

Eastwood's much-praised Oscar contender is a sucker punch

MORTON MARCUS - Sentinel CORRESPONDENT
 Article Launched: 02/27/2005 3:00:00 AM PST

Have you noticed how strange this year's race for the Oscars has been, especially in the Best Picture category? For the last four months or so, critics and audiences have gushed ecstatic over one film after another, becoming disenchanted with each one as they saw the film in question and another one came along. First it was "Sideways," a shoo-in for best picture and actor, everyone thought. Next it was "Ray" for its great music and even greater performance by Jamie Foxx. Then it was Martin Scorsese's "The Aviator," without a doubt, said critic after critic, the choice for best film and best director, with Scorsese a sentimental favorite since he has never won an Oscar.

But since January, when it went into general release, Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby" has captured most peoples' unqualified admiration, and those in the know insist it has the inside track to win this year's Oscars for Best Actress (Hilary Swank), Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Morgan Freeman), Best Director (Clint Eastwood), and Best Picture.

To me, the strangest part of the flip-flopping phenomenon was that after many of us saw each lavishly praised film, we left the theater puzzled. Each film was disappointing. Some were good, some were very good, but not one of them deserved the extravagant hoopla it had received. Right?

The most disappointing of the five Best Film nominees for me, an unregenerate Clint Eastwood devotee, was — surprise, surprise — "Million Dollar Baby." I had looked forward to seeing the film, but I found it was flawed in so many ways I couldn't comprehend how so many people I respected had gone into such raptures over it. If you haven't seen the film, be aware what follows may contain spoilers.

Let's understand a few things from the start. It's a given in life and art that any but the most heartless among us will be moved to pity if not tears by a physically fit young person suffering from a life-threatening disease or accident, especially a young person who has striven mightily to rise above personal and social restrictions.

It is also a given that the majority of us will be moved by a father-daughter relationship that grows between a father who for all intents and purposes has lost a daughter and a young woman who has never known the love and concern of a father. And it is a given that most us will feel sympathy for a character who is wrestling with faith in a world that seems to have conspired to keep him from believing in anything.

Those are the three main themes of "Million Dollar Baby." But the question is, has the filmmaker "earned" the emotions he's elicited from the viewer, or has he relied on knee-jerk reactions to the topics? What I'm talking about is the difference between sentimentality (or the calculated appeal to easy emotional reactions for their own sake) and sentiment (the hard-nosed examination of feelings that elevates our sense of compassion and leaves us calmer and wiser — or what we in the writing game call honestly "earning" the reader's emotional responses).

From a moviegoer's standpoint, I find the drawn-out hospital scenes toward the end of the film offensive. They seem to be aimed at manipulating our emotions, beckoning us to indulge in sentimentality. At the same time, I don't believe the relationship between the Eastwood and Freeman characters (Frankie and Scrap): there is a lack of chemistry between them, and their dialogues are forced and come off as more theatrical than realistic.

I was even more disturbed that Frankie would leave his best friend Scrap in the lurch at the end of the film — out of a job and a place to live — by going off without a good-bye and leaving him and the gym in a state of limbo, with neither a transfer of ownership or any instructions for handling the gym's continued existence.



From a critic's standpoint, I think "Baby" plays like a grade-B genre boxing film à la "Rocky," with "Rocky's" "feel-good" ending turned upside down. All the clichés of the genre are present and accounted for as well, from the one-punch knockout artist protagonist to the old washed-up pro's punching out the gym's bully.

And then there's the cast of one-dimensional boxing stereotypes with which Hollywood loves to populate these films: not only Scrap, Strange, and cantankerous Frankie, but also the super-villainous champ Billie "The Blue Bear" (Lucia Rijker), who is so bad Satan would refuse to let her enter his fiery domain. And what about the Hollywood cop-out ending: does Frankie off himself or is he sitting in a diner somewhere on Route 66, wolfing down endless servings of lemon meringue pie?

From a writer's standpoint, the plotting is spotty at best. Since Scrap tells the story in a voice-over, he must be in every scene as witness to what happens. That's why — if you wondered — he shows up in the shadows at the hospital near the end of the film. But Scrap is not present at a number of important scenes he tells us about, such as Frankie and Maggie's visit to Maggie's mother.

One of the most troubling problems from a writer's point of view, however, is the lack of explanation for

Frankie's daughter returning all his letters unopened. What horrendous act could Frankie have committed to cause such an unforgiving response? It certainly makes one wonder (unnecessarily?) what kind of person the self-protective, bad-tempered Frankie really is.

Another point that is never explained is the reason Frankie continually baits the priest. Is it to show he wants to believe in God but can't? Why not? What's going on with Frankie? Such questions of character and motivation have gone unanswered in Eastwood films before. The actions of the characters in "Mystic River," for example, come out of nowhere in the film, although in the novel the motivations for those actions are clearly delineated.

As for Frankie, in the end his character is all too familiar to critics and moviegoers alike: he's "The Man With No Name" 40 years later, the same character who first emerged in Eastwood's spaghetti westerns of the 1960s, has gone through various guises over the years, and last surfaced as Eastwood's William Munny in "Unforgiven."

From a boxer's standpoint, the film is embarrassing and an insult to those who work and train uncompromisingly to learn about and become part of the prizefighter's way of life.

If you are looking for boxing authenticity in film, see "Fat City" and compare it to "Million Dollar Baby." As I've already said, Maggie's one-punch knockout power is a creation of Hollywood myth. Then there's Maggie's being hit by the champ when she's down. That act, even without the champ's villainous reputation, would constitute an immediate disqualification. So would the sucker punch the champ throws so blatantly after the bell.

In fact, Maggie had to have won the fight by disqualification because of either one of those infractions of the rules. So Maggie was the champion after the fight, just as Max Schmeling was when Jack Sharkey accidentally fouled him in a heavyweight title bout in 1930.

For some reason, Clint, as director, never mentions that Maggie has won the championship, a piece of information that would serve as a final, almost tragic, irony loaded with emotional resonance.

So there you have it. A number of critics, among them Roger Ebert, have called the film a masterpiece, and a good number of my friends are more enthusiastic about it than they have been about a Hollywood film in years. I feel like the cheese standing alone: Heigh Ho! the Derry O! and all that. What am I missing? Whenever I think of the film, all want to do is rechristen it with a more suitable title. Not "Million Dollar Baby," but "Million Dollar Booby."

Morton Marcus is the co-host of the TV film review show "Cinema Scene," which airs Thursdays and Sundays on Channel 27 at 8:30 p.m.

Featured Links

Marketplace

- Find a Rental
- Find a Business
- Find Stuff
- Get Grocery Coupons

Special Sections

- Newspaper in Education
- SantaCruz PHOTOGALLERY
- Sentinel Triathlon
- Santa Cruz Live
- TV Schedule

Sponsored Links

- Alternative Cancer Treatment Clinic
- Attorney Finder Lawyer Search
- Aupairs & nannies available
- Bridesmaid Dresses
- Cellit Mobile Marketing
- Chrysler
- corporate awards
- Debt Management
- Diamond Rings
- Internet Auctions
- Magic Love Spells
- Moving Companies, Movers
- Personal Loan
- Reverse Osmosis Water Softener
- Vacation Home Rentals
- yellow pages
- Stem Cell Medicine
- Alternative Cancer Treatment
- Sea Logix Pharmaceutical Grade Fish Oil
- Support our Troops
- Credit Help Resource
- Santa Cruz Real Estate
- Free on-line dating: Deception services
- Moving Companies
- Online Degrees
- Isagenix
- 2009 Calendars
- Property South France
- Apartment Amsterdam
- Property Provence
- Property Provence