

**O Brother, Where Art Thou?** (12) ✓

Director: Joel Cohen  
USA/France 2000

25<sup>th</sup> February 2002

Running time:- 102 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: George Clooney (Everett Ulysses McGill), John Turturro (Pete), Tim Blake Nelson, (Delmar), Charles Durning (Pappy O'Daniel), John Goodman (Big Dan Teague), Michael Badalucco (George Nelson), Holly Hunter (Penny), Stephen Root (radio station man), Chris Thomas King (Tommy Johnson), Wayne Duvall (Homer Stokes), Daniel Von Barga (Sheriff Cooley).  
SCRIPT- Ethan Coen, Joel Cohen based on "The Odyssey" by Homer. PHOTOGRAPHY- Roger Deakins. EDITING- Roderick Jayes (i.e. the Cohen Brothers), Tricia Cooke. MUSIC- T-Bone Burnett.

...And so one might ask, looking at the direction credit. However, any Coen brothers fan will tell you that Joel always gets credited as director, Ethan as producer, and the writing credit is shared, although it is very much a joint exercise all the way through. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* tells of the adventures of three men, who break out of a chain gang in Mississippi during the Thirties and set off in pursuit of buried loot. And it demonstrates once again its makers unfailing ability to strike gold.

The Coen brothers first came to attention as editors on Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1983) and before long took the arthouse circuit by storm with a heartless and gory *film noir* called *Blood Simple* (1985). They are undoubtedly of the 'film buff' generation of moviemakers and their early work, though energetic, can be so greedy in its *homage* as to leave little room for depth and meaning. *Fargo* (1996) put an end to such critical dismissals and many found the unbridled sense of fun in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) irresistible. What a Coen film always does deliver is hyperbole; whether in the cartoon-like violence (Charles Durning's skyscraper dive in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994)) or in the dialogue, which gives ordinary Joes access to a highly cultured post-modern vocabulary, it is the ironic awareness that saves it. And the urge to exaggerate also drives the technical virtuosity of these films, which achieve stunning visual effects with relatively meagre resources.

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, as you will have gathered by now, is nominally at least a homage to Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels*. And there are similarities: both are set in the 30s, at a time of social crisis, and both involve characters who quixotically search for something, only to discover that their greatest gift, that of entertaining the people, was theirs all along. But this isn't enough for the Coens; they need a thicker cultural soup. So for 'Travels' think 'Odyssey', hence the Clooney character's name,

Homer, and the encounters with Sirens, Cyclops (John Goodman) and so forth. Now for the genre. It's a chain gang movie, the first of which, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, ushered in the 30s social conscience picture, that very phenomenon which Sullivan aspired to imitate. Then there's *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), the Newman film that contains some of the hayseed high jinks of *O Brother* (remember the hard-boiled eggs?) but is also heavy with symbolism: Luke as Messianic figure. And compare the taciturn guard wearing reflector shades of that film with the hound-wielding one of this.

And that's not all. We also have the Ku Klux Klan (we are in Mississippi after all) and gangster Baby Face Nelson (evoking *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Dillinger* (1973) more than the 30s gangster classics, which were city-set). There's an allusion to the Tennessee Valley Authority, brainchild of the New Deal, in that the valley containing the hidden treasure is about to be flooded for a hydroelectric project.

Country music completes this hymn to the Deep South, again recalling *Bonnie and Clyde*, and before you decide that you don't like corn-ball lyrics in close harmony, listen to the trio's impromptu rendition of *I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow*; I guarantee you'll be scanning the shelves idly for the soundtrack CD!

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* does not have the power of the brothers' best work, and the narrative chugs along as in most 'road movies'. But it does have the great faces of Coen movies past (Turturro, Durning, Goodman, Hunter) and Clooney in a superb debut. Above all it is a civilised entertainment, done with sureness of touch and taste. If you have not seen a Coen brothers film before, then here is a good enough place to start.

David Clare