

THE HUDSUCKER PROXY

My favorite shot in Joel and Ethan Coen's, *Barton Fink*, was of the camera descending down the drain of a bathroom sink. It was a visually stunning feast for the eyes and the mind, and that is where the Coen brother's strength lies, in visuals. However, like many picturesque artists (e.g. Tim Burton), they lack the ability to present three-dimensional characters, and thank heavens they decided not to start in their latest film, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, for it would have ruined all the fun.

As the film opens we are introduced to Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins), the president of the Hudsucker Corporation. He is about to leap to his death from his forty-fourth floor office at exactly the same time that the company's gigantic clock rings in the new year of 1959. The god-like voice over narration beckons us to return to a month earlier when Barnes was just a clerk in the Hudsucker mailroom.

While Barnes slaves away in the bowels of the Hudsucker building, the original president and founder, Waring Hudsucker (Charles Durning), runs along his bowling alley size boardroom table and crashes out the window. He falls forty-four floors to his death, "Forty-Five counting the mezzanine," states one of the board members. No sooner does he hit the ground than second-in-command, Sidney J. Mussburger (Paul Newman), comes up with a plan to seize the company stock. They must hire an incompetent president, one who will let the stock fall to an all time low, then the board can distribute it among themselves. They hire as their proxy, Norville Barnes.

Into this web of intrigue comes fast talking, Pulitzer Prize winning reporter Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh), who goes undercover as Barnes' secretary in an attempt to write an expose on him. At first believing he is a complete buffoon, Archer eventually falls in love with Barnes and becomes his only means of support.

The Board members are now beginning to realize that Barnes is not a small town hick, but a visionary genius. He takes advantage of his new position and invents the hula hoop, causing a nationwide frenzy. As a result, the Hudsucker stock shoots up higher than ever, forcing the Board to think up a way to bring about Barnes' downfall.

Tim Robbins manages to make Barnes a likable person. He constantly mugs at the camera like a drugged out Mister Rogers, and it's easy enough to root for the guy. However, it is the supporting roles that will catch the eyes of most audience members.

Paul Newman has a lot of fun with his role as Mussburger. Chomping on a cigar that would make George Burns envious and speaking in a combination

Godfather-Hannibal Lecter tone, Newman projects all the necessary qualities to make his character a memorable screen villain. The scene where he is saved from death by Robbins plays off how conceited Newman's character is, resulting in one of the film's funniest satirical moments.

The revelation here is Jennifer Jason Leigh as Amy Archer. Doing a great impression of Katherine Hepburn, and talking faster than the Micro Machines man could ever hope for, Leigh gives her character a commanding presence, evident whenever she is on the screen. This great actress has been overlooked by audiences for her whole career, and, hopefully, will now be recognized as a true leading lady.

Jim True gets special mention for his hilarious interpretation of elevator operator, Buzz. Spouting such poetic verses as, "Hey buddy, my name is Buzz, and I make the elevator do what she does," True captures what Jim Carrey aimed for and missed in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. He goes completely wild but does not make his character an unpleasant annoyance. He's a welcome addition to an already grand cast.

There is not one realistic character in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. The people inhabiting the film are all archetypes symbolic of a certain character trait, Barnes, the hopeful nobody, Mussburger, the boss from hell. Any conventional movie would have failed with these sorts of characters, but then the Coen brothers are not conventional filmmakers, and it is thanks to their unique vision that the movie works so well. They are helped by a fabulous production design, courtesy of Academy Award winner Dennis Gassner. The sets are a wonder to look at and Gassner should be awarded once again for his efforts.

The film itself is a comic masterpiece, a funny throwback to the screwball comedy of the thirties. In a time of numerous run-of-the-mill films, it is refreshing to see one that manages to be both rooted in the past and yet have a contemporary air around it. The Coens may never be able to create realistic characters, but, if *The Hudsucker Proxy* is any proof, perhaps it is better that way.