

## B Sides--MILLER'S CROSSING REVISITED

Contributed by Bruce Frigeri  
Wednesday, 28 October 2009

The growth of Netflix as a source for older titles, along with the growing reliance of pay cable networks on older libraries of films for programming has created an unprecedented opportunity for audiences to revisit, or discover, some great films that have been lost in the clutter of the last decade of voluminous and mediocre filmmaking. Over the next few months I hope to occasionally highlight some titles that resonate for me years after their initial release. Most of these will be independently produced films, or at least films produced outside the studio system. Notable among these is the Coen Brothers' MILLER'S CROSSING, the work that marks their maturation from skilled craftsmen into serious filmmakers. I hadn't seen it in over ten years. Now it seems like it is in an endless programming loop on the Encore family of channels and I have watched it three times in the past couple of months.

I've always had a place in my heart for MILLER'S CROSSING. Gabriel Byrne has never been better as Tom Reagan, right hand man to Albert Finney's gangster boss, Leo. The rest of the cast is equally compelling, with John Turturro as a sleazy hustler and Jon Polito as Leo's rival, Johnny Casper, standing out. The story takes place in some fictional mid western, depression era city and chronicles the deadly struggle between Leo and Casper for control of the town.

MILLER'S CROSSING is often remembered for its stylized dialogue—"What's the rumpus?" or "You gave me the high hat!", but what has always resonated with me is the film's focus on moral codes, or "ethics" as Johnny Casper calls them. Byrne's Tom is a man of dignity and principal. In fact, it's all he really has and values. Tom's struggle to live by his own moral code is at the heart of the film and is wonderfully visualized by his obsession with his stylized hat. He even dreams about losing his hat and chasing it through the woods—one of the best images the Coens have ever crafted.

The film is too smart to accept Tom's dedication to his moral code at face value, however, and this skepticism is what I believe deepens the film and almost makes it great. Is such a code anything more than just self destructive posing; something that is as superficial as a Derby Hat? Moreover, is keeping it really worth the price one has to pay? MILLER'S CROSSING shows the consequences for a man so committed to what he thinks is right. It is also clear eyed enough to explore what happens to those with no code at all. The cinematography in this film is remarkable for its evocation of a bygone era. Everything is burnished wood and shadow.

Composer Carter Burwell, who had worked with the Coens since BLOOD SIMPLE, wrote an unforgettable score that has become synonymous with MILLER'S CROSSING. Its bittersweet, Gaelic influenced orchestrations are the perfect accompaniment to a narrative that explores the price of honor, loyalty and love. I've only owned two sound tracks in my life. The first was the Maurice Juare score for Peter Weir's THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY. The second is Carter Burwell's masterpiece for MILLER'S CROSSING. Check this one out. It's a near perfect film that shows two of our most talented filmmakers hitting their stride and starting to fire on all cylinders for the first time.