THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON

Visually arresting and wildly ambitious, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is a tough film to dislike. But I'm giving it a shot anyway, because while director David Fincher's 165-minute opus is spectacular in lots of small ways, it's frustrating and fundamentally unsatisfying in much, much bigger ones. Given several days to reflect on the experience, I no longer hate the movie the way I initially did, yet I remain convinced that what could have, and *should* have, been a magical, lyrical piece of work is instead a graceless, obvious, and frequently maddening one.

This is, to be sure, a minority opinion, and it's easy to understand what the film's many admirers are responding to. Based, in concept if not plot, on an F. Scott Fitzgerald short story, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is an epic tale with a simple premise: Born with the appearance and infirmities of an 85-year-old, Benjamin Button (played, almost throughout, by Brad Pitt) ages in reverse, growing younger and healthier until finally, as an infant with an old man's eyes, he passes away. It's an elegant, thematically rich conceit - a tragicomic take on the maxim "Youth is wasted on the young" - and the director and his first-rate design and effects teams provide more than their share of miracles. Yet while *Benjamin Button* is a thrilling stylistic exercise, it's also, I think, a disheartening one, because it finds Fincher and company devoting their considerable talents to a screenplay, by Eric Roth, that seems badly thought out from moment one.

In the movie's first minutes, the love of Benjamin's life, the now-elderly Daisy (Cate Blanchett), lies dying in a New Orleans hospital, and asks her daughter (Julia Ormond) to read from her beloved's journal; the film subsequently toggles between Benjamin's experiences between 1918 and 2003, and the 2005 re-telling of the tale. Yet a few elements are irritating, if not downright rankling, about this setup. For one thing, while the hospital scenes do underline the movie's storybook quality, they seriously disrupt the flow of the Benjamin Button arc; every 15 minutes, the narrative you're caught up in gives way to another, momentum-stalling sequence of a bed-ridden Blanchett, under heavy latex, in emotional and physical agony. (This flashback-via-storytelling device, which Roth employed in his *Forrest Gump* script, is effective

enough as a means of leapfrogging through the decades, but surely Fincher, a true visual *wunderkind*, could've designed more compelling ways to illustrate the passage of time.)

But the bigger problem with these scenes is the way they're used for shameful and rather offensive manipulation, as Daisy isn't just dying, but dying during the onset of Hurricane Katrina. (At one point, a hospital staffer says, "I don't think it'll be that bad." Cue the ironic chuckles.) Using a national tragedy to goose suspense - Will Daisy die as a result of illness, or Katrina? - is almost unspeakably cheap, but here it's senseless, to boot. One of most charming aspects of *Benjamin Button*'s narrative is how none of Benjamin's acquaintances really questions the film's inherent impossibility, yet when The Real World intrudes on this profoundly make-believe universe, the movie's delicate, fairy-tale logic collapses. Given the naturalistic lighting and acting of the 2005 scenes, as opposed to the richly textured cinematography and intentionally stylized portrayals of the flashbacks, you wonder why Ormond never raises an eyebrow, drops the journal, and says to her mother, "Wait a minute ... you mean to tell me this guy is *aging backwards*?!"

Does the central romance work, at least? It might have if either Benjamin or Daisy were designed as a character rather than an idea. A shy, courteous fellow with no passions and no interior life - which leads to Pitt being more emotionally neutral (and dull) onscreen than usual - Benjamin looks at the world with an expression of vague wonder, and Roth has fashioned Daisy as a generically luminous free spirit whose changes in wardrobe and temperament mirror the changing times; it's Forrest and Jen-nay all over again. Pitt and Blanchett look stunning together, and Blanchett lends an extraordinary amount of emotional nuance to a purely functional role, but only Tilda Swinton - enticing and mysterious as Benjamin's first lover - is believable as an actual human being. (Even the sweet, soulful Taraji P. Henson, as Benjamin's saintly maternal figure, is stuck playing only one note.)

Despite the director's predictable over-reliance on drab, olive-green hues, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is visually distinctive and oftentimes lovely, and the combination of CGI and prosthetics leads to some unforgettable effects; seeing Pitt's visage superimposed on a withered, elderly frame is definitely amazing, but the scene in which the actor shows up looking about 10 years younger than he did in *Thelma & Louise* is an even grander, more jaw-dropping shock. The film, though, doesn't seem to be about anything *more*

than visuals (and potential Oscars). Fincher and Roth have made an epic without a dramatic center that constantly undercuts its own best qualities; it's not just the title character's aging process but the entire
movie
that's backwards.