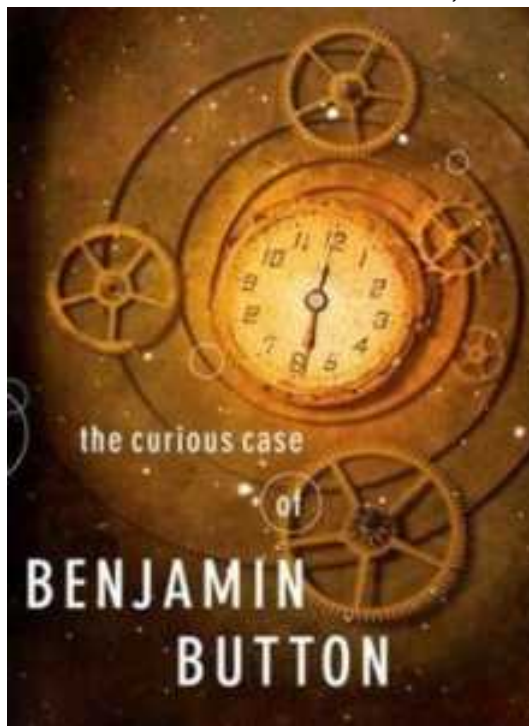


Movie Review: The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button

Written by {ga=mitch}

Saturday, February 14 2009 7:00 PM -

Every year in the week leading up to Oscars weekend, we run reviews from Mitch on all the films nominated for Best Picture. And today ... we get that rolling here at The Cleveland Fan with Mitch's review of "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button", a unique film that saw Director David Fincher once again team up with Brad Pitt, as they did in the cult classics "Se7en" and "Fight Club". Check back on the site all week for Mitch's reviews of "Milk", "The Reader", "Frost/Nixon", and "Slumdog Millionaire".



Director David Fincher has teamed up with Brad Pitt twice before, each time creating a completely unique film, both of them becoming full fledged cult classics. "Se7en" and "Fight Club" catapulted Pitt into Box Office stratosphere, so when Fincher called once again regarding another distinctive project, Pitt was more than willing to jump on-board.

It is unlikely, however, that "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" will go down in the same pantheon of fanboy-lore as the other two films. It lacks the full throttled testosterone levels exhibited in the previous two efforts.

What we have instead is a melancholy, imaginative, and enthralling fantasy regarding a life lived in reverse, focusing on how those backward passing years impact relationships.

The story follows Benjamin from cradle to grave, beginning in 1918 New Orleans, where his mother dies during childbirth. The baby induces screams from all around, as he is a five pound bundle of geezerhood, already shriveled with age, afflicted with severe arthritis and cataracts.

Appalled, his father first looks to throw him in the river, but instead drops him off at the door-step to an old-folks home.

He is discovered by a black woman named Queenie, one of the caretakers of the home, who vows to look after him for whatever short period he may have on Earth.

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The early part of the movie shows a wheelchair ridden seven year old who looks like he's in his 80s. But as he grows, he becomes more mobile. He goes from wheelchair to walking crutches, and by the time he is 16, he's looking more like a man in his mid 60s, and able to move about fairly well.

Growing up in a house full of senior citizens, Benjamin actually fits in quite well. He relates to all of the denizens when it comes to his looks and afflictions, but he is still a boy emotionally and intellectually, so that sets up some very interesting situations.

It is also during that period where he meets 10 year old Daisy, the granddaughter of one of the residents.

Daisy and Benjamin hit it off immediately, as they see each other as similar spirits, despite the difference in appearance.

Once Benjamin turns 18, he heads out into the world as part of a tug-boat crew that has been commissioned to sail the world during rather turbulent times. A few years into his adventures, he meets up with Elizabeth Abbott (Tilda Swinton), the wife of a British diplomat in Russia (sent there to spy). They strike up a friendship that soon turns into an affair as the 40 something Elizabeth has no idea she's with a 23 year old, instead believing she's involved with a 60 something man with youthful exuberance.

War breaks out, and as it did for so many, changed everything. Benjamin's ship is commissioned into the U.S. Navy, and Benjamin gets to see first-hand the same things that so many of his generation encountered.

Returning home, the tale becomes one of star-crossed lovers, as Benjamin and Daisy (now played by Cate Blanchett) are now close enough in physical appearance to become attracted to each other romantically.

In some regards, the tale is comparable to "Forrest Gump", with Daisy becoming Benjamin's Jenny. In fact, there are many similarities between the two stories...but at the same time they are told in strikingly different manners. Forrest's story was much more of a comedy, taking a simple person and placing him in the middle of Big Events that he often inadvertently helped shape.

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Benjamin's story is told much differently, watching Benjamin "grow" in the context of the time periods, rather than seeing the times through his eyes.

Daisy is also very different from Jenny. She is a smart, talented young woman who may be right for Benjamin, but early in her 20s, her maturity level is nowhere near the same as a man six years older chronologically who has seen the horrors of war.

It is when circumstances are right for them to finally get together that the movie becomes most moving and heartbreaking. For most people, true love means finding someone, and then going through life together as you both adapt to the changes life brings.

But how can you do that when one person is getting older, and the other growing younger every day?

This is the true tragedy of the movie; watching two people who are meant to be together come to the realization that they can only meet in the middle of their lives, and then only for a relatively small period of time.

Fincher, Pitt, and Blanchett bring these facets of the F. Scott Fitzgerald short story to poignant life. I cannot imagine this movie without any of the three.

David Fincher is one of the best visualists working in Hollywood today. He chooses his project carefully, as this is only the third film he's done since 1999's "Fight Club";

The last two were less whimsical projects, directing 2002's "Panic Room";, and last year's "Zodiac";

With the former, he injected style and intensity into what could have been a boilerplate suspense film.

On the flip side, "Zodiac" was far more suspenseful than what you would have thought from what was basically a biopic of journalists trying to track down a serial killer in a still-unsolved case.

"Benjamin Button" allows Fincher to once again engage his imagination, and he does it with gusto. But the effects are not the near over-the-top CGI stunts pulled by Robert

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Zemeckis in placing Forrest Gump in the same shots as various presidents.

Here, it is more a case of lighting, script, and mood establishing the magic of the scenes.

The effects therefore are almost seamless, and Fincher makes a wise decision by not going with too much CGI to make Pitt look like an 18 year old version of himself, and he uses other actors in makeup to play Benjamin when he's at his oldest, and also when he ages backwards into adolescence.

Brad Pitt is perfect for this role, and this is one that can stand with "Babel" as amongst his all-time best performances. Pitt infuses Benjamin with a smorgasbord of emotions that capture the joys and the pathos of his situation; the joy of seeing and experiencing things for the first time as an "old man" who never expected to live long enough to accomplish them, and then the pathos of knowing what lies ahead as he continues to get younger.

The chemistry between Blanchett and Pitt is excellent. Both are able to handle every aspect from the characters over a 30 year period of their lives without looking out of place playing either the 20 something version or the 50 something editions of their characters.

The only problem I had with the movie was probably the narration. It is told in the form of a woman (Julia Ormond) reading a diary to a dying old woman in a New Orleans hospital on the verge of Katrina striking. It wasn't that I disliked the narrative device per se, it's just that they seemed to spend a lot more time on these scenes than were necessary to advance the plot.

And having Hurricane Katrina as background to it?

That never made sense, as that part of it was never resolved.

That minor quibble aside, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" was a treat. A big budget movie with a high profile director and two big named stars that still featured an intelligent script, and a style that appeals to adults looking to have our minds stimulated, and not just bombarded.

As such, it's one of the best films of 2008.

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My Rating - Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)