Dramas of the ‘90s

Many drama films of the 1990s are strong in their acting performances and cinematography. The top three dramatic films of the 90s could very easily be *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Forrest Gump*, and *American Beauty*. These films are made powerful through the exceptional story-telling of their compelling actors and stunning images.

*The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont, is the story of Andy Dufresne. After being wrongly convicted of murdering his wife and her lover, he is sent to Shawshank Penitentiary where he makes a life-long friend who guides him through the horrors of prison life.

Tim Robbins portrays Andy Dufresne as a sensitive, yet strong-willed character, who has more panache than the audience first suspects. Robbins is “precise, honest, and seamless” in his displays of strength and vulnerability through facial expressions and physicality (Klady). Robbins’ boyish face and sly smirk make him appear innocent and charming while his icy blue eyes and monotone voice create unease. As the film progresses over many decades, Robbins is very believable as he “ages effectively from newcomer to father figure during the story” (Maslin “The Shawshank Redemption”).

Morgan Freeman, playing Andy’s friend Red, “has the showier role, allowing him a grace and dignity that come naturally” (Klady). Freeman’s delicate voice, narrating and leading the plot forward, makes every event personal and significant. Freeman is particularly convincing “when he suggests how dependent Red has become on the prison walls” that have institutionalized him (Maslin “The Shawshank Redemption”). The most memorable scenes, however, are the ones that include both actors who actively listen to each other and engage the audience in their compelling conversations.

The cinematography in *The Shawshank Redemption* reflects the dreariness of prison life and the warmth of friendship. The extreme wide shots of the Shawshank Prison with its stone walls and barbed wire fences make the audience feel just as intimidated and isolated as the newcomers entering the prison for the first time. Cinematographer Roger Deakins’ use of blues and grays wash out the prisoners and their surroundings. The lighting in the exterior of the prison is also very bleak, sometimes appearing nearly black-and-white. The lack of bright and deep colors produces a gloomy feel which for the setting and plot is very appropriate. Contrasting warm colors are used in certain scenes to give the audience glimpses of hope. When Andy's prison mates are enjoying beers on the roof, a setting sun shines on the characters' faces as the camera delicately moves to the speed of Red's voice over. Another scene that contains warmth is the shot of the prisoners outside as Andy plays Mozart over the loud speakers. The sunlight striking against them, as they stand in the court yard mesmerized by the music is a visual representation of hope.

Arguably, the best shot of the film is just after Andy’s escape through the sewage pipes as he makes it out on the other side. As he trudges through the water, lightning strikes, lighting up the whole shot. Andy removes his shirt and bears his chest in total surrender to the rain. Thunder rumbles as he lifts his arms up in the air; the camera’s final bird’s eye view shows just how free Andy has become.

The second best dramatic film of the 90s is *Forrest Gump*. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, *Forrest Gump* follows the many adventures of a simple man in love through iconic moments in history. Even as the world changes around him, Forrest’s love for Jenny never falters.

Tom Hanks plays Forrest Gump with a genuineness that makes him completely believable. He portrays an ordinary man who is somewhat slow “without condescension and without succumbing to the film’s Pollyanna-ish tone” (Maslin “Forrest Gump”). Two scenes, one where Forrest finds out he’s a father and the other where he is talking to Jenny by her grave site, are performed with such sincerity that the audience truly knows how deep Forrest’s love is for her. The supporting cast is also strong with Gary Sinise as Lt. Dan and Robin Wright as Jenny. Sinise portrays Lt. Dan’s transformations from a confident soldier to troubled addict, and then finally to a man who Forrest said, “made his peace with God.” Wright, whose character changes “from country girl to hippie to political activist to druggie” still consistently depicts a girl who one would cross the world for (Maslin “Forrest Gump”).

*Forrest Gump’s* cinematography is defined by many special and subtle effects that demonstrate the joyful journeys of an ordinary man. On several occasions Forrest appears to be on “the same film stock, in the same frame” as iconic figures of the ‘60s and ‘70s such as Presidents Kennedy, Nixon, and Johnson (Maslin “Forrest Gump”). This effect uses “archive footage to place Forrest right in the thick of the action” furthering the audiences’ belief that Forrest is changing history (Frost-Sharratt “Forrest Gump). The complete erasure of Sinise’s legs and Hanks’s kinetic ping pong balls add intensity to the characters’ strengths and weaknesses. The film’s cinematographer Don Burgess merges these special effects in his shots so naturally that the audience would not even know effects are used.

The most magical effect is a floating feather featured at the beginning and end of the film, creating a full-circle sensation to Forrest’s journey. The feather “drifts along a perfectly choreographed trajectory until it reaches its final destination” (Maslin “Forrest Gump”). The feather is simply going along for the ride, guided by the wind through pure happenstance. The feather symbolizes Forrest’s care-free journey through life, where events happen by chance, but the ending is destiny.

The third best dramatic film of the 90s is *American Beauty*. Sam Mendes directs this tale of a middle-class American family who appears normal in their suburban life, but in reality suburbia has stripped their individualism and stolen their joy. The father, Lester Burnham, regains his lust for life through the unhealthy attraction of his daughter’s friend.

Lester Burnham’s narration is the first thing the audience hears and Kevin Spacy’s purposely bored tone shows just how unimportant and insignificant the character believes himself to be. Kevin Spacy makes Lester identifiable and likable, though there are few admirable traits that the character has. Spacy portrays Lester’s sarcasm with eye-rolling and smirk-like smiles. Through the arrogance, the audience occasionally does enjoy glimpses of sincerity from the character. The scene between Spacy and Chris Cooper in which the ex-military man’s true feelings are revealed is performed with delicacy by both actors. The comfort of the hug and the confusion of the kiss is shown brilliantly through both Spacy and Cooper’s eyes. The final narration from Spacy at the end of the film is led with care and each word is said with purpose. The audience really does believe that Lester Burnham feels gratitude for every moment of his “stupid, little life.”

The cinematography in *American Beauty* helps portray aspects of the film’s theme. The film begins with an aerial shot displaying an average suburban neighborhood with houses that all appear identical. Then the camera closes in on a particular house with a bright red door, and the “apparently quiet neighborhood is revealed in all its quirky, ugly nakedness” (Frost-Sharratt “American Beauty”). When the film focuses on the Burnham’s family life, several wide shots are shown of the long dining room table with Lester at one end, his wife at the other, and their daughter awkwardly in the middle. The extreme space between the characters at the table represents a separation of relationships within the family. After Lester has gained excitement for life again, vivid dream sequences featuring his daughter’s friend covered in crimson petals repeatedly appear throughout the rest of the film. To create a dreamy atmosphere, Conrad L. Hall, the film’s cinematographer uses soft lighting, “saturated colors . . . and outlandish angels” (Nathan). The boy next door’s obsession with video recording allows for “shots within shots” (Nathan), creating visual depth in many scenes. In a way, the cinematography is a character in itself, reflecting realistic and fantastical views of the film’s setting and the characters’ circumstances.

Symbolism is also portrayed through the vivid cinematography with flashes of the color red within *American Beauty*. The front door to Lester Burnham’s house, the rose petals that surround his dreams, his 1970 Pontiac firebird, and his blood as it leaves his dying body are all the color of love, strength, passion, aggression, and beauty. The appearance of a color so striking contradicts the seemingly average suburban life of the main character, showing the audience that beauty exists in the most unlikely places.

These three films exhibit characteristics that made them instant classics. The cinematographers establish timely story-lines and the actors portray relatable complex characters. The cinematography in these films is not only about showing the actors’ performances but enhancing every glare and every grimace. The cinematographers created additional characters out of settings and objects that supported the characters through their various journeys. *Shawshank Redemption, Forrest Gump,* and *American Beauty* deserve to be recognized as the most memorable dramatic films of the 90s for their rich visuals and unforgettable performances.

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