



[Days of Heaven](#) at [Cornerhouse](#)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) September 2011

As Terence Malik's latest work 'The Tree of Life' closes, the Cornerhouse shows this new print of his second film, a work that already shows the director's trademarks – the detached narrator, the fascination with the nature and the overwhelming beauty of his images.

Following 'Badlands', in which a James Dean obsessed Martin Sheen, leads girlfriend Sissy Spacek on a crime spree mirroring the exploits of Bonnie and Clyde, the protagonists in Days of Heaven are acting out one American dream – we see the beginnings of that dream in the farmlands of the Texas panhandle in the early years of the last century.

In this awesome landscape migrant workers arrive from every corner of the world on the new railroads to work backbreaking long hours to feed the growing cities and build the fortunes of the Texan land barons. It is a country of endless wheat fields where steam powered ploughs share the landscape with the last remaining herds of buffalo, and where the work of man can be destroyed in an instant by the power of nature.

This is the story of three migrants: Richard Gere, fleeing Chicago after a murder; his young sister, Linda Manz; and his lover, Brooke Adams. It is Manz who provides the deadpan narration using adult phrases and unintentional humour – in an amazingly natural performance. Gere is a

young man passionately searching for his share of the American dream who makes a terrible decision in the hope of the wealth he desires. The young Gere often plays the *woman's* role, shot as a beautiful object – but in this he shows that he is a true actor, given an opportunity that was only to recur when his looks began to fade. And in Brooke Adams we see an almost European film – an unconventional beauty with the sulky stare of a young Jeanne Moreau and the throaty voice of Lauren Bacall. She is a woman who has survived poverty whilst preserving her self-respect – which she will sacrifice for love culminating in an awful denouement.

These three drifters arrive on Sam Shepard's farm – a man who lives in strange isolated splendour in the middle of nowhere with only his foreman for companionship.

When it opened in 1978 the film showed that Malik, a famously reclusive figure, was an enduring talent – here was a totally different story and a stunningly beautiful film. This is due to the vision of the director and the talent of two of the world's greatest cinematographers – Nestor Almendros, with additional work by Haskell Wexler. The film was shot mainly using natural light in the 'magic hours' of sunrise and sunset, the landscape shimmers, moving from landscape shots to super close-ups of animals and insects and lingering shots of the wordless actor's faces.

The interiors of the Chicago foundry and the Texan mansion glow like Vermeers. Martin Scorsese has spoken of the influence of Caravaggio on the lighting of his own films and here we can see moving images from the Dutch master.

As you may have realised I love this film – I had only seen in an original print on television, but on the big screen it is a revelation. I love the images, the acting, the matter of fact narration and the feeling that these characters will live on. The film does not tie up all the loose ends as we are only seeing one episode in their lives, but I also love the fact that it is a story of ordinary people. This is the real foundation of America, these people working long hours in the farms and factories of a new land – building the fortunes of the new ruling class whilst trying to get their share of the American dream.

There's a relatively short showing period at the Cornerhouse for this film, so in summary I'd urge you to GO SEE THIS FILM whilst it's still on.