MOVIES

Soldiers advance: *Ben Chaplin, John Cusack and Jim Caviezel (left to right), discuss their next move in an attempt to take out a Japanese bunker in Terrence Malick's "The Thin Red Line."*

'The Thin Red Line' is an event worth watching

By Hugh Gallagher
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Terrence Malick's "The Thin Red Line" is the second of two major film reassessments of World War II. It shares with Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" grim battle scenes and fierce male bonding but is a very different kind of movie.

Where "Saving Private Ryan" was a straightforward and simple story about a platoon sent to rescue a soldier after D-Day, "The Thin Red Line" is more complex, more philosophical and impressionistic. In addition to reflections on courage and camaraderie, it is also a meditation on nature under fire, the fragility of love, the destructiveness of ambition and much more.

But it never quite attains the authority, immediacy or importance of "Private Ryan."

"Thin Red Line" marks Malick's return to directing after 20 years. He was, with Martin Scorsese, one of the most promising and talented young directors of the 1970s. But after two extraordinary movies, "Badlands" and "Days of Heaven," he dropped out of the Hollywood scene. He had originally intended just to write the screenplay for this movie but was persuaded to return to the director's chair.

Based on a novel by James Jones, one of the finest chroniclers of the war in the Pacific, and author of "From Here to Eternity," "Thin Red Line" shares many attributes with Malick's last film, the richly atmospheric "Days of Heaven." It is beautifully photographed, under the direction of John Toll, with carefully chosen, deeply symbolic images. Shot in a remote area of Australia, the scenery is lush, vivid, idyllic until destroyed by advancing road graders followed by bombs and guns.

Ideas are carried over through voice overs – in the earlier film a young girl provided a knowing and painful narration, here the thoughts of several soldiers give us a variety of images and understandings. The language is elevated, poetic, vivid. Each character's voice is the voice of his inner soul. The pace is slow, in this case too slow. Points are made and made again. The images become plodding no matter how beautiful.

But any Terrence Malick film is an event and there is much in "The Thin Red Line" worth watching. He is the foremost impressionist among American film directors and his films have a fuzzy beauty quite different from Steven Spielberg's clarity of storytelling and vision.

The movie opens in paradise. AWOL soldiers frolic in a native village on Guadalcanal. Private Witt (Jim Caviezel) is sure that this is what life should be like as children play in the clear water and the people go about their lives in peace. He wonders how we ever got so far from "glory."

It is this paradise that will become a bloody battlefield, a pivotal, decisive fight to wrestle an airstrip from Japanese control. Though it is less the history of Guadalcanal as it is the shifting images that matter to Malick.

Private Witt is brought back to Charlie Company by his cynical, tough-guy sergeant (Sean Penn) and soon they and the rest of the company are on their way to mortal combat.

The characters are less rigidly defined than in "Private Ryan." On the other hand, they are also much less distinct. The idealistic Witt and his attempt to balance his conflicting emotions is probably central but many other characters have important roles though none takes a true center.

Nick Nolte gives a ferocious performance as an arrogant, angry, ambitious Army lifer colonel who is willing to sacrifice lives for his own glory. This is a stereotype character that becomes anything but in Malick's handling and in Nolte's nuanced performance. Nolte makes Lt. Col. Tall much more than a power crazy Custer.

Penn's Sgt. Welsh has seen and heard it all. This is another standard war movie character that gets an infusion of humanity and complexity.

Elias Koteas is the sensitive, caring Capt. Staros, who finds his concern for his men getting in the way of the colonel's plans. Here again, we are shown that as fine as the captain is, he is also full of doubts, scared and, in the end, eager to flee to safety. That sort of duality is rare in American war movies.

That duality is also present in John Cusack's performance as the truly heroic Capt. Gaff, who follows Tall's orders even as he fully understands how vain and dangerous his colonel is.

The dreamy quality is strong in the character of Private Bell (Ben Chaplin), whose memories of his young, ethereal wife provide yet another version of lost paradise.

Malick doesn't take the easy way when examining how war destroys paradise. "Thin Red Line" suggests that nothing is simple, nothing is exactly as it seems. There are poignant images of faith, brotherhood, fear and anger on both the American and Japanese side.

The battle scenes are loud and bloody, but not as galvanic, searing and personal as those in "Private Ryan." In Spielberg's film, viewers are actually immersed in the fighting, sharing the confusion and violence of Tom Hanks and his platoon. In "Thin Red Line" we are observers, more removed though no less aware of how horrible war can be.

"Private Ryan" ends on a note of mixed triumph and despair, while "Thin Red Line" ends as it began: on a note of wonder that humans can be so foolish – a soft, poetic sadness.

John Travolta braves the water in 'A Civil Action'

By Jon Katz
Special Writer

Showdown: *John Travolta stars as attorney Jan Schlichtmann, who stakes his practice, professional and personal reputation – and everything he owns – in a celebrated personal injury case in "A Civil Action."*

David James

"Water, water everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink"
– S.T. Coleridge

Poet Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" looked out over the ocean and realized that it could not sustain him. For the residents of Woburn, Mass., the Aberjona River water was just as deadly. It had a horrible stench. It tasted so awful it had to be mixed with Tang. It corroded kitchen pipes. And between 1965 and 1980, it allegedly caused 28 cases of childhood leukemia and 16 deaths in the Boston suburb.

Jonathan Harr chronicled the case in his 500-page best-seller, "A Civil Action." Brought to the screen by writer/director Steven Zaillian ("Schindler's List"), it is a powerfully told and acted motion picture, but one which might turn a whole generation off to the legal profession. Not because lawyers are what every comedian makes them out to be, but because the process itself is so downright dull.

The case of Anderson et al. versus W.R. Grace and Beatrice Foods dragged on for eight years. It can be argued that there were no winners. There certainly were losers. This is a story of losers. American filmgoers don't generally like losers.

Jan Schlichtmann (John Travolta) was a "bottom feeder," an ambulance chaser at the top of his game. The Italian suits, the Porsche, the radio show, the expensively appointed office; these were the spoils of war, and it is made clear to us through Travolta's narration that lawsuits are war. Personal injury law firms float their own money to fight their clients' battles, taking huge fees out of the settlements they literally bank on. "Trials are a corruption of the process," we're told. "Only 1.5 percent of civil suits reach a verdict; the whole idea is to settle."

Thus, when Schlichtmann and his partners got drawn into representing eight families against two huge corporations accused of dumping toxic chemicals into the Woburn water supply, they envisioned a quick and substantial score. Instead, they were outlawyered and out-funded. Schlichtmann as a 20th century David simply ran out of stones to put into his slingshot.

Travolta is on a decade-long roll of hits, and is well up to the challenge of playing flawed leads who are considerably less than heroic.

"I don't run away from bullies," he assures the parents. And yes, the character changes midstream from out for himself to out for the truth. Despite his success, however, Schlichtmann is portrayed as a pretty lousy lawyer. He conducts depositions clumsily – and they're about as action-packed as O.J. trial sidebars-and fools no one when he attempts to bluff the other side into settling for major bucks.

The one you'd want on your team is the remarkable Robert Duvall as Jerry Facher, Grace's lead counsel. Never far from a transistor radio broadcasting his beloved Red Sox, he plays the old fool while Schlichtmann plays right into his hands.

"You've been around long enough to know that a courtroom is no place to look for the truth," he tells his opponent in the film's most quotable line. Duvall is that rare master who, like Sox legends Ted Williams and Carl Yastrzemski, always gets good wood on the ball, whether it's in a supporting role like this or a lead like "The Apostle."

William H. Macy ("Pleasantville") is another can't-miss actor who the camera just loves. As the firm's bean counter, he stares helplessly amidst a roomful of overflowing file boxes, while the repo men wheel off the office furniture. Dan Hedaya (TV's "The Torteilis") is notable as the tannery owner most responsible for the dumping, and Kathleen Quinlan and James Gandolfini convey the working class frustration of townspeople who only sought an apology. We lost count of the number of times someone says "It isn't about the money."

You'll find symbolism galore in the many water-themed shots, and the wordless scene with a Woburn mother pouring water for her six children at the dinner table is a stunning indictment. Never mind all those depositions and motions; they should have just given the judge a glass of the stuff. Case closed.

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