

Thornton and Berry Bring Magic to the "Ball": "Monster's Ball" and 2002 Oscars Postmortem

Written by Mike Schulz

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MONSTER'S BALL

In Marc Forster's sterling drama *Monster's Ball*, Halle Berry portrays Leticia Musgrove, the wife of a convicted murderer (Sean Combs), who takes the graveyard shift of an all-night Georgia café to support herself and her pre-teen son (Coronji Calhoun). One of her repeat customers is corrections officer Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton), son of an unrepentant racist (Peter Boyle) and father of a damaged, depressed son (Heath Ledger). Through a series of tragedies, Leticia and Hank find spiritual and sexual solace in each other's company, and

Monster's Ball

asks the question that, sadly enough, must still be asked in modern-day America: Can black and white find a middle ground and truly exist in harmony?

Movies about race relations are seldom subtle, and with good reason: There's so much lingering hurt and anger and unparalleled injustice in the subject that even to broach it risks turning it into a diatribe. Spike Lee certainly understands this and goes for the opposite of subtlety, for which he is often criticized; his *Do the Right Thing* is about as in-your-face as movies get, and it's a masterpiece because it doesn't shirk from the weight of its message. (Its enormous humor helps.) Many in the press have acclaimed

Monster's Ball

for its subtlety, but they're completely off-base; the film is *low-key*

, but it isn't subtle. Director Forster lays on the symbolism – the literal white-washing of colored

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rooms in Hank's house, Hank's proclivity for black coffee and chocolate ice cream – but differs from Spike Lee in that his in-your-face tactics are visual rather than oral, and he manages to make a case for tolerance that's just as heart-wrenching. The screenplay, by actors Will Rokos and Milo Addica, has a few too many plot coincidences for comfort (Hank and his son individually share the same prostitute, fine, but must they engage in intercourse in the exact same manner?) but meshes with Forster's style in rarely using verbal tactics to spell out its messages, which is refreshingly unusual for works by actors-turned-writers. Their script is tight and spare, and they've written some marvelously detailed roles for the film's performers to inhabit.

Playing the racist-by-heredity Hank, Billy Bob Thornton, following his transcendent performance in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, confirms the notion that he might just be our country's finest actor. He doesn't hit one false note and makes his character's progression from hateful boor to flawed savior utterly believable. Berry, who just became the first African-American recipient of a Best Actress Oscar, is equally exquisite. Some have argued that she's far too glamorous for her working-class role, but I thought her beauty only added to Leticia's poignance; beauty doesn't matter a damn when faced with dire economic circumstances. Berry's go-for-broke emotionalism is riveting throughout *Monster's Ball*, but she's even better when silent; her final, nearly wordless scene on Hank's front porch, where the entire story is worked through Berry's eyes, is shattering. Forster appears to be a wizard with actors. Beyond Thornton and Berry, he evokes beautiful work from performers as varied as Boyle and Combs, gets an absolutely first-rate performance from young Coronji Calhoun, and gives Heath Ledger his first chance to prove that he's more than just a pretty face; his portrayal is a thrilling, career-saving piece from an actor who is, generally, as prettily bland as pre-*West Wing* Rob Lowe.

Best of all, and perhaps most surprising, *Monster's Ball* is the rare race-relations film that's genuinely *hopeful*; it shows that the road to tolerance, while not an easy one, is within our grasp. For sheer filmmaking magic and astonishing performances, *Monster's Ball* easily outclasses anything currently in release (with the exception, of course, of the recently re-released *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*); curiosity after Halle Berry's win might get you in the theatre, but the film itself might get you there more than once.

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OSCAR POSTMORTEM

Is it the hangover talking, or was Whoopi Goldberg the most achingly insufferable Oscar emcee of all time? On her fourth stab at hosting the Academy Awards, joke after joke fell resoundingly flat – I'm not sure I've ever seen a worse opening monologue from this annual event, and I sat through David Letterman's 1995 debacle – and considering that her material included incredibly dated jabs at Anna Nicole Smith, Jerry Springer, and the cinematic output of Michael Caine, head writer Bruce Vilanch has to share in at least part of the blame. Too bad, because in light of the historic victories of Denzel Washington and Halle Berry, not to mention the honorary Oscar awarded to Sidney Poitier (who gave another of his beautifully delivered but absolutely indecipherable meditations on the art of screen acting), a stronger performance would have completely capped this watershed year for African-American performers. Instead, she reminded the world that she's *lucky* to be remembered as The Center Square.

Annoyances abounded at this year's ceremony. We certainly had reason to fear the worst as the telecast opened with Tom Cruise giving a completely unnecessary apology for going on with the awards after the tragic events of September 11 – Cruise's "sensitive" pronouncements on the need for entertainment "now more than ever" were some of the least inspired line readings of his career – and Jennifer Connelly appeared to be the only person in the world who didn't expect her win for Best Supporting Actress; I'm sure she was nervous, but would it have killed her to memorize a speech and raise her head from her notes? However, everything that was embarrassing – Glenn Close's and Donald Sutherland's play-by-play, the forced banter between real-life marrieds Ryan Phillippe and Reese Witherspoon, the *Black Hawk Down* victories, the honorary Oscar for Arthur Hiller (one of America's most insipid directors) – was countered by something sublime; as bad as this year's ceremony was, and it was oftentimes *really* bad, the show was still able to provide one priceless moment after another.

Halle Berry's ultra-emotional, landmark victory was certainly memorable, but for me the evening's highlight came early, when Woody Allen strode onstage for his first Oscar appearance *ever* and gave a funny and moving plea for continued New York filmmaking. Add to that Randy Newman finally getting awarded after 16 previous nominations with no win (best line of the evening: Newman, when greeted with a standing ovation, saying, "I don't want your pity"), Julia Roberts' infectious giddiness at getting to read Denzel Washington's name, a hysterical bit

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of comedic oneupmanship between Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson, and a fabulously weird Errol Morris mini-doc recounting people's favorite movie memories (where the hell is

his

belated Oscar?), and you had enough magical moments to

almost

justify the show's obscene 260-minute running length. Memo for next year's Oscar producers:

Cut back on the clips and re-hire Steve Martin immediately.