950s (Hollywood's Golden Age), mainly on the lot and sets of fictional Capitol Studios, during the filming of several big budget productions, they treat us to a romp down movie memory lane. A big budget dazzling synchronized swimming water ballet production is a tribute to Busby Berkeley's elaborate musical production numbers (often involving complex geometric patterns) and would make Esther Williams, the Million Dollar Mermaid, proud. Scarlett Johansson, as DeeAnna Moran, is a ringer for Esther Williams in her skin tight mermaid costume. A rousing sailor theme musical number, "No Dames", (homage to "There is Nothing Like a Dame", in the film South Pacific), shows off the tap dance skills of Channing Tatum as Burt Gurney, rivaling the talents of Gene Kelly.

Several other vignette scenes hit all the highlights of a decade in the movie industry, offering a fond send-up to westerns with slow talking, cowboy Hobie Doyle who has trouble transitioning from his horseback stunt riding, lasso twirling Gene Autry-Hop-along-Cassidy Roy Rogers role to an elegant parlor drama. Film noir, detective who-dun-its, even a scene that shifts from black and white to color plus many, many more nods to pivotal points in movie making history are seamlessly woven in the films within a film.

More obvious is the name, Capital Studio, that is a purposeful thematic parallel to Karl Marx's "Das Kapital" putting the theme of Hollywood Black Listing front and center. (deja vu to our "Trumbo" film discussion.) It so happens that Baird Whitlock was kidnapped for ransom by "The Future", a communist "study group" that not only wanted to propagate films with Russian Communist propaganda, but also wanted to help fund the cause.

Kudos to the Coen brothers for multi-layering each character with important film history references, allowing the audience to enjoy just the top layer or to delve deeper and appreciate the nuanced allusions. One of the funniest scenes was very brief but laugh out loud memorable when chain smoking, film editor C.C. Calhoun (Francis McDormand) gets her scarf caught in the moviola (the first machine for motion picture editing). Pure fun but also a fleeting nod to legendary female film editor Margaret Booth who began her career in silent films with D.W. Griffith and ended it seven decades later.

As a simple comedy, the film was too silly for several of our resident film critics but others were delighted when they recognized the satirical and affectionate references and considered the film brilliant. Our less exuberant reviewers still thought it was a well-done, smart, intelligent comedy. The dance numbers were especially entertaining in almost full-scale replication of those wonderful musicals and choreography of yester-year. But even the dancing wasn't enough to sway some of our critical movie-goers who were bored and didn't find it funny at all. They don't hold actors/actresses and films in the high esteem that Coen Bros. might. In fact, this is the conundrum that faces the main character, Eddie Mannix, head of studio production, the savior of the (movie) world, who spends all his energy fixing the crises of actors and actresses so nothing disrupts the schedule/budget and any potential scandal is immediately diffused, such as the unexpected pregnancy of Million Dollar Mermaid, DeeAnn Moran, who is not married, and isn't sure who the father is.

Mannix is at a crossroads in his life. He doubts the value of his work (his flock tends to repeatedly stray) and questions the cosmic purpose of the film industry. A satanic head hunter from Lockheed Corporation tries to tempt Mannix into accepting a management position at Lockheed where he could "be part of something real,

making a difference” and leave the frivolous world of entertainment. He offers Mannix “...a piece of the future. After all, who's going to keep going to the pictures once every American home has a television set?” He proudly shows Manix a secret photo of a nuclear explosion test conducted by Lockheed. That image clinches Eddie’s decision to reject Lockheed’s “reality”, in favor of providing the escape, hope, solace, and wonderment that humanity needs.

For those who enjoyed the light heartedness and for those who were totally pulled into the looney tunes caper layered with too many inside jokes to cover here (see additional film references in summary footnotes), the film was a welcome contrast to our previous darker films.

On a scale of 1-5, with a single hand-clapping falling off the chair rating of 5 that was tempered by 12 other ratings from .5 to 4, we awarded the film a collective 2.92.

.....
** Footnotes from mostly web research and a few of my own observations: (the Coen brothers filled their film with references to film history and actual people and places as an affectionate send up to Hollywood.)*

- *Eddie Mannix’ story borrows heavily from film noir. He checks his watch, drives rainy roads at night, and encounters and solves complex problems using guile while seeming guileless.*
- *Baird Whitlock (George Clooney) appears in two stories: as a Roman soldier in the Bible epic Hail Caesar! A Story of the Christ and as his smugly self-satisfied self in a kidnap and ransom caper.*
- *Hobie Doyle (Alden Ehrenreich) appears in three genres: as a singin’ western hero in Lazy Ol’ Moon, (reminiscent of Roy Rogers in 1938 Shine On Harvest Moon), as cuckolded Monty in Merrily We Dance, and as himself in a Hollywood musical vignette, a significant extension of Eddie’s noir story.*
- *Laurence Laurentz (Ralph Fiennes) is a reference to Lawrence Olivier and to George Cukor, one of the most respected directors of Hollywood’s Golden Age, (a closeted gay man), George was meticulous about every detail of his films. Also note the similarity of Hobie Doyle’s problem with diction in his new more dramatic role to the scene in Cukor’s My Fair Lady when Audrey Hepburn’s character (cockney turned posh flower girl) has trouble pulling off the proper affectation.*
- *Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin) was an actual, behind the scenes fixer who worked for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.*
- *Carlotta Valdez (Veronica Osorio) is an obvious Carmen Miranda, the Brazilian bombshell 40s icon who danced with bananas and other assorted fruit on her head and was briefly the biggest movie star in Hollywood during the World War II years. But she is also a nod to Hitchcock’s film Vertigo, that had a character named Carlotta Valdez.*
- *Twin Gossip columnists Thora and Thessaley Thacker (Tilda Swinton) are a fictional take on word-wielding arch enemies Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. Hedda Hopper helped fan the flames of hysteria and Communist witch hunts during the 1950s.*
- *DeeAnna Moran (Scarlett Johansson) has her pregnancy covered up as did Loretta Young who flew to England to have her child in secrecy and then claim she was adopted. Also, when she seduces Joseph Silverman (Jonah Hill) she could be channeling Lauren Bacall’s seductive scene from To Have and Have Not.*
- *The Hollywood screenwriters are a humorous, satirical slap at the disgraceful episode of Hollywood Black Listing. This “study group” cell of communists believe the studio cheated them out of revenue from the films they wrote. Presented satirically, the “study group” of radicals, dubbing themselves “The Future,” espouse a Marxist interpretation of historical materialism, as they leisurely gather in Burt Gurney’s rather lavish beach house. They also announce their “scientific” worldview and quibble over methods for bringing about the downfall of the ruling class. Interestingly, the communists are working on a jigsaw puzzle in the beach house and as one tries to fit in the last puzzle piece, it is wrong shape.*
- *The Soviet submarine is a reference to the film The Russians are Coming in which a Russian submarine runs aground on off the coast of Cape Cod so the 9 men landing party arrive at the beach house of Walt Whittaker, a vacationing playwright from New York City. Maybe a stretch, but the scene brings to mind Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 silent film, Battleship Potemkin, his revolutionary propaganda film in which the sailors rebel against their overlords. The film’s potential to influence political thought through emotional response was noted by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who called Potemkin “a marvelous film without equal in the cinema ... anyone who had no firm political conviction could become a Bolshevik after seeing the film”. The film*

brought world-wide fame to the new Russian cinema and film ranks with The Birth of a Nation and Citizen Kane as one of the most influential films in cinema history. It also introduced new concepts of film editing and montage to cinema.

- The parlor melodrama resembles A Place In The Sun*
- The scene going to collect Clooney in the car and the approach to the house is very much the same as North By Northwest with Vandamm House. The interior was almost exactly the same with the open plan living room and white stone walls.*
- Watching the dailies of Laurence Laurentz's film, Mannix sees the opening with people waltzing and the music is "The Merry Widow's Waltz." This is an exact replica of a leit motif in Hitchcock's obscure film "Shadow of a Doubt" in which Theresa Wright figures out her Uncle Charlie is actually the Merry Widow killer!*
- The subtitle of Ben Hur is also A Tale of the Christ. Several scenes in Hail Caesar pay tribute to Ben-Hur. But also note that the Coen brothers's movie is set in 1951 and that is the year when Quo Vadis, the first of the classic New Testament epics, came out.*

Favorite Scenes: (In addition to C. C. Calhoun in the editing room)

-The discussion with religious leaders:

This scene also propels the theme of "split" society, iconically symbolized by the huge statue of just the lower half of a male nude on the studio grounds. The word "split" first comes up when Mannix appeals to the Legion of Decency, inviting a Jewish rabbi, Catholic priest, Greek Orthodox patriarch, and Protestant minister to see if there was anything religiously offensive in the biblical epic in production. The hilarious theological argument that ensues leaves Mannix confused, especially when the Catholic priest makes a distinction between "God" and "Son of God". Is God "split," Mannix asks? "Yes," replies the priest, "and no." The word comes up again when movie star Baird Whitlock is kidnapped by some Communist screenwriters who say that mankind is "split" between the people who do the work — like them — and the studio chiefs who profit from their work. But here, too, a pipe-smoking philosopher suggests that there may be some sort of unity behind the division. And all of these themes are ultimately touched upon in the final speech that Whitlock's character is called upon to give at the foot of the cross in the movie within the movie.

Other Notations:

-It's not the "extras" who are the Communists, as Hobie suggested, but ironically the seemingly patriotic sailor is actually the defecting Russian communist collecting the ransom for Baird Whitlock

Memorable Quotes:

"Would that it were so simple"

"Forgive me Father for I have sinned"

"Joe is most reliable person on planet.. he's a professional person."

.....



.....

See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, adedic@pacbell.net

Film Discussion Group (FDG) organizer