

Barton Fink ★★★★★

Year of Release: 1991

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Hollywood movies, good or bad, tend to be fairly predictable, since they almost always conform to the conventions of a genre. A successful movie can overcome this limitation in a number of ways. It may add a novel twist to an otherwise familiar story line. Or it may, for example, make you worry about the protagonist even though you *know* he or she will triumph in the end. And then, there's *Barton Fink*, which favors breaking the mold over bending the rules.

Written, directed, and produced by brothers Joel and Ethan Coen (*Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*), *Barton Fink* is a shockingly original vision, that rare Hollywood production which strays from the pack to create its own unique universe. Remarkably, the Coens have made a film which is virtually impossible to pigeon hole into any one particular genre (or any three for that matter), and it is precisely this elusive quality which makes *Barton Fink* such a rewarding experience. The Coens offer the viewer genuine suspense, the kind where you don't have a clue what's going to happen next. It's a strange and wonderful sensation.

Set in 1941, the movie stars John Turturro in the title role as an idealistic playwright whose burning desire is to convey the plight of the common man. When his latest play becomes a hit on Broadway, Fink's agent talks him into moving to Hollywood, where he can make good money writing movies. In L.A., Fink encounters a cornucopia of oddballs, starting with the bossy studio chief (Michael Lerner) who assigns him to write a B-wrestling picture. In his flea-bag hotel, Fink strikes up a friendship with his down-to-earth next door neighbor, Charlie Meadows, a door-to-door insurance salesman played by John Goodman. Suffering from writer's block, Fink finds himself spending more time shooting the breeze with Charlie than he does writing. So he seeks the advice of W.P. Mayhew, an alcoholic novelist who is modeled after William Faulkner and played with verve by John Mahoney. Mayhew isn't much help, but Fink hits it off with the famed writer's secretary/lover (Judy Davis). And there you have the key players in a bizarre tale which has minimal plot but plenty of atmosphere and off-beat humor.

The movie plunges you into Fink's psyche and creates a dream-like mood which is reminiscent (but not derivative) of David Lynch's best work. The Coens demand absolute creative control over their films, and you can clearly see the results in *Barton Fink*. Their idiosyncratic perspective hasn't been diluted by script doctors or meddling studio executives, and consequently, the style and tone of *Barton Fink* are exceptionally consistent and assured. Dripping with metaphors, the movie revels in ambiguity and offers heaping portions of food for thought.

The Coen brothers are widely respected in Hollywood for their writing, especially for their sharp, intelligent dialogue. But they also are masters of visual storytelling, and *Barton Fink* finds them at the top of their game. Joel's fluid direction, Roger Deakins' mesmerizing cinematography, and Dennis Gassner's surrealistic production design come together to cast a hypnotic spell, transfixing you to the screen. The haunting film lingers in memory long after the credits roll and the lights come up.

Of course, directing also involves working with the actors, and Joel has elicited inspired performances from his cast. Turturro, who masterfully conveys Fink's self-absorption, plays an unappealing character. But when he's on the screen, you can't take your eyes off of him; he's simply riveting. Goodman, who has a near-perfect batting average in supporting roles, convincingly plays Charlie as the ultimate common man, but it's not until the film's finale that you realize just how effective the performance has been. As the hyperactive studio mogul, Lerner is hilarious; his animated delivery is deliciously energetic and deserves an Oscar nomination. The movie stumbles only in the casting of Davis, who seems wrong for her small but important role as Fink's romantic interest.

Barton Fink has other pleasures as well, including Carter Burwell's musical score, the recreation of 1940s Hollywood, and a wickedly macabre sense of humor. This rich, unconventional fable may be too much for some viewers to swallow, but one thing is certain: the movie won't go in one ear and out the other. Don't leave your brain at the door; you're going to need it for this one.