

To the Wonder

Writer-director Terence Malick is known as a perfectionist filmmaker who micro-manages every angle and shot. For that reason, he has, prior to 2012, directed only five films in the last 40 years, including “The Tree of Life” in 2011. Wonder of wonders, Malick has now picked up his pace considerably. In less than a year he has come out with “To the Wonder,” a film which might have benefited from a longer shooting schedule or, perhaps, been better left in the can.

The film succumbs completely to what has marred parts of Malick’s earlier films: a willful obscurity. In this mini-review, I could summarize the plot, but, frankly, it isn’t worth doing because the “story” is mostly incoherent, as are some of the actors (like the muttering Ben Affleck). In trying to show the ecstasy then disillusionment of a love affair, the chemistry between his couple (the girl is Olga Kurylenko) is conveyed mostly by swirling, diving camera moves that stand in for character and personality.

Though the tumbling camera works best at the beginning when the couple is falling in love in France, with Paris and Mont St. Michel as backdrops, it seems both puzzling and trivial when they move to his home in the flat suburban confines of Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Malick has always loved his camera moving through high grass and reeds and here we get an abundance of it—standing in for--what? Another of his standard features, a languid, overwritten over-voice narration, doesn’t help move a narrative that is finally turgid. Then, about a third of the way in, there is a befuddling counter-element dropped into the film of a local priest (Javier Bardem), again over-voicing, having his faith tested for no clear reason. If this is meant by Malick to be a serious overlay of religious meaning, it doesn’t work; it just adds to the muddle.

Frankly, it looks like too much of “To the Wonder” consists of outtakes, appropriately taken out, of “The Tree of Life.”

(Rated “R,” the film runs 112 min.)

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