

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS

US, 2001. Rated R. 109 min. Cast: Gene Hackman, Anjelica Huston, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, Luke Wilson, Danny Glover, Bill Murray; **Music:** Mark Mothersbaugh; **Cinematography:** Robert D. Yeoman; **Written by** Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson; **Directed by** Wes Anderson.

Anyone who has seen *Rushmore* surely remembers the bravura montage that runs through prep school protagonist Max Fischer's numerous extracurricular activities at a blurring, breakneck pace. Director Wes Anderson's follow-up film *The Royal Tenenbaums* similarly begins with an action-packed history of a New York family of fallen geniuses. Accompanied by an instrumental version of The Beatles' "Hey Jude" and our narrator's wistful voice-over (provided by Alec Baldwin), the sequence swells and soars like a miniature symphony. We get succinct but revealing mini-portraits of each family member, we tour 111 Archer Avenue, their enormous but intricately designed house (as much of a character as its inhabitants), and we learn of their rise, decline and subsequent fracture, all in the space of a few minutes.

From there, the story picks up twenty-two years later. Flat broke, banished patriarch Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman) longs to "make up for lost time" with the family he neglected, only to discover how much everyone has changed. His estranged wife, archaeologist Etheline (Anjelica Huston) is now engaged to Henry Sherman (Danny Glover), a respectable accountant—he's "everything Royal is not". Uptight, eldest son Chas (Ben Stiller) is an entrepreneur still traumatized over the recent death of his wife. Overprotective of his two little sons, Ari and Uzi, Chas moves them back into the Tenenbaum home. Adopted, eternally disaffected middle daughter Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow), a failed playwright, and shattered youngest son Richie (Luke Wilson), a failed tennis pro, also return. Margot is stuck in a loveless marriage to psychologist Raleigh St. Clair (Bill Murray) and is cheating on him with Richie's childhood friend, novelist Eli Cash (Owen Wilson), while Richie is secretly in love with Margot. With the aid of butler/sidekick Pagoda (Kumar Pallana), Royal schemes to return to 111 Archer Avenue and win back everyone he's alienated.

Building on the promise of *Rushmore* and *Bottle Rocket* (Anderson's first feature), *Tenenbaums* is an epic by comparison. Where the previous films focused on a handful of misfits, this one celebrates an extended family of them. As it zig-zags through their elaborate backstory, it weaves together a

tapestry of universal themes exploring familial relations, made personal by Anderson's quirky but ultimately compassionate sensibility. Structured like a novel (the opening shot imagines the film as a well-worn book getting checked out of the library) and divided into chapters, it's also bursting at the seams with literary references and allusions. For instance, most of the characters have either written books (from Margot's plays to Henry's *Accounting For Everything*) or, in Richie's case, have appeared on a magazine cover.

Many have likened the Tenenbaums to the titular clan in Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, or J.D. Salinger's Glass family; however, the film's design suggests more a comic strip come to life. Virtually every character appears in a requisite costume of sorts that rarely changes throughout: Richie's tennis shirt and headband, Henry's blue blazer and bow tie, Chas' red Adidas track suit and the identical, miniature versions his sons wear. The immaculately



storyboarded interior sets, with their deep pink walls and insane attention to detail (the childhood drawings on Richie's bedroom walls (created by Anderson's brother Eric), the walk-in closet overflowing with board games) are also obviously exaggerated. Many shots even feature someone tightly framed through a window, peering at the outside world.

The New York-centered *Tenenbaums* was Anderson's first feature not shot in his home state of Texas. The house used for 111 Archer Avenue was actually a dilapidated brownstone at 144th Street and Convent Avenue in Harlem. Anderson and his crew painstakingly redesigned the building's interior from top to bottom for the film. Although a few scenes were shot at famous Gotham locales such as Battery Park, Central Park and the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, Anderson generally avoided using the city's most recognizable landmarks. He eschewed obvious skyline panoramas for smaller, but striking neighborhood vistas like the green pedestrian bridge where Margot and Eli confront each other. Alas, most of Anderson's New York exists in the mind: a

city forever stuck in late autumn/early winter where one can always hail a Gypsy Cab full of dents and exercise (or take refuge) at the 375th Street "Y".

Although it had a relatively large budget (twice that of *Rushmore*), a high-profile ensemble cast (supposedly, Hackman's and Huston's parts were written with them in mind) and a much wider, more ambitious scope, *Tenenbaums* is still instantly recognizable as a Wes Anderson film. As with the other two, it features credits entirely done in Futura Bold typeface, a whimsical musical score from former Devo member Mark Mothersbaugh, Anderson stock players such as Pallana, Seymour Cassel (as Dusty, the elevator operator-cum-doctor) and Andrew Wilson (Luke and Owen's older brother), a cameo from the director himself (as the tennis announcer) and a final, reflective shot that's filmed in slow-motion.

Also look out for various motifs and jokes: the number of Tenenbaums wearing a piece of pale pink clothing at any given moment, the particular instrument on the soundtrack most prominent during Margot's scenes, the cameo appearance (as a paramedic) by one Brian Tenenbaum, a real-life college friend of Anderson's.

Yet, for all its self-aware cleverness, off-the-wall sight gags, and excessive stylization, *Tenenbaums* is really a sweet, rather poignant film that resonates more profoundly with each viewing. Once you've absorbed such showy (but dazzling) moments as the detective's clipped rundown of Margot's past loves (furiously edited to The Ramones' "Judy is a Punk"), what you're left with is essentially a tender (if occasionally side-splitting) tale of redemption. Marvel at the brilliant long take where Royal tells Etheline he's dying, and note how Huston's reaction shifts from disgust and surprise to concern, grief and rage without missing a beat. Observe how Anderson often tempers melancholy with hilarity without obscuring either tone (the Gypsy Cab appears just in time as Margot walks out on Raleigh). Pay attention to little details like how Royal refers to Margot not as "my adopted daughter", but simply, "my daughter" in the ice cream parlor. Take in the "Sparkplug Minuet" scene late in the film, where the camera tracks from one group of characters to another along the street outside 111 Archer Avenue, and notice the obvious affection and care Anderson has for each one. At one point, Eli gently says, "I always wanted to be a Tenenbaum". Royal replies (mostly to himself), "Me, too", and you just want to join him in unison.

—Written by Chris Kriofske