

My Dad Takes The Coen Bros. Back to Shul

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Fyvush Finkel, a venerable star of Yiddish theatrical melodrama, was expecting Joel and Ethan Coen to feed him nothing but juicy lines for their new film, "A Serious Man." Yet he felt they'd given him dreck. So Finkel, 86, did the heretofore unthinkable: He kibitzed the Coens on-set, and then, unbidden, rewrote 10 pages of the latest of their always-inviolable scripts.

It was 2008, and the brothers were filming in their home town of St. Louis Park, a Minneapolis suburb that would serve as the backdrop for "A Serious Man," their latest cinematic ode to tragicomic weirdness, this time grounded in their Jewish upbringing. As Joel later explained, it's a picture "filmed in the context our own youth in St. Louis Park, but with a made-up story."

Personally, however, nothing in their brilliant oeuvre could top the weirdness of Joel Coen phoning my 83-year-old father at home for a reason also never before thought possible: The sibling auteurs wanted an outsider's opinion on one of their scripts, specifically the 10 pages Finkel found so noxious.

Joel heard through the St. Louis Park grapevine that my father, Markle, was the most vital and fluent member of the local

Jewish Community Center's Yiddish club. Dad, a widower, had recently hooked up with an 84-year-old friend, Roz Baker, who'd invested \$500 in "Blood Simple," the Coens' first film, and was still receiving small royalty checks. Her son, David Amdur, one of the Coens' best friends since junior high school, told Joel that the most proficient local source was my father. Roz agreed.

If you're getting the sense that it's a small world in the Coens' home town, you'd be right. And such a prolific town it is in terms of Jewish achievers: Among St. Louis Park's roughly 10,000 Jews circa 1967 (when the new film is set) were near or actual teenagers [Allen Franken](#), who went from "Saturday Night Live" to the U.S. Senate; Tommie Friedman, who alchemized into the celebrated New York Times columnist and author; Norm Ornstein, perhaps Washington's smartest political polymath; and of course "Joe" and "Eth" Coen, who vow to spend the rest of their lives collaborating, because, as Ethan said the other day, "two heads are better than none."

Oh, and now my father, the brothers' octogenarian script adviser. When Joel Coen gave my pop a call, he politely asked if Dad would compare for accuracy, tone and narrative flow their own 10-page prologue, written in Yiddish with English subtitles, against Fyvush's scribbled rewrite. Joel and my father talked for about 10 minutes about linguistic nuance; the essence of 19th century Jewish Eastern Europe; and Fyvush vs. the Coens. Joel immediately dispatched two versions of the script for exegesis.

In "A Serious Man," Finkel plays Reb Groshkover, a

mysterious sage. During the film's opening scene -- which has no linear connection to the rest of the movie -- he wanders inside a rickety, 19th-century shtetl lean-to, inhabited by a peasant couple. Some crazy stuff ensues. Turns out the Reb may or may not be a dybbuk, a mischievous Jewish specter.

Two days later, Dad dialed one of filmdom's most guarded private numbers. "Joel, the first version wasn't bad," he said, "but the second one was pure *dreck*." My father waved his hand in the universal language of "Feh!" (The brothers' script was the first version, though my father was unaware of which was whose.)

And the story?

"Ach," Pop said, "It's the usual shtetl shtick. A woodchopper. A poor old woman. A dybbuk. Who needs it."

Hey, what about me? The Coens were my favorite local heroes. I'd seen their films more than 100 times (granted, 36 viewings were ["The Big Lebowski"](#)), while my father had never seen a single one, and even turned down a chance to invest a few hundred bucks in "Blood Simple" back in the mid-1980s. ("Meshugas," he still says.)

I was the guy in the family who made a living sweating out narrative arcs. Before he retired from medical practice, Markle Karlen had been a people doctor, not a script doctor. But at that point, unlike virtually everyone I've ever known from St. Louis Park, I had never laid eyes on the Coen brothers in my entire 48 years. I was a few years younger (Ethan is 52; Joel 54), but we'd all gone through the same public and Hebrew school systems, had our bar mitzvahs at the same synagogue, and had recently spent time quizzing my father.

Watching the movie the day it opened in Minneapolis -- there were lines around the block -- was a lot like going home (then again, I live seven minutes away from St. Louis Park). It tells the tale of beleaguered and a cuckolded physics professor named Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), who attempts to divine the existential meaning of his disintegrating life in St. Louis Park from three incomprehensible rabbis.

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Gopnik lives with his family -- adulterous wife Judith, pot-smoking son Danny and bohemian daughter Sarah -- on a street called Fern Hill. That was the name of my elementary school.

"Mr. Turchick," the Hebrew School principal Danny Gopnik was sent to after listening to his transistor radio with an earplug during his lessons, was the same Mr. Turchick I was condemned to see after I'd committed the exact same crime.

My first girlfriend was seventh-grade femme fatale Kori Samsky, who introduced me to the French kiss; Professor Gopnik's femme fatale next-door neighbor is Mrs. Samsky, who introduced him to infidelity. (The Coens were friends with Kori Samsky's older brother. You follow?)

Built-In Irony

The Coens didn't need to inject their usual surreal sense of character and space into this paean to their youth: Jews on the prairie is seemingly enough of a bizarre incongruity. Growing

up in St. Louis Park, however, is not an exercise in Lake Wobegon-goes-to-Hebrew School.

Although roughly 20 percent of the suburb's residents are actually Jewish, the image of a gilded ghetto remains indelible in a state where only 42,000 Jews (29,000 in Minneapolis) dwell amid 5.2 million people. And despite Minnesota's progressive tradition, Midwest populism has historically carried a troublesome whiff of anti-Semitism. (In 1946, Carey McWilliams, editor of the *Nation*, wrote, "Minneapolis is the capitol of anti-Semitism in the United States.") As late as the 1990s, bagels were being thrown onto the rink when St. Louis Park's high school hockey team took the ice at away games.

Though anti-Semitism has eased over the years, a unique kind of Jew evolved in this atmosphere. This fact was of supreme importance to the Coens when casting their film. "Jews in the Midwest just sounds abnormal," Ethan says. "We were determined to use as many local Jews as we could instead of resorting to the usual Hollywood ethnic type. We wanted to communicate that there are Jews on the Plains. It is a subculture, and a feeling, that is different from Jewish communities in New York or Los Angeles."

That unique "feeling" is perhaps one reason St. Louis Park's most famous natives almost always come back. Al Franken came home to Minnesota to challenge a coreligionist, Brooklyn-bred Republican incumbent Sen. Norm Coleman. During the campaign, Franken liked to point out that "I'm the Jew who was actually raised in Minnesota."

Days after Franken announced his candidacy in 2007, his first large rally was held in the gym of St. Louis Park Junior High

School. Dave Griffin, Franken's close friend since they met in the school's halls in 1963, introduced him with details of his old pal's run for seventh-grade class president. Franken won in a walk, with posters of him wearing a beard and a stovepipe hat atop the words "Vote for Honest Al."

Decades later, during the bruising Franken-Coleman battle, one of the only genuinely sweet moments was a commercial featuring Val Molin, Franken's fourth-grade teacher at St. Louis Park's Cedar Manor Elementary School.

Mrs. Molin filmed a spot for "Allen" in her natural "yer darn tootin' " accent, seemingly imported straight from the Coen brothers' ["Fargo."](#) The popular ad helped make the point that Franken was no New York carpetbagger.

Today, from his Senate office, he can tick off all his elementary school teachers with the rapidity of a Henny Youngman routine, minus any jokes. "Miss Jackson, first grade. Mrs. Morrison, second grade. Miss Bullock, third. Mrs. Molin, fourth. Mrs. Lungabaugh, fifth. Mr. Knudsen, sixth."

Thomas L. Friedman's timbre, meantime, turns from sober triple Pulitzer Prize winner to chairman of the St. Louis Park Chamber of Commerce when asked about his memories. "You can never go home again," he says, "unless you're from St. Louis Park."

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His first bylines came as a junior on the high school newspaper. Among those stories was an interview with Ariel

Sharon, who'd given a speech in Minneapolis. "My whole identity is St. Louis Park," he says, adding that the death of high school classmate Judy Bernstein on American Airlines Flight 11 on Sept. 11 "has partially informed my opinions of terrorism."

Friedman thinks there is a sui generis atmosphere to his home town that resulted in such an eruption of talent. "It was the mystery of a moment," he says. "It was this stew of a cosmopolitan community that had the tremendous stability of 'Leave It to Beaver.' We had a creative Jewish community mixed together during a progressive moment in politics when Minnesota meant Walter Mondale, Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey."

Friedman, who commands five figures per lecture on the Chautauqua circuit, has spoken gratis in St. Louis Park several times, helping to raise \$350,000 for a local Jewish nursing home and \$1 million for combatant casualties in Minnesota, among other causes.

He also spent his 50th birthday in Las Vegas with his best friends -- the same guys with whom he played cards during junior high school. Norman Ornstein, the political quote machine based at the American Enterprise Institute, also says he still considers St. Louis Park his home. The suburb's fame quotient might stem from its "warm environment for creativity," he speculates. "Conformity isn't valued in St. Louis Park. Great value was put on education, an offbeat sense of humor, and looking outside of ourselves to the rest of the world."

Interconnections to home often seem to entail zero degrees of

separation. Ornstein once went on a date with Friedman's sister, and he gave Franken his guest bedroom while the neonatal senator looked for Washington lodgings. Friedman, Franken and Ornstein all angled for parts in the picture, but the scheduling didn't work out. The Coens, meantime, owe their career to contacts and introductions made in St. Louis Park with several dozen friends and acquaintances; friends of friends; and acquaintances of acquaintances of their parents and neighbors from childhood.

In junior high school, Joel made enough money mowing neighbors' lawns to buy a Vivitar Super 8 camera. The brothers' first movie was a remake of Cornell Wilde's "The Naked Prey," which they renamed "Zeimers in Zambezi." Later, although still not shaving regularly, the Coens were soon making three-to-five-minute films with titles like "Henry Kissinger -- Man on the Go." "Ed . . . a Dog" was their remake of "Lassie Come Home."

"Blood Simple" was financed via Joel giving a story pitch in hundreds of St. Louis Park living rooms, showing a two-minute film clip to shake loose \$500 to \$5,000 from potential investors.

For a quarter-century, the Coens were my Loch Ness Monsters, my Moby-Dicks. The only bumper sticker I'd ever put on my car bore the keynote line of "The Big Lebowski": "The Dude Abides." So, last year, I decided, the time to cross paths had finally come. I would try out to be an extra in "A Serious Man," and somehow meet the men who'd long served as living proof that just because you came from Minnesota didn't mean you had to end up as a citizen of Garrison Keillor's state-of-mind, which is apparently composed entirely of village idiots.

The casting company instructions: "PHYSICAL LOOK: Specific characteristics represent 1967 . . . ASM is not a 'glamorous' film. WE LOVE INTERESTING FACES. The dorkier, the better!"

I could do this. I could do "dorkier." Tryouts were held in a nondescript building west of St. Louis Park. I went into a small room filled with nine other hopefuls, and a woman with a Polaroid took a group shot. I faced forward, snap. I turned to the side, snap. I turned to the door, please leave.

Rejected, I drove home, passing St. Louis Park High School. Despite my geographic pedigree, I would never be a Franken, an Ornstein, a Thomas L. Friedman, or even see from afar the Coen brothers. They would remain as ethereal and frightening as dybbuks, a pair of ghosts.

Then I got this assignment, and weaseled my way into an evening with the Coens at Minneapolis's Walker Art Center a couple of weeks ago. It was a fundraising event reserved for the museums' best-heeled patrons. Most major donors seemed to have given their tickets to their Richie Rich children; the audience seemed filled with postmodern cinema hipsters straight out of "Sprockets," Mike Myers's "Saturday Night Live" bit.

Over the years, the Coens had blown me off at the last second for two interviews. I'd been treated like dog-dirt at tryouts for extras. And now, as their talk concluded, I was being warned by a supercilious film company minion to stay far away. (Evidently he'd been tasked with protecting the Coens from human beings unworthy to grasp at their jacket sleeves.)

Panicking, I performed a one-man Green Bay Packers-style

sweep, and came within inches of running into Ethan's rear-end. Ethan, unperturbed, turned toward me, and I began babbling names we both knew at the speed of one of their favorite actors, Steve Buscemi.

Ethan shook my hand, apologized about the missed interview, and amiably chatted about life, movies, home. He also asked me to pass along greetings to mutual friends he wouldn't have time to call during this brief trip.

"Go say hi to Joel," he said, as the studio nabob looked on as if he needed a Valium the size of a pizza.

The elder Coen laughed, remembering my father's career as his script doctor. He too chatted warmly. "Say hi to your pop and Roz," he said.

"Did I do something terrible talking to you?" I asked Ethan, who'd circled back, seemingly trying to avoid the "Sprockets" crowd.

"No!" he exclaimed. "It's nice just to talk. And can you tell David [Amdur, Roz's son] I'm sorry we can't come over for dinner this trip?"

Dybbuks? Feh. Turns out they were just a couple of mensches from the old neighborhood.

Neal Karlen's most recent book is "The Story of Yiddish: How a Mish-Mosh of Languages Saved the Jews."