

Boyhood Review

By Nicholas DeLorenzo

There's no way *Boyhood* should even exist, let alone be as great as it is. The idea is a simple one. So simple, in fact, that it's a wonder that nobody jumped on it before: Let's follow this boy for 12 years — from age 6 to 18, or the length of a typical elementary, middle, and high school experience — and see what happens.

It's not an entirely original conceit. Documentaries like *Hoop Dreams* chronicled the lives of kids over the course of several years to an emotional payoff, and the *7 Up* series has been revisiting the same group of people every seven years in the most vast cultural anthropology experiment ever committed to film. But no one has dared to do what Richard Linklater has done with *Boyhood*, a humanist, hyper-realistic narrative look at growing up where star Ellar Coltrane literally evolves into a man before our very eyes. It's such an incredible thing to think about that if Mason's parents weren't portrayed by famous actors (Ethan Hawke and Patricia Arquette) that some audiences would surely mistake it for real life. (Even when explaining the movie to my mother, after saying Hawke and Arquette played the parents, she still asked, "But the boy is actually the boy, right?" No, mom, he's an actor too.)

No director has used time as a character better than Linklater. In *Dazed and Confused*, his self-described "anti-John Hughes" film, he allows his characters to meander through one uneventful night following the last day of school. *Waking Life*, purposely disjointed and abstract, delves into the human psyche during a dream, which can feel like hours even if they never actually last more than a few seconds. The crown jewel of the Linklater catalog, the *Before Sunrise/Before Sunset/Before Midnight* trilogy, follows a couple's relationship at the ages of 23, 32, and 41, exploring their evolution through the lens of the very different stages of their lives.

So when it came time for *Boyhood*, it made perfect sense why Linklater would feel qualified to tackle such an ambitious project (so ambitious, in fact, that *Before Sunset* (2004) and *Before Midnight* (2013) were both released during production). In lesser hands, *Boyhood* would have come off as little more than a gimmick, existing simply to remind the audience of its time-passing premise. But Linklater understands that the story is never one about pop culture references or sight gags to dead technology of the recent past, but instead the slow reveal of this character's maturation through both the big and small events in his life.

****spoilers start here****

It takes you about halfway through the viewing experience to fully get a grasp on what's unfolding, which, the more I think about it, seems to be precisely what Linklater intended. The movie is told through Mason's point of view, and the thoughts of a six,

seven, eight year old are not all that elaborate or logical. He doesn't know why his parents are divorced, and neither do we (even though we can kind of fill in the gaps), and it's equally frustrating for us as it is for Mason when his mom moves on to an even bigger asshole of a husband (and then another). What's important to Mason as a kid, like establishing himself socially and in school, aren't taken as seriously because he's not quite old enough to articulate his feelings.

Then the magic of the film starts to wash over you when, before you know it, Mason moves from an introspective, worried kid to a slightly awkward, unsure of himself young teenager to well-spoken and informed (yet still confused) as he approaches adulthood. With his years of prospective, he's able to piece together things from his past that didn't make much sense at the time. Having a rebellious kid spout a rant about how college is just a preordained step in the process of today's young person isn't very original on its own, but Mason's thought process carries extra weight when he brings it back to the mistakes made by his mom, who despite getting her degree, looking out for her children, and doing everything she's 'supposed' to do, she's ultimately just as confused as he is. Moments like these take so much patience and are so well earned that the emotional payoff sneaks up in seemingly mundane (yet relatable) moments.

Linklater always puts a lot of trust in his viewers, which is another way *Boyhood* bucks the trend of the typical coming-of-age story. There are no abrupt transitions between the years, and sometimes entire plot lines are left dangling for the viewer to pick up the pieces later on. We see that the second husband is no longer around, that Mason and his girlfriend are trying to be friends post breakup, that the family is once again in a new city. Even well-tread plot points, like weddings, births, and graduations, are purposely skipped over in favor of the smaller, more intimate moments surrounding those events. Even if the answers aren't always laid out in front of us, that's never the kind of film this is set out to be. *Boyhood* would much rather you feel what is happening, to make the experience uniquely yours.

The performances, of course, are top notch. Coltrane isn't flashy but never needs to be. His naturalistic performance is not only in line with Linklater's past work but fits perfectly into the evolution of the typical American boy, from wide-eyed and curious to painfully soft-spoken and awkward to a version of the strong man he's destined to become. Same goes for Lorelei Linklater as Mason's sister Samantha, whose rambunctious style of smart-assery was a pleasant departure from the typical quirky sidekick.

It's a shame that Ethan Hawke can't work exclusively with Linklater, because those two clearly speak the same language. His sympathetic yet flawed version of the father was endlessly engaging to watch unfold, especially when he and Mason are chatting about the mysteries of life that he doesn't have the answers to even as he enters his 40s. As for Patricia Arquette, she's never been better as the regimented and thoughtful mom who nonetheless continues to fall into old patterns out of habit and comfort against her better judgment. Her saying goodbye to Mason before he goes off to college was heart-wrenching (and likely what will earn her an Oscar nomination), mostly because I experienced a similar sendoff with my mother. She's a broken woman who's beside

herself that her only son isn't more upset to be leaving her behind. She's been put through the ringer, and she won't (nor should she) apologize for the moment she's having

And instead of Mason having a sweet resolution with the mom, that's the last we see of her! Because that's the type of film this is. There are no quick solutions to our problems and things aren't tied up neatly for us as we go through these transitions. But while there aren't necessarily any clear-cut endings to our stories, there's an ever-present sense that we are trying our best to feel our way through these vignette-like stages of our lives, which *Boyhood* captures so effortlessly. As Mason comes to realize, it's not us who seize the moment, but the moment that is constantly happening all around us. It is always 'right now.'