

Movie Review: 'The Tree of Life' is the best film of the decade; a unique, beautiful experience

By Steven Adam Renkovish

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

This verse of Scripture from the book of Job opens Terrence Malick's latest masterpiece, entitled *The Tree of Life*. After these words appear over a black screen and fade out into the darkness, a mysterious flame illuminates the center of the screen, followed by a distant voice which breaks the silence – "Brother. Mother. It was they who led me to Your door."

Thus begins the most beautiful and complex film that you are likely to see this decade. It is not a film in the traditional sense of the word. This is not a plot-driven film. What we have here is the journey of life in words and images – a prayer to God which questions His motives, which longs to understand Him, which calls upon Him, and yearns to be near Him at all times.

The film follows Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn) on the anniversary of his younger brother's death. Jack, a skilled architect, is disillusioned with the world around him. "The world has gone to the dogs", Jack ponders, as he stares blankly out of the window of a high-rise building. Jack leaves his office and prays to God – "When did you first touch my heart?" Almost immediately, we are whisked back and forth, through past, present, and beyond, to the creation of the galaxies and the Earth, to the brief reign of the dinosaurs, and the beginning of human existence, until, finally, we reach "the end of time".

Throughout the film, we revisit Jack's tormented childhood in rural Texas in the 1950s. We are introduced to his family, led by his parents (Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain). His angelic mother teaches Jack and his two brothers the ways of grace (love, forgiveness), while his father represents the way of nature (selfishness, greed). These conflicting worldviews serve as a catalyst for Jack's spiritual and existential struggle, which drives the second act of the film.

Mind you, this synopsis does the film no justice. This film cannot be defined in simplistic terms, nor can it be categorized into any specific genre of film. This is a film that defies convention. It redefines the way that we experience cinema. It is alive, full of wonder and awe. It is poetry. As a friend of mine said after the first screening, *this film is a force*. It will be a different experience for each individual. You will get out of this film exactly what you bring to it. For me, it is quite possibly the most spiritually significant experience that I have ever had in a theatre. It allowed me to see God portrayed in a way

that is respectful, unique and all-encompassing. The grace and mercy of God saturates every frame of this film. Every element - from the beautiful and haunting imagery, to the ethereal soundtrack, to the understated performances, to the philosophical musings on existence - works together in perfect harmony to create a work of art that you will never forget. The performances are uniformly excellent, and the direction from Terrence Malick is as perfect as ever. Not since Kubrick has an artist tackled these complicated themes with such respect and originality.

Rated PG-13 for thematic elements. 139 minutes. ***** out of ***** Fox Searchlight Pictures. Directed by Terrence Malick.

Currently playing at Cherrydale Cinemas. Please do yourself a favor. See this film before it is gone.