



At the movies

'Places' out of step with reality

"Places in the Heart," a film by writer-director and two-time Academy Award winner Robert Benton, is a journey into the town of Waxahachie, Texas, during the 1930s. Recalled from Benton's own childhood, the film is the story of Edna Spalding's (Sally Field) struggle to keep her family together in spite of enormous hardships.

Spalding's husband, the town sheriff, is killed in an accidental shooting by an intoxicated black youth, sending her into a hostile, unfamiliar world. A simple woman, she has only been concerned with her home and family. With the loss of her husband, she is now in danger of losing both.

Informed by black-clad local banker Albert Denby that there is no way she can pay her mortgage and that she may have to split up her family, Spalding takes comfort in her belief that, somehow, providence will provide through faith.

And providence does provide. She takes in an itinerant black worker, an expert cotton grower, who farms as a means of paying off the mortgage. The banker soon returns and offers to postpone the foreclosure for a favor: letting his blind brother-in-law live in the Spaldings' home. Spalding accepts and everything begins to look rosy.

Spalding's experiences serve as the central plot to which several other narratives intertwine. Her sister, hairdresser

Lindsay Crouse, is married to mechanic Ed Harris, who is having an affair with schoolteacher Amy Madigan, his best friend's wife. The affair leads to jealousy and broken promises, as one couple moves out of town and Crouse later learns of Ed's infidelity.

The film is not just the story of a plucky mother encountering a mean, cruel world but is a sort of film sampler of various lifestyles in the 1930s, when any sort of personal or physical hardship could be overcome through good, hard work.

In one scene we see Spalding crawling on hands and knees, battered and bloodied from picking cotton, to make a rapidly approaching deadline. In the case of Edna's sister we see a marriage saved by forgiveness. And later the whole town faces a tornado that seems to be yet another test of spiritual strength.

This spiritual strength is the main theme of the film; for solace Spalding and everyone in Waxahachie have religion. Although religion is never discussed outright, it usually is in the background, in paintings depicting biblical scenes, or in bibles lying around. The film literally begins and ends with a prayer. The message is that religion is part of everyday life.

Throughout the film the viewer ends up awarding points for racial tolerance, marital fidelity, charity and hard work.



Sally Field

The mossy, predictable plot begins with the accidental shooting by the black youth and climaxes with the rescue of the black hired hand by the blind lodger, who takes wild but purposeful shots at members of the Ku Klux Klan. It all adds up to too neat a sum of moral balance.

The presentation of divine justice by the end of the film is absurd; things just don't work out that well. The glorified, idealized plot is not what Benton recalls from his childhood but what he would like to recall. "Places in the Heart" is showing at Cinema World near Valley River Center.

By Mike Duncan

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