

# 'River' almost swamps story



Sissy Spacek is Mae Garvey and Mel Gibson is her husband Tom, a couple who farm their land but see their dreams dying when their livelihood is threatened, in "The River."

Eschewing water imagery in this review is going to be pretty tough because "The River" floods, as it flows along nicely but a bit too far.

There are occasional twists in Sissy Spacek's latest that detract. On the whole, though, this melodrama of survival on the small family farm is an effective, entertaining film.

"The River" affirms the great strength of the family and of the human spirit in adversity. The Garveys' small, bottom-land farm is constantly in debt, plagued by natural disasters and the ever-present, villainous Mr. Big.

In spite of these odds, Tom Garvey (Mel Gibson), his wife Mae (Sissy Spacek) and their children, Lewis (Shane Bailey) and Beth (Becky Jo Lynch) struggle to save the family and their farm. There seems to be no question about the first and many about the last.

ONE OF THE Garveys' major problems (and the film's as well) is that selfish Mr. Joe Wade (Scott Glen), a James Coburn look-alike, is a cliched, one-dimensional villain. Wade is in love with Mae, runs a big farm in the hills, manages the County Grain Exchange, pressures the bank to foreclose the Garveys so he can flood the bottom land with a new dam — the completely cliched Mr. Big.

"The River" does, however, prove

that elements of this kind of Depression-era melodrama can be effective when beautifully photographed and framed by naturalistic acting.

Vilmos Zsigmond ("The Deer Hunter," "The Red" and "Cinderella Liberty"), whose photography won an Oscar for "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," has done another masterful job with naturalistic farm settings presented in soft, warm colors, marvelously composed.

Many frames of the film would be welcomed as landscapes on your walls. The impressionistic photographic quality is excellent in this emotional story of family spirit.

Spacek and Lynch are commendable in their appropriately down-to-earth style. The latter, in her first film role, is a very cute little 7-year-old. Whether she is just being herself or whether she is acting isn't clear. In either event, the performance is beguiling.

SPACEK, OF COURSE, is an accomplished actress whose naturalistic appearance fits the role of Mae Garvey so well.

But here I begin to part company with "The River." The Garveys are just too good. I can accept Tom Garvey's determination, nay his obsession: "My people are buried here, and I'm only leaving in a box."

Under the circumstances — long



the movies  
**Dan Greenberg**

hours of back-breaking work, adversity of natural and man-made disasters — nobody can be that nice, go through such physical and mental torment and still look unscathed.

The floods, the fights, the strain — through it all Tom Garvey rides, looking handsome, well-fed and pretty well-groomed as well as having the great ability to be well-mannered. He could have slapped the kids once or twice, just to let us know he's human.

Son Lewis takes after his father, in a small way, and is the perfect older brother with nary a cross look at his kid sister. Along with the one-dimensional Joe Wade, such lack of realism

dilutes the film's impact.

The auction of equipment by financially strapped farmers is a carbon copy of the "Country" auction and the film's ending sends confused signals as Joe Wade is uncharacteristically detached and, after all that struggle, there's no harvest.

Scabbing for dollars in a steel fabrication factory, as Tom Garvey does to survive, provides some excellent sequences but tends to stretch "The River" beyond reasonable time limits.

In spite of these complaints, I suspect most audiences will enjoy "The River."

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