

Only self-important

Cast Away, Chocolat and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

By David Walsh
21 February 2001

Cast Away, directed by Robert Zemeckis, written by William Broyles Jr.; *Chocolat*, directed by Lasse Hallström, written by Robert Nelson Jacobs, from the novel by Joanne Harris; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, directed by Ang Lee, written by Hui-Ling Wang, James Schamus and Kuo Jung Tsai, from the novel by Du Lu Wang

Between them these three films— *Cast Away*, *Chocolat* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* —received 17 Academy Award nominations (*Crouching Tiger* was nominated in ten categories, *Chocolat* five and *Cast Away* two). They are directed by a 54-year-old Swede (Lasse Hallström, *Chocolat*), a 48-year-old American (Robert Zemeckis, *Cast Away*) and a 46-year-old Taiwanese (Ang Lee, *Crouching Tiger*). Five screenwriters receive credit for their work. A number of film stars from different parts of the world perform—Tom Hanks, Helen Hunt, Johnny Depp, Juliette Binoche, Chow Yun Fat, Michelle Yeoh and others. Large chunks of money and technical expertise went into the production of these films.

In *Cast Away*, a systems engineer from the package delivery firm Federal Express finds himself stranded on a remote and uninhabited South Sea island. He has to learn how to survive and come to terms with his isolation, and later, on his return to civilization, accept changes that have taken place in his absence. A mysterious woman and her child, blown in by the north wind, appear in a small French village in *Chocolat* and offer sweets that magically change the lives of their consumers. The chocolate-maker is obliged to battle the local powers that be in her bid to spread tolerance and kindness. The performers fly through the air in the fantastical martial arts film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. A young girl resists the mentoring of two older warriors, but learns in the end the value of their wisdom.

These are very different works. Little seems to connect them except this year's award nominations and the fact their titles all begin with the same letter. Lumping them together might seem entirely arbitrary if one weren't struck in each case by the remarkable level of self-satisfaction, the absence of protest or urgency and the thoroughly mediocre result.

Zemeckis, the director of *Cast Away*, came into his own in the wake of the Steven Spielberg-George Lucas takeover of the American film industry, i.e., the dawn of the age of the bland blockbuster that commenced some time in the mid- to late 1970s. His filmography includes *Used Cars* (1980), *Romancing the Stone* (1984), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) and *Forrest Gump* (1994).

The first scenes of *Cast Away*, oddly enough, take place in Moscow, where Hanks' character Chuck Noland is attempting to teach American corporate discipline and technique to a group of befuddled Russian employees. "We never allow ourselves the sin of losing track

of time," barks Noland, who subsequently and pointedly telephones his girlfriend from Red Square. The film, in other words, begins with this spiritual and practical triumph of American global business, even if a certain criticism is implied.

We recognize, however, that all is not well with Noland. He is in too much of a hurry, he pays scant attention to the relationships in his life. When the small plane carrying him to East Asia crashes into the Pacific and he is washed ashore on a tiny islet, the rhythm of his life profoundly changes. Years go by; a leaner and tougher Noland ("No land") figures out a means of escaping his reef-encircled prison. Cast away once, onto the desert island, he finds himself cast away again, by his former love. No longer a slave to the corporate stopwatch, Noland stands at the crossroads. Every possibility is now open to him—why, he might become a personal trainer, a management consultant, even a motivational speaker!

Zemeckis says the film "celebrates the idea that no matter how many obstacles are thrown in our paths, we will find ways to accept them. The story is not so much about the survival of a human being, but rather the survival of the human spirit and an illustration of the idea that surviving is easy, it's living that's difficult." People speak rather loosely about the human spirit these days, it deserves better. Here is a film aimed at the audience member who drives a late-model sport utility vehicle but wonders, on the occasional dreary Sunday afternoon, what his or her life "is really all about." It is, in its own way, a tribute to the human spirit—or something very similar—that well-heeled individuals, who firmly intend to go on making large sums of money, repeatedly assure the rest of us that material trappings are of no significance and that we should turn our attention to higher things.

Hanks carries a good deal of tedium around with him these days, but he is not too bad in certain scenes. When he returns from his island, his sadness feels real, at least for a little while, until we realize it isn't going to lead anywhere. Helen Hunt has become the epitome of self-involvement. Whatever lightness or comic touch she possessed has been entirely lost.

There is one absurd strand of this two-hour advertisement for Federal Express that somehow sums up the entire undertaking. When Noland washes up on the beach, a few packages float in with him. He makes use of the contents of all but one. The last parcel, emblazoned with angel wings, he manages to hold onto unopened through years on the island, rescue at sea and so forth. A good company man, he finally delivers the item to an isolated ranch in Texas. The film thus points to two of the critical pillars of current establishment ideology: vague but persistent religiosity and a belief in large corporations. Perfect.

In *Chocolat* Vianne Rocher (Binoche), the enigmatic candy-maker,

intervenes in the lives of a number of townspeople. She helps the wife of a brutal cafe-owner set out on her own. She matches an elderly lady and gentleman. She brings joy to the life of her aging landlady, and reunites the latter with her grandson; the two have been kept apart by the landlady's uptight daughter. Vianne comes into conflict with the Comte de Reynaud (Alfred Molina, who is fine), who is mayor and the chief local big shot. The count, whose wife is off in Italy enjoying herself apparently, leads a life of self-deprivation. He is offended by Vianne's hedonism and her refusal to observe Lent, with its fasting. He urges the nervous young priest to sermonize against her. When a roving band of river gypsies arrives, things go from bad to worse. A crisis erupts, and finally the count too gives way to his sensual side. A new spirit reigns in the town, and Vianne gives up her wandering.

There is at least one line in the film that rings true. After Vianne has brought Armande, the landlady, and her grandson together, the old lady (Judi Dench) fires off: "Stop looking so damned pleased with yourself!" If only Binoche *could*, for an instant, the film might have half a chance! Not that it's principally the performer's fault. Her all-knowing, Cheshire Cat smile is simply the physical expression of the film's inner being. Everything here blends into one sweet, sticky river of liberal self-satisfaction. Vianne is one's nightmare of an intrusive social worker or school official, who inevitably knows what's best for everyone. The ability of the townspeople to figure out anything for themselves is excluded from the start. They are all putty in her hands.

In interviews the film's creators make much of the fact that Vianne is 'helped by others as much as she helps them.' But only because she, in her wise and patronizing manner, has made it possible. She is the demiurge who goes on helping others until they help themselves in self-defense.

"To me," says the director Hallström (*My Life as a Dog*, *The Cider House Rules*), "*Chocolat* is a very funny fable about temptation and the importance of not denying oneself the good things in life. It's about the constant conflict in life between tradition and change. And at its very center it is about intolerance and the consequences of not letting other people live out their lives and beliefs."

But the film is so toothless that it doesn't make a strong statement about anything. Intriguingly, Robert Nelson Jacobs, the screenwriter, made one significant change from the Joanne Harris novel. He turned the chocolatière's opponent from the town priest into a nobleman. A less sensitive target perhaps. The priest, in fact, becomes a minor and generally sympathetic character in the film, albeit weak and inexperienced. The thought of a major motion picture depicting a battle between a free thinker and the Catholic Church was apparently too much to contemplate. It might have been closed down in New York City.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is, in my view, a big self-satisfied bore and perhaps the most disappointing of the three films. It should at least have been more fun than this. Ang Lee's film takes place in a mythical China. To summarize the complicated story briefly: two warriors, one male (Li Mu Bai, played by Chow Yun Fat, one of the biggest stars in the world) and one female (Yu Shu Lien), have had a long friendship, although they have suppressed their desires for one another out of respect for her dead fiancé. Li is having second thoughts about his life. A young woman (Jen) comes into their lives who has immense talent as a fighter, but is rebellious and troublesome and keeps company with Li's old enemy, Jade Fox. Jen has an old love (Lo), a bandit, who shows up unexpectedly.

One battle or trial follows the other. The various combatants fight

on rooftops, in treetops and on water. Some of the effects are impressive. Along the way, Li in particular walks around pompously distributing bits of Taoist wisdom. The director Lee describes it thusly: "The internal strength, which in essence is searching for nothingness, the void, to find your strength.... If you can lose all the tension and direct all your energy to one channel, you create tremendous power and wisdom." This is the kind of stuff one can find in the average self-help guide of a certain type.

The astonishing thing about this film, set in *feudal* China, is the thoroughgoing absence of social commentary or protest. Certainly that was a common feature in Kurosawa's samurai films, for example. Even in the ordinary run-of-the-mill martial arts film one comes across on late-night television the hero is often defending oppressed villagers or opposing some evil lord or other. Not in Lee's film. The subject matter is borrowed from every trivial, self-absorbed story of the middle class in recent years: a girl struggles with her identity amidst a world of pressures and temptations. The lower classes are kept properly in the background.

This is the filmmaker's own self-important description of the film: "Some may have thought it strange that I could just drop what I normally do and make something like a B-movie. And as I was doing it, there was no escape, I had to bring in drama, I had to bring in women, I had to bring beauty and whatever I felt added quality to it. It became an Ang Lee movie." And what precisely is that? *The Wedding Banquet*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm* do not comprise an immortal body of work. A rather amorphous liberal sensibility, combined with a certain technical skill. I find his work insipid.

And then there is the claim, because the women are given equal opportunity (or more) to perform as fighters, that *Crouching Tiger* makes an "important feminist statement." As if those weren't a dime a dozen. Females of the upper classes have lots of defenders. After all, there are women studio executives making millions of dollars and stupid movies just like the men. What a step forward for humanity! Who speaks for the poor and the oppressed in contemporary filmmaking?

The smugness and complacency of these works, which, in the end, preach acceptance of the status quo, have a social basis. This is not a matter of individual weakness. Layers of the middle class and upper middle class have prospered during the recent decades, particularly in the stock market boom, as well as through the fantastic profits being earned in the entertainment business. These social layers are largely indifferent to the fate of society, indifferent, in general, to suffering, except as it's manifested in the individual angst exhibited in these films. Or if *they're not indifferent*, they don't have the courage or the perspective with which to combat the current atmosphere. A devotion to the fate of humanity, which one sticks to under all circumstances, is a precondition in our day for serious artistic work. There is no reason to tolerate this kind of filmmaking, or merely to shrug one's shoulders. It should make the thinking viewer angry and dissatisfied. That is a necessary starting point for change.

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