

'Tumbleweeds' explores destiny

Film tries to capture American dream

By Jason Hardy

Staff writer

In the 19th century, the term "manifest destiny" was used to illustrate the United States' continued territorial expansion.

The phrase had a nice ring to it, and to many, the idea of expanding westward was as appealing as a shiny silver dollar. Still today, many of America's downtrodden and heartbroken set sail for California in the hopes of finding a happiness they have never known.

Stories such as these are the essence of desperate American road trip movies.

Someone is always running from something and always finding that something by the end of the film. That something is usually California's alluring scenery and a renewed sense of identity.

Such is the premise of Gavin O'Connor's "Tumbleweeds," the story of a mother, her daughter and their quest for independence from abusive husbands and boyfriends. For the most part, the story is typical of most single-parent, battered-wife stories, but what makes "Tumbleweeds" memorable isn't the story, it's the characters.

Janet McTeer, the British actress who plays Mary Jo Walker, the film's lead role, delivers an astonishingly realistic performance. Her portrayal of an overly optimistic and whimsical Southern gal becomes more genuine with every scene, as she continually exposes the audience to the sadly deconstructed and sheepish woman beneath her party-time facade.

Also adding to McTeer's performance was her wardrobe and makeup, simple as it may sound. Her dirty, dyed blond hair was often a mess in a flawed attempt at looking presentable and her poorly fitting, thrift-store sun dresses made her a far cry from the traditional Hollywood leading lady.

More than simply embodying the stereotype of a battered woman, however, McTeer was able to instill an individuality in the character that made Mary Jo seem as realistic as someone you'd pass in the supermarket.

Despite McTeer's incredible job, her 12-year-old co-star, Kimberly J. Brown, almost stole the show. Brown was simply amazing as Mary Jo's resourceful, intelligent and even intuitive daughter, Ava, and was the perfect counterpart

for the role-reversal mother-daughter relationship between her and McTeer.

Together, the two find themselves involved in yet another threatening situation and are forced to come to grips with reality. This time, however, there are two men offering solutions, one of whom is played by O'Connor, who rounds out the quality cast with a solid job as Jack, the temperamental and controlling new boyfriend.

A weak casting choice, however, was made in getting Jay O. Sanders to play Dan Miller, Mary Jo's other, allegedly good-hearted suitor. When Miller isn't coming across as odd, eerie and even scary, he seems cheesy and detached from the events taking place around him. Nevertheless, he is accepted as the film's only good guy, but his character portrayal is mostly just confusing.

O'Connor also found success behind the camera as many of the film's shots are very well done. He seamlessly shifts from shaky, "NYPD Blue"-type shots to more anchored, steady shots, depending on the intensity of the scene.

At first, the shaky, hand-held feel of some of the shots seems a bit obvious, but by the end of the film, it works well to illustrate the ups and downs of life in an abusive relationship without being distracting.

Without a doubt, "Tumbleweeds" is an incredible example of quality acting and the ability to tell a story more through character development than through obvious scenery elements and situations. It is an interesting exploration of a story that, despite becoming sadly cliché, is still worth telling.

REVIEW **Tumbleweeds**

STARS: Janet McTeer, Kimberly Brown and Gavin O'Connor.

DIRECTOR: Gavin O'Connor

RATING: PG-13, language sensuality and domestic violence

GRADE: B-

FIVE WORDS: Superb acting, storytelling saves film.



Courtesy Photo

'Wonder Boys' ending is rushed and unsatisfying

By Shelley Mika

Staff writer

How is it that an incredible cast of characters can collaborate to make only a slightly above-average movie? It's one of those questions that begs an answer, but can only really be explained by example, and a good one is "Wonder Boys," the new film by "L.A. Confidential" director Curtis Hanson.

Michael Douglas leads the cast as Grady Tripp, a literature professor whose wife has just left him and whose mistress (Frances McDormand) is pregnant.

But these events — strangely — seem to be the least of his problems as he deals with an unusual student (Tobey Maguire), a murdered dog and a novel that makes Joyce's "Ulysses" seem short.

Douglas acts his way through all of the nuances of his character well and provides an excellent layer of narration over the top. From the very beginning, Douglas' character is unique and funny. But not the Laurel and Hardy brand of

funny. Rather, he brings a subtle humor that edges its way in at the least expected moments. For the most part, this is the selling point of the film.

Equally as good as Douglas, if not better, is Tobey Maguire as James Leer, Grady's student and writer of dark fiction. Again, as in many of his other roles, Maguire's glassy stare brings more justice to the character than words could ever do.

With Douglas and Maguire as two intriguing characters, one would think the film would be a highly original dramatic comedy. And it is — almost.

The usual build-up, climax and denouement are left behind for a true-to-life plot that matches the biographical nature of the film.

But, at the same time, the film is pretty predictable in overall direction. Obvious clues are left all over the place as to what will happen in the end. Instead of keeping with the feel of the unpredictable script, everything falls into place just as it should.

For as much soul searching as is going on, the

REVIEW **Wonder Boys**

STARRING: Michael Douglas, Tobey Maguire, Frances McDormand and Robert Downey Jr.

DIRECTOR: Curtis Hanson

RATED: R (PG-13 style language and drug use)

GRADE: B

FIVE WORDS: Humorous film lacks emotional impact.



Courtesy photo

Michael Douglas and Frances McDormand star in "Wonder Boys."

end seems rushed and rather unexplained. It's not so much that the end doesn't fit as much as it pales in comparison to the rest of the film.

Even though a good deal of the traditionally funny moments (as well as plot lines) are given away in the trailer, the humor and spectacular performances are enough to make the film rise above average. In addition to Maguire and Douglas, the side characters add humorous

dimension and acting expertise.

McDormand as Douglas' mistress is up to her usual premium par, though an actress of her caliber should be given more time to shine in front of the camera. Her role is well done, and yet

Please see **BOYS** on 11