

'Magnolia' blooms into beautiful creation

By Samuel McKewon

Senior editor

It's easier to appreciate P.T. Anderson's "Magnolia" if you know how rarely a film like it is made.

It's the type of movie that Hollywood doesn't green light often. The distributor, New Line Cinema, wisely gave Anderson, director of the 1997 "Boogie Nights," total control over everything "Magnolia"-related: the running time, the story, the soundtrack, the casting — everything.

The result is a beautifully original creation — a 195-minute tale that intertwines the lives of several Los Angelenos over a 24-hour period with an ending only God could have predicted.

This ending, which has to be seen to be believed — and even then, it takes some serious reflection — is foreshadowed by the film's beginning narration. The narration outlines three unrelated events through time: a hanging, a scuba diver and a suicide-murder. While all three of the events could be played off as strange coincidences, narrator Ricky Jay pushes another possibility: "These

things happen."

That message hangs as an echo for three hours as Anderson weaves his story through major themes of television and father/son relationships.

The dying network tycoon Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) has a son, "TJ" Mackey, who refuses to speak to him. Mackey (Tom Cruise) is an infomercial king who teaches men how to "seduce and destroy" women.

Partridge also has a younger, repentant wife (Julianne Moore) trying to write herself out of his will, and a nurse (Philip Seymour Hoffman) desperately trying to find Cruise's character for a reunion.

And then there is children's game-show host Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall), a drunk who can't connect with his drug-addicted daughter, Claudia (Melora Walters), or his wife while he slowly dies in front of TV whiz kid Stanley (Jeremy Blackman).

Stanley's father browbeats him into winning, an eerily similar situation that former whiz kid Donnie Smith (William H. Macy) went through as a child before becoming a burnout in sales and a seedy barfly in search of the

perfect braces.

Circulating around all of this is LAPD Officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly, in fine performance) who is seeking someone — anyone — to make a human connection with, eventually finding a potential friend in Claudia.

Anderson sets the stage with these characters and then lets their stories mix together and play out amidst some of the best performances and individually written scenes this year.

In a role designed specifically for him, Cruise is a tour de force, basking in his self-made glory of hating women that slowly breaks down as we uncover the truth of his past. Moore's truth-telling scene is equally devastating, with some of the best work the veteran actress has ever done. Macy, Robards and even the young Blackman all have their moments of clarity and courage in the script.

Just as important in "Magnolia" is the score and original songs from Aimee Mann, part of the inspiration for Anderson's story. Mann has a soft, introspective voice, often sad, which sets the tone for the humbling experiences the characters find. It ought to be

depressing but manages not to be.

Somehow (and I couldn't profess to know exactly how it's done), "Magnolia" lifts itself above the dredge of its material. Some of that has to do with the film's twist conclusion, meant to remind us how little we control and that we move through and around life; it doesn't revolve around us. Anderson seems to mean it as a revelation, and for those who want to give in to "Magnolia," it is.

Critics of the film, of which there are some, have contended it has much less focus and energy than Anderson's "Boogie Nights."

Those critics are right, but only in the sense that "Magnolia," with its meandering plot lines, isn't meant to have the visceral power and immediacy of "Boogie Nights," and it treats its characters with significantly more love, — even Cruise, a man whose mantra is to "respect the cock" while drop-kicking dogs.

"Magnolia" stands up to, and in some ways exceeds, some of Robert Altman's best work ("Nashville," "The Player"), though Altman doesn't like his characters nearly as much, and his

REVIEW **Magnolia**
STARS: Tom Cruise, Jason Robards, William H. Macy, Julianne Moore
DIRECTOR: P.T. Anderson
RATING: R (strong language)
GRADE: A+
FIVE WORDS: Truly original, "Magnolia" a revelation

directing style lets us in to different portals than Anderson's. Still, they share the same type of vision.

I have little choice than to give "Magnolia" the highest rating; my reaction to it was stronger than any movie since "The Sweet Hereafter." Logic would suggest otherwise — it's not a perfect film. But we don't identify with perfection.

Rather, we move to something else, like one of the movie's characters who listens to the same song no matter what car he's in. "Magnolia" will be that song for certain people.

Sometimes these things happen.

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