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Current Affairs



Architecture

Arts

Aviation

Banking & Finance

Books

Business

Corporate Affairs

Cover Story

Culture

Economy

Education

Energy

Entertainment

Environment

Films

Health

Hospitality

Human Resources

Humour

Lifestyle

Markets

Media

Opinion

People

Ports & Shipping

Region

Religion

Science & Technology

Society

Transport & Logistics

Travel & Tourism

Links

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Films

Of Life, Death and Love

Benjamin Button – delightfully pure cinema fails to impress Hollywood’s Academy

By Gautaman Bhaskaran,

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David Fincher’s “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” had 13 Oscar nods, but a mere three, and minor ones at that, translated into actual awards. Sadly so, for it is delightfully pure cinema. The work is based on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1922 short story of a child who resembles an old man at birth. He begins to age backwards, growing younger, and it’s this fantasy with a touch of Latin American magic realism that has been dramatised in all its romantic splendour by Fincher and writers Eric Roth and Robin Swicord.

Benjamin Button (played by Brad Pitt) is born on the day of victory in Europe in 1918, a baby that looks so hideous with failing eyesight, brittle bones and creased flesh that his mother, dies perhaps in grief, and his father abandons him in an old-age home. Queenie (Taraji P. Henson), a black woman who runs the place raises him as her own son.

Benjamin grows into a young man and meets young Daisy (Cate Blanchett), and though they are moving in different chronological directions, with one getting older and the other younger, a friendship develops and evolves into love and passion. When Daisy gets pregnant, they are in a dilemma. How would she raise two children, with Benjamin’s clock turning the other way?

The film takes us from one touching moment to another and covers a huge time span from 1918 to that day when Hurricane Katrina ravages New Orleans in 2005: a dying old Daisy on a hospital bed asks her daughter to read the diary of Benjamin. As the words flow out, a complex tale of life and death, and, above all, of love can be seen played out by a stellar cast.

The acting honours undoubtedly belong to Pitt. His incredible good looks, a striking screen presence and an ability to perform to perfection were widely considered as winning points for a Best Actor Oscar, but that did not happen. A familiar scene for Pitt, who had missed the statuette in 2006 for “Babel”, and, more regrettably, for “The Assassination of Jesse James” the following year.

Pitt’s Button is a class by himself and proves his range: we saw him in “Burn After Reading” as a dim-witted, cycle-peddling health club worker. As Mr Button, he is erudite, sombre, dashing, debonair and, most of all, tender. Blanchett is unusually ravishing, and Benjamin’s pursuit of her seems one of not just love but life itself. Benjamin Button will go down as The Curious Case that Missed the Oscar.

Gran Torino:

Clint Eastwood Lives up to His Name



Produced, directed and enacted by Clint Eastwood, "Gran Torino" may be set in today's Detroit suburb, but is old world in feel and texture. Very Christian in what it projects and preaches – sin, suffering and forgiveness through confession – the film centres on the Korean war-veteran-turned-automobile engineer, Walt Kowalski (Eastwood).

Armed with cans of beer, some guns and a mouthful of curses, freshly widowed Kowalski fumes when his neighbourhood is over-run by Asian immigrants, particularly those from Vietnam and Laos. One family, consisting of a teenage daughter Sue (Ahney Her), her teenage brother Thao (Bee Vang), and their folks proves terribly irksome. Their loud manners and reportedly dog-eating habits drive the widower over the bend with the just out-of-the-seminary Jesuit priest, Father Janovich (Christopher Carley), pestering Kowalski for a confession, adding to his intense discomfort. However, when Thao is harassed (after he fails in his attempt to steal Kowalski's 1972 Gran Torino) and Sue is raped by her own cousin and his gang, the war vet takes up arms in his new battlefield, his racial prejudice melting into humanism.

Eastwood in his first screen appearance since the 2004 "Million Dollar Baby" is not only an amazing performer in the league of Al Pacino and Jack Nicholson, but also a powerful crusader of harmonious race relations. In movies such as "Bird", "Unforgiven", and "Letters from Iwo Jima", he has tackled race issues with feeling and intelligence, and "Gran Torino" is another interesting extension of this.

At 78, Eastwood can still hold your attention in a movie that finally reaches an emotional high point through an act of supreme sacrifice. Or, was Kowalski making amends for all the brutality he perpetrated in Korea?

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