

THE TALKIES



RAISING COEN

by Bruce Bawer

H. I. "Hi" McDunnough (Nicolas Cage), the goofball protagonist of the hilarious offbeat comedy *Raising Arizona*, is not only a crook: he's a hapless, pathetic small-time crook, a crook with no imagination at all who keeps getting caught for holding up convenience stores—and who keeps getting paroled, after a few months in the slammer, because he never uses live ammo. About his recidivism, Hi (who narrates the first ten minutes or so of the film) tells us, "I tried to stand up and fly right, but it wasn't easy with that sumbitch Reagan in the White House. I don't know, he seems like a nice man. Maybe he has bad advisors."

This refusal to take responsibility for his own actions is characteristic not only of Hi but of everyone around him. The world of this film—which was produced by Ethan Coen, directed by Joel Coen, and written by both of the celebrated young brothers, who were previously responsible for the stunning *Blood Simple*—is a world whose denizens, amoral, selfish, stupid, and tacky though they be, are nonetheless highly conversant with the current clichés and jargon of pop politics, pop psychology, and pop sociology; they've been educated not to behave virtuously but to transfer blame, to get in touch with their feelings, to "like themselves." At the Tempe, Arizona, "maximum security facility" to which he keeps returning, for instance, Hi is part of an encounter group at which a huge, evil-looking con articulates his feeling that he is a woman trapped inside a man's body. So it goes.

The third and last time that he gets paroled, Hi marries Edwina, a.k.a. Ed (Holly Hunter), a corrections officer, and they move into a "starter home in suburban Tempe"—i.e., a mobile home in the middle of the desert. Hi takes a factory job drilling holes in metal. "These were the happy days," Hi tells us, while we watch him and Ed eat

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dinner from TV trays in an awful little paneled room filled with black velvet paintings, "the salad days, as they say." But one horrible circumstance threatens their perfect bliss. They want a baby, but Ed is barren, and the adoption agencies won't give them a child because of Hi's prison record. (As Hi puts it, "Biology and the prejudices of others conspired to make us childless.") A despondent Ed loses "all interest in both criminal justice and housekeeping."

It is at about this time that Nathan Arizona (Trey Wilson), the smarmy owner of Unpainted Arizona, a heavily advertised store that sells unpainted furniture, becomes the father of five babies—the "Arizona quintz," Harry, Barry, Garry, Larry, and Nathan, Jr. Hi, watching the news reports of the infants' birth, decides that it's unfair for Nathan Arizona to have five babies when he and Ed cannot even have one—so, urged on by Ed, who has quit her corrections job, he sneaks into the nursery of the Arizona house and purloins Nathan, Jr. (though neither he nor the baby's father is ever really certain that this one is Nathan, Jr.). They take the baby back to their mobile home, where Hi has strung up a banner reading WELCOME HOME SON, and Hi sets up a camera to take a portrait of his new family (or, as he puts it, "family unit").

But the kidnapping of Nathan, Jr.—whom both Hi and Ed, characteristically, continue to refer to by that name—doesn't restore their bliss. On the contrary. Hi is racked with guilt, troubled by nightmares of a vengeful, monstrous, death-dealing "Lone Biker of the Apocalypse." Moreover, complications ensue almost immediately in the form of the arrival, at Hi and Ed's home, of two pals of Hi's, Gale and Neville, who have escaped from the Tempe prison and want shelter—and who are puzzled as to why Ed isn't breast-feeding her baby. ("Ma'am," Gale explains gently, "if you don't breast-feed him he'll hate you for it. That's why we ended up in prison.") Then there's Hi's awful Polish-joke-

telling boss, Glenn, who recognizes Hi and Ed's baby from the TV news and threatens to turn them in unless they give the baby to him and his wife, Dot, who have been wanting another youngster (they already have half a dozen or so). And finally there's that death-dealing biker, who turns out not to be a figment of Hi's guilty imagination after all, but rather a professional manhunter named Leonard Smalls, who's out to find Nathan, Jr., and sell him to the highest bidder. Though all of these characters eventually find out, then, that Hi and Ed are kidnappers,

it never occurs to any of them to do the right thing and return the baby to his parents. Everybody's got an angle, and before the film is over, Nathan, Jr., has been kidnapped and re-kidnapped five times over.

Though *Blood Simple* was a murder drama and *Raising Arizona* is a farce, the two films have a great deal in common. Both are set in the Southwest, whose dry climate and open spaces reflect the moral aridity and intellectual vacuity of the films' charac-

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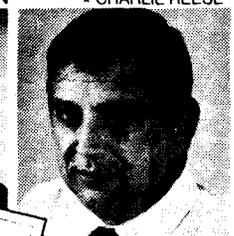
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ters. Both films are about people matter-of-factly committing outrageous crimes (in *Blood Simple*, a man hires someone to murder his wife in cold blood); in both films, criminals betray each other, and violence begets violence. Both films, indeed, are gruesomely, grotesquely violent, violent to the point of hilarity, like a Monty Python movie. (The most memorable sequence in *Blood Simple*—in which a man has to reach out of one window and into another, in the next room, to remove a knife that has been plunged through the wall and into his hand—has a very similar counterpart in *Raising Arizona*.) Like some of the Python movies, moreover, the films of the Coen brothers, for all their absurdity, nevertheless reflect an acute and pained awareness of the evil of which human beings are capable.

But to go on too long about such matters would be to suggest that the film is more serious than it is. In the main, *Raising Arizona* is a top-notch screwball comedy. Perhaps the funniest sequence is one that begins when Hi and Ed drop by a convenience store to buy some Huggies for Nathan, Jr., and Hi, unable to resist the temptation, holds up the joint. The ensuing chase—complete with police cars, a vicious watch dog, and a pimple-faced counterboy who turns out to be far more bloodthirsty than Hi ever was—builds wonderfully, has a terrific pace, and is as elegantly choreographed as a Balanchine ballet. (Nicolas Cage, it should be said, is far more effective here than in his uncle Francis's *Peggy Sue Got Married*; one is almost tempted to say that Cage was born to play Hi McDunnough—a frightening thought.)

Another particularly funny sequence is the one in which Gale and Neville, having found out Nathan, Jr.'s true identity, tie up Hi and make off with the baby, determined to hold him for ransom. Yet they're not completely evil: when they stop to rob a bank, they're conscientious enough not to leave the baby alone in the car for five minutes—so they drag him, car seat and all, into the bank with them. Soon afterwards, when they just miss losing Nathan, Jr., due to a foolish mishap, Gale and Neville weep tears of relief and Gale decides that they'll never give him up: "He's our little Gale, Jr., now."

One of the things that separate this movie from the typical witless and pallid contemporary film comedy is its plethora of wacky, weird details:

the vulgar five-baby wooden crib, for instance, in the Arizona nursery, on which the boys' names are printed over their respective heads; the sign reading FARM SUBSIDY CHECKS CASHED HERE in the rural bank that Gale and Neville rob; the Mondale-Ferraro sticker on Gale and Neville's car. Another delightful aspect of the film is that the Coen brothers make fun not only of contemporary American manners and morals but of contemporary American film: *Raising Arizona* is full of camera moves and angles that parody the visual clichés of *Friday the Thirteenth* and *Halloween* type movies, as well as of Steven Spielberg. *Raising Arizona* is not a work of genius, by any means, but it is inspired and inventive throughout—and this alone places it head and shoulders above most of the comedy films of the day. □

THE PUBLIC POLICY



COMPETITIVE URGES

by John A. Barnes

The TV ad shows a middle-aged man—presumably a laid-off blue-collar worker—huddled under a blanket. "Something could have been done back in '87," he says disgustedly. But apparently nothing was and the result, we surmise, was disaster for America. "It's a damn shame," he declares. Then, at the fade-out, the logo of the United Auto Workers flashes on the screen and a voiceover warns: "We need a tough trade policy!"

The idea is catching. "No more Mr. Nice Guy," blares *Forbes* magazine. "For going on forty years, the U.S. has been sacrificing national interest to the bigger cause of keeping the Free World prosperous. Simple arithmetic says the party is over."

Exactly what sacrifice the editors of *Forbes* are talking about is not immediately clear, since during those forty years the U.S. has without question been the most prosperous country in the world. Nevertheless, 'tis the season to be a pessimist, especially inside Washington. In 1980, it is pointed out, America was the world's largest creditor nation, with over \$150 billion in outstanding loans. By the end of next

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year, we will be the largest debtor, owing perhaps as much as \$500 billion around the world—easily eclipsing Brazil.

For as long as the dollar appeared to be overvalued on world markets, the growing trade deficit could be safely dismissed as nothing more than a phase. But even after Treasury Secretary James Baker succeeded in forcing down the value of the dollar, the deficit continued to grow; and now the doom-sayers are arguing that there is something structurally wrong with the U.S. economy: Reaganomics is built on a house of promissory notes, and the 1980s will be remembered as the last spree before the start of our post-imperial decline.

The list of complaints seems endless. American cars need 3.5 repairs a year compared with 1.1 for Japanese cars. The U.S. is the king of technological inventiveness but cannot exploit its own discoveries—the VCR, for example, was invented on these shores, but it took the Japanese to market it. The best graduates of the elite schools shun manufacturing for the glamour of high finance and the law, choking the country with litigation and accounting tricks that prop up dying corporations.

Thus the Democrats, joined by some

in the business community and organized labor, have discovered "competitiveness," a wonderful term that can mean almost anything to anybody. For business, it means labor working longer hours for lower wages; for the education lobby, it means higher salaries for teachers; for scientists, it means more government grants for "basic research"; for big labor, it means "managed trade" and a "level playing field."

Now none of this is intended to suggest the dreaded *p*-word—"protectionism." Everybody, it seems, admits that the protectionist Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act strangled world commerce and largely brought about the Great Depression. "Nobody here wants protectionism," says South Carolina Republican Strom Thurmond. "We just want to keep out a few imports, that's all." Restricting those imports, of course, would hurt consumers. But Congress is responding to different pressures. The interests affected by those "excess" imports are large and often concentrated in congressional districts. Consumers, on the other hand, are an amorphous breed, dispersed around the country and largely uninterested, as a class, in the ramifications of trade policy.

A few examples, however, show the hidden damage of the "competitiveness" obsession. Early in this decade, "free trader" Ronald Reagan slapped a "voluntary quota" on the number of Japanese cars that could be imported into this country. The idea was to allow the inefficient and unresponsive U.S. auto industry to get back on its feet. The quotas stayed on for nearly five years and undoubtedly saved jobs. But Robert Crandall of the Brookings Institution estimates that during that period consumers paid about \$1,500 more per car, thanks to the quotas. Each job "saved" cost something like \$150,000, money that won't go to create other jobs in other sectors of the economy.

Then there's textiles. Keeping out lower-cost shirts and dresses made in the Far East may save a few jobs in North Carolina (where the unemployment rate is something like four percent). Meanwhile the poor (especially) end up having to shell out more for their clothes.

But the competitiveness boys are trying to make larger points as well. It is certainly true, as they say, that the U.S. economy has been undergoing