

Frances O'Connor plays a thoroughly modern Fanny in *Mansfield Park*



PHOTO BY CLIVE COOTE

Mixed flicks

A bag of assorted holiday presents for film lovers

We may be through with the past, but the past isn't through with us" is a line uttered by several characters in *Magnolia*, the new film by director P.T. Anderson (*Boogie Nights*). The film's dozen or so characters, all residents of Los Angeles' suburban San Fernando Valley, are trying, each in his own way, to erase, outrun, atone for or live up to the past.

Magnolia follows these people through confessions of marital infidelity, memories of emotional and physical childhood abuse, unrequited love, drug addiction, suicide attempts and death. It may sound bleak, but Anderson depicts his characters' stark, sometimes embarrassing pain with empathy, their awkwardness with grace. It's a complete experience, acknowledging both the terrifying darkness and the redemptive light that can touch a human life.

Each member of the sprawling ensemble cast is dazzling. Tom Cruise is a deeply wounded, misogynistic men's movement guru; Jason Robards is his estranged, dying father; and the always exhilarating Julianne Moore is Robards' much younger wife, a shakily despondent woman who has as many regrets as her fatally ill husband. Phillip Seymour Hoffman (who played the trans woman in *Flawless*) is superbly subtle in his portrayal of Robards' nurse, a person whose unadulterated decency is shown not through pious clichés, but through his unself-conscious, deep involvement with his patient's illness and family.

Elsewhere, William H. Macy (*Fargo*) plays a depressed gay man who, trapped in a dead-end job and a dead-end life, looks back with a sense of failure on his childhood years as a star on a long-running game show called "What Do Kids Know?" which featured high-IQ children competing with adults for cash prizes. He spends much time and energy on a sweet, dorky, hope-

less scheme to attract a hunky bartender. His homosexuality is a nonissue; his very real, human longing, his frustration and disappointment fit seamlessly with that of the other characters. A complementary story line involves a child genius browbeaten by his father into success as a present-day "What Do Kids Know?" contestant.

In what are perhaps the most moving scenes in *Magnolia*, two unlikely people—an extremely strait-laced, well-meaning cop and a



Malcolm Moorman is out to kill in *Hard*

broken, angry cocaine addict—recognize each other's peculiar loneliness and fall in love. To see these people's halting steps over the false barriers that society, propriety and fear of rejection have placed between them is wrenching and, in the end, deeply gratifying.

To call *Magnolia* "quirky" would be patronizing, but the film is gorgeously odd. At one point, time stops as the characters, still embroiled in their own narratives, are joined together in a song—they sing one line each, in turn. Not long after that, frogs mysteriously rain from the sky, flooding the city. What could easily have seemed pretentious is instead a cinematic wake-up call to reality; *Magnolia* rightly maintains that "weird" is relative, and that the singularity or strangeness of an event makes it no less credible or real. "But it *did* happen," a line of text shown in close-up tells us. "Things like this *happen*. This really *happens*," a child repeats to himself in awe as he watches the deluge of frogs from his window.

After overdoing the technique and skimping on the substance in *Boogie Nights*, Anderson demonstrates absolute, judicious mastery of the medium with *Magnolia*. The many story lines are perfectly realized, emotionally pitch-perfect, and flow easily together, aided by Anderson's frankly amazing technical prowess. Although the film clocks in at three hours and 15 minutes, there's not a single wasted moment.

Many great movies have bravely shown us "the truth," the often painful physical and mental circumstances of Real Life, something that rarely exists in Hollywood films. With *Magnolia*, Anderson uncompromisingly shows us "the truth," but he goes one step further to reveal the sometimes ridiculously simple things that help people survive it. *Magnolia's* affirmation of life, its assertion of the humane, is hard-earned, real and resonant.

—Christopher McQuain

A gay "erotic thriller" directed and co-written by John Huckert, *Hard* is about a superb serial killer (Malcolm Moorman) whose victims are all young male hustlers.

There's also a superb cop (Noel Palomaria) who hides his own queerness from his macho co-workers. He's assigned to the serial killer case, and events (including inadvertently sleeping with the killer himself) conspire to make him choose between coming out and catching the killer, or keeping his secret and letting the killer run free.

Hard is a very poor film, despite perfectly passable camera work and overall technical proficiency. The story, dialogue and editing choices are simply awful. The only scenes that work at all are the horrific rape-torture-murder scenes, which are believable enough to provoke revulsion. In the context of the rest of the film's feebleness, however, these scenes seem cheaply manipulative, even insulting.

The film's attempts at showing us the killer's motivation and giving us a "message"—he's apparently killing for some ideologically unsound reason, internalized homophobia etc.—are laughable, considering the sensationalistic, sexualized manner in which the killings are filmed, as well as the killer's chilling comfort with his sexuality, which clearly includes torture and murder as turn-ons.

I won't even go into the one admirably explicit but inexorably cheesy nonrape sex scene, which for some reason is choreographed ludicrously to a George Michael tune.

Perhaps what the filmmakers should've done was create something actually pornographic. In the medium of porn, cheesiness is

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