

Pulling the Threads of an Intricately Stitched Together World

A *Train Dreams* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

In my opinion, there are too many Best Picture nominees—seriously, the category should legit be cut down by half! Five Best Picture noms is acceptable, and really would force the Academy to be more selective in their nomination process; however, if that were the case this year, I might have missed *Train Dreams* altogether.

I'm not going to lie, I had *Train Dreams* listed pretty low on my list of Best Picture noms that I was excited to watch (that being said, I had *Sinners* at the top of my list last year of movies I wanted to watch, so there is *that*). It was more so the Terrence Malick comparisons that initially rubbed me the wrong way: don't get me wrong, if you're a Terrence Malick fan there's nothing wrong with that—his movies are stunningly gorgeous to look at—but they often leave me feeling like I am on the outside of a big, inside joke, and that's a feeling I *hate* feeling when it comes to movies. I'm happy to report that *Train Dreams* hit me more akin to *The Life of Chuck* (legit underrated and underappreciated) than any Malick feature (which might be ironic, because I know a lot of people “didn't get” *The Life of Chuck*).

Train Dreams is a beautifully simplistic movie: it's one of those biopic-type features that follows a primary character throughout their life. I feel like the simplicity of it all is what really makes it work. We are transported to the early 1900's, where much of America is still being explored, and reshaped, through brute force labor. Robert Grainier is a railroad construction worker who dreams about being able to make enough money to eventually build his own saw

mill with his wife. The story centers around their relationship (told from his point of view); that's it—simple!

The film is primarily shot in nature, with a few scenes taking place inside of Grainier's cabin. Now, I am of the opinion that it is somewhat difficult to shoot nature-focused settings and *not* have them be beautiful, but Adolpho Veloso's cinematography here goes well beyond *just* nature scenes, and truly is the star of the show. Veloso shoots *in nature* but chooses to focus on more eye-catching, symbolic items, such as a pair of boots bolted to a tree, a saw going back and forth through a tree, or men huddled around a campfire after a hard day's work. These types of shots really do wonders in recapturing a time where there were no cell phones, no external light sources, etc. The entire film feels like a time capsule, and it makes the story feel that much more personal. The numerous scenes shot around campfires made it impossible for me not to reminisce of the days of my youth, and what it felt like sitting back and yapping with my friends.

I suppose that every movie review should at least include a brief discussion of the acting in the film, but this is really one of those cases where there isn't really much to talk about. The standout acting-wise in this one is probably William H. Macy who plays explosives expert Arn Peeples. Peeples serves as the embodiment of a mentor/father figure for Grainier. Macy shines in his limited role here, providing smiles and wisdom during Grainier's working seasons away from home. For his part as Robert Grainier, Joel Edgerton is not really asked to do much: Grainier is a simple man, and his emotions are very measured. In fact, reflecting on his performance, it is, once again, the simplicity of it that makes it stand out—there is no need for layers in a character such as Grainier, because his motivations are obvious. Felicity Jones stars as Gladys, Grainier's

wife, and truly the spark of his entire existence. Jones provides the viewers with a strange sense of comfort every time she is on the screen—a feeling that Robert has made it home.

There is an emotional center to the film, and a much larger message to be gleaned about life, the importance of family, etc. but this film doesn't beat you over the head with it. If outdoorsy type stories are not for you, then avoid this film like the plague, but that's really what makes the entire experience. This movie checks a box for me that I feel is important every year for the Academy to recognize: the humanistic, slice of life tale. While I did feel *The Life of Chuck* checked that same box, and is ultimately the more memorable film, that doesn't change the fact that *Train Dreams* is a nice little movie that gives the viewer the opportunity to revisit a much different time than we are currently living in.