



# The Fall

**117 Minutes, 2006, India/UK/US**

**Director:** Tarsem Singh

**Cast:** Lee Pace, Justine Waddell, Danial Caltagirone, Leo Bill

## **Synopsis:**

Award-winning music video, commercial and film director Tarsem Singh (*The Cell*) creates a moving and seamless blending of mundane life in a 1915 Los Angeles hospital with a visually sumptuous fantasy world of exotic bandits, evil tyrants, dream-like palaces and breathtaking landscapes. Shot on location in 28 countries around the world, *The Fall* stars Golden Globe nominated actor Lee Pace (*Pushing Daisies*, *Infamous*, *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*) and Justine Waddell (*Mansfield Park*, *Chaos*) and features a breakthrough performance by first-time Romanian child actress Catinca Untaru. --© Roadside Attractions

## **Review: Phelin O'Neill, The Guardian**

It's a simple economic fact that things will work out much cheaper if you get someone else to pay for them. Director Tarsem Singh made full use of this making *The Fall*. Constantly employed in the world of high-end advertising, Singh would pitch some exotic location to execs, race through the ad shoot, then fly his actors out (on his own dime) to utilise the film crew that were already there and waiting. Twenty countries and four years later he had this extraordinary film.

At no point does it betray its money-saving, piecemeal origins. Its subject matter of fantasy and imagination is ideally suited to Singh's rather freeform approach. The plot deals with an injured 1920s Hollywood stuntman (Lee Pace), bedridden and suicidal, who tricks a fellow patient, Alexandria, a young girl with a broken arm, to procure him enough drugs to end it all. His conniving involves spinning a fantastical tale of high adventure, which is where the globetrotting film-making comes in.

It's comparable to Pan's Labyrinth in the way fantasy and real life are informed by each other, and also to Terry Gilliam's *Tideland*, with a child trying to make sense of adult situations armed only with their imagination. But it's very much its own beast, thanks largely to young Catinca Untaru's incredibly naturalistic turn as Alexandria. Untrained as an actress, her performance was created out of a series of games and improvisations, with the camera and crew often hidden from her. She "acts" like a real child, not a Hollywood caricature, giving the film a solid realism that allows the fantasy to truly fly.

## **Review: Saxon Bullock, Channel 4 Film**

In the early days of Hollywood, a hospitalised stuntman tells an epic fantasy to a young girl - but the tale starts to uncomfortably mirror their real lives. A bizarre, visually stunning drama from the director of *The Cell*

The music videos and commercials industry is a high-pressure business that's also served as a proving ground for some of the most distinctive film directors of the last two decades, including big names like David Fincher, Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry. Unfortunately, it's also true that a large proportion of ex-music video directors can be filed in the 'style over substance' category, and Tarsem Singh (who now prefers to be known, Prince-like, as just 'Tarsem') seemed to fall into that trap with his 2000 debut movie *The Cell*.

Suffering from an overwrought screenplay and a miscast Jennifer Lopez, that offbeat serial killer thriller felt more like a two hour music video. For his second movie Tarsem has chosen a far more personal project. Instead of producing another Hollywood film, he's crafted a relatively low-budget and largely self-financed tale that still features some astonishing imagery, and which ambitiously tackles the difficult borderline between fact and fiction.

Set somewhere in the early days of Hollywood during the era of silent cinema, the story begins in an LA hospital, where a six-year-old Romanian girl named Alexandria (Untaru) is recovering from a broken arm sustained while working in an orange grove. Exploring the grounds of the hospital, she happens upon Roy Walker ('Pushing Daisies' star Pace), a near-paralysed stuntman nursing a broken heart, and the two of them strike up an odd friendship.

Cotting on to the girl's imagination, Roy invents an epic and fantastical story for her, a melodramatic tale of five colourful heroes all out to revenge themselves on an evil governor. Alexandria populates this imaginary story with the inhabitants of the hospital. However, Roy keeps stopping at important moments - there's something he needs Alexandria to do for him and the tale slowly becomes a way of manipulating their friendship, leading them both into dangerous territory. As with *The Cell*, Tarsem's visual style is once again amazingly opulent and extravagant, particularly in the incredible fantasy sequences. Working with a minimum of digital effects (most of which are used for enhancing colour) he's created an amazing fantasy world almost entirely through bizarre costume design and carefully chosen locations from across the world.

It's a film of endless labyrinths, lush forests and tangled cities, it's a genuinely dream-like film that's enhanced by the deliberately silent movie-like storytelling, and which plays like a blend of 1940s fantasy *The Thief Of Bagdad* and the weirder excesses of Terry Gilliam.

Tarsem tells a compelling story with much of the film revolving around the relationship between Alexandria and Roy, and he's helped in this by an outstanding turn from Lee Pace. Shifting easily from odd comedy to tragedy, it's a memorable performance and while much of his young co-star's dialogue is improvised, Untaru is wonderfully unaffected, giving the film a touching sense of reality.

Most of the story is told from her point of view and the director uses a mix of visual devices to make the seemingly normal world of the hospital into a place of oddities and wonders, from a keyhole accidentally projecting the silhouette of a horse, to the oddly affectionate exchanges between Alexandria and a toothless old patient in Roy's ward. As the film progresses, it gets darker and stranger, pushing into more difficult emotional territory, and the story which began as a colourful and simple melodrama becomes more violent and blood-soaked. While the film is heavily inspired by a little-seen 1981 Bulgarian drama called *Yo Ho Ho*, it's often closest in tone to *Pan's Labyrinth*, dealing as it does with an imaginative young girl slowly being introduced to the difficult and cruel nature of the real world.

There are also strong echoes of *The Princess Bride* in the film's approach to storytelling, with Roy's fantasy regularly punctuated by questions from Alexandria (and sometimes going in unpredictable directions as a result), while the madly extravagant visual style continues to push the film in ever darker and more symbolic directions.

While the end result is hypnotic and dream-like, *The Fall* doesn't quite achieve the emotional impact it's aiming for. The biggest problem is that Tarsem is obviously far more interested in the fantasy sequences than the reality, leaving the film as a curiously unbalanced work. The pace is slow and stately - at least 10 minutes could be easily trimmed from the running time - and while the visual approach is successful for most of the film, there are moments where it feels like style for style's sake. While the film dazzles the senses, it doesn't quite earn the emotions the story reaches for, meaning the climax feels a little underwhelming.

Despite these problems, there is plenty to be found in *The Fall*, and it's undoubtedly a far more interesting and multi-layered film than *The Cell*. While the darker themes and strong violence rules this out as a children's film, it'll be fascinating to see Tarsem let loose on a full-blown fantasy. Even working with a relatively small budget, he's come up with some striking imagery, and if he can build on the promise shown here, he may still have the potential to become a filmmaker