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FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS

Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* is serious and noble, but it isn't resonant - despite some harrowing battle scenes, this World War II drama is surprisingly easy to brush off. Based on the James Bradley book, the film provides the back story to the historic raising of the American flag during the battle of Iwo Jima - a moment eternalized in Joe Rosenthal's famed photograph - and then follows the flag-raisers as they cope with their newfound status as American heroes, sent on a nationwide tour promoting war bonds. Yet with the exception of Rene Gagnon (Jesse Bradford), who is seduced by the limelight, the men don't *feel*

heroic - John Bradley (Ryan Phillippe) falls into a jittery depression, and Native American Ira Hayes (Adam Beach) becomes a despondent alcoholic. These men didn't ask to be heroes. They just wanted to stay alive.

Like many of Eastwood's works since *Unforgiven*, the film is staunchly anti-violence; in killing others, *Flags of Our Fathers* argues, you destroy your own soul. Yet the film puts the audience in the uncomfortable position of wanting *more*

violence. The movie is structured within two separate time-frames: the '40s, with the Iwo Jima battle and the bond tour, and several decades hence, with author James Bradley (Thomas McCarthy) exacting information about the experience from his elderly father. Yet the scenes off the battlefield have exactly one thing to say - that a country aching for heroes will *create*

them, with little regard for the actual objects of their adulation - and say it over and over again

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Written by Mike Schulz

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without variation and with little subtlety. These flatly composed sequences press their point and make the movie feel inert - you want to say to Eastwood, "We

get

it already," and get back to the two Jima flashbacks, which at least have dramatic fire, surprise, and legitimate feeling. (A scene of the Japanese preparing to fire against the Americans - seen from the shooters' point-of-view - is a terrifying prelude.)

As a director, Eastwood is famed for filming quickly - the individual scenes in his movies are oftentimes the actors' first or second takes - which makes his usual sequestering of top-tier talent not only understandable, but something of a necessity. Considering the performances in *Flags of Our Fathers*

, a few more takes may have been necessary. Most of the film's actors, especially those in supporting roles (Melanie Lynskey, Robert Patrick, Judith Ivey), are frustratingly one-note, and the leads don't fare much better. Phillippe, whose John Bradley is badly underwritten, is stoic and grim but doesn't suggest any interior life, and Bradford never rises above sitcom blitheness; though vain egocentrism is right for the character, it's Bradford, not Gagnon, who seems vapid. Beach, meanwhile, is soulful and sometimes moving, but even he is undone by the film's pushiness - a scene of Hayes addressing a group of fellow Native Americans, who see him as an empty suit, is staged with an obviousness that negates its good intentions.

Good intentions, of course, are what the movie has in spades. And Eastwood's filmmaking is never less than duly reverent, even if, at times, the movie feels less reverent to World War II veterans than it does World War II *movies*. The film's flashback structure and battlefield sequences, with their bluish-gray color palette, appear to be deliberate nods to Steven Spielberg's

Saving Private Ryan - Spielberg and

Eastwood are

Flags'

producers -

and its measured, poignant tone suggests both

Ryan

and the HBO mini-series

Band of Brothers

. (Perhaps as a benediction on the film, there are appearances here by

Ryan

's Barry Pepper and gravelly voiced Harve Presnell, and

Band of Brothers

' Neal McDonough.) Yet while

Flags of Our Fathers

doesn't feel cynical, it doesn't feel

alive

,

either, and it displays less raw emotion than the photograph

it's commemorating.



THE PRESTIGE

Stage magic, as an art, isn't about believing. It's about agreeing *to* believe - as an audience, we *want* to be fooled into thinking the impossible is possible. We enter movies with the exact same request - "Make us *believe*

" - and every once in a while a film magician will wow us with the cinematic equivalent of a rabbit out of a hat, where we stare at the trickery with abject delight and only one thought: "How did they *do*

that?" Welcome to

The Prestige

, Christopher Nolan's spellbinding thriller concerning two rival magicians (played by Hugh Jackman and Christian Bale) whose desire to be remembered as the greatest prestidigitator of the Victorian era is only slightly superseded by their desire to destroy one another.

The film, co-written by Nolan and his brother, Jonathan, is like *Sleuth* with dueling illusionists - for that matter, it's also a little like

The Illusionist

- and it's about as exciting, devious, and wholly pleasurable an entertainment as you could imagine. Yet there's so much more going on than "mere" entertainment. The wickedly clever plotting features surprisingly profound insight into the nature of creation and deception, and the film's metaphysics (which might strike some viewers as a cheat) explode the chicanery in mind-blowing fashion; it took all my resistance not to applaud at the end.

The Prestige isn't exactly perfect - Scarlett Johansson feels a bit out of place, and the Nolan brothers can't quite do with words what the director can do with his sublimely arresting visuals. Yet the movie, like its subject, is magical. In the film, the illusionists continually frequent one another's performances, and you want to do the same with *The Prestige* itself. (For full appreciation of Jackman's and Bale's performances, a repeat viewing might actually be

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mandatory.) I may never fully understand how Nolan and company pulled off a trick this spectacular, but I can't wait for another shot at figuring it out.



MARIE ANTOINETTE

It takes enormous talent to make a movie about idleness that doesn't, itself, feel idle. Yet in Sofia Coppola's strange, haunting, occasionally brilliant *Marie Antoinette*, passivity has never before felt so exhilarating. (Well, maybe

once

before - in Coppola's

Lost in Translation

.)

Coppola finds both the comedy and the tragedy in a life devoted solely to leisure, and does so through imagery and silence (and a great, anachronistic rock soundtrack) - it's a movie about *longing*

, made with delicacy and underplayed wit. I'm still not entirely certain what the point of

Marie Antoinette

is, or even if it

has

a point. But it's a fascinating, altogether extraordinary mood piece, both a rebuke to a life of obscene extravagance and an almost embarrassingly enjoyable celebration of it. And perhaps none of it would have worked without the naturalistic grace of Kirsten Dunst, who suggests a vibrant, active mind trapped in a constricting society that prizes a woman's

in

activity; Dunst, here, is every bit as breathtaking as the movie's stunningly elaborate costume and production design. Our first image during

Marie Antoinette

's opening credits is of Antoinette lounging in a chair - surrounded by luscious-looking pastries and even

more

luscious

mise en scène

- and after a beat,

she turns to share a knowing smile with the audience. "Isn't this yummy?" she seems to ask.

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"Aren't

/

yummy?" Yes, and yes.