



Robert Duvall plays Mac Sledge, a man who struggles to put his life back in order after meeting a widow played by Tess Harper in the recently released "Tender Mercies."

the movies  
**Louise Snider**

## 'Tender Mercies': an uncanny slice of Americana

When a movie whispers, pay attention. That's a good indication that the filmmakers cared more about integrity than flash and gills.

"Tender Mercies" (PG) opts for integrity. The style is quiet, low key, unpretentious. It's a superior example of how engrossing a film can be when it puts its trust in people — how they talk, act, relate to each other — instead of in action for action's sake.

The principal characters are Robert Duvall and Tess Harper (in her film debut). Duvall plays Mac Sledge, a once-great country Western singer and composer. Twice married and the father of an 18-year old daughter, Mac lost his family and his career to alcohol. Harper plays Rosa Lee, a young woman who grew up quickly. She married at 16, was a mother at 17 and a widow at 18 when her husband was killed in Vietnam. She has remained where her roots are in the dry, flat, Texas landscape where she runs an isolated motel and gas station.

Her 9-year-old boy, Sonny (Alistair Fothergill in his movie debut), is both child and man. He wants the attention of a father, but he also displays the cocky assuredness of a boy accustomed to being the only male in the house.

When Mac awakes from a binge in Rosa Lee's motel without any money to pay his bill, he asks if he can stay and work it off. "Tender Mercies" begins that simply and continues with a compelling simplicity and directness. Mac stays, works, gives up drinking, and marries Rosa Lee.

The dialogue is sparse. Every word is important. These aren't people who easily speak about their thoughts and feelings. That goes into their music — those country Western songs about heart-break, loneliness, cheating lovers and true love. The music is an important and very moving part of this film.

DUVALL DOES his own singing in the movie and wrote two of the songs. The script was written by Horton Foote. It's a lean, beautiful piece of writing. No word or phrase rings false to the characters, time or place.

The Australian director Bruce Beresford ("Breaker Morant," "The Getting of Wisdom") directed the film with an uncanny perception for Americana. Everything looks and feels right from the dusty Coke machine on the motel porch to the Baptism ceremony at the church.

Beresford concentrates on the familiar, homely things that make up his characters' lives — tending the garden, mending a door, going to church. These activities help define them; but "Tender Mercies" is also about an artist (Mac) cut off from his art and still needing to express himself. And it's about the quiet courage of people facing up to life's inequities, enduring and building anew.

Beresford treats all the characters with dignity and respect, and he taps into what is universal about them. Their needs for loving, trusting and giving direction to their lives are shared by all of us.

The result is an exceptional film that deserves to be hailed as an American classic.

## what's at the movies

**BABY IT'S YOU (R).** A teenage-mismatch story set in the '60s about the attraction between a smart, middle-class girl and a no-future, high school dropout.

**BLUE THUNDER (R).** Action-adventure with Roy Scheider as a police helicopter pilot engaging in a battle with the developers of an ultra-sophisticated helicopter.

**BREATHLESS (R).** Richard Gere and Valerie Kaprisky are passionate lovers running from the police after Gere kills a policeman in this remake of the Jean-Luc Goddard classic, 1959 film, "A Bout de Souffle."

**DOCTOR DETROIT (R).** Dan Aykroyd is a mild-mannered college professor by day and a flashy swinger by night after he inherits a group of prostitutes.

**EVIL DEAD.** Tale of supernatural forces produced locally by Robert Tapert, written and directed by Sam Raimi. Partly filmed in Birmingham.

**EXPOSED (R).** The world of high-fashion modeling and international terrorism mix in erotic movie with Nastasia Kinski and Rudolph Nureyev.

**FLASHDANCE (R).** A determined, young woman works as a welder by day and a dancer by night. Movie doesn't make too much sense but the dancing makes a terrific impact.

**GANDHI (PG).** Epic film about Mahatma Gandhi, political and spiritual leader who led movement for Indian independence from Britain. Magnificent performance by Ben Kingsley as Gandhi.

**THE HUNGER (R).** Slow-moving film about a man and woman searching through the ages for eternal life and beauty. With Catherine Deneuve, David Bowie and Susan Sarandon.

**THE KING OF COMEDY (PG).** Jerry Lewis is a talk-show host and Robert DeNiro is the aspiring comic who wants to appear on his show. Directed by Martin Scorsese.

**LOCAL HERO (PG).** Cliches go flying in this wry film about a Texas oil company that wants to buy out a quaint Scottish fishing village. Directed by Bill Forsyth ("Gregory's Girl"). Burt Lancaster is featured in cast.

### MOVIE RATING GUIDE

G General audiences admitted.  
PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.  
R Restricted. Adult must accompany person under 18.  
X No one under 18 admitted.

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