

Homecoming

by [Daniel C. Richardson](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

Director Wes Anderson's vision in his latest and (so far) greatest film, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, is so singular that it is difficult to isolate its individual elements. His meticulous specificity in creating characters, the hallmark of his previous two films, *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*, has expanded to include not only the dialogue (written again with friend and actor Owen Wilson) but also the costumes, set design, cinematography and music. All of these pieces fit together seamlessly to create a magical yet tactile New York City of rusted-out cabs, neuroses and a whole lot of heartache.

The city is home to Royal and Etheline Tenenbaum (played masterfully by Gene Hackman and Anjelica Huston) and their three aging child prodigies. Anderson uses a literary motif to frame the story. Each character has authored a book or two, and the film itself employs book covers, captions, title pages, chapter breaks and narration (effectively tackled by a breathy Alec Baldwin) to organize the storytelling. A literary context may help us grasp the film as well: Anderson's work is often compared to that of writer J. D. Salinger, and like many of Salinger's characters, Anderson's display a mixture of longing and naïveté that must be fleshed out by the reader's--and viewer's--experience and imagination.

Each of the Tenenbaum children has been endowed with a special talent: Richie (Luke Wilson) was a top-ranked tennis player at age 12, Chas (Ben Stiller) was a gifted businessman buying real estate when he was in his early teens, and Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow), an adopted child (and constantly reminded of that fact by her father), was a prizewinning playwright in the ninth grade.

When they were at the peak of their abilities Royal left the family and moved into a Manhattan hotel. The departure was traumatic for the children, whose accomplishments were clearly their efforts to win their father's love and acceptance. The children move on, each in his or her own direction, until Chas's wife dies in a plane crash, sending Chas (with his two sons, Ari and Uzi) to seek a safe haven in his mother's house. When Margot and Richie learn of this development, they too return

home in search of something missing in their lives. Royal, turned out of his hotel because he is unable to pay his tab, returns to the house to seek the acceptance of his family--thus reuniting the Tenenbaum family after 22 years.

We learn of Margot and Richie's love for each other despite their familial connection and despite Margot's marriage to psychologist Raleigh St. Clair (Bill Murray). We are also introduced to the family accountant, Henry Sherman (Danny Glover), who is courting Etheline and unknowingly competing with Royal to claim the family. While the film has many peaks and valleys, it has no traditional climax. As the characters bump around blindly, seeking one another's approval, one senses a wonderfully refreshing freedom in both Anderson's characterization and his storytelling.

By dressing his characters in costumes that (with slight variations) they seem to wear for their entire lives, Anderson enforces the notion that people are the same from childhood through adulthood, with the same need to be loved. The cinematography suggests a similar respect for individuality. Anderson noted in a recent *New York Times* interview that he carefully centers each character in the middle of the screen and rarely obscures anyone. If there are 13 people in a scene, we see all 13--as if to say that all of them demand attention and love.

It's been said that viewing *Rushmore* is like listening to someone else's inside jokes. But with Anderson's films it's a mistake to pay attention only to the jokes, and that's especially true in the case of *The Royal Tenenbaums* (which is being advertised as Anderson's most laugh-out-loud comedy). It has many funny moments, to be sure, but in the end the film is about the importance of home. In a scene that capsulizes the theme, Richie's previously liberated pet falcon, Mordecai, unexpectedly returns home, but is so changed in appearance that he's difficult to recognize. It is not necessarily a blessing to be free of the constraints and the love--which go hand in hand--of family. And though it's necessary to venture into the world alone, there's always a need to return home.