



Inside Llewyn Davis

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The Cannes Film Festival's system of using coloured badges to denote a hierarchy amongst attending critics and journalists can result in some almighty scrums to gain entry to the hottest tickets. Such was the case with the Saturday-night unveiling of the Coen brothers's *Inside Llewyn Davis*, which fortunately ended up acting as a soothing, intoxicating balm to take the sting out of bruised feelings left by the ridiculous jostling to get in to see it.

It actually ended up being a fitting start to watching the tale of a guitar-strumming folk singer, a melancholic and original shaggy-eared charmer of the highest order which features a star-making performance from Oscar Isaac, a sincere, emotive portrayal of the early '60s New York folk scene and a magnificent movie cat bearing more than a passing resemblance to the feline companion in *Breakfast At Tiffany's* in terms of symbolic significance.

Set in 1961 Greenwich Village and drawing on real people and events for its story, Isaac's title character is mired in career frustration. The talent is there: Oscar's folk ballads are deep, earnest and melodic; the rewards are not, as he's scraping a grim and meagre existence and having to beg friends and non-friends alike to sleep on their couches while encountering disapproval and chagrin from his nearest and dearest.

Among them are the married folk singer Jean (Carey Mulligan), pregnant after their brief fling and furiously demanding that Llewyn pay for her abortion; her husband Jim (Justin Timberlake), whose sunny disposition and jolly, consumer-friendly tunage are finding favour and financial reward; and the Columbia University professors who offer their shambolic friend occasional sanctuary. They also own the ginger tom which ends up embarking with Llewyn on his strange, episodic journey to Hell (Chicago) and back – a hitchhiking detour in which they both share a car with a drug-addled blues man (John Goodman, marvellous) and a James Dean-alike beatnik (Garrett Hedlund).

Inside Llewyn Davis is an inspired companion piece to *A Serious Man* with its beleaguered protagonist sapped by pained circumstances, and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in its odyssey narrative and depiction of bluesy music men (there's a bit of Barton Fink thrown in for good measure). But the Coens' restraint with *Inside Llewyn Davis*, shot in a dusky, muted haze that transports the viewer back in time, yields a more endearing film and a tight, elliptical narrative that's full of hidden depths and delights, not to mention abundantly glorious humour and joyous songs (magnificently arranged by T Bone Burnett) which are allowed to play out in full. Timberlake crooning a jaunty pop-folk number called *Please Mr. Kennedy* with Isaac and the baritone asides of *Girls'* Adam Driver ends up being both a comic and musical highlight ("Please Mr. Kennedy, don't shoot me into outer space...").

As for Isaac, his handsome hangdog demeanour and beatific voice make him the perfect foil to endure the relentless indignities heaped upon him by the Coens, and still emerge with his dignity intact. He's a revelation, making his serious man a deeply relatable presence. Llewyn seems condemned to walk the earth as a musician whose vaunted reputation amongst his peers will never translate to commercial success, something which has obviously not been a problem for the Coens although Davis's deceptive slightness may well leave it prizeless when it departs the Cannes Film Festival. In the big wide world, though, the brothers's pleasure-guided musical saga seems set only for a bright and rosy future.

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