

INVICTUS

Eastwood hits another cinematic homerun ___ 10/10

Written by John Carlin

Screenplay by Anthony Peckham

Directed by Clint Eastwood

Morgan Freeman ... Nelson Mandela
Matt Damon ... Francois Pienaar
Tony Kgoroge ... Jason Tshabalala
Patrick Mofokeng ... Linga Moonsamy
Matt Stern ... Hendrick Booyens
Julian Lewis Jones ... Etienne Feyder
Adjoa Andoh ... Brenda Mazibuko
Marguerite Wheatley ... Nerine



Francois Pienaar: I was thinking how a man could spend thirty years in prison, and come out and forgive the men who did it to him...

... and just in time for the Oscars. [I'm wondering whether the Academy Awards or the other various award ceremonies have some rules regarding release of movies by a particular director or studio at end of year. For example, "For Oscar consideration a given director/studio is limited to two November/December releases in a five-year period." I don't think Eastwood or Malpaso calculate that sort of thing, but I'll bet a lot of others do. Heck, an Academy Award nomination, let alone a victory, is major ducats in the bank for everyone associated with a film. ...random thoughts there.]

Invictus is an exciting, inspirational movie that will have serious moviegoers scrambling to visit Wikipedia on their computers to look up "Nelson Mandela" and "rugby." What Americans generally don't know about either subject could fill volumes.

Of the two, rugby is going to be a lower priority for you civics teachers, but trust me, this is the only movie having anything to do with rugby that makes the sport worth watching or even, if one were a younger man, participating in. Truth be known, it's the only movie having anything to do with rugby most Americans are likely ever to see. But Eastwood makes the sport dynamic, especially with the throwing and kicking of the ball—yes, I do believe it's called a ball, but a lot of other terms are strange.

What still baffles me, though it's a little bit clearer than it was, is when the teams line up at the line where the ball just was stopped. I think this line is analogous to the line of scrimmage in American football, and like American football, there is a huddle of sorts. But in rugby I gather they call this a "scrum," and what happens is... frankly, I don't know. The teams interlock shoulders in general directions opposing each other, but all bunched up and hunched over, pushing against one another with a lot of force and grunts—the sound effects are impressive in the movie rugby scenes, the men sound like so many bulls straining at a barrier—then for no obvious reason, the ball (which I could never tell where it was inside the scrum) pops out and one team or the other gets it.

Like American football, you do get some number of points for running across the other team's goal line, and you also get a lesser number, I believe, of points for kicking the ball through the uprights—but it has to go through the uprights at a proper height off the ground, too. Finally, although players can be substituted, it does not appear there are timeouts or pauses of the duration you have in American football. According to a UK

saying, "Football is a gentlemen's game played by thugs and rugby is a thug's game played by gentlemen." In the saying, football means soccer, but it seems the statement could apply to American football, too.

Anyway, rugby is quite grueling and rough. But the best of the best are undoubtedly skilled in some of the more subtle aspects of the game. And, unbeknownst to me, rugby is an international game that no doubt came of age in the waning days of the British Empire. A lot of the countries from the former British Commonwealth field national teams, as do many other countries who were colonial powers alongside the Brits... like the Dutch, who settled and later fought—my history is weak, but I believe the Boer War(s) was between the Dutch and the English—for domination of South Africa and probably other bragging rights at 19th-century European cocktail parties.[1]

The fortunes of the South African national rugby team, known as Springboks, are the context for the plot of *Invictus*. This is a true story. Francois Pienaar (Matt Damon) was the captain of the Springboks when Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994. Until that time, the team performed adequately in international competition but had nothing close to elite status. They were, of course, overwhelmingly white Afrikaner with the exception of a Chester Williams. And let's just say the apartheid regime in SA was not conducive to widespread extension of civil liberties, or much economic opportunity, to people of color.[2]

So aside from being considered by the jock fans of SA to be unworthy of the nation, the Springboks were viewed by the vast native-black majority of the country to be unworthy of their attention at all. Indeed, the practice, had been, even with Nelson Mandela himself during his years of jail and harassment, for the black majority to root for whatever team was playing against the Springboks.

But these are new times, and Mandela (Morgan Freeman) is not only the choice of the majority of voters, he wants to represent the country as a whole. So resisting the sentiment of his own party, he insists that the Springboks continue to be named as such, and that the team be given the respect they deserve as professional athletes by the citizens of SA. Naturally, it's easier to raise the respect level when the team is good. So Mandela arranges a meeting with Pienaar, which turns out to galvanize the young sports' leader beyond simply earning his paycheck.

We find that Pienaar is tremendously moved by consideration of the genuine heroism of this international icon of social justice. He resolves to be worthy of that greatness and to devote himself to making the team into a world class deal. I just have to say both of these actors take what might in other hands be sophomoric leader-speech/action, especially Damon in the sports' context, and give them an uplifting gravitas. You will really find you like Nelson and Francois as men.

Since the movie tells a true story, no need for me to go into the detail here, as all roads lead to a culminating World Cup event... in Johannesburg and including the South African rugby team. It's fabulous and uplifting, even a bit of a tearjerker. Eastwood is so good with little directorial touches, such as when a tough security guy for the De Klerk regime—now a welcome member of the Mandela security staff—slaps on his sunglasses to conceal moist eyes... or as the World Cup final proceeds, a little black street boy, who would formerly be chased away by white police, is seen sitting on the car of the police, everyone intently listening to the car radio.

And musically, the film is one of the more interesting you'll have the pleasure of hearing. As many realize, Clint Eastwood is quite an accomplished composer himself, having written and in some cases performed the scores for some of the movies he directs. I think with *Invictus*, he's a kid in a candy store. The melodies and rhythms of the native South African music are so rich and fluid, they roll out naturally without blasting you into the balcony. Whoever did the score—no doubt Eastwood had a say—skillfully weaves sound with sight. It's great... and I don't generally pay much attention to movie scores.

You really can't say too much about Mandela and Freeman's portrayal of him. I've heard some critics say this is the role Morgan Freeman was born to play. And that may be true. But, frankly, it is not a BIG role, certainly nothing like Ben Kingsley's Gandhi; what I find exhilarating is Freeman's mastery of the cadence and depth of what Mandela says... and how he says it. What comes shining through, without the need for many words, is the character of a man who may have the greatness of a Gandhi. But the performances of Freeman and Damon are balanced and complementary; they sing a wonderful duet... the "beginnings of a beautiful friendship." Thanks, Clint, for keeping their personae exactly right.

Can't wait for the DVD to come out!

Here's the poem that nourishes Mandela during his captivity. Many of us know it by heart, but when you see the movie you feel it:

Invictus, by William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

[1] From everything I've heard, the geographical area known as South Africa is beautiful and fertile. And like many such regions of earth, was inhabited by "others" before the Europeans came along. The movie, even as Eastwood-efficient as it is, manages to give the viewer a sense of the complexities and even the refinement of these indigenous peoples... from which Nelson Mandela, aka Mandiba, is descended.

[2] Much like—though not as savagely deadly—as the apartheid regime of Zionist Israel (ZI) vis a vis the indigenous non-Jewish people in the area formerly designated Palestine. (I wouldn't mention the sins of ZI all the time, except for the fact that they're so blatant and the MSM never does.) Ref. Jimmy Carter's moderate book: *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*.

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Nelson Mandela | Morgan Freeman | Matt Damon | Francois Pienaar | Invictus

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