

Surreal 'Barton' may be too bizarre for some

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Brothers Joel and Ethan Coen have concocted a bizarre movie set in 1941, the story of a New York playwright in Hollywood, *Barton Fink* (20th Century Fox).

Against his better judgment, Barton Fink (John Turturro), a self-absorbed poet of the common man, is lured to Tinseltown at the insistence of studio-mogul Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner), who wants him to write screenplays with "that Barton Fink feeling."

Settling into a cavernous hotel that has seen better days — its stationery gamely proclaims: "The Hotel Earle: A Lifetime or a Day" — Barton draws a total blank on writing a wrestling movie to star Wallace Beery.

His long days and nights before his typewriter are relieved only by Charlie (John Goodman), his next-door neighbor, a huge, eager-to-please insurance salesman who seems as lonely as Barton.

Desperate for advice to overcome his writer's block, Barton seeks his idol, W.P. Mayhew (John Mahoney), who has succumbed to writing for the pictures. He finds that Mayhew has become a hopeless drunk whose secretary-girlfriend, Audrey (Judy Davis), is essentially ghostwriting for him.

As Barton grimly tries to evade describing his non-existent story to Lipnick, inspiration finally comes — but only after a shocking, unexplained death and even more disturbing revelations about his seemingly gentle neighbor.

What co-writer/producer Ethan and co-writer/director Joel Coen have here is a



John Turturro (left) portrays Barton Fink, a screenwriter holed up in a hotel room battling writer's block. John Goodman is Charlie Meadows, the friendly, talkative traveling salesman next door in *Barton Fink*. Melinda Sue Gordon—Twentieth Century Fox

stylishly captured period, place and state-of-mind. The self-conscious direction and craftsmanship in this movie — visuals, sound, settings, costumes and editing — are all superior. What's less than compelling is the sluggish pace, the emotionally remote lead character and the abrupt mood change from satire and dark comedy to what amounts to horror.

In fact the audience is left wondering if the Goodman character was real or all part of Barton's fevered imaginings. In any event, Goodman and Turturro give stand-up-and-take-notice performances, each seeking companionship but neither really listening to the other.

Much of the film's frequent biting humor emanates from Lerner as the lar-

ger-than-life studio boss who deftly satirizes the familiar movie mogul stereotype.

Aside from the fine production design, crisp dialogue and offbeat comedy, viewers are likely to find "Barton Fink" bizarre and not accessible. Like the oft-stressed wallpaper in Barton's hotel room, it starts coming unglued well before its surreal climax.

Due to some gory violence, discreet sexual innuendo and minimal rough language and profanity, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'Defenseless'

An attorney defending the wife of her

murdered lover finds that she herself may be "Defenseless" (New Line).

Shrewdly brittle Los Angeles attorney T.K. Katwuller (Barbara Hershey) is reeling from a series of nasty shocks: her client-lover Steve Seldes (J.T. Walsh) turns out to be married to Ellie, her college roommate (Mary Beth Hurt); Seldes produced sleazy porn movies; and, worst of all, someone murders him just after she confronts him and in a rage stabs him in the shoulder with a letter opener.

Things get dicier when T.K. conceals all this from suspicious Detective Beutel (Sam Shepard) and agrees to defend Ellie on the murder charge. Though the often-jilted wife certainly has motive, T.K. discovers that their only daughter has a more compelling reason.

Meanwhile an obvious suspect is a vengeance-bent madman (George P. Wilbur), whose 14-year-old child was exploited in Seldes' sex films.

Directed by Martin Campbell in the "film noir" tradition that sees the world as a bleak and sinister place, the movie maintains suspense within the confines of lurid melodrama.

The plot however is fairly dense, derivative, and relies on the sensational: sexual exploitation, incest, adultery, wife abuse and implied castration. These elements, though, are handled with considerable discretion and are depicted in a wholly negative light. The lead character comes to regret her casual past affairs.

Because of intermittent violence, sexual innuendo, fleeting nudity and rough language, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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