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THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Nov 1, 2004



Reviews

The Royal Tenenbaums bursts on the screen with such a barrage of loopy inventiveness, you fear it can't be sustained. And you're right. Yet somehow it doesn't matter. It's like falling in love with a flawed person who can do no wrong.

The bravura opening, framed as a written story, presents with unwavering panache one of filmdom's zanier families: a trio of kid geniuses. Chas started buying real estate in his early teens and became a whiz in international finance (and physically resembles Max Fisher, the teen prodigy from Wes Anderson's 1998 *Rushmore*). The adopted Margot is a playwright who received a grant for \$50,000 in ninth grade. Richie, never without his sweat band, was a junior champion tennis player who won the U.S. Nationals three years in a row. Adding to the merriment, these overachievers are shot in the stern frontal style of rotogravures.

Fast-forward to the parents Etheline (Anjelica Huston) and Royal (Gene Hackman) who have long been separated. Their child geniuses have grown up, known disappointment and failure, and are marooned in mediocrity--and now they want, well, to come home to mama and their old home, Anderson's priceless riff on a New York brownstone mansion. At the same time, Royal, a disbarred lawyer who's been living in a ludicrously grand hotel with his loyal retainer, has run out of cash and also yearns to return to the family fold. Though his kids barely tolerate the old reprobate, he worms his way back in by feigning mortal illness. Royal also hopes to reconcile with his wife--an acutely observed scene of them strolling in a recognizable Central Park captures the autumnal warmth of long acquaintance--but Etheline, an archaeologist working for the Housing Authority, has fallen for her accountant, Henry (Danny Glover).

Plotwise, Anderson is working with pretty thin material: a prodigal father who feels mortality nipping at his heels and wants back with his family. Moreover, once grown, the children are one-note cartoons, squandering the talent of fine actors. Gwyneth Paltrow's Margot is a sulky siren in eyeliner, distinguished mainly by her secret mania for cigarettes. Ben Stiller as Chas is a nonstop tantrum against his father. Anjelica Huston weights her role with a gravitas the character can't support. But as Royal, Gene Hackman is irresistible, wickedly funny as a faux sick man with a fondness for cheeseburgers and martinis; as grandpa to Chas' overprotected children, teaching them to pilot go-carts and hitch rides on garbage trucks; and as the consummate con artist, who can ingenuously ask, 'Can't someone be a shit their whole life and repair the damage?'

Star billing should go to the costumes and production design. Margot seems to live in a thrift-shop honey mink over a Lacoste tennis shirt; Royal sports a vintage gray double-breasted suit, the perfect scammer's plumage. Was ever the color pink used to loonier effect? It's a screaming gladiola pink, coloring the walls of the brownstone, Etheline's suits, and the preposterous pants of Royal's retainer. Often the decor upstages the actors, as in a riotous painting of a coven of Goyaesque motorcyclists done in Old Master style. And let's not forget Mordecai the falcon, and the Dalmatian mice, now flea-bitten, that Chas bred as a child. Anderson brilliantly conjures a goofy, skewed world as seen by a hyper kid, including a city with ravaged gypsy cabs and the 375th Street Y--a world not unlike, coincidentally, the surreal universe of French megahit Amlie. And if, finally, The Royal Tenenbaums resonates beyond the visual jokes, it's because it celebrates the longing to return to some Edenic childhood.

--Erica Abeel

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