Movie Review: 'There Will Be Blood'

by David_Elliott

If the genius actor Daniel Day-Lewis didn't actually dig up John Huston (1906-87) for his stunningly dominating role in "There Will Be Blood," he must have tapped some psychic channel.

'THERE WILL BE BLOOD' - Dillion Freasier, left, stars with Daniel Day-Lewis in the drama 'There Will Be Blood.' CNS Photo courtesy of Melinda Sue Gordon. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) As Daniel Plainview, whose pastoral name cannot hide a gnarly interior, the actor is often quite close to Huston's vocal timbre, mannerisms and slightly sinister courtliness. And yet, with fresh force, Day-Lewis is drilling in depth. Daniel drills for oil, after raw years as a metal prospector. He is very alone, except for adopted baby H.W.

Part of the movie's creepy power is that we can't tell if Daniel loves the boy, finds him a burden, or just uses the kid to soften dim or suspicious farmers out of their land and oil rights. Daniel is a grabber already rich in

snake oil.

Paul Thomas Anderson has greatly altered Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel "Oil," about the California boom in "black gold." The result, if never so lyrical as James Dean's wildcatter scenes in "Giant," easily beats "Oklahoma Crude." The torque of greedy appetite keeps twisting, the parched hills call out for water rather than oil, and Day-Lewis rules the story with the brute ruthlessness of a classic empire builder.

Daniel slaves and scams into big 1920s money, his kid mostly silent even before a serious accident (we can guess that he will produce a gusher of bile). Daniel's kindness to a young girl only shows his deep unease with women, while every male is an enemy or instrument. His stiff courtesies imply insult, his erratic care for the boy can't alter his gross contempt for people.

As an ego bulldozer this surpasses even Huston's Noah Cross in "Chinatown." Day-Lewis gives the best performance of an emotionally stifled power glutton since Orson Welles in "Citizen Kane," and if he lacks the foxy charm and pure bravado of Huston and Welles, he has created an even more hard-bitten paragon of predatory, American neurosis.

The plot is fairly simple, and creaks. We hear that happening as Daniel gets into a poisonous rivalry with a smug, boyish preacher, Eli Sunday (Paul Dano). Both are fanatical hucksters. Eli, a dinky prophet, has conned himself into some belief, and Daniel despises him.

The movie has a startling sense of work, the beauty and danger of tools, the way hard land can be both heaven and hell. Under starchy facades of dignity, people crawl with need and envy. Oil ("mud" says Daniel) becomes a Freudian vent for all the sub-surface troubles.

Anderson, who created the fascinators "Boogie Nights" and "Magnolia," has a gift for making characters sting. The scenes of Daniel trying to find a little soul relief at the beach, while also calmly planning to kill someone, is as acutely good as the heart-rending scene of his boy alone on a train.

But Anderson is a gambler who likes wild cards. The duel of Daniel and Eli, often spurred by a heavy score, is as rigged as an oil derrick, and is too thin to carry the moral portents about God and sin. There is an amusingly sadistic baptism, but a violent, topping scene at Daniel's private bowling alley heads into satire, even Coen Bros. high jinks.

For two ironclad hours, Anderson has a grand, dark movie fit to finish a West Coast grab trilogy begun by "Greed" and "Chinatown." Then, for about 30 hammy minutes, he opts for surreal payback antics. It's as if he decided to make a doughnut, and had to punch in a hole.

A Miramax Films release. Director, writer: Paul Thomas Anderson. Cast: Daniel Day-Lewis, Paul Dano, Ciaran Hinds, Russell Harvard. Running time: 2 hours, 32 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

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