



Patrick Wilson, Billy Bob Thornton and Jason Patric star in *The Alamo*.

DEANA NEWCOMB, TOUCHSTONE PICTURES, 2004

Texas History Lesson

A cautionary tale with human faces

THE ALAMO: Directed by John Lee Hancock. Written by Leslie Bohem, Stephen Gaghan, John Lee Hancock. Produced by Mark Johnson, Ron Howard. Executive producers Todd Hallowell, Philip Steuer. Cinematography, Dean Semler. Production design, Michael Corenblith. Editor, Eric L. Beason. Costumes, Daniel Orlandi. Music, Carter Burwell. Starring Dennis Quaid, Billy Bob Thornton, Jason Patric, Patrick Wilson, Emilio Echevarria, Jordi Molla. Touchstone Pictures. Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2004. PG-13. 137 minutes.

A large-scale historical film, *The Alamo* didn't have a chance on Easter weekend against *Passion of the Christ*. This deliberate, solemn evocation of the famous 1836 battle that pitted a few embattled warriors for independence against a well-equipped, armed occupation force deserves a wider viewing than it may attract.

Co-writer and director John Lee Hancock grew up in the Gulf Coast Texas town where I lived in fourth grade. I heard the story of the Alamo throughout my public school education in Texas, where the study of Texas history is required. But if what you know about the battle is based on John Wayne's 1960 movie version, you may expect grandstanding, mythic heroics and jingoistic posturing. But Hancock has done his homework, and while he may have taken the gloss off the great names, he has made credible the sacrifice of their lives.

Early in the story, Gen. Sam Houston (Dennis Quaid), a troubled, hard-drinking military man, sends Jim Bowie (Jason Patric) and his ragtag band of irregular soldiers, back to San Antonio de Bexar (pronounced bay-are) to tear down the Alamo before the Mexican Army led by Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna (Emilio Echevarria) returns to occupy it. These guys do a lot of drinking, Bowie in particular. He swaggers about wearing the long knife that made him famous, even though he is quite ill with tuberculosis.

On the other hand, Lt. Col. William Travis (Patrick Wilson) has been sent to guard the Alamo and to stand there against Santa Anna. Travis is a bit thin-lipped and definitely a dandy, which does not help him win the allegiance of Bowie's men. But as his illness takes its toll, Bowie urges his men to follow Travis, who acquits himself in their eyes in a simple act of bravery.

Capt. Juan Seguin (Jordi Molla) is the leader of the Tejanos in the Alamo. He raises the moral questions about the war against the

Mexicans. Tejanos are the Mexicans long settled in what eventually becomes Texas. They fought for independence from Mexico before the Anglos, called Texians, took up the cause. Travis sends Seguin to Houston with an urgent message before the attack.

Now add to this mix the Tennessee legend, Davy Crockett (Billy Bob Thornton), who enlivens all the men and gives them a hero to emulate. Crockett takes the limelight with both modesty and style, truly winning over their hearts with his fiddling. You can't watch anyone else if Thornton is on screen. This charismatic character is right for him in some endearing fashion.

The film's poignancy comes from the human way the characters are portrayed. I don't trust heroes.

Unlike most reviewers, I find a lot to like in the movie. It is not an action-packed war film, and that is good in my book. Crockett understands that his actions are influential, and while he doesn't look forward to dying in the mission any more than any soldier present, he accepts his responsibility to be clear about why they are fighting and to keep up the men's morale. The film's poignancy comes from the human way the characters are portrayed. The actors' understated performances add to the emotional quality of the work for me. I don't trust heroes.

The actual siege of the Alamo took place over 12 days, but on March 6, when the Mexican army advanced, the fighting was over in 90 minutes. All 189 Texian and Tejano defenders fell before Santa Anna's 2,500 men, of whom several hundred were killed.

As the film shows, the fight for Texas independence was not over. Spurred on by calls to "Remember the Alamo," recruits volunteered and were sent against the remainder of the Mexican army. The decisive victory was won by Gen. Houston in the Battle of San Jacinto, where a tall monument now honors them.

The Alamo, now playing in Cinema World and Cinemark, is highly recommended. **CW**

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PRINCE AND ME - PG (1:10) 3:40 6:10 8:40
WALKING TALL - PG-13 (12:50 2:50) 4:50 7:00 9:00
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