

Films

Terence Malick's triumphant return



Cameraman Almendros' stunning photography

Days of Heaven Paramount Pictures

by Mitchell S. Cohen

Badlands, as eloquent a motion picture directorial debut as I've seen in this decade, was released in 1973, the same year as American Graffiti, Mean Streets and The Sugarland Express. But while Lucas, Scorsese and Spielberg went on to build creatively and financially on these early works, Terence Malick, Badlands' writer-director, wasn't heard from again. That is until Days of Heaven, a visually confident, dramatically poetic and extraordinarily beautiful film that pays off on all the promise of Badlands. It is, to be blunt, staggeringly original, although it does take off from such cinematic sources as Griffith, Ford and Vidor. The narrative, which unfolds casually against the landscape, is primal conflict, romantic and social. The movie is set in the Texas panhandle just prior to America's entry into World War I; Bill (Richard Gere) has gotten into a fight — we don't hear the counter-accusations, only see their results — with his factory foreman in Chicago, and goes on the run as an itinerant worker with his girlfriend Abby (Brooke Adams) and sister Linda (Linda Manz) who narrates the film in the same kind of flat comic-poignant tone of Sissy Spacek in Badlands. To avoid talk, Bill and Abby pretend they're

brother and sister. A rich farmer (Sam Shepard) falls for Abby and, convinced that the farmer has a fatal disease, Bill convinces Abby to marry the land owner. Inevitable violence erupts, culminating in a plague of locusts, a fire, murder, a chase, and the killing of Bill.

It's difficult to convey in print the impact of Days of Heaven. The first thing that attracts you to the film is the spectacular cinematography of Nestor Almendros and Haskell Wexler (who shot the closing scenes of the film: blazing flames, active insects, fields of wheat, the sky at dusk, snow, are all rendered with eye-popping vibrance. But as stunning as the images are, they aren't all the Malick has to offer. His point of view here and in Badlands is a mixture of detached objectivity — the camera records events dispassionately, without editorializing — and commonfolk sentimentality (Manz and Spacek's syntactically unique reading of lines that are pure mass-magazine philosophy). The sounds of both films, the voices, the dialog, the natural noises, stay with you as long as the look of them. Malick's integral use of music is another element that enhances his artistry. Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek dancing to Nat "King" Cole's "A Blossom Fell" lit by a car's headlights is one of my most cherished movie sequences. And in

Days of Heaven Malick embellishes Ennio Morricone's score with such musical pieces as Doug Kershaw slashing at his fiddle at a farmworkers' celebration and the use of Leo Kottke and Camille Saint-Saens.

Malick also works extremely well with actors. Richard Gere's quiet strength and hesitant manner helps to make believable the moral ambivalence Bill feels about turning the woman he loves over to another man. Brooke Adams is solidly effective as Abby, who becomes torn between her original love and the wealthy farmer who draws his life force from here. Both, however, are all but eclipsed by the two novices who make up the other half of the quartet. Sam Shepard, the playwright, in his first screen appearance, has a craggy, fiery-eyed dignity and real screen registry. He's the film's John Carradine to Gere's Henry Fonda, and it's to the credit of Malick that he saw such potential in Shepard. Another find is young Linda Manz, carrying the weighty responsibility of having us assess the events of the film as she sees and conveys them. Her croaking, deadpan voice is letter-perfect, and her observations get most of the movie's laughs (some are also generated by a vaudeville troupe that lands on the farm from the air in a scene of Felliniesque incongruity), but her's is also a movie face; haunting, angular,

androgynous. She stands outside the triangle, caring for her brother but also fascinated and entertained by the comparative luxury she suddenly finds herself enjoying, and it's ultimately Linda whom we care the most about.

With only two films under his belt, Terence Malick has to be counted among the most arresting cinematic talents to emerge in the 1970's. He manages at the same time to be distant and intimate. He tells stories that are as sparse as morality tales but that unravel with the subtle inflections of short, pointed scenes and prosaic com-

positions. And he co-mingles character and environment so that the two are inextricable. Like many great love stories, Days of Heaven is about sacrifice and confusion, about circumstances that run out of control and sweep sympathetic people up with them. Days of Heaven is a particularly American breed of art film. A brilliant achievement, bleak, yet not without hope, not without humor. There's never been a movie quite like it, and I'm happy to be leaving the pages of Good Times for a film reviewing sabbatical on Malick's exquisite grace note.

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