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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
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Toronto Film Fest Day 2: Two Hits, A Fun Miss and Then Malaise

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Day 2 of the Toronto Film Festival and I'm still waiting for my friends' dog Momo to get used to me. He went into a frenzy when I came home last night, laid in wait outside my room in the morning, leaped at me when I hugged my friend Noriko and barked like crazy until I left. The (very) quiet streets of Toronto were a relief. Now where can I find doggie treats?

This morning is the Joel and Ethan Coen movie *A Serious Man*, the first test of how easy/difficult Toronto can be. The theater only holds 582 people. But I had a pleasant surprise: my badge has a little "p" on it which gives me a teensy bit of extra priority. Hallelujah. But my friends in the longer line got in as well, so Toronto really does seem hassle-free.

A SERIOUS MAN *** 1/2 out of **** -- I don't know if I should call this an unexpected treat after they won the Oscar. But *A Serious Man* is so distinctively a Coen Brothers film -- and so successful -- that it seems like a rebirth. No irony here. No distancing or sour comic tone. No outside source material. It feels bred in the bone and deeply felt. The story is set in 1967, with our hero a college professor and Job-like character beset by one trouble after another. (I defy anyone to review the film and *not* reference Job.) His wife wants a divorce because she's in love with an unctuous man who constantly hugs Larry Gopnik (a wonderfully restrained Michael Stuhlbarg) and needs to discuss everything in a reasoned, calm manner that is utterly infuriating. Larry is up for tenure but someone is sending anonymous letters denigrating him to the committee. His son is having a bar mitzvah but is in hock for \$20 to the local juvenile delinquent pot dealer. Larry also has to deal with an awkward bribe from a Korean student that escalates in bizarre ways. Did I mention his brother (Richard Kind) is living on their couch, constantly draining some sort of oozing sore? On the bright side, the sexy neighbor next door bathes in the nude. That's a catalog of plot points, but not a good summary of the feel of this film. It's the most universal -- and yet the most Jewish -- movie the Coens have ever made, even though it has a close kinship with the over the top *Barton Fink*. Of course, getting specific can make any experience universal and that's what they achieve here. Who hasn't wondered, why me? Who hasn't yearned for answers? Who hasn't thought things

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couldn't get worse and then invariably been proven wrong? Their wicked humor is here: Larry is stranded at a local motel and having a crisis at work when his son calls to complain that the TV show *F Troop* is coming in fuzzy. The series of rabbis and lawyers and doctors all proffer advice, but when someone has something truly useful to reveal, of course they drop dead in front of him. It's deadpan but real, funny but sad, absolutely true and a fable for our times. It's such an odd duck, I thought I might have to start defending it, but the people around me all seemed to be on the film's wavelength. And yet what does the opener (in which a peasant woman stabs a dybbuk in the heart) actually imply? The price of not confronting evil head-on? Or the danger of letting fear and mistrust make you act hastily and without reason? One acquaintance called the film a Rosetta Stone for understanding the Coens. But they've never spoken in a foreign tongue that needed translating. They just cloaked their fears in comedy and heightened drama. Here, they have the nerve to stare the trouble right in the eye in this, their most honest film. Me, I'm running away but it's fascinating to see them not even blink. Can't wait to see it again. Another Oscar contender.

Well, I ran right from *A Serious Man* to Jason Reitman's *Up In The Air* with a heavy heart. The law of averages says I'm unlikely to see two really good Hollywood movies in a row.

UP IN THE AIR *** 1/2 out of **** -- Well, I was wrong. George Clooney and Vera Farmiga make a sexy couple in this romantic drama with bite. Clooney is a man who specializes in firing people -- he's great at coming into a company for a day, calling in people one by one and "letting them go" with a wry touch or brief insight that keeps the people from imploding (and more to the point, from suing). But his real passion is for frequent flier miles. Clooney loves to fly, loves to stay in hotels, loves to rent cars and loves to...avoid life? Unlike in the novel by Walter Kirn, in the film Clooney's character has never been married, perish the thought. When he bumps into fellow road warrior Farmiga, it's a match made in the Executive Lounge waiting area at JFK. They whip out hotel cards, compare notes on car companies and click on every level: especially on the level of no commitment or no fun. Single is what they want. Not even "single," for that implies the potential for dating, for marriage. Uh-uh. Seeing them spark and trade details of who is in what city when so they can arrange a play date is contemporary naughtiness at its best. Clooney's air-tight, impersonal, first class life is upended when college grad Natalie (Anna Kendrick) convinces his company they can fire people over the internet, potentially grounding him forever. She joins Clooney for a trip to Detroit to gain some hands-on experience and it's a delight to see him and Farmiga cluck over and guide Kendrick both personally and professionally (though they may be the ones who need the most help). The film couldn't be more timely, with its compelling montage of people being fired and then reacting in a thousand different ways. A light romantic comedy, it gains more gravitas and then smoothly segues to Clooney reconnecting with his family, getting serious about Farmiga and...well, you can do the rest. But you can't. An easier film might have stopped there. But *Up In The Air* is bolder and goes on quite a bit longer, frustrating our expectations and avoiding the smooth romantic-comedy landing for an ambiguous crash landing with Clooney still up in the air about where he wants to go. Not Reitman. He's taken a major leap forward and Clooney and Farmiga have chemistry to burn. (She's certainly got her eye on a Supporting Actress nod.) This is sophisticated, adult fare and another potential Oscar contender, especially in a year with ten nominees for Best Picture.

Whew. Two in a row, from Hollywood no less. Others admire *Up In The Air* but don't seem quite as bullish as me. Still, I'll wait for the reviews instead of my tiny sampling of opinion. I see **Hollywood Reporter has already raved** about the Coens film, which I imagine will be the first of many at the very least respectful reviews. (Respectful is the tone for *Variety's* take.) I scramble over to a new venue (the first time I'm leaving the Varsity on Bay St. above the Indigo bookstore) to catch *Valhalla Rising*, which I know nothing about except there are Vikings.

VALHALLA RISING ** out of **** An arty Viking film? Why not? From the director of the *Pusher* trilogy, this is a moody and fairly engrossing look at a man captured by other men and forced to fight to the death other prisoners for their amusement. Our hero has one eye and a vicious way in the ring (he never loses, never even comes close) and you know it's only a matter of time before he loosens those chains. A young boy that feeds him teams up with the man when he escapes (brutally, bloodily -- this is a slow film with exceptionally vivid violence when it strikes). They team up with/are dragooned into a group of Christian Vikings headed for the Holy Land but sideswiped by a fog into a path for Ireland or perhaps America. Very little happens here, but it looks very striking and the quirky score -- an organ at one point, at others an anachronistic electric guitar -- keeps your attention. But despite its would-be commentary on Christian crusaders and their bloody spreading of the faith, it all adds up to little more than a lot of atmosphere and just a little plot. The 90 minutes don't drag, but they don't skip by, either. *The 13th Warrior* it ain't.



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The rest of the day is a low-key disaster. First, I need to file a [profile of Matthew Sweet](#) before he performs in New York City tonight. But finding a free Wi-Fi spot (or even one I can pay for easily) proves frustrating until I discover that Starbucks Canada offers two hours of usage a day *free* to any customer who signs up online. God bless Canada! So I bounce between Starbucks and the press office, secure a midnight movie ticket and then get utterly lost when striking out for a new venue, even though it turns out to be across the street from the Eaton Centre. The location was *much* farther away than I was told.

So I trudge back, only to find out the closest bookstore with a copy of Walter Kirn's *Up In The Air* is at the Eaton Centre, so back I trudge, finally spotting the cinema where *Solomon Kane*, the movie I missed, is playing. I press my nose up to the box office window and then move forlornly on. I hit another screening just because the timing works out. The film has the very unpromising title *Melody For A Street Organ* and the Ukrainian film doesn't seem much better. The child actors who star are very forced and the translation of the dialogue is weak. But it's the subtitling itself that kills me. It's fuzzy, yes *fuzzy* and incredibly distracting. After 40 minutes, I give up because I'm hungry and tired and need to write and all the dialogue is *fuzzy*, which is awfully tiresome.

Back to the *other* Indigo to file this story, when I find out someone contacted me to appear on their TV show tonight at 9 on CP24 but I didn't check my mail until 8:53 p.m. Oh well. I might try and talk my way into the midnight showing of the new Ethan Hawke vampire flick or just head home and read Kirn.

Tomorrow I'm looking forward to a documentary about Disney's animation resurgence (it began with *The Great Mouse Detective*, in my book), either a well-reviewed French film *I Am Love* or the new spin on *Dorian Gray*, either *The Trotsky* (a *Rushmore*-like high school comedy) or *The Road* and whatever else I can fit in. I also receive a handwritten (!) invite from the director of a documentary on Hugh Hefner (which just got a good review in the *Hollywood Reporter*.) But it conflicts with the only screening of *Trotsky*, so I'll take my chances and try to catch it on Thursday. I definitely don't want to miss it and am sorry I won't be at the premiere with Hefner himself in attendance Saturday at 2 p.m.

Visit me online at [my website, MichaelGiltz.com](#), and find links to the weekly pop-culture podcast I co-host on iTunes called Showbiz Sandbox, the solo podcast show Popsurfing featuring my interviews with artists, Facebook, Netflix and more.

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In a time when most of Hollywood can only do remakes, comic book adaptations, and adaptions of mediocre TV shows the Coen brothers are a treasure. Impossible to pigeon hole, always trying new things from comedy to drama to various shades in between, and always finding the best actors and bringing out the best in them. Can't wait to see the new movie.

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I've seen only one Ukrainian movie during my life, and it may have been a Ukrainian-Russian co-production. It was (A Driver for Vera), set in 1962 Yalta. I saw it while I was in Russia in fall 2006. The main thing that I derived from the movie was that in terms of lifestyle and culture, anyone could confuse the USSR with the USA (if I remember right, one scene portrayed people listening to American music). I didn't see the whole thing, because the bus on which I was traveling suddenly jerked and we had to stop and wait for another bus. I never did find out what happened that made the bus do that.

Anyway, that movie was worth seeing.

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