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HEREAFTER

It's been a couple of days since I've seen it, and I still find myself unable to explain to friends why I enjoyed Clint Eastwood's *Hereafter* as much as I did. I wonder if that has anything to do with the movie being an almost complete mess.

A deliberately paced, intensely serious drama exploring our relation to the afterlife, Eastwood's film follows three unrelated storylines that inevitably merge in the closing reel. In one, a Parisian TV journalist (Cécile de France) survives a 2004 tsunami and becomes obsessed with scientific theories concerning life after death. In another, one of a pair of neglected, inseparable British twins (Frankie and George McLaren) is killed, leaving his sibling to seek out means by which to communicate with him. In the third, a depressed San Francisco psychic (Matt Damon) who actually *can* converse with the deceased struggles to ignore his talents and those needing his help. And while the confluence of events that finds these characters accidentally bumping into one another at the London Book Fair is pretty hard to swallow, it's really no more bothersome than just about anything *else* in *Hereafter*.

One of the things that makes Eastwood the director so fascinating, and so vexing, is that you never know if you're going to get the exacting, tough-minded force behind *Mystic River, Million Dollar Baby* , and *Gran Torino*
or the funereal helmer of those fraudulent, waxworks outings

Flags of Our Fathers, Invictus,
and (his low point to date)
Changeling
. Unfortunately, it's frequently the latter fellow who shows up here. Barring a few exceptions, such as the horrifyingly brutal tsunami sequence that opens the film,
Hereafter
's staging is static – its images drowning in that same plaintive, plinky-plunky score that Eastwood composes for
all
of his movies – and the excess of saturated browns and grays on display makes you only slightly less downbeat than the characters. (You're left feeling that Damon's mope would cheer up immensely if he just added a few primary colors to his apartment, or at least turned on an overhead light.)

While the moroseness is dispiriting, the actual shock of the film is that Peter Morgan's script is such a dud. Morgan has written such smart, witty movies as *The Queen* and *Frost/Nixon*; his being credited as
Hereafter
's author isn't a typo, is it? Structurally, the screenplay isn't terrible, even if that London rendezvous and a few other narrative turns are contrived. (Love interest Bryce Dallas Howard, pitched
way
too high, discovers Damon's psychic abilities when overhearing a message on his answering machine. Why do movie characters keep letting callers leave messages when someone else is in the room? Has any good
ever
come from this?)

What's infuriating is that Morgan's dialogue is so poor. Many of his lines are stilted or solely expository or just plain weird. (I chuckled when a tour guide at Charles Dickens' home said, "*A Christmas Carol*
is arguably one of Dickens' most famous books." Um ...
arguably
?) And some are blatantly, even embarrassingly on-the-nose. A conversation in which Damon and Jay Mohr discuss the former's abilities features three doozies: "It ruins any chance I have of a normal life"; "It's who you are... it's
what
you are"; and "It's not a gift; it's a curse," a line that Morgan has Damon repeat later in the film, for those not already knocked unconscious by the sentiment's thudding obviousness.

And yet, against all odds and even basic common sense, *Hereafter* worked for me. As he demonstrated so spectacularly in
Million Dollar Baby
and
The Bridges of Madison County
, no one can scrape the corn off sentiment quite like Eastwood, and there are numerous moments here in which the director's thoughtful, low-key approach to Morgan's heart-tugging yields extraordinary rewards. Eastwood doesn't push his points in the scenes in which de France's journalist finds her lover cagily pulling away from her, or in which the surviving twin can't sleep unless an additional bed is placed in his room;
Hereafter
's director trusts his performers to express suffering and complex states of grief without resorting to melodrama. Marvelous bit players – especially Lyndsey Marshal as the twins' drug-addict mother and Richard Kind as a subtly tortured widower – pop up throughout, and Eastwood ensures that they're every bit as vivid as his leads; their characters may be disengaged, but Damon, de France, and the occasionally magical McLaren brothers are wholly, wonderfully present.

Best of all, the film exudes a palpable, clear-eyed sincerity and an almost hypnotic calm, elements that make its random bursts of violence and unfettered emotion nearly harrowing; an explosion in the London underground is almost as gut-wrenching as Damon's eventual, heartbreaking psychic-reading of the surviving twin. Slow, stagnant, and monochromatic though it oftentimes is, I was never bored at Eastwood's latest, and while I thought I'd need a tire jack to keep my eyes open during the hyperactive action comedy *RED,* I managed to go *Hereafter*'s entire 125-minute length without yawning. Not even once. I officially believe in miracles.

For a review of Paranormal Activity 2*, see " Demonizing ."*