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## Cannes 2011: The Four Star Review - Terrence Malick's *The Tree Of Life*

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### THE TREE OF LIFE \*\*\* out of \*\*\*

"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?"

-- "The Book Of Job," 38: 4-7

It's brilliant. Let's get that out of the way. If you like director Terrence Malick, rest assured his new film fits in snugly alongside *Badlands*, *Days Of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*. It features extensive voice-overs musing on the nature of life, stunning images that convey a wealth of emotion and a surprisingly detailed storyline conveyed almost entirely

without conventional narrative. If you're not a fan, this certainly won't win you over. But if you've never seen a Malick film in the movie theater, this look at growing up in Waco, Texas in the 1950s may be the perfect entry point when it opens on May 27. That's not to say the movie isn't polarizing. **It looks certain to be the most hotly debated film of the festival.** No film buff can afford to miss it, and I can't wait to see it again.

It begins with a telegram, and a telegram is never good news. In this case, a mother (Jessica Chastain)

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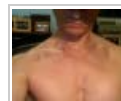
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gets word that her 19-year-old son has died. Why bring a child into the world if its life is going to be snuffed out so soon? Why give a parent the joy of creating a new person if you then rend their hearts by taking that person away? Why is there pain and sadness in the world? The rest of the movie answers those questions in ways both beautiful and strange. It's no surprise the film begins with a quotation from "The Book Of Job," one of the great poems of all time and the section of the Bible that directly addresses the eternal issue of suffering.

At the simplest level, *The Tree Of Life* focuses on childhood. Three brothers grow up under the stern tutelage of their father (an excellent Brad Pitt) and loving mother. It can take a few minutes to adjust to the flow of a Malick film. I was won over when those boys were running with abandon through the yards and streets of their neighborhood and the music swelled with excitement and fervor, capturing with a rush the sheer joy of youth, the endless possibilities of endless summer days and the perfect freedom of no responsibility. They live in a world where you are always safe and your parents will always take care of you. (It was the 1950s, after all.)

Pitt is not a cruel father, no Great Santini, but his sons are a little afraid of him. Pitt thinks the best way to raise a boy into a man is to expect a man's behavior, to demand discipline. He can always criticize and find room for improvement; he can rarely praise or seek out the good. When he hugs his sons or asks for a kiss, it's an order. You never doubt his essential love for the boys. He's simply of the generation that thought feelings and warmth were unmanly.

The eldest boy (played marvelously by Hunter McCracken as a child, Sean Penn as an adult in brief glimpses) has the most troubled relationship with his dad. I mean "father." At one point Pitt angrily insists that his son always call him "father." "And don't interrupt!" he adds. "But you always do," says the boy. When Pitt goes away on a business trip, the look of happiness that transports the kids is infectious. Suddenly, they're all running through the house, whooping it up and even their mother is bouncing on the beds and laughing.

Few movies have ever captured so well young boys at play or the quicksilver changes in their relationships. When a group of kids are running down a street and come upon a shed, one of them says they should throw a rock through the window. The boys circle warily, knowing it's wrong but too afraid to speak up and too certain the delicious thrill of breaking the rules will be worth it. They do smash the window in and the cheap pleasure is immediately followed by guilt.

Another time, the eldest son sneaks into a neighbor's home when the woman of the house goes out. He sneaks tentatively from room to room, every squeak of the floor freezing him with fear. He finds her lingerie drawer and lays a slip on the bed. Soon he's running out the door and towards a river, first hiding the slip under a board and then tossing it in the water, flushed with shame. When he goes home, he can't even look his mother in the eye. "What have I started?" he wonders in voiceover, consumed with the fear that this act-- which we recognize as just curiosity rather than theft or perversion -- might in fact mean he's a bad boy. He's disappointed his father in so many ways; will this be the next one?

Those are just two scenes of many. They rush by in vivid detail, typically carried along by music and the open faces of the actors with only a minimum of dialogue. There's so much more: a fight at the dinner table, playing with a water hose and a brief flash of danger when father is working under the car and the boy eyes the jack holding the body of the automobile high off the ground and a "what if" lightnings through his brain.

There's even a flashback to the dawn of life on earth that is eerily realistic. Prehistoric creatures wander about, with one creature dominating another by knocking it down, placing its foot on the other's head and keeping it on the ground. The smaller creature lays still, panting with fear. The bigger one holds it down with a foot, releases the foot just a tad and then taps the head of the smaller one again. "Stay right there," it's saying, proving its superiority. The little one stays motionless, trembling, long after the bigger one has moved away. Some things never change. We even watch a meteor crash into the earth, wiping out all the life we've just seen flourishing. Why did the dinosaurs exist at all if they were going to be wiped out?

What the heck is going on? What are these scenes of the afterlife that appear during the final moments, the many characters of the movie wandering a beach and approaching each other with tentative warmth? Why does the mother say in voiceover, "I give you my son," echoing the words about Jesus Christ in the Bible. And the crashing waves? The repeated glimpses of life coming into being? The images of what might be the dawn of the universe?

In a very simple way, Malick is saying that life is shot through with glory. Time and again, we are struck dumb with a beautiful image, be it the water of a sprinkler or the sun bursting through the clouds.



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Anyone can create a pretty picture; Malick suffuses them with pregnant meaning. When a boy can live a thousand lifetimes in one afternoon, when each hour is crammed full of sensation, what need is there to worry about how long it lasts? Each moment is precious.

Every act of creation is also an act of sacrifice, whether you're giving birth to the universe itself or just a little boy. The longest speech in the film comes during a funeral for a child who died suddenly at the local swimming pool. How can such a terrible thing happen? Why? The priest struggles for an answer but knows only this for certain: pain and sadness will come to us all at some point. We can't protect our children from it, no matter how much we struggle. No one ever could. In the Bible, when Job's woes are just beginning, he wishes he'd never been born. "I should have been carried from the womb to the grave," he laments in chapter 10. Why live at all? Malick's answer: just look around you.

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**La Fin Du Silence/The End Of Silence** \*\*

**L'Apollonide/House Of Tolerance** \* 1/2

**Martha Marcy May Marlene** \*\*\*

**Michel Petrucciani** \*\* 1/2

**Midnight In Paris** \*\*

**Polisse** \*\* 1/2

**Restless** \* 1/2

**17 Filles/17 Girls** \*\*

**Sleeping Beauty** \* 1/2

**The Slut** \*\*

**Take Shelter** \*\*\*

**The Tree Of Life** \*\*\*\*

**We Need To Talk About Kevin** \*\* 1/2

**Wu Xia aka Dragon aka Swordsmen** \*\* 1/2

\*\*\*\*\*

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