

# The sweet scent of DYSFUNCTION

Paul Thomas Anderson's movie "Magnolia" draws in the audience with an innocent notion of connection but digs deep into the reality of life, love, sex and relationships to uncover a gritty Americana scene.



## MOVIES

### Magnolia

Starring Tom Cruise, Julianne Moore, Phillip Seymour Hoffman, William H. Macy, Jason Robards, Jeremy Blackman and John C. Reilly. Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. New Line Cinema.

★★★★☆

By Sara Jarrett

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A web of connection, as if by chance, runs through the desolate streets of California's San Fernando Valley. Each character in Paul Thomas Anderson's "Magnolia" is captured by the familiar thread like a grandma's lovingly knitted scarf, intended to protect against the harsh wind but instead found wrapped around grandpa's lifeless neck.

Who would have thought she had made it strong enough to support the weight of his body?

The movie opens with real-life tales that seem too far-fetched to be purely coincidental. Nothing less than chance can be used to make sense of them, though. Anderson uses this notion to find his inspiration. He is obviously dedicated to portraying these types of subtle — maybe not so subtle — relationships in "Magnolia."

"What Kids Know," a popular quiz show, makes all of the connections come together. Jason Robards plays Earl Partridge, producer of the show and a dying old man whose death-bed performance, though a little prolific in moans and groans, evokes sympathy for the bastard surrounded by gold and dogs.

His suicidal wife, played by the much, much younger Julianne Moore, pops pills and stumbles in and out of the house as she deals with her newfound love for a man she admittedly married for fortune.

Partridge, in a drugged delirium, asks his nurse Phil (Philip Seymour Hoffman) to find his estranged son. After searching through porn magazines, Phil finally finds the one-and-only Frank T.J. Mackey, played by Tom Cruise.

Mackey is a guru, of sorts, to lonely men everywhere. With a successful seminar business under the name "Search and Destroy," he exhorts these desperate guys with the mantra, "Respect the cock and tame the cunt."

We later find out that it wasn't a woman who made Mackey the



Courtesy of New Line Cinema

Stanley Spector (left, Jeremy Blackman) plays a child genius who wins big on a quiz show. Michael Bowen is his father and Felicity Huffman plays the show's producer.

misogynist he is today, but rather his own father, who left years earlier when his son and dying wife needed him most.

The range of Cruise's performance in "Magnolia" is his most impressive to date. This latest endeavor will first cause outrage, then leave viewers filled with pity. Cruise is actually on the verge of evoking tears with this role.

Working with Stanley Kubrick in last summer's "Eyes Wide Shut" has obviously left its mark. Fans who fell in love with Cruise's earlier roles in movies such as "Top Gun" and "Days of Thunder" may be disturbed by his pull to the dark side, though.

This dark theme runs amok in "Magnolia."

Jimmy Gator, played by Philip Baker Hall, is the host of "What Kids Know." After learning he has just two months to live, Gator confesses to committing adultery and molesting his only daughter Claudia (Melora Walters). In the end, he gets what he deserves.

A seemingly insignificant character played by William H. Macy, Donnie Smith has a relationship to the movie as a whole that is best

understood as what might have been. Stanley Spector, played by Jeremy Blackman, is the child genius who wins big on the quiz show until an accidental call of nature makes him stand up to both his domineering dad and Gator.

The pathetic Smith, who was a child winner on the same game show years earlier, represents what Spector could have very well grown up to be if he kept letting adults push him around.

The tangible connection between Smith and the rest of the characters, however, is when police officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) saves him from a raining toad storm.

Kurring, who has fallen in love with Gator's coke-addicted daughter, is feeling sorry for himself after she dumps him in the middle of their first date. A relationship that begins when Kurring is called to her apartment on a domestic disturbance complaint is obviously doomed from the start.

When Kurring witnesses Smith fall off of a telephone pole after being hit in the head by a falling toad, Kurring drags Smith out of harm's way.

The entire toad storm, hailed as just one of those phenomena that just happens sometimes, is almost unbearable to watch. Not only do giant toads the size of newborn babies fall from the sky, their green, slimy bodies pound the concrete ground with thunderous plops. Blood isn't too prevalent, but slimy, twitching legs are. Nevertheless, the concept wins points for originality.

Anderson directs the viewers' gaze around the screen through the use of crystal clear images in front of hazy backdrops. This technique directs the initial point of entry, yet then begs the viewer to look at the blurriness behind.

Instead of making it impenetrable, Anderson makes the background just clear enough to see what's going on. This juxtaposition reveals minute details that heighten the movie-going experience and provides further connectivity.

Anderson also chooses to let the volume of the musical score become the most dominant aspect in a few places. "One is the Loneliest Number," for instance, nearly suffocates the dialogue of the opening sequence. As many of the char-

acters are being introduced to the audience, Anderson decides to make it difficult to hear them speak.

The weather is also used so exactly it virtually becomes a character in the movie. The duration of the film spans one day that is divided into three parts, delineated by changes in the weather.

Text explaining the changes, which very accurately follow the mood of the plot, are displayed on the screen in a weather update-type style often found on the front page of newspapers.

"Magnolia" is not just a movie about people and how one life affects another. On a deeper level, this movie explores the idea that existence, in and of itself, is mere chance.

Then again, the movie could appeal to those fans who just want a good story with well-developed characters.

In the end, this film could lend itself to over-analyzing, just as easily as it could be stripped to the core and effortlessly swallowed. Mostly "Magnolia" is a must-see for all those who are in the mood for something in-between.