

Poetic 'Red Line' Fails to Achieve Power of 'Ryan'

"The Thin Red Line" director Terrence Malick makes a highly anticipated return to the big screen, but he falls short of expectations.

I guess it was inevitable. After going to see the new World War II epic "The Thin Red Line," a film about the battle for the island of Guadalcanal in the Pacific, one of the first questions I was asked was "Is it better than 'Saving Private Ryan?'"

Hardly a fair question considering that the films are about as different as the European front was from the Pacific front. But, as this seems to be the context in which public perception of "The Thin Red Line" is to be grounded, I'll play along. So, is it better than "Saving Private Ryan?" Sadly, no.

"The Thin Red Line" is more daring in every aspect of filmmaking. It deserves to be a far superior film, yet it can't outdo Spielberg's gut-wrenching realism.

"The Thin Red Line's" director, Terrence Malick, is as close to mythical as anyone gets in Hollywood. After directing two outstanding films in the '70s, "Badlands" and "Days of Heaven," Malick walked away from the industry — essentially pulling a J.D. Salinger. So when word got out that the reclusive Malick planned to film James Jones' 1962 novel "The Thin Red Line," Hollywood's elite lined up to be a part of it.

And while Malick cast many of the megastars who courted him in bit parts (Sean Penn, John Travolta, George Clooney and others), the meaty roles went largely to relative unknowns. Malick, though, is known for making stars out of unknowns by eliciting outstanding performances. Ever heard of Martin Sheen or Richard Gere? You might not have without Malick. So keep your eyes peeled in the future for Ben Chaplin, Elias Koteas and James Caviezel, the stars of "The Thin Red Line."

The film does not follow a conventional plot structure, and herein lies both the film's primary strength and its greatest flaw.

If most movies are like novels (i.e., a core group of characters who encounter conflict and affect resolution), "The Thin Red Line" is like a poem — an abstract meditation on the



Sean Penn leads the pack of established stars who play secondary roles to relative unknown actors.

MATT MILLER

Movie Review "The Thin Red Line"

★★★

nature of war and war's place in nature set against the backdrop of a bloody historical event.

While this poetic approach is a refreshing break from Hollywood norms, it carries the same problem that keeps most poetry from being widely popular. It is exceedingly difficult to write poetry involving the reader like a novel can.

An exceptionally talented poet can pull this off, and, at times, so does Malick. Much of the time, though, I just found myself wanting him to get on with it. Give me conflict, give me characters, give me anything other than another shot of blades of grass waving in the wind!

Of course, this is not to say that "Saving Private Ryan" was a perfect movie. It had narrative problems of its own, not to mention a few over-stereotyped characters, a problem that "The Thin Red Line" avoids entirely.

Unfortunately, this film's uninvolved beauty can't claim the same power as Spielberg's ultra-realistic masterpiece.

The Diversions Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

Flick Leaves Audience 'Blue'

In rural Texas, high school football rules the land. The Friday night contests rival all other news events. Residents hold up the coach as a demigod, looking past his dictatorial ways. The players are above the law.

Sounds like a great life — if you play football. It'd be even better if it made a good movie.

JIM MARTIN

Movie Review "Varsity Blues"

★★

"Varsity Blues," the latest in the teen-film explosion started by "Scream," sets up its cinematic shop in West Canaan (note the blatant biblical allusion), a small town where guys in shoulder pads hold the pride of the community in their hands.

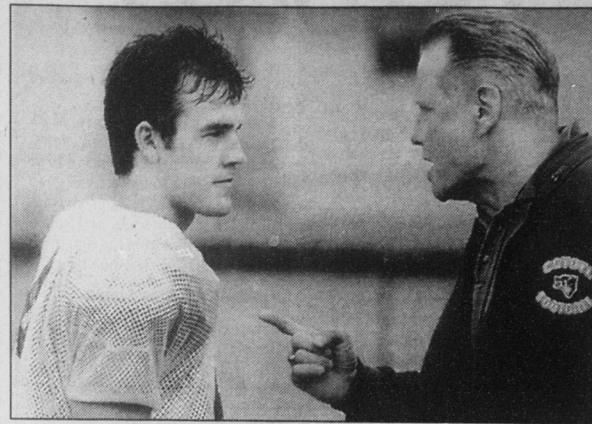
At the helm of the West Canaan Coyotes football team for 35 illustrious yet tyrannical years is Bud Kilmer (Academy Award winner Jon Voight in one of his most underutilized roles since "Anaconda"). Kilmer walks and talks like Hitler was his role model.

So when second-string hot-shot quarterback Jonathan Moxton (James Van Der Beek, TV's "Dawson's Creek") takes over after the starting QB suffers a traumatic knee injury, philosophies clash.

Audiences have seen it all before. This movie about an athlete struggling with a mean-spirited leader rehashes "The Program" in order to make a sports movie for the teenage demographic. Director and Producer Brian Robbins admitted he had always been a fan of John Hughes' '80s high school films, and he said he followed sports.

What Robbins comes up with in "Varsity Blues" is an incredibly generic and formulaic sports film with teenage drinking and sex scattered around.

In fact, there's nothing inherently wrong with the movie, but more importantly, there is not one remarkable qual-



James Van Der Beek withstands the verbal assault from Jon Voight (his coach) in the latest Hollywood teensploitation flick, "Varsity Blues."

ity in it either.

Sure, Van Der Beek secured his first feature film and kept his head above water, but don't look for his career to skyrocket as if he was one of the "Party of Five" girls.

As a production of MTV Films, one must accept that the two female supporting characters are both fashion models. Of course, the lead character will be surrounded by outlandish stereo-

types — a 300-pound hick named Billy Bob with a pick-up truck and a pig named Bacon, and a hyper-sexualized renegade named Tweeder.

"Varsity Blues" is one of those on-the-fence films that can't settle on a genre, yet settles for being completely mediocre.

The Diversions Editors can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

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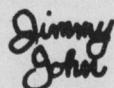
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