

Clint Eastwood, Matt Damon Deliver Poignant 'Hereafter'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 20, 2010 - 9:27am

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Clint Eastwood's "Hereafter" is a dramatic examination of a subject rarely dealt with in American cinema with even an ounce of honest emotion: What happens after we die. Without Shyamalan-esque twists or overwrought melodrama, director Eastwood, writer Peter Morgan, and their incredibly-talented cast have crafted one of the most complex dramas of the year, a piece that has already been misunderstood by the critics that have easily dismissed it but that will eventually be remembered as one of Eastwood's best films of this period of his remarkable career.

The best films of Eastwood's career – "Unforgiven," "Mystic River," "Million Dollar Baby," and, of course, others – have almost entirely centered on a small group of characters working with a subject that the director clearly finds personally important. While "Hereafter" has a global scope, it essentially tells the story of three people and does so with long, uninterrupted scenes of dialogue that center around the question of death that will eventually face us all, but is obviously more personally important to someone entering their eighties. In other words, it plays to Eastwood's strengths perfectly.

Peter Morgan's script tells three simultaneous stories in a very linear fashion. We see a scene from story A, then story B, then story C, and then back to A, back to B, and so on until the final act when the stories pile up on top of each other. Those exhausted by the cross-cutting narratives of films like "Babel" shouldn't be concerned as Morgan's structural choice allows us to spend time with each story before gradually moving on to the next one without feeling the chronological whiplash that often comes with the subgenre.



Hereafter

Photo credit: Warner Brothers Pictures

The first story is that of Marie (Cecile De France), a famous French reporter who is introduced on a vacation with her boyfriend. While in a small town buying trinkets, the coastal area is hit with a massive tsunami, a remarkable technical feat to behold and the one time the film seems to display the touch of Executive Producer Steven Spielberg. Marie dies for long enough to see a vision of the other side, something we’re shown as blurry shadows and light but that seems like something more concrete to the character. Marie returns to her life but struggles to maintain normalcy now that she knows there’s more to death than she previously reported.

The second story is that of George (Matt Damon), one of the rare actual psychics, a man who used to make money off his ability but realized the hard way that speaking to the dead loved ones of emotionally fragile people can make for a rough life. What George sees when he does a reading isn’t completely clear. Once again, we see a flash of light and shadow but there are no scenes of ghosts speaking to George or a clear idea as to how he gets his information. It’s brilliantly open to interpretation and never “translated” as heaven, purgatory, etc. — merely a variation on the widely-reported visions of light that come with stories of near-death experiences. George meets a gorgeous girl (Bryce Dallas Howard) and has an aggressive brother (Jay Mohr) but essentially keeps to himself.

The third story is that of British twins Marcus and Jason (both alternately played by Frankie & George McLaren). While trying to protect their alcoholic mother and not be sent to foster care, Jason is killed in a car accident, sending Marcus into a state of confusion and despair. He is taken away and given to another family, but spends his days trying to figure out what happened to Jason now that he’s dead, visiting false psychics and being generally lost.

All three stories will come together in a final act that feels a bit forced and is easily the weakest material in the piece, but what happens in those first two acts more than makes up for the missteps of the finale.



Hereafter

Photo credit: Warner Brothers Pictures

First, there’s Peter Morgan’s script. One of our finest writers (“The Queen,” “Frost/Nixon”) brilliantly works from Charles Dickens (who is referenced several times in the piece) to fashion a story that could be read as a variation on “A Christmas Carol.” The three characters represent different ways of looking at death. Jason is mostly just worried that he will never see his brother again – death is past. For George, death is present. And for Marie, death is merely the future – another step. It’s a brilliant script with adult, complex dialogue that walks that fine line of being sentimental without being melodramatic. It has a poignancy that plays perfectly to both Eastwood’s skills as a director and Damon’s as an actor.

The cast is exceptional. Damon never overplays his hand (although I wish he didn’t have to utter the “it’s a curse” line not once but twice). I love the way he handles the readings, not treating them like a spectacle out of “Ghost” but realizing that genuine emotion can be more powerfully conveyed with silence than overacting. De France and Howard are also remarkably effective and the latter has one of the few scenes of honest, raw emotion and she plays it note-perfectly. Sadly, the McLaren’s, rookies who were reportedly cast because Eastwood didn’t want overly-trained child actors, don’t quite work. There’s a happy medium between the naiveté that Eastwood clearly wanted and those kids who come off as too Hollywood. The McLaren’s’ inexperience shows.

Finally, the technical elements of the film are above reproach. Regular Eastwood collaborator Tom Stern uses interiors perfectly, never forcing

the camera too close to his actors, often creating a fly-on-the-wall aesthetic that keeps the piece from ever taking on that too-polished sheen of a TV movie. And Eastwood's sparse, simple score is either his best in years or merely fits this material better than what it fit films like "Changeling" and "Flags of Our Fathers." Either way, it works.

It is increasingly rare to see adult subjects like death handled outside of horror, Nicholas Sparks movies, or period melodramas. With "Hereafter," Peter Morgan and Clint Eastwood have taken a challenging subject and produced a challenging film, one that might not be the supernatural thriller that audiences will expect from the misleading trailers but will be an unexpectedly powerful drama for those that are open to its ideas. This is Eastwood's best work since "Letters From Iwo Jima" and proof that we can't close the book on one of the most notable directing careers of the last several decades just yet.

'Hereafter' stars Matt Damon, Cecile De France, Frankie McLaren, George McLaren, Bryce Dallas Howard, and Jay Mohr. It was written by Peter Morgan and directed by Clint Eastwood. It opens on October 20th, 2010. It is rated PG-13.



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