Written by Mike Schulz
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TROUBLE WITH THE CURVE

The latest movie to star Clint Eastwood, marking the icon’s first on-screen appearance since 2008’s *Gran Torino*, is director Robert Lorenz’s baseball drama *Trouble with the Curve*. That curve, by the way, is the *least* of this film’s troubles.

Admittedly, I was put off by Lorenz’s outing beginning with its very first scene, which found Eastwood’s aged baseball scout and comically irascible grouch growling at his ill-functioning penis and describing his morning feast of Spam as “the breakfast of champions”; *Trouble with the Curve* was n’t even five minutes old, and already I felt overwhelmed by terminal cutesiness, senior division. It turns out, though, that I should have appreciated the opener more, because at least Clint’s below-the-belt convo and Spam comment, though corny, weren’t *predictable*, and I’m not sure that even one unpredictable moment occurs over the 100 minutes to come. Screenwriter Randy Brown’s hackneyed effort gives Clint’s Gus a daughter he can’t relate to (Amy Adams), who, in turn, is given a wannabe beau she doesn’t like (Justin Timberlake), and it goes without saying that pop and daughter will eventually bond and daughter and beau will eventually kiss. But with every plot point spelled out with maximum obviousness, and all of the characters – including Matthew Lillard’s weaselly corporate suck-up and Joe Massingill’s obnoxious pitcher – effectively summarized in their first two lines of dialogue, the movie is a tedious, simpleminded, pandering bore; as with death, you’re given nothing to do here but wait for the inevitable.

John Goodman, bless him, offers a few flashes of humanity, and happily, Adams comes through with a salty, tough-minded portrayal that actually transcends the clichéd, borderline-offensive “all work and no play” stereotype she’s stuck with. The movie, however, would certainly have benefited from one of Adams’ two main co-stars bothering to match her, and Timberlake, despite his natural charisma, appears so removed from the proceedings – *especially* during his and Adams’ romantic byplay – that he may as well have Skyped in his performance. As for Clint, he’s no doubt giving his legions of fans exactly what they want from him, and the man is entertaining in bits and spurts. But his work here also suggests that

Gran Torino
might have proved unfortunately impossible to shake off; with his throaty mumbles and clenched jaw and frequent “God
damn
it!”s, you keep waiting for this cartoon Walt Kowalski to tell everyone in sight to get off his lawn. “I’ve been in this business too damned long,” grumbles Clint halfway through the picture. A few more movies like
Trouble with the Curve
, and I might start agreeing with him.

END OF WATCH

David Ayer’s action thriller *End of Watch* opens with a title card reading “Once upon a time in South Central ... ,” which, considering that the writer/director’s film is also a cop drama, is certainly more welcome than the traditional “The following is based on true events.” That introduction, though, may also be one of the least appropriate seen in recent cinema, because it suggests something akin to a fairytale, and *End of Watch* is nothing if not aggressively, sometimes strenuously, realistic. Following a pair of incorruptible police officers and best buds (Jake Gyllenhaal’s Brian and Michael Peña’s Mike) as they chase perps, raid apartments, and attract the unfortunate ire of a California drug cartel, the movie appears mostly caught on the fly, visualized through the lenses of hand-held cameras positioned in the cops’ squad car, on the officers’ lapels – Brian is recording their experiences for a class – and on other characters’ camcorders. All told, and despite the impressive vérité of the feat, it proves too much for the film’s good, a stylistic device that infringes on the narrative and occasionally impedes
End of Watch
by making us too conscious of the camerawork as a stunt. To my great and delighted surprise, though, that’s among the very few issues I have with Ayer’s offering, which I found terrifically exciting, sensationally well-paced, and, in Gyllenhaal’s and Peña’s superbly modulated performances, even tremendously touching. The men’s fast, profane banter, rife with genial razzing of one another’s ethnicities, is oftentimes laugh-out-loud hilarious, particularly when Brian rails against the sheer volume of area
quinceañeras

and Mike responds with a riotous bit on empty-headed Anglo consumerism. Yet beyond being merely amusing, Gyllenhaal’s and Peña’s playful rapport in the squad car plants the seeds for our caring about these characters more and more as the movie progresses, and by the time the men face a truly terrifying situation near the climax, you may be shocked at how completely rapt you are in the moment. I’ve seen plenty of action thrillers in my time, but I’m not sure I’ve ever seen one this unexpectedly, profoundly
moving
;
End of Watch
is the rare genre entertainment that ties your gut in a knot with simultaneously putting a lump in your throat.

BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD

Believe me, this is by no means a complaint, but if I may ask: What is going on over at Moline’s Nova 6 Cinemas these days? A week ago Friday, months after the independent movie premiered in larger markets, the venue presented us with the area debut of *Ruby Sparks*, a charming, funny, original romantic comedy that I incorrectly presumed we Quad Citians would never have the chance to see at the cineplex. This weekend, meanwhile, brought with it Nova 6’s booking of director Benh Zeitlin’s
Beasts of the Southern Wild
, the critically
way
-acclaimed summer title that’s on many Oscar prognosticators’ short lists for Best Picture and, for star Quvenzhané Wallis, Best Actress. How did this rather shocking area two-fer of indie releases come to pass? And can it please continue indefinitely? A fantasy-tinged, post-Katrina drama concerning a gravely adult little girl and her makeshift family on the Louisiana bayou,
Beasts of the Southern Wild
is a gorgeously evocative blast of magical realism, so alive with specific feeling for its New Orleans milieu that you can practically smell the gumbo wafting from the screen. In truth, the movie proved a little shapeless for my tastes, and I found its gentle, lulling rhythms, while perfectly appropriate for the setting, a bit too languorous; I had to fight the urge to nap, though
contentedly
nap, more times than I care to admit. Yet I wouldn’t have missed Zeitlin’s movie for anything,

considering its beautifully disarming flights of fancy (those beasts of the title are truly impressive creatures), and its heartbreaking, tough-love relationship between Wallis’ indefatigable Hushpuppy and her dying father (the powerful Dwight Henry), and, most of all, for Wallis herself. All of six years old at the time of filming, this disarmingly focused and preternaturally gifted youth boasts a clear gaze and effortless gravity that one would think could only come from a long lifetime of acting, and Wallis’ readings – especially during her frequent voice-over narration – are unerringly fine, filled with determination and purpose and absolute conviction. So thank you, Nova 6, for the opportunity to catch
Beasts of the Southern Wild
, and don’t be surprised if, come February, the film’s star is carrying an Academy Award, even if she is petite enough for the statuette to conceivably carry
her
.

For a review of The Master*, see “ Cult of Personality .”*

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