

FILM REVIEW



Unconquerable souls

Clint Eastwood's retelling of the Springbok's stunning 1995 World Cup victory makes reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa look a little too easy

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

“Inspiration” is a word that occurs frequently throughout *Invictus*, and inspiring is certainly what this film strives to be. And it succeeds, perhaps a little too well for its own good.

For those with even a smidgen of skepticism about truth and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa, there is a sense of being bludgeoned with Clint Eastwood's sunny message of hope and the unlimited potential of man to shape his destiny for the better.

This is not to say that *Invictus* is a bad movie, or even a thoughtless one. It simply decides that it will, in the words of the Monty Python song, “always look on the bright side of life.”

The stage is set economically, first in a sequence that zooms out from well-fed white kids training at rugby on beautifully tended grounds to encompass a scratch game of soccer between bare-foot blacks in a rubble strewn field across the road.

Along this road comes the newly elected Nelson Mandela (played with an almost Christ-like benignity by Morgan Freeman), who is clearly destined to bridge this divide with his belief in tolerance and understanding. Subsequently, Mandela welcomes white staffers at the presidential office, many of whom are already packed in preparation for being booted out by the new black president. When Mandela's security chief asks for more staff, he gets landed with a bunch of white, SAS-trained hard boys who, it turns out, are nice guys whose intentions are good — to paraphrase another song — but who have been sadly misunderstood.

Mandela's powers to bring about reconciliation between entrenched enemies are just a little bit too magical, and as a storyteller, Eastwood treads very lightly in dealing with the fear and hatred that generations of apartheid fostered between the



Morgan Freeman, left, and Matt Damon star in *Invictus*, directed by Clint Eastwood.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WARNER BROS

racers. The mutual suspicions are presented in the film in such a slight, almost negligible way, that reconciliation comes too easily.

Fortunately, this is only one half of the film.

The other half focuses on the film's other major star, Matt Damon, who plays the part of Francois Pienaar, the beleaguered captain of the demoralized South African national rugby side, the Springboks. The main narrative thrust of the film is how this team, with the moral support of a black president who had no love for the white-dominated sport of rugby, managed to bring South Africa together behind its effort to win the 1995 rugby World Cup.

A knowledge or love of rugby union is not a requirement for audiences of *Invictus*, for this is a sports movie only tangentially. The stadium is simply an arena in which the underdog Springboks get to demonstrate the inspirational force that has been injected into them through their captain from Mandela.

Damon does a splendid job as Pienaar, never overplaying his part, and has bulked up and dumbed down very effectively as a thoughtful if not particularly articulate sportsman, and his efforts to make sense not just of Mandela's message, but also of his own career, are presented in a few deft brush strokes.

The poem by William Ernest Henley that gives the film its title, with its passionate faith in the power of individuals to transform their world, stands at the center of the film. The lines “I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul,” stand as a kind of mission statement for the film which would otherwise have to be expressed by the scriptwriters themselves.

The opposing sides in the World Cup draw are a nugatory presence. Even New Zealand's All Blacks, the favorites to win the cup and the final challenge for the Springboks, are represented only by the figure of Jonah Lomu as a shadowy presence with almost

Film Notes

INVICTUS

DIRECTED BY:
CLINT EASTWOOD

STARRING:
MORGAN FREEMAN (NELSON MANDELA), MATT DAMON (FRANCOIS PIENAAR), TONY KGOROGE (JASON TSHABALALA) PATRICK MOFOKENG (LINGA MOONSAMY), MATT STERN (HENDRICK BOOYENS), JULIAN LEWIS JONES (ETIENNE FEYDER), ADJOA ANDOH (BRENDA MAZIBUKO), MARGUERITE WHEATLEY (NERINE)

RUNNING TIME:
133 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

mythical powers to overcome the opposition defense. Much is made of the intense physical power of the scrum and the tackle, and it is almost as though Pienaar and his teammates are battering through a wall of brawn to achieve a victory that in an instant, and perhaps only for an instant, transforms South Africa into a racially unified nation.

South Africa's victory on the field is sweet, even for the audience. Eastwood is a consummate filmmaker, even if he is somewhat given to an evangelical sentimentality in his old age. (Note the symbolism of the Passion that dominates that final act of his last film, *Gran Torino*.) He knows how to draw his audience into the spirit of his story, and it is delightful to give oneself up to his fantasy of an explosive burst of universal brotherhood that extends from the sports arena to the violently divided communities beyond.

If it were only so simple.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

The Men Who Stare at Goats

If it's George Clooney, then it must be a liberal-leaning action movie or historical drama, right? In this case, it's a bit of both. Based on a book that exposed purportedly real-life shenanigans by elements in the US Army over the years, this is a yarn that should delight fans of leads Clooney, Ewan McGregor, Kevin Spacey and Jeff Bridges. Clooney is a special forces operative of mysterious purpose whose activities in Iraq turn out to be wackier than McGregor's reporter could have dreamed ... and the fate of the titular goat is just the beginning.



20th Century Boys: The Last Chapter - Our Flag

The final installment in this manga-sourced Japanese trilogy of kiddie-induced apocalyptic madness arrives in Taipei to a ready-made audience. Part 3 concentrates on the final stages of the attempt by doomsday cult leader Friend to destroy the world. His long-time opponents — a rock star and his female relative — attempt to frustrate him both within his organization and from the outside. It's worth noting that this intriguing and sometimes disturbing mixture of cults, children, terrorism, pop music and religion could never have been made in the US.



Crazy Racer (瘋狂的賽車)

Frenetic Chinese action comedy involves a disgraced cyclist whom fate further mistreats by ensnaring him in a mish-mash of drug-running, spouse murder and even more nefarious activities. There's action to spare and some innovative elements, too. Perfect for getting crazy on a brainless night out on the town. This is a follow-on of sorts from director Ning Hao's (寧浩) *Crazy Stone* (瘋狂的石頭) in 2006.



The Warrior and the Wolf (狼災記)

Chinese director Tian Zhuangzhuang (田壯壯), who made the fine drama *The Blue Kite* (藍風箏), is a force to be reckoned with. Unfortunately, this strange, messy film may not enhance that reputation. Maggie Q (*Die Hard 4.0*) is a luckless widow, Japan's Joe Odagiri (*Air Doll*, which also opens today) is a warrior and Taiwan's Tou Chung-hua (佟宗華, from *Lust, Caution*) is a fallen general in this cosmopolitan action fantasy set thousands of years ago. The film offers two pieces of advice among the battles, rape sequences and pretty vistas: (1) Don't fornicate with wolf-women and (2) Don't assume eclectic Asian co-productions will make money.



Sex, Party & Lies

What, no videotape? A hit in Spain, this teen drama seems to be mining territory (teens getting it on and getting out of control) that Larry Clark exhausted years ago, though the actors cast here seem a little older. If the version that screened at Cannes is the one released here, then the teen audience that this flick craves will be locked out. If you want to see Spanish filmmakers pushing the envelope, track down some of Pedro Almodovar's earliest films instead. Original title: *Mentiras y Gordas*.



Conversations With God

We in Taiwan may get a regular supply of films about religious figures, but it's not often an explicitly religious film gets a screening — let alone Christian. This one invites the viewer to join Neale Donald Walsh's real-life transformation from street bum to super-wealthy self-help author thanks to some conversations with the Almighty when he was at rock bottom. Henry Czerny plays the itinerant-turned-publishing icon well enough, according to some reviews, but overall this effort left most critics conversing with themselves about their own career direction. Find *God* at the Changchun theater in Taipei.



Painters & Provence

Finally, the Majestic theater in Ximending is taking splendid advantage of the current Van Gogh exhibition at the National Museum of History by releasing this series of five made-for-TV documentaries by Charles de Lartigue about nine artists and their depictions of glorious Provence, France. Other featured artists include Goya, Renoir, Matisse, Cezanne and Picasso. The festival runs until Jan. 29.



FILM REVIEW

Happy ending?

‘Air Doll,’ a movie about a sex toy who becomes human, is an exquisitely executed meditation on urban solitude and the plight of women as disposable playthings

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda is known to the world for his humanist creations such as *After Life* (1998), *Nobody Knows* (2004) and most recently *Still Walking* (2008). At first glance, *Air Doll*, his latest feature, may seem a bit too titillating for the director's taste. Based on a 20-page graphic short story by manga artist Yoshiie Gouda, the film is a dark modern fairy tale about a life-size inflatable doll who takes on a life of her own.

Sex is definitely there, both in human and sex-doll terms, but *Air Doll* is more of a poetic meditation on the human condition punctuated with charming humor and heart-rending despair. Polished

and structurally diffused, this rather ambitious film touches on many weighty issues. It is part of the work's charm but also a flaw as the director seems to hover tentatively over eroticism, feminist allegory and the paucity of human emotions.

Set in an old Tokyo neighborhood, the film opens with middle-aged Hideo (Itsuji Itao) sinking into the seat of a commuter train, looking worn out. A disgruntled waiter by day, Hideo leads a perfectly happy life at home with Nozomi, an inflatable doll. He tells her everything, bathes her, has sex with her at night and says goodbye to her in the morning.

One day after Hideo leaves for work, the doll starts to blink and

morphs into a real woman (Bae Doo-na). Arrayed in a French maid's outfit, the new Nozomi begins to explore the real world with the innocent curiosity of a small child. As she makes her way through the old quarter, Nozomi comes across a cavalcade of lonely folks as empty inside as her plastic body.

Nozomi soon develops a parallel existence away from Hideo's apartment by having a daytime job at a small video-rental store where she falls for fellow worker Junichi (Arata). In the evening, she returns home to play the inanimate doll for her master.

Nozomi tries to find meaning in her newly found existence, but even visiting her maker, Sonoda (Joe Odagiri), doesn't seem to help



South Korean actress Bae Doo-na plays an inflatable doll in *Air Doll*, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ATOM CINEMA

much. As a sex doll with a heart and mind, Nozomi experiences the joy and pain of being human but realizes that the parallel lives she leads may be incompatible.

Air Doll has all the elements needed for a cinematic musing on urban anomie and solitude — a heroine who is replaceable, an eerie, dreamlike electronic

Film Notes

AIR DOLL

DIRECTED BY:
HIROKAZU KORE-EDA

STARRING:
BAE DOO-NA (NOZOMI), ARATA (JUNICHI), ITSUJI ITAO (HIDEO), JOE ODAGIRI (SONODA)

LANGUAGE:
JAPANESE WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME:
126 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

score, and an atmospheric locale provided by a run-down neighborhood nudged between ominous high-rises. Even the video store Nozomi works at is a symbol of a culture where images take precedence over real

experiences and DVD copies over original film prints.

For his modern fairy tale, Kore-eda gathers a variety of characters to fill in the rather thin narrative and illustrate how empty most people feel inside. Aided by the crystal-clear visuals of Taiwanese cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-bin (李屏賓), the film exudes lightness and buoyancy, but sometimes lets the poetry run too wildly and the narrative weight diffuse. Consequently, the “we are all alone and hollow” spiel mostly falls flat. Not even the doll's simple rhetoric on humanity and the orations of an old poet can redeem the film's existential musing from being as hollow as the protagonist and cute as a children's book.

Beneath the yarn's limpid surface, an undercurrent of eroticism bubbles and threatens to erupt at any minute. That the film is about a sex doll makes it Kore-eda's most erotic creation to date. Erotic tension is indeed felt throughout the movie, though the director doesn't flirt with the sexual subtext. Examples can be found in the two scenes where Nozomi or

her owner scrub her detachable vagina in soapy water rendered in a matter-of-fact manner.

Masterfully cast, South Korea actress Bae Doo-na manages to simultaneously exude a child-like innocence and a disturbingly infantilized sexuality as a life-sized plaything designed to pleasure men. It would be interesting to know whether Kore-eda's choice of casting a South Korean actress as a sex doll was a deliberate critique of the sexual slavery practiced by the Japanese military during World War II.

Despite its flaws, *Air Doll* makes an effective social commentary if one applies a focused, albeit rudimentary, feminist reading to the story about a sex doll gaining autonomy over her body and mind: first through consumerism, then through discovering how to reach orgasm and finally via the realization that her actions have consequences.

One such consequence ultimately leads to a climactic finale that is sickly humorous and fascinatingly horrific that makes the two hours spent watching the film worth the wait.