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CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON

You may have heard that Ang Lee's latest work, the historical-drama/romance/martial-arts/action pic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is in Chinese with English subtitles. It's true. Yet no filmgoer with a subtitle phobia should be dissuaded from seeing the movie, because it's such a thrilling, intoxicating, heady ride that its subtitles are absolutely superfluous. Ang Lee has created something rather amazing – an accessible, American-audience-friendly foreign work – that will leave you gasping at its audacity and superior visuals while finding yourself completely enraptured by its two sets of heartbreaking romances; it's a Chinese

Titanic

with a better script.

Chow Yun-fat and Michelle Yeoh play Li Mu Bai and Yu Shi Lien, a pair of warriors whose respect for one another has led to an unspoken romantic attachment. But their courtship is interrupted by the arrival of their longtime nemesis, the Jade Fox (Pei-pei Cheng), who killed Bai's master and plans on dispatching Bai and Lien as well. Thrown into the mix is the Jade Fox's young disciple, Jen (Zhang Ziyi), who has surpassed her mentor and become a practiced and deadly thief, and who has romantic difficulties of her own – she's set to marry a "suitable" man while holding a torch for her true love, the desert bandit Lo (Chang Chen). The film addresses these entanglements while featuring numerous action sequences involving the theft of Green Destiny, Bai's mystical sword with unparalleled powers.

Written by Mike Schulz

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Crouching Tiger's human element is rich and detailed – it often resembles Anthony Minghella's graceful handling of *The English Patient* in terms of romantic themes set against an epic background – and features a magnificent cast; best of all are Yeoh, displaying the reserved, gradually unleashed passion of Emma Thompson's Elinor in Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*

, and Ziyi, deliriously duplicitous and, most impressive for such a young performer (she's 19), free of mannerism. But let's be honest: It's the action scenes that everyone is talking about, and with good reason. With fight choreography by Yuen Wo Ping, who created those jaw-dropping mid-air battles in

The Matrix

, the film's visual effects are flabbergasting: Characters run up walls, leap over rooftops, collide, and spin with unimaginable quickness, and make you feel as uncontrollably happy as a kid seeing a stage version of

Peter Pan

for the first time.

If it seems I've spend an exorbitant amount of space comparing *Crouching Tiger* to more mainstream Hollywood works, that's intentional: Ang Lee, whose direction of the movie is never less than spectacular, has made a popular blockbuster that both stays within the limits of its genres and completely transcends them. Gorgeous to look at, beyond exciting, and emotionally wrenching, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* just might be the first foreign film to, deservedly, snag the Best Picture Oscar. Miss it at your peril.



O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?

The Coen brothers' movies always seem at their most inspired when they employ a tight narrative, as in *Miller's Crossing* and *Blood Simple*, and at their most erratic when the "plot" is an excuse for a series of comedic vignettes that don't lead anywhere, as in

The Hudsucker Proxy

and

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The Big Lebowski

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

is a mixture of the two types; its structure follows Homer's

The Odyssey

in rough outline and several details (yes, you'll be treated to a blind prophet, the sirens, and a menacing cyclops), but there's still enough that's out-of-left-field to include George Clooney singing bluegrass in a fake beard and a Ku Klux Klan rally designed as a Nazi musical number. I don't know what nonfans of Joel and Ethan will make of all of this; I, for one, found it fascinating and frequently hysterical.

Clooney, John Turturro, and Tim Blake Nelson play three escaped convicts in the Depression-era Deep South, and the film follows their path as they try to reclaim a fortune that Clooney has hidden in the home he shares with his estranged wife (Holly Hunter). Simple enough, but when have the Coens ever believed in "simple enough"? Our leading purveyors of form over content (even in their masterpiece, *Fargo*), the Coens are in a giggly, adventurous frame of mind in *O Brother*; somehow, the action manages to include a gubernatorial race (featuring a hilarious Charles Durning), a blind record producer (Stephen Root) who makes unwitting radio stars of the convicts, and the distinct possibility that Turturro's character has turned into a toad, and it all feels freewheeling yet inevitable; the audience I saw the film with actually applauded when the deus ex machina arrived and made sure all was right with the world. Joel and Ethan's script is filled to brimming with laughs both verbal and physical – their early attempt to board a train while chained together in a minor masterpiece – and many of the performers, particularly Clooney, Nelson, and John Goodman (revisiting his malevolent *Barton Fink* portrayal), are comic perfection.

Like many of the Coens' works, *O Brother* seems to run out of inspiration as it reaches its close, and the subplot featuring Holly Hunter remains unrealized and leaves her with nothing to do. But the film is still a refreshing winner, aided by a stunningly good soundtrack and, yet again, Roger Deakins' astounding cinematography. Many critics decry the Coens for their lack of depth, but with their latest go-round, they prove again that no filmmakers give emptiness more substance, or have so much fun doing so.

Two and a Half Cheers: "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," "O Brother, Where Art Thou?", and "The Wedding Singer"

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~~WEDDING SINGER: The only hybrid of the two movies, 'The Wedding Singer' is a~~