

Berlin Festival to roll out with Coens' Hail, Caesar!

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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The Berlin Film Festival will open on February 11 with Coen Brothers' Hail, Caesar!

This will be the second time that the Brothers will get the opening night Red Carpet honour. In 2011, their True Grit — an American Western, based on Charles Portis' novel with the same title, opened Berlin. True Grit was first adapted to the screen in 1969 with John Wayne playing the lead.

Hail, Caesar! has an impressive star cast, which includes George Clooney, Josh Brolin, Alden Ehrenreich, Ralph Fiennes, Jonah Hill, Scarlett Johansson, Frances McDormand, Tilda Swinton and Channing Tatum.

Set during the golden era of Hollywood in the 1950s — when studio bosses were virtual dictators with some of the biggest actors held captive by unfair contracts — Hail, Caesar! confines itself to a single day. A studio fixer (Brolin) is urgently summoned to try and find a star named Baird Whitlock (Clooney), who has vanished from the sets of Hail Caesar — an epic tale of Christ's life.

This story reminded me of another movie by the legendary Italian master, Nanni Moretti, called We Have A Pope. Michael Piccoli plays Cardinal Melville, who on being elected Pope (after the death of the Pontiff), fails to appear on the balcony at St Peter's Square. What follows is a hilarious chase to find the new Pope.

Hail, Caesar! has been on the drawing-board since 2004, and it was originally to have been

set in the 1920s. The film was to have followed actors performing a play about ancient Rome. This plot was shelved, and in 2013, the Coens reworked Hail, Caesar! to allow the narrative to unfold in Hollywood.

Joel and Ethan Coen are extraordinarily adept at switching from one genre to another — handling each with finesse and brilliance. They have done comedies, tragedies, horror, crime, romance, Westerns and so on.

As a young boy, Joel bought a Vivitar Super 8 camera, and the brothers made movies of what they saw on television. Their first work was called Kissinger, Man On The Go. Which probably got the boys going as well.

Their first real film came in 1984, Blood Simple — about a crafty bar owner, who hires a private detective to kill his wife. The movie had all the ingredients that would go on to make the Brother's later films — twisted plots layered over simple stories and black humour.

We see this most vividly in the 1996 Fargo (which premiered at Cannes), where a travelling car salesman, desperate for money, kidnaps his own wife and demands a huge ransom from her father. The plan goes awry, the wife is killed and a cop (essayed by Francis McDormand), seven months pregnant (Vidya Balan in Kahaani reminded one of her), smells something foul when she meets the salesman, and slowly closes in on him, like a predator on a prey.

In 2007, No Country for Old Men sees a Vietnam war veteran stumbling upon a two-million-dollar drug money, which he keeps. But there are others out to grab it as well, and one of them is a sociopathic killer (played with terrifying cruelty by Javier Bardem, whose rise after that was dramatic).

The Coens' Burn After Reading in 2008, a black comedy laced with hilarious extra-marital affairs, and A Serious Man (2009), talking about a Jewish guy who loses belief in his faith after professional and personal losses, are some of the other works that have been critically applauded.

Hail, Caesar! promises to be another feather in the Coens' cap.

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Orson Welles

An unpublished manuscript of American director Orson Welles has been found.

The 1972 manuscript, Crazy Weather, has been discovered by an Australian professor, Matthew Asprey Gear (who authored At the End of The Street in the Shadow: Orson Welles and the City).

Crazy Weather reflects Welles' passion for Spain, even while denouncing the country's macho tendencies, including bullfighting — which has since then been banned, much like Jallikattu in Tamil Nadu.

The manuscript — which was to have been the script for a film about a love triangle featuring an American in Spain on his way to watch a bullfight — is said to have been inspired by the writings of Ernest Hemingway.

Hemingway got the Nobel Prize for Literature for his works, which included The Sun Also Rises and Death in the Afternoon. Both spoke endearingly about Spanish bullfighting — which in an important way promoted Spain as a macho tourist destination in the 1960s. Welles lived in Spain then and he was quite upset with this kind of promotion linked to bullfighting that he intensely disliked.

"Spain was one of his passions," Gear told the media recently. "By late 1973, he was

thoroughly disgusted by the superficial appropriation of Spanish culture by American tourists who were inspired by Hemingway. There were a lot of tourists coming to Spain, seeing the bullfights, inspired by Hemingway's life and his books. Welles saw this as very superficial and he really detested the machismo. He clearly had that in mind when he wrote *Crazy Weather*." The American hero of *Crazy Weather*, Jim Foster, is on his way to a bullfight with his Spanish wife, Amparo. They meet a youth who is critical of Foster's fondness for bullfighting, flirts with Amparo and later deflates their car tyres. The youth also mocks Foster for his cliched idea of Spain — which is a macho Spain.

The manuscript may be seen as a strong denouncement of bullfighting — a sport that Welles abhorred. The director had seen many animals die on the ring and had turned against bullfighting.

Welles is best regarded for his 1941 drama, *Citizen Kane*. His debut feature, *Citizen Kane* is still considered by many to be the best movie ever made.

The quasi-biopic examines the life and legacy of Charles Foster (played by Welles himself), a character based on the American newspaper magnate, William Randolph Hearst, and also Chicago tycoons, Samuel Insull and Harold McCormick.

First shown as a philanthropist, Foster gets power hungry, and ruthlessly so. And not surprisingly, Hearst did not allow any mention of *Citizen Kane* in any of his newspapers.

Hopefully, *Crazy Weather* will go on the floors soon and tell us all about how cruel fighting a bull can be.

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