

# Love, death & angst in California's San Fernando Valley

Magnolia, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

By Peter Mazelis  
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*Magnolia* is unwieldy, ambitious, often very moving, at times superficial and wrongheaded. Parts of it are worth supporting and praising, other parts are disastrous.

The film is a series of tangentially-linked stories, all dealing with characters in varying stages of emotional catharsis. It is an ensemble performance and the writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson self-consciously orchestrates each component. A summary of the story inevitably leaves you in a tangle. There are familial relationships which have failed; there are needs left unfulfilled and pasts that are ignored, children betrayed and parents unable or unwilling to respond.

The loose structure of the narrative (clearly influenced by Robert Altman) is held together with the aid of some instructive parallels. There are two fathers, one a television producer (Jason Robards), the other a game show host (Philip Baker Hall), both dying of cancer, estranged from their children and racked with guilt about the past. There is a young boy who is a quiz show prodigy (Jeremy Blackman), who is pushed and bullied into fulfilling the role of genius, and his counterpart, a has-been child celebrity (William H. Macy), who is longing for love. The daughter of the quiz show host (Melora Walters) is a cocaine addict who is unable to get herself out of the house and into contact with the world. The son of the television producer (Tom Cruise) is a self-help sex guru who makes a lucrative living from promoting misogyny and spins an elaborate network of lies about his history.

On the fringes of these relationships there is a male nurse to the dying television producer (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who develops a filial connection with his charge; a "nice guy" police officer (John C. Reilly),

awkward and shy, who hasn't had a date since his marriage broke up three years ago; and the producer's young trophy wife (Julianne Moore), who is coming to terms with her emotional frigidity as her husband lies dying.

We dive in and out of one story after another, sometimes dazzled by Anderson's technical skill, his flair for elaborate tracking shots and montage, at other times moved by moments of growth and epiphany for these characters who seem to be trapped by life. Pain is universal, but each has no choice but to experience it in isolation. Anderson, as *Boogie Nights* demonstrated, has a penchant for investing small-scale subjects and relationships with the trappings of epic film. The setting in this film shifts between false worlds of quiz shows and celebrity interviews and the real worlds in which suffering is unmediated by pop-cultural excess. This style serves to make the film consistently compelling, but also can't help but point up the weaknesses of his method.

The most direct comparison that has been evoked by critics is with Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* [1993] (also incidentally set in the San Fernando Valley, i.e., suburban Los Angeles). On many levels I feel Anderson's film is an improvement. Where Altman is not sure whether to ridicule his characters or feel sympathy for them, Anderson seems to demand compassion for the people he has created. The most affecting moments are worthy of this demand. In particular, the characters played by Cruise, Blackman and Robards, have on-screen epiphanies which are among the most powerful moments seen this year.

Everyone is given their "moment" here, and the acting is certainly committed and energetic, but where

some moments feel earned and authentic, at times Anderson appears to be forcing his characters to have simultaneous nervous breakdowns, as if this were the only way to make explicit the connections between them. Julianne Moore and Bill Macy particularly, play characters whose history and development is told rather than shown. Reilly and Hoffman (as the police officer and Robards' caretaker) play the only characters in the film that are identifiably working class and as such they seem to be positioned as saviors for the other characters who are creatures of Hollywood glitz and flash. While this is a trite conceit, and at times it is unbearably executed (as in Reilly's voice-over monologue towards the end of the film), there is a quiet dignity in their performances that contrasts well with the *sturm und drang* occurring elsewhere. Still, for all of his empathy, Anderson doesn't always allow these stories to speak for themselves.

The failure of the promise of much of this film comes into sharpest focus during a third act climax, a natural disaster *cum* biblical plague, which comes completely out of left field. It should have been left as one of those cinematic legends, like the pie-fight supposedly filmed for *Dr. Strangelove*, and left on the cutting room floor. To give Anderson the benefit of the doubt, this scene is clearly designed to bring things to a head and then allow those characters that can be saved to pick up and move on with their lives, but one can't help but feel that such a climax would be unnecessary in a more careful and coherent film. The last hour of the film (with the exception of Robards' deathbed scene and the scenes between Reilly and Walters) play as though Anderson has given up on his grand project. Cruise, after doing some of his best acting earlier in the film, is allowed to flail and emote relentlessly.

Still, *Magnolia* becomes a great film in moments, most of which I've mentioned briefly. At his best, Anderson has a gift for displaying human weakness uncritically and honestly. We can empathize with these people and are moved by their battles, both internal and external. If, at times, one wishes he were content with a smaller canvas (as he was in the fine *Hard 8*, [1996]), there is something ennobling in his choosing such grandeur as a vehicle for such small stories. It makes you want to forgive his occasional, and often fatal, clumsiness.

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