

It's the age of a child who grows from a man

In David Fincher's hands, the incredible conceit of a man who ages in reverse has been turned into a plausible love story

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The *Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, which occupies around 25 pages in the collected works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, is a slender piece of whimsy, a charming fantasy about a man who ages in reverse, descending through the years from newborn senescence to terminal infancy. As Fitzgerald unravels it, Benjamin's story serves as the pretext for some amusing, fairly superficial observations about child rearing, undergraduate behavior and courtship in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

From this odd, somewhat unpromising kernel, the director David Fincher and the screenwriter Eric Roth have cultivated a lush, romantic hothouse bloom, a film that shares only a title and a basic premise with its literary source. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, more than two and a half hours long, sighs with longing and simmers with intrigue while investigating the philosophical conundrums and emotional paradoxes of its protagonist's condition in a spirit that owes more to Jorge Luis Borges than to Fitzgerald.

While the film's plot progresses, with a few divagations, in a straight line through the decades of Benjamin Button's life, the backward vector of that biography turns this *Curious Case* into a genuine mystery. And the puzzles it invites us to contemplate — in consistently interesting, if not always dramatically satisfying ways — are deep and imposing, concerning the passage of time, the elusiveness of experience and the Janus-faced nature of love.

Above all, though, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is a triumph of technique. Building on the advances of pioneers like Steven Spielberg, Peter Jackson and Robert Zemeckis — and on his own previous work adapting newfangled means to traditional cinematic ends — Fincher (*Fight Club*, *Zodiac*) has added

a dimension of delicacy and grace to digital filmmaking. While it stands on the shoulders of breakthroughs like *Minority Report*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Forrest Gump* (for which Roth wrote the screenplay), *Benjamin Button* may be the most dazzling such hybrid yet, precisely because it is the subtlest. While he does treat the audience to a few grand, special-effect showpieces, Fincher concentrates his ingenuity on the setting and the characters, in particular — and most arrestingly — on the faces of his stars, Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt.

Blanchett is Daisy, a dancer, bohemian and all-around free spirit who ages gracefully, before our eyes, into a stately modern matron and then into a wasted, breathless old woman. Pitt, for the most part, plays Benjamin, who is born, looking like a man in his 70s, into a prominent New Orleans family in 1918. I say for the most part because near the end of the movie Pitt is replaced by younger and younger children and also because, at the beginning, he is evoked by an uncanny computer-generated confection that seems to have been distilled from his essence. This creature, tiny and wizened, is at once boy and man, but in every scene the ratio is readjusted, until the strapping figure of a familiar movie star emerges, gradually and all but imperceptibly.

The inner life of Benjamin Button, abandoned at birth by his stricken father (Jason Flemyng) and raised by the infinitely kind caretaker of a nursing home (Taraji P. Henson), is harder to grasp than his outer appearance, in part because Pitt seems more interested in the nuances of reticence than in the dynamics of expression. It's true that Benjamin's condition imposes a certain detachment: he is at once innocent and ancient, almost never who he appears to be.

But even though Pitt's coolness is a perfectly defensible approach to this character, his

elusiveness, from one film to the next, is starting to look more defensive than daring. His recent performances have been devoted mainly to the study of his own magnetism, a quality he earnestly explores in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* and playfully subverts in *Burn After Reading*. It goes without saying that Pitt has charisma to burn, and he is a capable and inventive actor, but he will only be a great one if he risks breaking himself open on screen as he did, briefly, in *Babel*.

And so, while Benjamin's progress through life drives the narrative of *The Curious Case*, he is (as the title suggests) more an object of contemplation than a flesh-and-blood (or bit-and-byte) candidate for our empathy. His jaunt through the 20th century is certainly fun to watch, with an episodic rhythm that recalls old movie serials or, even more, the endlessly dilated adventures of newspaper comic-strip heroes. After some initiation into the pleasures of the flesh and the bottle in the city of his birth, Young Button (Old Button) hires onto a tramp steamer. He carries a while in Russia, sampling caviar and adultery (with a superbly soignée Tilda Swinton) before World War II intrudes.

Later there will be sailboats and motorcycles as the ambient light turns gold along with Pitt's hair. There will not be much in the way of big events or public happenings — Benjamin Button is, finally, no *Forrest Gump* — and though he is a white Southerner raised by a black woman, he seems untouched by racial turmoil or by much of anything beyond the mysteries of his peculiar destiny.

But the movie's emotional center of gravity — the character who struggles and changes and feels — is Daisy, played by Blanchett from impetuous ingenue to near ghost with an almost otherworldly mixture of hauteur and heat. The story of Benjamin's life is read to Daisy by her

daughter (Julia Ormond) in a New Orleans hospital room in 2005, just as Hurricane Katrina is approaching the city. The imminence of the storm is a superfluous and unduly portentous device, since Katrina brings to mind precisely the hard, real-life miseries the movie has done everything in its power to avoid.

That power, though, is something to be reckoned with, and it resides in Fincher's ability to use his unbelievable skills to turn an incredible conceit into a plausible love story. The romance between Daisy and Benjamin begins when both are chronologically pre-adolescents and Benjamin is, physically, a codger, but the initial element of pedophilic creepiness in the relationship gives way to other forms of awkwardness. Their love is uniquely perfect and enduring. At the same time, like any other love — like any movie — it is shadowed by disappointment and fated to end. In the case of *Benjamin Button*, I was sorry when it was over and happy to have seen it.

Film Notes

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON

DIRECTED BY: DAVID FINCHER

STARRING: BRAD PITT (BENJAMIN BUTTON), CATE BLANCHETT (DAISY), TARAJI P. HENSON (QUEENIE), JULIA ORMOND (CAROLINE), JASON FLEMYNG (THOMAS BUTTON), ELIAS KOTIAS (MONSIEUR GATEAU), TILDA SWINTON (ELIZABETH ABBOTT), JARED HARRIS (CAPTAIN MIKE)

RUNNING TIME: 167 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



The changing face of Benjamin Button, played predominantly by Brad Pitt, as he ages backwards over the course of the 20th century.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WARNER BROS.

Mission imperative: assassinate the Fuhrer

Tom Cruise is too Tom Cruise — and too American — to be a count and colonel in the guise of Claus von Stauffenberg

BY MANOHLA DARGIS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

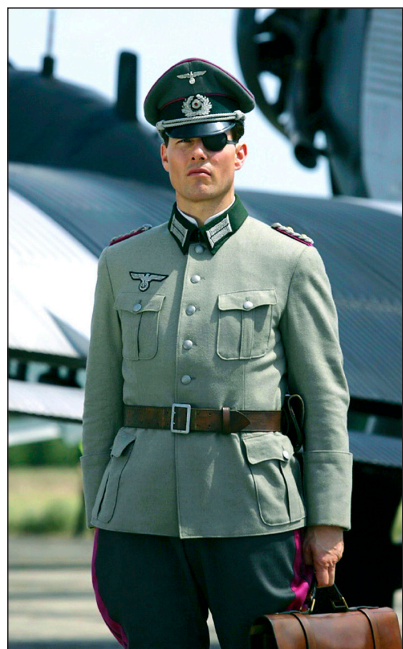
There are no discernibly nasty Nazis in *Valkyrie*, though Hitler and Goebbels skulk about in a few scenes, shooting dark, ominous looks at the heroic German Army officer played by Tom Cruise. Perhaps they're wondering what this Hollywood megastar is doing in their midst, a sentiment that you may come to share while watching Cruise — who gives a fine, typically energetic performance in a film that requires nothing more of him than a profile and vigor — strut about as one of history's more enigmatic players.

That enigma was Claus von Stauffenberg, a count and a colonel who, though he lost one eye, an entire hand and several fingers while fighting on behalf of the Reich, made several attempts to assassinate Hitler and seize control of the government. At the core of Stauffenberg's spectacularly ambitious plot was *Valkyrie*, Hitler's plan for the mobilization of the home army that Stauffenberg hoped to hijack in order to quash the SS and its leaders. It didn't work, of course, for complicated reasons, though also because by 1944, as William L. Shirer bluntly puts it in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, the conspirators were "terribly late."

You don't learn how belated the coup d'état was in *Valkyrie*, which might matter if this big-ticket production with Cruise in an eye patch and shiny, shiny boots had something to do with reality. But the director, Bryan Singer (of the *X-Men* franchise), and the writers,

Christopher McQuarrie and Nathan Alexander, aren't interested in delivering a history lesson. Slick, facile entertainment is the name of the game here, as it is in all Singer's films, including *Apt Pupil* (about a Nazi war criminal and the American boy next door who outs him) and *The Usual Suspects*, an intricately plotted story with men and guns, secrets and shadows that McQuarrie wrote. The secrets have already begun swirling by the time *Valkyrie* opens with Stauffenberg, stationed in North Africa, bitterly recording his opposition to Hitler in a diary right before losing various body parts to the war. After his convalescence he meets Major General Henning von Tresckow (Kenneth Branagh), who, sometime earlier, tries to blow up Hitler with a bomb hidden in bottles of French liqueur. (Russian vodka might have been more effective.) Stauffenberg soon joins the conspiratorial party that includes other British class acts brandishing high military rank and speaking in lightly accented or unaccented English: Bill Nighy as General Friedrich Olbricht, Tom Wilkinson as General Friedrich Fromm, Terence Stamp as General Ludwig Beck and Eddie Izzard as General Erich Fellgiebel.

Most of the crucial rebellious officers are played by British actors, while some of the Nazi diehards are played by Germans, which wouldn't be worth mentioning if this cacophony of accents weren't so distracting. But, as with the casting of Cruise, whose German voice-over quickly



eases into English, this international acting community invokes an earlier studio age, when Peter Lorre and Claude Rains delivered their lines in exotically flavored English and everyone pretended that Rick's Cafe really was located in Casablanca and not on a back lot. If Cruise doesn't work in *Valkyrie*, it's partly because he's too modern, too American and way too Tom Cruise to make sense in the role, but also because what passes for movie realism keeps changing, sometimes faster than even a star can change his brand.

Though Singer's old-fashioned movie habits, his attention to the gloss, gleam and glamour of the

image, can be agreeably pleasurable, he tends to gild every lily. Hitler (David Bamber) doesn't need spooky music or low camera angles to be villainous: he just has to show up. Singer's fondness for exaggeration can even undercut his strongest scenes, as when Stauffenberg visits Hitler to secure approval for the rewritten *Valkyrie* plan. If implemented, the plan will bring down the Fuhrer who, for his part, seems intent on bringing down the house with leers and popping eyeballs. Singer appears to have taken cues here from *Black Book*, Paul Verhoeven's World War II romp, but he's too serious to make such vaudeville work.

Stauffenberg, who hated Hitler but worshipped the Reich, sacrificed himself on the dual altar of nationalism and militarism, which makes him a more ambiguous figure than the one drawn in *Valkyrie*. He's a complex character, too complex for this film, which like many stories of this type, transforms World War II into a boy's adventure with dashing heroes, miles of black leather and crane shots of German troops in lockstep formation. It's a war that offers moral absolutes (Nazis are evil) and narratives (Nazis are evil and should die) that seem easier to grasp than any current conflict. Truly, World War II has become the moviemaker's gift that keeps on giving, whether you want it to or not.

Brian Singer's depiction of Claus von Stauffenberg, played by Tom Cruise, turns an ambiguous historical figure into a dashing Hollywood hero.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF UNITED ARTISTS

Film Notes

VALKYRIE

DIRECTED BY: BRYAN SINGER

STARRING: TOM CRUISE (COLONEL CLAUS VON STAUFFENBERG), KENNETH BRANAGH (MAJOR GENERAL HENNING VON TRESCKOW), BILL NIGHY (GENERAL FRIEDRICH OLBRIGHT), TOM WILKINSON (GENERAL FRIEDRICH FROMM), CARICE VAN HOUTEN (NINA VON STAUFFENBERG), THOMAS KRETSCHMANN (MAJOR OTTO ERNST REMER), TERENCE STAMP (GENERAL LUDWIG BECK), EDDIE IZZARD (GENERAL ERICH FELLGIEBEL), KEVIN R. MCNALLY (DOCTOR CARL GOERDELER), JAMIE PARKER (LIEUTENANT WERNER VON HAEFTEN), DAVID BAMBER (ADOLF HITLER)

RUNNING TIME: 120 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Frost/Nixon

As Richard Nixon walked his long road toward hoped-for rehabilitation, he conducted a series of interviews in 1977 with declining TV identity David Frost. This film by Ron Howard, based on Peter Morgan's play, recreates and embellishes their crucial, revelatory exchanges and the maneuvering that surrounded them. Nominated for Oscars including Best Picture, *Frost/Nixon* follows *All the President's Men* in defying the foregone conclusions of historical events to deliver a crackling drama. The widely praised Frank Langella is Nixon and Michael Sheen is Frost.



He's Just Not That Into You

A large and breezy cast turns a successful self-help book into a comedy in which a bunch of couples and singles agonize over their romantic shortcomings. Derided by some critics as dressing up the same old conservative formula of happy endings and character karma in modern clothes and fresh faces, fans of the performers should still have a good time — and at least it's not based on a cellphone serial. Stars Jennifer Aniston, Scarlett Johansson, Drew Barrymore, Ben Affleck, Justin Long and the head-turning Ginnifer Goodwin, among many others.



Elsa and Fred

This rather melodramatic Spanish/Argentine co-production from 2005 revisits the late blooming romance sub-genre as lonely new neighbors Fred (Manuel Alexandre) and Elsa (China Zorrilla) strike up a relationship that ought to make the characters in *He's Just Not That Into You* envious. Fred eventually fulfills Elsa's dream of recreating the fountain scene from Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* during a trip to Rome. Critics were not as impressed as might be expected with this one, though Roger Ebert thought the fountain climax was moving enough to warrant a spoiler.



Storm Rider: Clash of Evils

An animated film from Hong Kong continues the saga of two young martial arts aces of lore who avenge their parents' deaths before being separated and facing new challenges to survive. When they finally link up again they must deal with a new and more powerful enemy and difficult choices. Judging from the trailer, this is manna from heaven for people who know the story or who play sword and sorcery computer games online, but of little interest for anyone expecting the depth and craftsmanship of Pixar.



The Dark Knight (IMAX version)

Just in time for the Oscars, the *Miramir* in Taipei is re-releasing this wonderful spectacle until *Watchmen* starts on the very big screen on March 6. The IMAX theater is where this brooding classic truly belongs, and those who haven't seen the IMAX print now have another chance to pay slightly more for a very big payoff. This *Batman* entry, the best of them all, starts with Heath Ledger's criminal anarchy and ends with the battered, bereaved hero fleeing from infamy into the unknown. Brilliant, rousing stuff.



Love Exposure

This South Korean romantic yarn from 2007 about the lives and loves of two female friends is notable for being made by women. Its English title suggests something rather lewd, but the package is about much more than one-night stands and designer underwear as our heroines deal with infidelity and life choices. Likened to *Sex and the City*, and also (unfortunately) known as *Lovers Behind*, this hiChannel promotion is exposing itself at Ximending's Baixue theater.

