BERLIN REVIEWS

There Will Be Blood

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Daniel Plainview - Daniel Day-Lewis
Eli Sunday - Paul Dano
Henry - Kevin J. O'Connor
Fletcher - Ciaran Hinds
H.W. Plainview - Dillon Freasier
Mary Sunday - Sydney McCallister
Abel Sunday - David Willis
H.M. Tilford - David Warshofsky
William Bandy - Colton Woodward
Adult Mary Sunday - Colleen Foy
Adult H.W - Russell Harvard

By TODD MCCARTHY

Boldly and magnificently strange, "There Will Be Blood" marks a significant departure in the work of Paul Thomas Anderson. Heretofore fixated on his native Los Angeles and most celebrated for his contempo ensemblers, writer-helmer this time branches out with an intense, increasingly insidious character study of a turn-of-the-century central California oil man. There's no getting around the fact that this Paramount Vantage/Miramax co-venture reps yet another 2½-hour-plus indie-flavored, male-centric American art film, a species that has recently proven difficult to market to more than rarefied audiences. Distrib will have to roll the dice and use hoped-for kudos for the film and its superb star Daniel Day-Lewis to create the impression of a must-see.

Officially penning an adaptation for the first time, Anderson turns out to have been inspired very loosely indeed by his source, Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel "Oil!" Pic betrays little of the tome's overview and virtually none of socialist Sinclair's muckraking instincts. Instead, it is more interested in language, in the twinned aspects of industry and religion on the landscape of American progress and, above all, in creating an obsessive, almost microscopically observed study of an extreme sociopath who determinedly destroys his ties to other human beings.
Notwithstanding its passing resemblance to "Citizen Kane," this theme is an odd one on which to build a big movie, especially in view of the extreme manner in which it ends; one can only guess at Anderson's personal reasons for dwelling on it with such unremitting fervor. But his commitment to going all the way must be respected in the face of conventional commercial considerations. Day-Lewis' Daniel Plainview is a profoundly anti-social fellow, malevolently so, and "There Will Be Blood" devotes itself to scratching, peeling and digging away at a man determined to divest himself of his past and everyone associated with it.

Foregrounded by an electronic sound that soars to an almost unbearable pitch, the first 15 minutes unfold with essentially no dialogue, as Daniel, in 1898, digs laboriously for silver and gold, then moves into oil. By 1911, he is a man of some means and has a son, although no wife. Tipped off about the abundance of oil in a rural area, and about Standard Oil's activities thereabouts, Daniel visits the farm of the pious Sunday family on false pretenses, obtains drilling rights at a bargain rate and immediately constructs the derricks on the property that will make his fortune.

Notably distinguishing the film during this initial stretch are its fulsome physicality, its linguistic distinction and the extraordinary originality of the musical score. Filmed around Marfa, Texas (where both "Giant" and "No Country for Old Men" were shot), pic presents a vivid, visceral account of the risky and sometimes dangerous labor it took to summon up black gold. With its functional, makeshift buildings and scattered equipment lending the parched landscapes a scarred beauty, Jack Fisk's production design indelibly brings to life the evocative photographs that exist of such industrial communities, and Robert Elswit's lensing captures it all with strong widescreen compositions and muscular camera moves.

More striking, however, is the nature of the language. Day-Lewis may well have used John Huston as a vocal model for his line deliveries, and it may not be farfetched to suggest that Plainview reps a younger incarnation of Huston's memorably corrupt tycoon Noah Cross in "Chinatown." Beyond such a comparison, however, lies Anderson's remarkable achievement in creating dialogue marked by different cadences than we're accustomed to today, with heightened formality, clarity and precision that lend it a slightly theatrical quality rooted in the 19th century. The unashamedly declarative talk, set against the backdrop of an America quickly transforming from rural to industrial, brings to mind a bracing fusion of Eugene O'Neill and John Dos Passos.

On top of these elements is the sweeping, surging, constantly surprising score by Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood, which could be described as avant-garde symphonic. It develops over long, sustained periods, not always in precise emotional alignment with what's taking place onscreen, but generally deepening and making more mysterious the film's moods and meanings. It's a daring, adventurous, exploratory piece of work, one that on its own signals the picture's seriousness.

From the outset, when Daniel suffers a leg injury, a sense of foreboding exists that, in concert with the title, promises worse to come. Accidents take place on the job, notably one in which Daniel's son H.W. (the marvelous Dillon Freasier), now about 10, loses his hearing. Until now very close to his father, the newly impaired H.W. is soon heartlessly banished by Daniel.

Further disturbing developments involve Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), the son of the landowner Daniel took advantage of. A young, charismatic evangelist, Eli builds a considerable congregation of staunch believers in Daniel's midst, and while Daniel pays lip service to the community, he clearly views Eli's activities with contempt.
Then there's the arrival of Henry (Kevin J. O'Connor), a derelict who claims to be Daniel's half-brother and informs him their father has recently died. A jailbird and vagabond, Henry wants nothing but a menial job. Daniel takes him in, and eventually confides his radically misanthropic views to him as he does to no one else.

"I hate most people," Daniel bluntly admits. "I want to earn enough money so I can get away from everyone." It's an ambition money can facilitate, but not before a terrible crime is committed and Daniel launches a one-man war against Standard Oil that involves acquiring more land to build an oil pipeline to the sea.

Drama's final 25 minutes play out in 1927, with an ultimate reckoning among Daniel, now crazy as a loon and living in Kane-like isolation, Eli and the now-grown H.W. Visually and dramatically, the final scene is a jaw-dropper, one that fits with what has come before but may still leave even partisan viewers a bit flummoxed.

The film's zealous interest in a man so alienated from his brethren can be alternately read as a work abnormally fascinated by cold, antisocial behavior, or as a deeply humanistic tract on the wages of misanthropy. Either way, Anderson has embraced his study of a malign man intimately, as has Day-Lewis, who, as always, seems so completely absorbed in his role that it's difficult to imagine him emerging between takes as just an actor playing a part. Daniel is a man who will stop at nothing to achieve the unnatural state of becoming an island onto himself, and Day-Lewis makes him his own.

Entire cast looks to have stepped out of a photo album from a century ago. Bulky but cherubic-faced, Dano ("Little Miss Sunshine") ranges from politely deferential to frothingly enraptured in a powerful performance as the young man of God, while O'Connor quietly rivets as a lifelong unfortunate. Pic could have used a developed sequence or two to establish the relationship between Daniel and his right-hand man, a role in which the imposing Ciaran Hinds gets short shrift. By contrast, numerous other supporting players have at least one scene in which they can shine. Women count for nothing in Daniel's rough and rugged world.

On a craft and technical level, the film is of the highest quality, not least in the sound department, where the mix is exceedingly complex and expressive.

Camera (Deluxe color, Panavision widescreen), Robert Elswit; editor, Dylan Tichenor; music, Jonny Greenwood; production designer, Jack Fisk; art director, David Crank; set designer, Carl Stenzel; set decorator, Jim Erickson; costume designer, Mark Bridges; sound (DTS/SDS/Dolby Digital), John Pritchett; sound designer, Christopher Scarabosio; re-recording mixers, Michael Semanick, Tom Johnson; stunt coordinators, Jeff Habberstad, Myke Schwartz; assistant director, Adam Somner; casting, Cassandra Kulukundis. Reviewed at Paramount studios, Los Angeles, Oct. 25, 2007. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 158 MIn.