



Family tree: Aden Young, Gabriel Gotting, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Christian Byers, Tom Russell and Morgana Davies as the O'Neill family in *The Tree*.

# ENTERTAINMENT

2 • FRIDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2010

ENTERTAINMENT

# Tree of life and death

## FILM

The Tree (M) ★★★★★  
Charlotte Gainsbourg, Morgana Davies  
Directed by Julie Bertuccelli  
Review: Mark Naglazas

Sometimes it takes the eye of the outsider to remind us of the strange, haunting beauty of the Australian landscape, as Brit Nicolas Roeg did in *Walkabout*, Canadian Ted Kotcheff achieved in *Wake in Fright* and now French director Julie Bertuccelli does — and does so quite magnificently — in *The Tree*.

Bertuccelli's adaptation of Judy Pascoe's 2002 novel *Our Father Who Art in the Tree* does not feature the harshly spectacular scenery of those earlier outback classics.

Set on the outskirts of a small town in rural Queensland, *The Tree* tells the story of a family struggling to cope with the loss of a father, and a giant Moreton Bay fig that comes to play a healing role in their shattered lives.

Bertuccelli has a way of shooting people and their environment — the artful placement of the camera, the concentration on small, telling details, the quick thinking that leads to her capturing nature in all its unpredictable ferocity — that brings Australia alive in ways that eluded Baz Luhrmann.

That eye for our country in all its oddness is evident from the start with Bertuccelli opening *The Tree* with a series of shots of an old Queenslander, not happily nestled in some verdant setting but being hauled along a lonely outback road by truckie Peter O'Neill (Aden Young). It's a stunningly surreal opening.

When the job is done, Peter is back in the bosom of his large, loving family, with his lovely French-born wife Dawn (Charlotte Gainsbourg), his studious, sensitive older son (Christian Byers), younger brother Lou (Tom Russell), toddler Charlie (Gabriel Gotting) and feisty, blonde moppet Simone (Morgana Davies).

The family's idyllic existence is ripped away when Peter dies of a heart attack at the wheel of his truck, with the vehicle careening off the road and crashing into the Moreton Bay fig in the backyard of the family's ramshackle farmhouse. "The truck and the tree are fused into one," according to the published screenplay.

Immediately Dawn plunges into an abyss of grief and despair, spending much of her time in bed or wandering around like a zombie, leaving the children to their own devices and barely keeping the fridge filled with food.

Eight-year-old Simone is equally distraught by the loss of her beloved father — she was his favourite. However, her means of coping take a different tack, with the single-minded, wildly imaginative youngster gradually coming to believe her father's spirit has taken up residence in the Moreton Bay fig, that he speaks to her through wind blowing through the leaves, and that the branches are his comforting embrace.

At first, Dawn is annoyed by Simone's obsession with the tree. But when a branch crashes into her bedroom when she begins a relationship with a local tradesman (Marton Csokas), a development that upsets Simone, Dawn begins to wonder about the grip that the deceased Peter has on the family.

In lesser hands this tale of loss, grief and renewal might have been unbearably twee, with the symbol of the tree becoming so literal we would have sat tabulating its meaning and not going with the emotional flow.

But Bertuccelli, channelling her own tragic experience into the film (her husband died while she was writing the screenplay), has taken what might have been a therapeutic, message-heavy yarn aimed at children and made a beautiful, mysterious and gratifyingly complex study of how the past and memory can be destructive and powerfully liberating.

Bertuccelli achieves this richness by not overplaying the supernatural elements. A former maker of documentaries, she treats each of the vaguely fantastic incidents naturally, with the gorgeous Gainsbourg, an actress who seems permanently shrouded in melancholy, effortlessly embodying a woman clawing herself back into the world of the living.

But *The Tree* will probably be remembered as the movie that launched Davies, who was seven years old at the time of filming and pulls off the minor miracle of capturing a child wise beyond her years without ever stepping out of the reality of her own age.

And, of course, special mention needs to be made of the breathtaking Moreton Bay fig (or the people who found this towering beauty and those who "wrangled" it to meet the story's needs). It gets my vote to replace Megan Fox in the new *Transformers*.

**The Tree is now screening at the Luna Leederville and Luna on SX.**