Only self-important

Cast Away, Chocolat and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

By David Walsh
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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 C—Cast Away, Chocolat or Crouching Tiger. Zemeckis, the director of Cast Away, says the film "celebrates the idea that no matter how low in the doldrums you are, the next step is forward. The film is about instinct, the will to live and the desire to find ways of surviving. The film is about the human spirit." Zemeckis says the film "celebrates the idea that no matter how low in the doldrums you are, the next step is forward. The film is about instinct, the will to live and the desire to find ways of surviving. The film is about the human spirit."

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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 or
fight 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 demure 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 is 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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