

changes form,” she says. “All these drops might be a river someday, might be snow, might be in you.” Neither the speech nor the characters’ movements or gazes are unnaturally slowed down; they’re simply given apt space and weight. The emphases and pauses, the hesitations and the tendernesses seem to reflect the tempo of deeply considered lives. Again and again, where many movies would just convey information, Jackson’s conveys texture. And when a scene shows Mack and Wood meeting again as adults (played by Charleen McClure and Reginald Helms, Jr.), Jackson pulls thoroughly familiar gestures of affection out of the realm of cliché, investing them with astonishment and wonder.

With most films, the avoidance of spoilers is a courtesy; with “All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt,” it’s nearly a moral and aesthetic necessity. Suffice it to say that the basic plot involves a turn of events that I find multidimensionally stunning—remarkable to imagine from the perspectives both of the filmmaker who conceived it and of the characters who live it. I’ve seen the movie three times, and, while I was surprised only once, my breath was taken every time. Much of this has to do with a colossal six-minute sequence—as poised and reserved in its manner as it is explosive in its tensely quiet expressions—that’s among the great cinematic anthology pieces of recent times. I’ve often discussed melodrama as a crucial cinematic form, for its ability to endow ordinary lives with the furies of tragedy. “All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt” is one of the finest recent melodramas, not only because it looks at ordinary life with such loving care but because its sense of tragedy is so noble and exalted. ♦

Coming soon to Acropolis:

- *Mambar Pierrette* (Rosine Mbakam, 2023)—One night only, February 28 at Laemmle Glendale

Acropolis Cinema presents:



February 13, 2024 – NeueHouse Venice Beach

 @AcropolisCinema  /AcropolisCinema  @acropoliscinema

www.acropoliscinema.com

ABOUT THE FILM

A lyrical, decades-spanning exploration across a woman's life in Mississippi, the feature debut from award-winning poet, photographer and filmmaker Raven Jackson is a haunting and richly layered portrait, a beautiful ode to the generations of people and places that shape us. *In person: Raven Jackson.*

TRT: 92 min

All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt by Richard Brody

The following article was originally published by The New Yorker, November 2, 2023

In a year of impressive debuts, the first feature by the writer and director Raven Jackson, “All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt,” which opens Friday, is the best so far. It’s a comprehensively imagined and realized film, each of its elements brought to life with originality, inspiration, and a sense of beauty. Every aspect of the movie heralds a truly cinematic sensibility: the story and the dialogue; the casting and the performances; the eye for clothing, furnishings, and locations; the composition of images, attentiveness to light, and audacious editing; the sound design and the precision with which the score tracks the action. The result is a film that feels like a world come alive—or, rather, two worlds, Jackson’s inner one and the outer one of shared experience.

“All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt” is a multigenerational saga, spanning half a century in the life of its protagonist, Mackenzie (nicknamed Mack), a Black woman who grows up in rural Mississippi in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. (She’s played, at different ages, by four different actresses.) Yet the movie’s most distinctive and powerful achievements are in the realm of time. If the events in Jackson’s spare script had been filmed at a conventional pace and with conventional stagings, the film would be a longish short, of maybe thirty or forty minutes. And if she had filmed the full spectrum of incidents that are suggested or implied in the wide-reaching story, the movie would run four hours or become a miniseries. As it is, Jackson has shot a film that, despite its unexceptional ninety-seven-minute duration, exhibits a daring conception of cinematic time.

Mack grows up in a loving household with her father, Isaiah (Chris Chalk), her mother, Evelyn (Sheila Atim), and her sister, Josie (Jayah Henry). As a kid (played by Kaylee Nicole Johnson), Mack takes bike rides and goes on earnestly playful adventures with her friends in woods and clearings and swimming holes; as a teen-ager, she has a burgeoning flirtatious romance with another teen, named Wood (played, at that age, by Preston McDowell). But Mack’s mother dies, and Isaiah sends the children to live with their paternal grandmother, Betty (Jannie Hampton), prying Mack away from Wood.

The separation weighs heavily on her, throughout the course of her life, even as she lives as fully as possible in her new surroundings, eventually working and advancing, marrying, and having a child.

The stories of Mack’s life are told not in chronological order but as a temporal mosaic. The film’s time frames are intermingled, leaping back and forth through years and decades. The technique is not one of flashbacks from a dominant present tense. Instead, there’s a sense that, in memory—and, even more, in the collective life of a family, an area, and a community—past, present, and future are united through teachings and legacies, prophecies and premonitions. Scenes bringing Mack and Josie together with their grandmother have a special air of transcending time’s arrow by connection with the spiritual realm.

The action displays a rare convergence of a seemingly literary conception with a specificity of observation that suggests documentary. Jackson, working with the cinematographer Jomo Fray, unites gesture and drama, creating bold and nuanced sequences from moments that, in most movies, would be tossed off in a blandly illustrative shot or two. The ride away from the family’s home town, after Evelyn’s funeral, is inseparable from the girls’ hands resting on the grooved blue bed of the pickup truck that Isaiah is driving. But this image is embedded in an elaborate, symphonic collage of experiences, from their view of foliage on the road behind them and the sight of Isaiah at the wheel through the cab’s rear window to the hair styles and dresses that the girls wear. This montage, like many throughout the film, develops a single piercing moment over a remarkably sustained span of time; these constructions conjure the power of memory itself by way of aesthetics. The movie opens with young Mack getting a waterfront lesson in fishing from her father, and it, too, involves an array of visuals: the handling of the fish, the manipulation of a reel and a line, the use of a basket, and the lesson that follows, from Evelyn, in the family kitchen, in cleaning and preparing the catch for cooking—a shimmering sensory rapture, in which the gestures of hands, the postures of bodies, tones of voice, and deep moods imbue minor incidents with an aura of epic grandeur.

In moments of overtly great dramatic import, Jackson’s inspiration rises to the occasion, as in the scene of Mack’s wedding, where, during the singing of a spiritual, the parishioners are shown not singing along but in portraits, one by one, in extreme closeup, in a mode that joins shared devotional fervor with private contemplative stillness. Jackson and Fray cap the scene with a camera move of quiet bravura, roving past the couple to look out one window and then another, as if connecting the events inside the church with the life of the community, with the world at large.

Similarly, the movie’s dialogue is spare but not scant; Jackson writes lines of a lapidary strength and density, and her actors deliver them in a way that conveys the experience packed within. “I watched my daddy come toward me after almost killing me, but I guess I saw what I needed to,” Wood says of his father’s tough swimming lessons. Mack’s description of water contains a life-worn metaphysics: “It doesn’t end or begin, it just