

INVICTUS - REVIEWS

December 11, 2009

Final Score: Future 1, Past 0

By A. O. SCOTT - NY TIMES

It may not seem obvious at first, but [Clint Eastwood](#)'s "Invictus," a rousing true story of athletic triumph, is also that director's latest exploration of revenge, the defining theme of his career. It is hard to think of an actor or a filmmaker who so cleanly embodies a single human impulse in the way that Mr. Eastwood — from "[Pale Rider](#)" to "[Mystic River](#)," from Dirty Harry to "[Gran Torino](#)" — personifies the urge to get even.

He has also, of course, taken a critical view of the drive for vengeance, investigating its tragic roots and terrible consequences. A movie like "[Unforgiven](#)," most famously, suggests that violent revenge is regrettable. But rarely, in the world of Mr. Eastwood's films, is it avoidable.

"Invictus" is to some degree an exception, a movie about reconciliation and forgiveness — about the opposite of revenge — that gains moral authority precisely because the possibility of bloodshed casts its shadow everywhere. The film, based on John Carlin's book "Playing the Enemy," takes place in South Africa in the mid-1990s, just after [Nelson Mandela](#)'s election as the country's first black president. Many of the whites in the film — most of them Afrikaner nationalists still attached to a system that kept their black compatriots poor, disenfranchised and oppressed — brace themselves for payback as Mandela assumes power. Quite a few of the president's black supporters expect it, too, as their due after decades of brutality and humiliation under apartheid.

But Mandela, played with gravity, grace and a crucial spark of mischief by [Morgan Freeman](#), knows that score-settling would be a disastrous course for a new and fragile democracy. Passing by a newsstand on the morning after his victory, he spots a headline in Afrikaans. He has shown that he can win an election, it says, but will he show that he can govern? His bodyguards bristle at a pre-emptive low blow from a hostile press, but Mandela shrugs. "It's a fair question," he says.

And a perennially urgent one in any democracy. Mr. Eastwood and the screenwriter, Anthony Peckham, are too absorbed in the details of the story at hand to suggest historical analogies, but "Invictus" has implications beyond its immediate time and place that are hard to miss. It's an exciting sports movie, an inspiring tale of prejudice overcome and, above all, a fascinating study of political leadership.

But much of the ingenuity in Mr. Freeman's performance lies in the way he conveys that idealism and the shrewd manipulation of symbols and emotions are not incompatible, but complementary. Taking power a few years after being released from 27 years of incarceration, Mandela is already a larger-than-life figure, an idol in South Africa and around the world. His celebrity is something of a burden, and also an asset he must learn to use; his moral prestige is a political weapon.

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But he is preoccupied, to the dismay of loyalists in his movement, with finding some kind of concord — not friendship, necessarily, but at least a state of non-enmity — with the people who hate and fear him: the whites who see him as a terrorist, a usurper and a threat to their traditions and values. Mandela's overtures to the Afrikaners — starting with his refusal to dismiss white members of the presidential staff and security detail — arise partly out of Gandhian principle, and partly out of political calculation. They are a powerful force in the army, the police and the South African economy.

Mandela's aides — in particular Brenda Mazibuko (Adjoa Andoh) — are baffled when he takes up the cause of the South African rugby team, a symbol of stiff-necked Afrikaner pride despised by most blacks. The team's Springbok mascot, named for a kind of gazelle, and its green-and-gold uniforms are nearly as loathsome as the apartheid flag, and when Mandela insists that the colors be retained, it seems almost like a betrayal of his life's cause. South Africa, a pariah in the world of international sports for a long time ("the skunk of the world," as Mandela puts it), is preparing to host the Rugby World Cup, and Mandela decides that if the nation is to find unity and self-respect the underachieving Springboks must win the championship.

And so an alliance develops between the president and François Pienaar, the Springbok captain, played with crisp, disciplined understatement (and utter mastery of a devilishly tricky accent) by [Matt Damon](#). Pienaar's struggle to keep control of his team, and also to persuade them to accept some perplexing new social realities, is a microcosm of Mandela's larger project. And he quietly accepts Mandela, who shares with Pienaar the Victorian poem that gives the movie its title, as a mentor.

Beyond the politician, Mr. Freeman and Mr. Eastwood allow us glimpses of a complicated and somewhat melancholy man, carrying the loneliness of his long imprisonment with him and estranged from much of his family. He is gracious and charming in small groups, a stiff but compelling public speaker and a boss whose authority is buttressed by a phalanx of devoted, sometimes skeptical aides.

But if "Invictus" is predominantly an absorbing character study of one of the most extraordinary characters of our time, it is also fleshed out with well-sketched minor players and subplots that illuminate the progress of racial rapprochement in its comic human dimension. The black bodyguards and their white colleagues proceed from hostility to wary tolerance to guarded warmth in a way that is pointed without being overstated. And that, for the most part, characterizes Mr. Eastwood's direction, which is always unassuming, unhurried and efficient. In this film he tells a big story through a series of small, well-observed moments, and tells it in his usual blunt, matter-of-fact way, letting the nuances take care of themselves.

And once again, as in "[Letters From Iwo Jima](#)" — a tragic rather than heroic inquiry into the nature of leadership — they do. "Invictus" is more sprawling than that film, and more willing to risk hokiness. That is a chance Mr. Eastwood is often happy to take, and no genre is more susceptible to it (or earns it more honestly) than the victorious-underdog team-sports movie. That the sport is as alien to most Americans as it is to black South

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Africans presents its challenges, but by the end you might care about rugby more than you thought you would, even if it remains harder to understand than politics.

The convergence of the two provides an occasion for some potent, intelligent filmmaking — a movie that hits you squarely with its visceral impact and stays in your mind for a long time after.

“Invictus” is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has some swearing, the threat of violence and brutal sports action.

INVICTUS

Opens on Friday nationwide.

Directed by [Clint Eastwood](#); written by Anthony Peckham, based on the book “Playing the Enemy” by John Carlin; director of photography, Tom Stern; edited by Joel Cox and Gary D. Roach; music by Kyle Eastwood and Michael Stevens; production designer, James J. Murakami; produced by Mr. Eastwood, Lori McCreary, Robert Lorenz and Mace Neufeld; released by [Warner Brothers](#) Pictures. Running time: 2 hours 14 minutes. WITH: [Morgan Freeman](#) ([Nelson Mandela](#)), [Matt Damon](#) ([François Pienaar](#)) and Adjoa Andoh ([Brenda Mazibuko](#)).

Invictus

South Africa's messiah as rugby fan

*Release Date: 2009 Ebert Rating: ***½*

By Roger Ebert Dec 9, 2009

Morgan Freeman has been linked to one biopic of Nelson Mandela or another for at least 10 years. Strange that the only one to be made centers on the South African rugby team. The posters for Clint Eastwood's "Invictus" feature Matt Damon in the foreground, with Freeman looming behind him in shadowy nobility. I can imagine the marketing meetings during which it was lamented that few Americans care much about about Mandela and that Matt Damon appeals to a younger demographic.

Screw 'em, is what I would have contributed. The achievement of Nelson Mandela is one of the few shining moments in recent history. Here is a man who was released after 24 years of breaking rocks in prison and sleeping on the floor to assume leadership of the nation that jailed him. His personal forgiveness of white South Africa was the beacon that illuminated that nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, one of the very few examples in history of people who really had much to forgive, and forgave it. Let us not forget that both black and white had reasons to grieve, and reasons to forgive, and that in many cases they were facing the actual murderers of their loved ones.

Compared to that, what really does it matter that an underdog Springbok team, all white with one exception, won the World Cup in rugby in the first year of Mandela's rule? I understand that in a nation where all the races are unusually obsessed by sport, the World Cup was an electrifying moment when the pariah state stood redeemed before the world -- **even if soccer is the black man's game there, and rugby is the white's.** It was important in the way the Beijing Olympics were important to China.

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Clint Eastwood, I believe, understood all of these things and also sought to make a film he believed he could make, in an area where he felt a visceral connection. Eastwood is too old and too accomplished to have an interest in making a film only for money. He would have probably read the screenplays for the previous Mandela projects. They all had one thing in common: They didn't get made. It was universally agreed that Morgan Freeman was the right actor (Mandela and he met and got along famously), but the story, financing and deal never came together. Eastwood made the film that did get made.

It is a very good film. It has moments evoking great emotion, as when the black and white members of the presidential security detail (hard-line ANC activists and Afrikaner cops) agree with excruciating difficulty to serve together. And when Damon's character -- Francois Pienaar, as the team captain -- is shown the cell where Mandela was held for those long years on Robben Island. My wife, Chaz, and I were taken to the island early one morning by Ahmed Kathrada, one of Mandela's fellow prisoners, and yes, the movie shows his very cell, with the thin blankets on the floor. You regard that cell and you think, here a great man waited in faith for his rendezvous with history.

The World Cup was a famous victory. The Springboks faced a New Zealand team so dominant it had crushed every opponent -- Japan by around 90 points, which in rugby is a lot. South Africa won in overtime. About that team name: The South African national teams have been called the Springboks since time immemorial (New Zealand is known as the All Blacks). A springbok is on the tail of every South African Airlines airplane. It's the national logo. Would Mandela change the name to one less associated with the apartheid regime? He would not. Join me in a thought experiment. An African American is elected mayor of Boston. He is accepted, grudgingly in some circles. How would it go over if he changed the name of the Red Sox?

Freeman does a splendid job of evoking the man Nelson Mandela, who is as much a secular saint as Gandhi (who led his first campaign in Durban, South Africa). He shows him as genial, confident, calming -- over what was clearly a core of tempered steel. The focus is on his early time in office. I believe there may be one scene with a woman representing Winnie Mandela, but the dialogue is vague. Damon is effective at playing the captain, Francois Pienaar, an Afrikaner, child of racist parents, transformed by his contact with "the greatest man I've ever met." Clint Eastwood, a master director, orchestrates all of these notes and has us loving Mandela, proud of Francois and cheering for the plucky Springboks. A great entertainment. Not, as I said, the Mandela biopic I would have expected.

Cast & Credits

Francois Matt Damon Nelson Mandela Morgan Freeman Tony Jason Tshabalala Springbok coach Louis Minnaar Francois' father Patrick Lyster Mary Leleti Khumalo Warner Bros. presents a film directed by Clint Eastwood. Written by Anthony Peckham, based on the book by John Carlin. Running time: 134 minutes. Rated PG-13 (for brief strong language).

http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-invictus11-2009dec11_0_4151866.story

MOVIE REVIEW LA TIMES

'Invictus'

In this stirring film, Clint Eastwood recounts the true tale of Nelson Mandela and his plan to use rugby to unite his nation.

By Kenneth Turan film critic >>>

December 11, 2009

"Invictus" is Clint Eastwood's latest and most unexpected foray in his one-man campaign to make movies the way they used to be made. Instead of a thriller, war movie or western, the director has turned out a stirring drama about South African leader Nelson Mandela, blending entertainment, social message and history lesson in a way that recalls such decades-old films as "The Story of Louis Pasteur," "The Life of Emile Zola" and "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet." The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Eastwood, who will be 80 next year, understands the flow of narrative in a way younger directors might envy. Working here with co-stars Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon, he doesn't allow anything, especially not splashy technique, to get in the way of simply telling a story. Over the last several years, he's become as much of a brand name as Pixar when it comes to audience satisfaction that you can count on.

The story he tells, based on a script by Anthony Peckham, is far from the ordinary great-man tale. It focuses on one particular moment in history when the newly elected Mandela, played by Freeman, tried something so brazen, so risky, that his closest advisors were not only against it, but they also considered it political suicide.

As detailed in journalist John Carlin's "Playing the Enemy," the excellent book on which the screenplay is based, Mandela, in his usual "half-instinctive, half-calculating way," came up with the notion of using sport in general and rugby in particular in a manner that no one had ever thought of before. He decided to use perhaps his country's most divisive symbol as a way to unite South Africa's white population (fearful of being marginalized after Mandela replaced decades of white-supremacist apartheid government) with its striving, long-oppressed fellow countrymen.

"Invictus" opens with a particularly illustrative tableau centering on a 1990 motorcade driving a just-freed Mandela from his Robben Island prison. On one side of the road, black South Africans take time out from soccer to cheer loudly, while on the other side their white counterparts are playing rugby and listening as their coach says: "It's the terrorist Mandela. They let him out. This is the day our country went to the dogs."

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It's not just that different races played different games, its that over the years the national rugby team, the green-and-gold-wearing Springboks, became so much the symbol of apartheid that during international competitions, South African blacks would cheer fiercely for whatever country was playing on the other side.

It is one of the intriguing aspects of Freeman's nuanced portrayal that it reminds us that Mandela was hardly a young man but age 71 when he was released after 27 years in prison, and even older when he became president four years later. Freeman's Mandela is a figure of dignity, even solemnity, but also someone whose faith in other people brought out the warmth in them and him.

"Invictus" also shows us that Mandela paid a personal price for his political convictions. Estranged from both his wife and his eldest daughter, he lives completely alone, and when someone on his security detail asks about his family, he replies "I have a very large family: 42 million."

Aside from his chief of staff, Brenda Mazibuko (Adjoa Andoh), security specialists Jason Tshabalala (Tony Kgoroge) and Linga Moonsamy (Patrick Mofokeng) are closest to him, and they are shocked when he insists they integrate their team with men from the Special Branch, the former enforcers of apartheid. "Forgiveness liberates the soul," he tells them. "That's why it's such a powerful weapon."

Those close to Mandela are even more shocked when he decides to fully embrace the Springboks in the 1995 Rugby World Cup, even though the team is so weak that only its host-nation status got it into the tournament. If his government is to have the support of the white elite, he says, "we have to prove we are not what they feared. We have to surprise them with compassion."

To get the Springboks to work with him, Mandela uses his considerable personal charm to enlist the help of their normally apolitical captain, Francois Pienaar. Though he's noticeably shorter than the 6-foot-3 athlete, the chameleon-like Damon has gone buff and blond, transforming himself into a believable participant in this very rough sport. Pienaar's role has also been buffed up (in real life, the team's manager, Morné du Plessis, was also influential), but Damon carries it convincingly.

Fully half of "Invictus" is taken up with that World Cup tournament, as South Africa takes on the great nations of the rugby world, including the fierce All Blacks of New Zealand (named for their dark uniforms). Though the action on the field (expertly photographed by Tom Stern and crisply edited by Joel Cox and Gary D. Roach) can be followed in a general way by nonfans, the film could have used more explanation, which, an article by screenwriter Peckham in Script Magazine hints, was written but didn't make the final cut.

"Invictus" is named after a poem by William Ernest Henley, a particular favorite of Mandela, who was especially inspired by its last two lines: "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul." This popular Victorian-era work is not on the top of school

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reading lists anymore, but it just might be the latest old-fashioned form that Eastwood's skill brings back to life.

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