

A film of beauty

FROM PAGE B-1

Gere and Adams play similar roles — two lovers named Bill and Abby who pose as brother and sister as they journey from farm to farm with Bill's real sister Linda (Linda Manz) and a trainload of migrants.

During the trio's stay at one farm, the rich landowner (Shepard) spies Abby and falls in love. He asks Abby to stay on after the harvest, and when she learns that he is terminally ill, she agrees, provided that Bill and Linda can stay, too.

Soon after, the owner and Abby marry but Abby continues her earlier liaison with Bill. After the love triangle erupts in violence, Bill, Abby, and young Linda become fugitives a la "Badlands."

Just as Sissy Spacek served as narrator in Malick's first film, young Linda Manz provides the voice-over for "Days of Heaven." Manz speaks with an ingenuous, homespun quality that perfectly reinforces the innocent yet eerie mood of the film. Malick has also injected flashes of Mark Twain into Manz's narration, touches of dry wit to keep the film from becoming too somber.

Watching "Days of Heaven," one gets

momentary reminders of films past — "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," "Bound for Glory," and "1900," for example — but ultimately the film seems unique. Behind every scene lurks Malick's genius be it in the way the shot is framed, in the way the mood develops, or in the way peripheral details bring the drama into focus.

Consider, for example, Malick's inclusion of a time-lapse sequence of a wheat seed sprouting, a vignette of two black minstrels performing, a shot of a rabbit and a skunk scurrying away from a thresher. None is central to the story, but each adds breadth to Malick's overall vision. The environment, in effect, becomes a central character.

Despite the similarities to "Badlands," "Days of Heaven" represents a radical departure for Malick. He risks commercial appeal for the sake of uncompromising art, and sacrifices plot and character development for a meticulous depiction of the pre-World-War-I era and its climate of desolation.

Malick's gamble has succeeded. The film is one of the best of 1978.

"Days of Heaven" opens today at Manhattan's Cinema I Theater with a 70-mm print and with six-track Dolby sound. Rated "PG", the 90-minute film deals with adult subjects.