

The Tree of Life

Terrence Malick's "The Tree of Life," released in June, has already gained a reputation as one of *the* films of the year, occupying, to these eyes, a position attained last year at roughly the same time by "Inception," i.e., an enormously ambitious, spectacularly mounted film by a noted auteur who aims for profundity. It is the kind of mega-film that both strikes the eye and beguiles the mind of critics who admire its complexity and ambition.

For this film reviewer, "The Tree of Life" has a commendable, even touching, family saga at its core, but it is sadly burdened with a tri-partite structure that it cannot comfortably bear.

The core element concerns the O'Brien family: three pre-adolescent sons torn between their disaffected, disciplinarian father (Brad Pitt) and their sweet, indulgent mother (Jessica Chastain). The film opens with a mysterious flame and a whispered semi-prayer in over voice describing the ways of "nature" (the father, in this case), and the ways of "grace" (the mother). Then follows an almost wordless prelude wherein the parents learn of the death (never explained) of their middle son.

Then this family saga is interrupted by two other, very disparate, elements. One is an abrupt flash forward to the present, featuring Sean Penn as Jack, the adult version of the O'Brien's oldest son. He is a surly architect in what looks like downtown Houston, and he is wrestling with some demons from his past, especially the death of his brother. Scenes with this adult Jack appear later in the film, somewhat randomly, and ultimately go off the rails into a fantasy desert landscape as his torment grows to an uncertain conclusion.

This contemporary episode is then followed by a grandiose creation story—complete with galaxies twirling, cells reproducing, volcanoes erupting, and dinosaurs roaming the earth—that bursts out of nowhere and lasts for some 20 minutes, accompanied by a portentous sound track which includes a contemporary "Lachrymosa." It's the kind of grandiose imagery which you expect to see an IMAX nature film. It is also evolution shown at bullet speed, and the sequence climaxes with the birth and early years of Jack and his siblings.

After a brisk, nostalgic montage of family life and growth, the narrative settles down to the family itself, living in 1950's Texas (Waco is evoked). Filmed lovingly on classic suburban blocks (not a set), this part of the movie works well as a poignant elegy for a lost time that any sensitive person over 50 can readily identify with. The varied rhythms of family life, the spot-on portrayal of young boys, the elements of furtive tension in a marriage—all ring true (with an occasional question mark: would a working stiff in Waco really play clean Bach fugues on the church organ?).

Young Jack is the true protagonist here, torn between acknowledging the harsh world his father defines and appreciating the delicate one his mother embodies. He is beautifully played by young Hunter McCracken, a non-actor whose pug face and turned-up nose signal toughness while his sad eyes reveal his unsteady conscience. He is nicely seconded by Laramie Eppler as the middle brother, R.L., who moves through the

film like a blond, mystic presence and who looks amazingly like Pitt (kudos to the casting team!).

We see Mr. O'Brien mainly through Jack's eyes, and Brad Pitt, in a role new for him, stands out as a mercurial family autocrat, bristling against a world that has never recognized his talents. Red-haired and winsome Jessica Chastain certainly looks the part of the dulcet Mrs. O'Brien though through much of her time on screen she seems merely ethereal, an ornamental rather than a real presence.

Malick is one of filmdom's revered figures, an artistic loner and something of a recluse, who is known to take enormous pains with his films and, for that reason, has produced only five in the last 38 years ("Badlands" was his first in 1973!). Perfectionist he may be (he worked three years editing this one), and master he certainly is of imagery and tone, but feature films work best when they have a coherent, plausible structure. Here I think he fails. There is a coherent, even affecting domestic drama buried within "The Tree of Life," but the overall effect of this rich yet vagrant film—running 138 minutes—is of a patchwork which succumbs to pretentiousness as often as it achieves profundity.

(The film is rated "PG-13.")

(June 2011)