

# 1969 Oscar winner shows two of the most memorable movie characters in Buck, Rizzo

By Oliver Spivey  
Staff Writer

There are a handful of great movies whose images have been indelibly etched into our national psyche, and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) is unquestionably one of them.

Many of you will recall Jon Voight's smiling and naïve Joe Buck walking down a congested New York sidewalk with Nilsson's "Everybody's Talkin'" blasting on the soundtrack. And who can forget Dustin Hoffman's Ratso Rizzo shouting, "I'm walkin' here, I'm walkin' here," at a taxi in the middle of a busy street?

As unforgettable as it is, *Midnight Cowboy* is not a perfect movie. Director John Schlesinger makes some serious blunders along the way. What we end up with is a movie about two fascinating characters who transcend the unnecessary plot contrivances forced upon them.

The movie is another rendering of the classic tale of the country boy who comes to the big city and finds out just how ugly the world is. Essentially, the film is a story of disillusionment, one concerning an American dream that becomes an American nightmare.

Voight's Joe Buck thinks he has it all figured out: leaving Texas, he'll take a bus to New York, get a small place to stay and rely on his boyish

charm and cowboy getup to seduce rich, middle-age women.

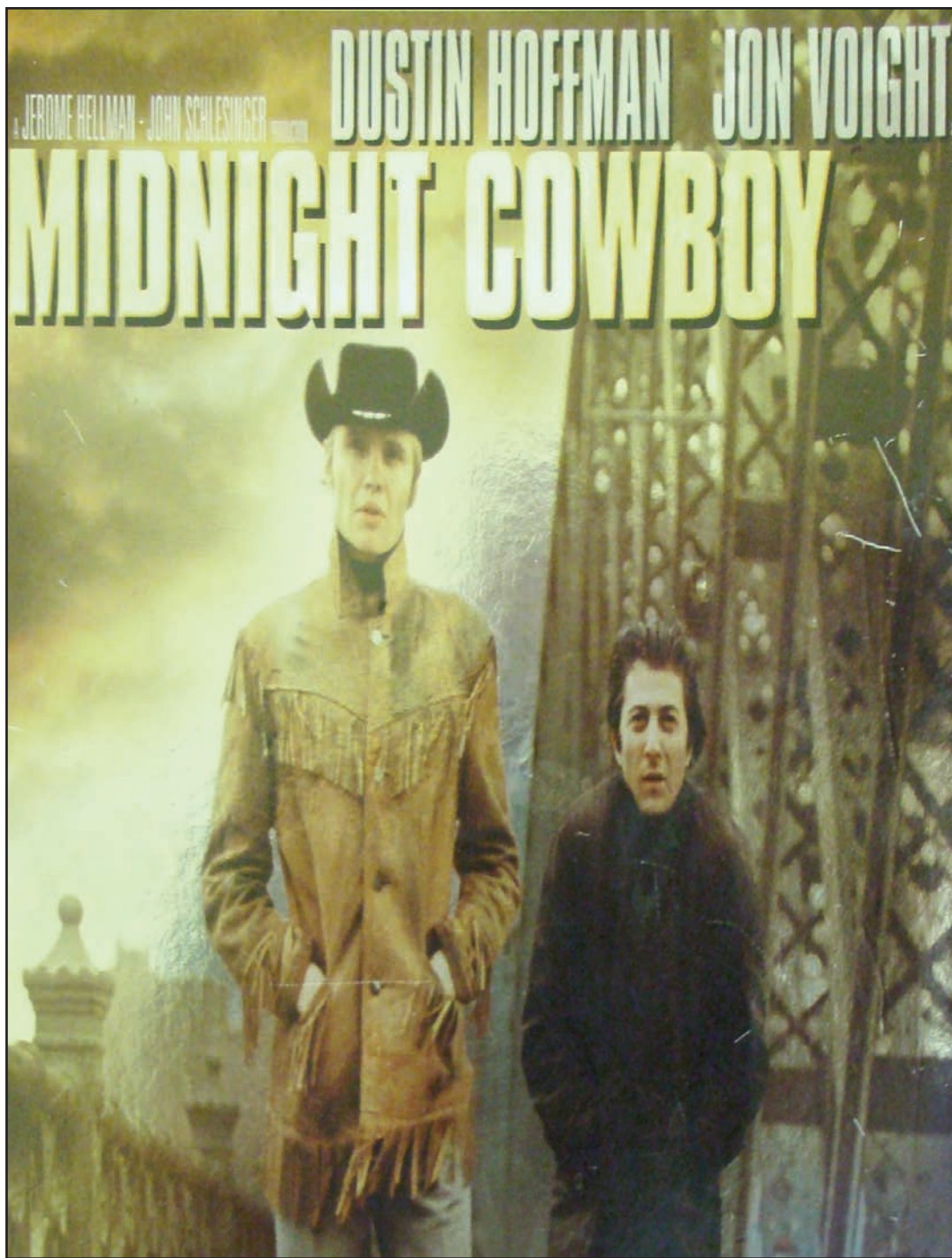
Down on his luck, Buck meets the small-time swindler Ratso, whose name is more than appropriate. The two form an unlikely pair and Buck eventually moves into Ratso's cramped room in an abandoned apartment complex. They survive by stealing bits of food, planning unachievable cons and by Joe Buck's sad self-prostitution.

Unfortunately, it is one of these prostitution scenes that become one of the movie's biggest shortcomings. The scene takes place in a hotel where an older traveling salesman offers to pay Buck for sex. When the man begins to feel guilty for what he is about to do, he decides to not go through with it.

This ruins Buck's last desperate attempt to get enough money to put himself and the dying Ratso on a bus bound for their fantasy escape of Florida.

In all the scenes that come before it, no matter how grim the circumstances, Buck is depicted as a gentle soul who never resorts to the use of force. In this particular scene he beats the man's face in with a telephone and steals his money.

You could argue that the scene stresses his love (yes, this is a love story) for the sickly Ratso, but I think it strikes an entirely false note. There is not much established earlier in the film—or in those rather pointless flash-



backs—to suggest that the gentle Buck would act this way.

Agreeing with some other critics, I also think another thing that mars the film is a completely arbitrary and excessive sequence that takes place at a psychedelic, Andy Warhol-like party. Here Schlesinger really drops the ball with a dated

sequence that would seem to exist solely to please "groovy" feeling hipsters that may have been among the original audience. The sequence itself has no functional value in serving the larger narrative.

The final issue I have is with the excessive montages that show us Buck and Ratso passing time,

while the theme song is played over and over. Something Roger Ebert has termed "the semi-obligatory lyrical interlude." This became some kind of fashionable statement in movies of the '60s and '70s.

As a matter of fact, it has become such a common feature in modern movies that even the most

cautious of critics must try to overlook it. The problem with it, however, is that music is commenting on things that the film should be showing us through real character interaction. Instead of letting characters develop through dialogue, we get a bunch of pop songs that try to do it for us.

Rather than a whole lot of trendy, pseudo-artistic camerawork, *Midnight Cowboy* cries out for a sparer, more minimalist approach. I think it deserved an approach similar to the unadorned but intelligent style Darren Aronofsky used to service Mickey Rourke in 2008's *The Wrestler* (which was my pick for the best American movie of that year).

What's amazing is that, even with all its flaws, *Midnight Cowboy* emerges as a great movie for us.

Hoffman, in one of his earliest screen roles, shows us he is destined to be a persuasive force in the American cinema and the likeable western charm that Voight brings to his character is played in exactly the right key.

When I saw this film for the first time, I was completely floored by the emotional power generated by the actors, striking me at that entirely instinctive level of emotional response. I think all great movies should do that. If it hasn't already, let *Midnight Cowboy* do the same to you.

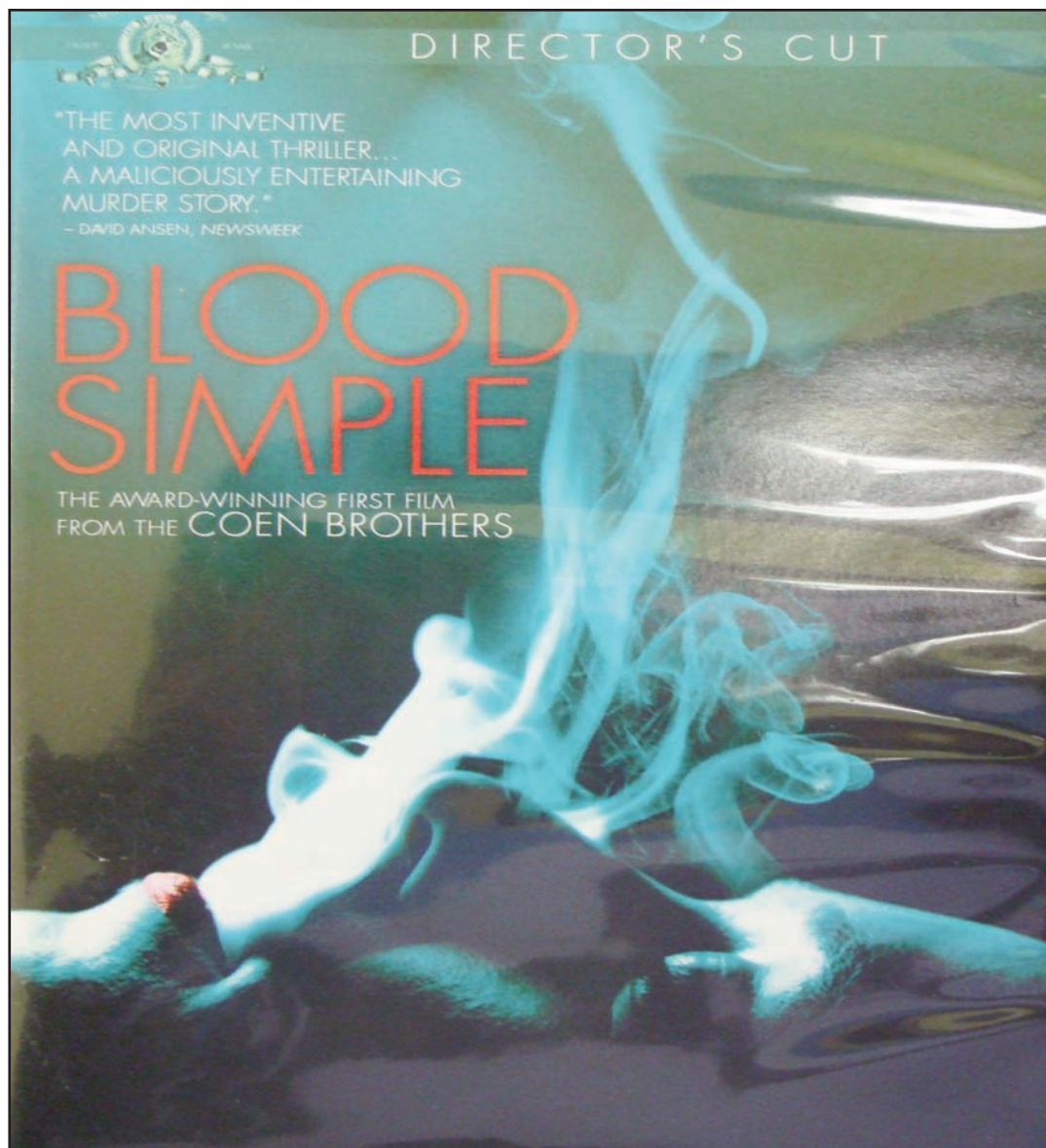
# Coen film a tale of murder, double-cross

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At the beginning of Joel and Ethan Coen's *Blood Simple* (1985), we see shots of an expansive and forever indifferent Texas landscape. A voice-over narration is soon heard on the soundtrack, introducing our ears to the sleazy southern drawl of the film's murderous private eye (played to twisted perfection by M. Emmet Walsh). His bizarre narration suggests an honestly gloomy perspective on human nature and the uncertainty of best laid plans, while the desolate images visually testify to his point of view. The doomed tone of the film is established for us at the outset.

The Coen brothers open their Cormac McCarthy-based masterpiece *No Country for Old Men* (2007) much in the same way, but with Tommy Lee Jones giving us his wistful opinions about the good ol' days and the increasingly wicked violence of the modern world.

With this, their very first feature, the Coens crafted a film that remarkably codified many of the thematic musings, visual techniques and eccentric cinematic touches (including their knack for wonderfully offbeat dialogue) that have defined their brand of cinema for the last 25 years.



Without explaining away the whole plot, which is uncannily clever, I'll relate only the basics: Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya), the owner of a shady country bar, hires a grotesque private investigator (Walsh) to find out information on his cheating wife, Abby (played by the Coen's favorite, Frances McDormand). Marty soon finds out that Abby is cheating on him with one of his bartenders, Ray (John Getz).

The jealousy is eating Marty alive, so he makes his seedy private eye an offer he can't refuse: \$10,000 to murder both his wife and Ray. Walsh's private eye agrees to do the job. But things turn out quite differently from the original plan.

The venal hit man decides to fake the murder of Abby and Ray and instead kill Marty, thus eliminating the only person who could possibly implicate him—while get-

ting away with the money, of course. So far so good, but things take a tragically unforeseen turn at this point in the plot.

Revealing anything further in terms of plot is not doing a favor for those of you unfamiliar with the film. It's sufficient to say that all of the following scenes add up to something like a gruesome and ironic nightmare for the characters involved.

But these events do not unfold in nightmare

logic (like we find, say, in Martin Scorsese's *After Hours*). In fact, they unfold in such strictly logical terms—one choice, action or event leading appropriately to the next—that it is almost insanely logical.

The Coens give us a movie that is touched with the originality of born filmmakers, but one that is also an amalgam composed of the finest bits and pieces from the heyday of film noir.

One can trace *Blood Simple*'s lurid adultery and spousal murder scheme to Billy Wilder's incomparable *Double Indemnity* (1944), its shocking and nightmarish dilemma of corpse disposal to Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and its scenes of a car speeding down a rainy highway at night seem to echo Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945).

The intricate cinematography of Barry Sonnenfeld is one of the film's great pleasures. Brilliantly emulating (but never surpassing) their master, Alfred Hitchcock, the Coens and Sonnenfeld give this lower-budgeted movie a degree of visual polish and sophistication to be envied. The Coens, like Hitchcock, are savage ironists, and use counterpoint like few other contemporary Hollywood directors could hope to.

In *Blood Simple*, as in many of their films, the

brothers often cue ridiculously upbeat music to scenes of brutal violence; the ironic effect of such flourishes should be savored by anyone who deeply appreciates movies.

The Coens also enjoy punctuating moments of character tension in their films with objects that act as correlatives to the emotion being expressed in the frame (also borrowed from Hitchcock). In this film, they give us a mosquito zapper that sparks intensely at a moment early in the film when Marty's anger flares up, a newspaper that slams into a screen door right when Ray tells Abby of his vile deed in a farmer's field and a final, haunting moment involving the leaky pipe of a bathroom sink.

The Coen brothers always seek the road less taken, and they've taken us down some strange roads of human behavior with wholly original works like the brilliant *Fargo* (1996), the (slightly overrated) cult comedy *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and the fierce black comedy *Burn After Reading* (2008).

If you think the Coens have been great as of late, I urge you all to watch—or re-watch—the film that gave rise to these invaluable cinematic artists.

You'll be a poorer movie fan if you don't. Trust me.