

Strange, Beguiling Sean Penn in ‘This Must Be the Place’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 18, 2012 - 2:06am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sean Penn picks his roles carefully, and famously said he didn’t know what the story meant in “Tree of Life.” His attachment to “This Must Be the Place” continues the vague journey through movieland, as he plays a bizarre and aging rock star whose life is about to get interesting.

This movie doesn’t make a lot of sense – at a lot of points – but it does push the envelope as far as deconstructing narrative and opening up some scenic vistas. It is a reminder of Michelangelo Antonioni’s “The Passenger,” and somehow manages to be as vague as that famously soft storyline. Penn’s performance is exasperating, it’s bothersome from beginning to nearly the end, but damn if he doesn’t reel us in...again. His attention to character is stunning, the ticks and turns of his older rock star persona has many bad decisions, but Sean Penn loves to be interpretively creative and in this film he has free reign.

Cheyenne (Penn) is a 1980s rocker who was on the dark side. After two kids commit suicide listening to his records, he goes into exile in Dublin, Ireland. He lives with his devoted wife Jane (Frances McDormand), and wiles away the hours obsessing on his stock market portfolio and seemingly in a permanent funk. He has a buddy named Mary (Eve Hewson), whose mother Mary (Olwen Fouéré) is pining over a lost boy named Tony.



On the Road: Cheyenne (Sean Penn) on the Road in ‘This Must Be the Place’
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Cheyenne is called back to the United States, as his father is near death. The old man passes away by the time he gets there, and the son is surprised to find that the father – who survived the Holocaust – has spent his life trying to find his tormentor at Auschwitz. After consulting David Byrne (playing himself), Cheyenne decides to take up the Nazi hunt. He consults with expert pursuer Mordecai Midler (Judd Hirsch) and begins the quest. What and who he encounters will change the fabric of his life, maybe literally.

Given the description, the film is definitely worth seeing, but it does unravel a lot of rope for Penn to get entangled in. His Cheyenne character is suppose to be like Robert Smith of the Cure, but he also had a combination of Boy George and Michael Jackson working within it. Yeah, it was that annoying. In the first quarter of the film, as we see Cheyenne going through the I-can-do-anything-with-my-time scenarios, there emerges a desire to reach into the screen and shake the character into reality.

A favorable ingredient is the supporting cast. Frances McDormand can play any character, fitting into the rock wife like a silky glove. Judd Hirsch is amazing, his best role since "Ordinary People"? His curmudgeonly Nazi hunter is right at pitch, and not too heavy on the schmaltz. Joyce Van Patten, who began her career in the early days of television in 1948, does a turn as a history teacher who knows nothing about history. Simon Delaney portrays Jeffery, Cheyenne's stock broker and horny friend. His riffs are on the edge of sanity, almost prose poetry.

Director Paolo Sorrentino expands the vistas in the film, creating alienation for Cheyenne in virtually every landscape he occupies. He also co-wrote the screenplay with Umberto Contarello, which bounces between staccato David Lynch-like line readings to histrionic Sean Penn flights of fancy which includes a give-and-take with David Byrne of The Talking Heads. What also is majorly weird is that Cheyenne never tips what he going to say, or how he is going to express it. This was both excruciating and flashed brilliance. It was moody to say the least.



Made Up: Cheyenne and His Wife Jane (Francis McDourmand) in 'This Must Be the Place'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Cheyenne is not a lovable character, in fact, it seems as though Penn created him to be off putting. A major theme is the rocker's inability to grow up, never having taken up cigarette smoking because – as he explains it – children don't smoke. He is a child in allowing to do whatever he wants, but he also is in control of his tragic circumstances. The Nazi hunt becomes part of the control. Ultimately, it's a tribute to Penn's painful contortions of character that makes Cheyenne work, up to and including his metamorphosis.

This film was released in the festivals last year, and has built a buzz for its odd reputation. Every time you might think that Sean Penn has faded into the Hollywood woodwork, he comes along to remind us that although he might be a bit of a show off as an actor, what he delivers is always noticed.

"This Must Be the Place" had a limited release, including Chicago, on November 16th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Sean Penn, Frances McDormand, Judd Hirsch, Eve Hewson, Harry Dean Stanton, Joyce Van Patten, Olwen Fouéré and David Byrne. Written by Paolo Sorrentino and Umberto Contarello. Directed by Paolo Sorrentino. Rated "R"



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