

The Badlands Collective
presents

Wonder Boys

A Tribute to Curtis Hanson
12 January, 2017
Prince Charles Cinema, London



A Tribute to Curtis Hanson

The director Curtis Hanson, who died in September 2016 at the age of 71, was one of the great studio craftsmen of our era. Most widely celebrated for his Oscar-winning 1997 adaptation of James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential*, Hanson was in fact responsible for a string of rich, handsome films that balanced excitement with sensitivity, including some of the most underappreciated Hollywood gems of the past thirty years.

Born in Reno, Nevada, growing up in Los Angeles, Hanson dropped out of high school to work for Cinema magazine, where he first observed film sets and interviewed directors such as John Ford and Vincente Minnelli. His first filmmaking jobs were in exploitation film, writing the H.P. Lovecraft adaptation *The Dunwich Horror* (1970) and directing the Tab Hunter psycho-killer thriller *Sweet Kill [aka The Abusers]* (1972) for Roger Corman. After writing the Elliot Gould thriller *The Silent Partner* (1978), which is said to have been admired by Alfred Hitchcock, and co-writing the screenplay for Sam Fuller's brilliant *White Dog* (1982), Hanson scored a modest success directing the Tom Cruise sex comedy *Losin' It* (1983), and then secured his position as a director-for-hire with a run of thrillers that were slick and propulsive with a feel for ensemble casting.

The Bedroom Window (1987) was a sharp, sexy and dangerous Hitchcockian effort with Steve Guttenberg, Isabelle Huppert and Elizabeth McGovern. *Bad Influence* (1990) was a glossy yuppie-noir showdown with James Spader and Rob Lowe. *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1991) was Hanson's first smash hit, with Rebecca DeMornay as the vengeful nanny up against Annabella Sciorra, Julianne Moore and Ernie Hudson. *The River Wild* (1994) turned Meryl Streep into a big-budget action heroine alongside a cast including Kevin Bacon, John C. Reilly and David Strathairn.

With *L.A. Confidential*, Hanson reached another level, making a tribute to the city of his youth with the gripping technique of his suspense films and an amplified sense of character, beautifully showcasing established Hollywood stars like Kevin Spacey, Kim Basinger and Danny DeVito alongside relative newcomers such as Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce. It was a fiendishly disparate and convoluted novel turned into a multi-award-winning, rapturously reviewed crowdpleaser of a movie.

In his phase as an elder statesman of mainstream American cinema, Hanson made *Wonder Boys* (2000), which we'll be celebrating tonight, not to mention turned Eminem into an actor for the hip-hop melodrama *8 Mile* (2002) and cast Cameron Diaz, Toni Collette and Shirley MacLaine in the thoughtful, surprising comic drama *In Her Shoes* (2005). His cameo as Meryl Streep's husband in *Adaptation* (2002) gave a public glimpse of Hanson as a sociable industry player, and indeed in 1999 he became the first chairman of the U.C.L.A. Film & Television Archive.

Even as Hanson's directorial career wound down, he commanded impressive casts: The disappointingly soft poker drama *Lucky You* (2007) featured Eric Bana, Robert Duvall and Drew Barrymore; the Emmy-winning TV movie *Too Big to Fail* (2011) included William Hurt, Cynthia Nixon and James Woods as some of the many players in the 2008 financial crash. He was working on the surfing picture *Chasing Mavericks* in 2010 when he stepped down due to illness; the film was completed by director Michael Apted, with both directors receiving screen credit.

In large part, Hanson will be remembered as an actor's director, but that's not to imply his films were plain or theatrical - rather, that he had the wisdom to let his performers breathe even while he took joy in technical polish and tight plotting. "What I try to do is give each actor an environment in which they can do their best work," he said. "Then they go off and do the mysterious thing that they do."

A Note About Tonight's Screening: 25% of box office from tonight's performance will be donated to Alzheimer's Research UK, a charity with which the Prince Charles Cinema has worked previously. However, we should note that Curtis Hanson suffered from frontotemporal degeneration, which is a similar condition to Alzheimer's but one with its own unique challenges. For more information on frontotemporal degeneration, please visit www.theaftd.org

Wonder Boys



USA / 2000 / 107 mins

Directed by Curtis Hanson / Produced by Curtis Hanson, Scott Rudin / Written by Steve Kloves
Based on the novel by Michael Chabon / Photographed by Dante Spinotti / Edited by Dede Allen
Music by Christopher Young / Production design by Jeannine Opewall / Casting by Mali Finn

Starring Michael Douglas (Grady Tripp), Frances McDormand (Sara Gaskell), Tobey Maguire (James Leer),
Robert Downey Jr. (Terry Crabtree), Katie Holmes (Hannah Green), Rip Torn (Q), Richard Knox (Vernon),
Jane Adams (Oola), Alan Tudyk (Traxler)

While *L.A. Confidential* was the most prestigiously lauded of Curtis Hanson's directorial achievements, and *8 Mile* was the most commercially successful, it is *Wonder Boys* that is his masterpiece. Based on Michael Chabon's 1995 novel, starring Michael Douglas as perpetually stoned creative writing professor Grady Tripp, it's a warm meditation on the eccentricities of the literary life that plays like a slowed-down screwball comedy.

Set in a Pittsburgh campus town, the movie sends Grady on an odyssey where his life reaches an out-of-control crescendo during the snowy weekend of the WordFest festival. With his second novel seven years past due, Grady finds his literary agent on his back, not to mention his wife leaving him, a stranger trying to claim his car, a morose student wreaking havoc, and the chancellor of the university, with whom he is having an affair, pregnant with his baby. There are also shenanigans with fainting spells, a piece of celebrity memorabilia and a pearl-handled pistol.

The astonishing cast features not only Douglas but Frances McDormand and Rip Torn, not to mention Robert Downey Jr., Katie Holmes and Tobey Maguire in career-best performances. Bob Dylan's original song "Things Have Changed" kicks off a soundtrack full of 60s folk-rock greats that also includes Neil Young, Buffalo Springfield and Leonard Cohen. And the movie is beautifully photographed in warm, wood-panel hues by Dante Spinotti. While Hanson had proven to be a director adept at building tension and excitement, here he dials back, giving the components time to be savoured, and shoots with a handheld camera that's at one with Grady's shaggy bemusement.

Wonder Boys was released in the USA in February 2000 to excellent reviews; Variety called it "massively inventive... spiked with fresh, perverse humour that flows naturally from the straight-faced playing." The box office receipts, however, were disappointing, so Paramount, who perceived the film as a potential hit and one with awards prestige, took the unusual step of re-releasing the film in May with a brand new marketing campaign. Still, though, *Wonder Boys* failed to set the box office alight. At the Oscars, Bob Dylan won for his song, and the movie achieved nominations for Steve Kloves's screenplay and Dede Allen's editing, but there was no recognition in the Best Picture, directing or acting categories.

Nevertheless, *Wonder Boys* is a film beloved by many who have seen it, and we're pleased to celebrate it tonight by watching an original 35mm release print. It's a work of curiosity, warmth and restraint, with a quiet sense of adventure, an atmosphere of friendship and a touch of the magical.

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Directed by

Curtis Hanson

THANKS

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