

movies

Can Coens regain mojo at Cannes?

• Filmmakers Ethan and Joel Coen create a buzz at the festival that's been good to them.

By MICHAEL GILTZ
Special to the Star Tribune

Can the Coen brothers do it again? The Twin Cities natives who have triumphed repeatedly at Cannes are once again stirring talk of being in the hunt for a major award today.

That talk centers on "No Country for Old Men," a humor-streaked drama about a guy (Josh Brolin) who stumbles upon a pile of cash from a drug deal gone bad and decides to make the play of his life. Tommy Lee Jones is the small-town sheriff who knows that Brolin is in way over his head. Neither of them counts on Brolin being tracked down by the relentless Anton Chigur (a scene-stealing Javier Bardem as a soulless killing machine).



JEFF CHRISTENSEN • Associated Press

Ethan and Joel Coen are debuting their latest, "No Country For Old Men," at the 60th Cannes film festival.

And the Coens don't usually count on outside material. But this movie (due out in the United States this fall, perhaps after playing the Toronto Film Festival) is based on a book by novelist Cormac McCarthy, author of "All the Pretty Horses" and the current apocalyptic bestseller "The Road."

Usually press-shy and taciturn, the Coens were reluctant even to characterize what McCarthy was thinking when they showed him the finished movie.

"He sat through the whole thing," said Ethan, the younger and slightly shorter brother. "He didn't leave. He didn't throw anything at the screen."

Joel jumped in with, "And he didn't hit Ethan on the way out."

As they've done since breaking out in 1984 with the shoe-string noir drama "Blood Simple," the two brothers finish each other's sentences and manage to keep a polite, low profile while promoting their quirky movies. And there's no better place for them to begin that work than at Cannes.

"We've always gotten a generally friendly reception, and they've been generally good for the movies," said Joel. "It's also the kind of movies we make. They may be in one respect or another out of the mainstream and more difficult to market. It

needs some attention and traction from a festival like Cannes. In the corner we [work in], it becomes important."

'A bloody classic'

The Coens' most recent efforts, "Intolerable Cruelty" (2003) and "The Ladykillers" (2004), both scored in the \$35 million to \$40 million range at the U.S. box office — a decent amount for their off-beat films — but left critics cold. "The Man Who Wasn't There" (2001) was a critical favorite, but sold only \$7 million in tickets.

Despite a bleak outlook and dour ending, "No Country for Old Men," which also stars Woody Harrelson, is so assured and funny it seems likely to garner great reviews and the Coens' best box office in ages. Variety dubbed it "one of their very best" and "a bloody classic," and that praise has been echoed throughout the festival.

So the Coens bring their star-studded, ambitious works to Cannes, and Cannes returns the favor. Three of their films have won the festival's best-director award ("The Man Who Wasn't There," 1996's "Fargo" and 1991's "Barton Fink," which also won the top prize, the Palme d'Or).

That acclaim is why their relatively low-budget movies



RICHARD FOREMAN • Miramax Films

Javier Bardem stars as a ruthless killer in "No Country for Old Men," which has already garnered praise from audiences and critics.

can attract major stars such as George Clooney and Brad Pitt, who have both signed on for the Coens' next project, "Burn After Reading."

"I can't believe I'm with the Coens," Bardem said. "I was in the Toronto Film Festival in 2001 with my first movie. [My new agent] said, 'Who would you like to work with?' I said, 'The Coen brothers.' She said, 'Well, that's not going to happen because they make American movies.' And now here I am with them."

Chigur isn't described (beyond his icy blue eyes) or given any background or history in the book, so the Coens felt free to hire Bardem. They gave him a ridiculous pageboy haircut that somehow is so awkward it makes Chigur all the more

scary: A man with such bad hair clearly doesn't care what anyone thinks about him.

"I went to a trailer and I went to the hairdresser and they did bop, bop, bop," said Bardem. "I saw these guys laughing their eyes off, like crying. I said, 'What happened? Give me a mirror.' I looked at it and said, 'OK, we've got a character.'"

Bardem's one reservation? He doesn't like violence, and his character is almost Terminator-like in his ruthlessness.

"Let me tell you about Javier Bardem," said Ethan. "I don't know what he told you. It's true he was initially reluctant, but he warmed to it to an alarming degree. He'd walk on the set and go, 'A-a-a-right [clapping hands together with glee], who do we kill today?'"