Review: The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Submitted by Kimberly Gadette on Mon, 01/12/2009 - 17:19.

Presenting Benjamin Button – behind the time, all the time. But, wonders a curious **Kimberly Gadette**, is it ultimately a good time?

Just like clockwork, a story about time reversal starts with a story about time reversal.

A woman on her deathbed (Cate Blanchett's Daisy) recounts the tale of a blind clockmaker creating a glorious new timepiece for a New Orleans train station. As he builds it, he pines for his dead son, a soldier killed in action during WWI. Upon the clock's unveiling, the gathered crowd gasps. In an attempt to reverse time, to somehow resurrect all the dead soldiers, the clockmaker had set the ticking hands to operate in reverse.

It's a magical opening, beautifully shot in flickering ambers and golds, as if to convey the dying woman's attempt to hold onto a fading memory. When the clockmaker rows away in a tiny boat, heartsick, losing himself somewhere in the blue between the sea and the horizon, it is perfect.

The next 155 minutes? Not so much.

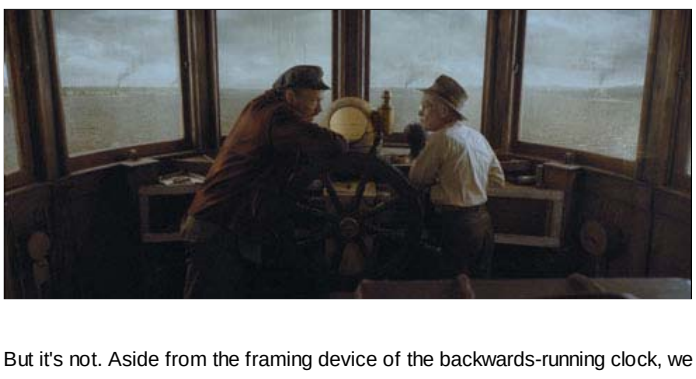
Based on a 24-page short story written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* relates the tale of a man (Brad Pitt) who enters the world on November 11, 1918 as an eightysomething and subsequently 'youthens' over the decades, until he dies as a newborn in 2003. While the literary Benjamin possesses both an ancient body and mind, the movie mixes his physical decrepitude with a child's intellect. Which makes for a delicious first act – we see a geezer, barely able to walk, yet with a wide-eyed innocence and humor. Admitting to the age of seven, he adds, "but I look a lot older."

It's fitting that a movie in which the last comes first, in which the dessert acts as appetizer, that the best of Benjamin begins the proceedings. Fitting – but as followed by blander courses – highly dissatisfying. With every step toward a straighter posture, the winsome geez-child evolves into a stoic, nearly robotic younger man. Per director David Fincher: "Benjamin is like a cue ball and all the people he collides with leave marks on him … a collection of these dents and scratches. They are what make him who he is …" Nice theory — yet Pitt's cue ball is, well, sans even the slightest 'Pitt.' Paging Brad/Benjamin: you're wanted on the set. But this time, bring along a little personality?

It's not that Pitt can't express a bigger character – recall his last role as the cockatiel-headed Chad in *Burn After Reading*, a sunny, energizer bunny of jaw-dropping stupidity. In contrast, the last time Pitt was this blank was in *Meet Joe Black*, but with good reason … he was DEAD.

Which makes the one instance of Benjamin initiating an action all the more dramatic. Nearing the end of his life, Benjamin's biological father (wonderfully played by British actor Jason Flemyng), speaks wistfully of watching the sunrise over Lake Pontchartrain. When next we see the two men, it's in the dim light of dawn. Benjamin slings the dying man over his shoulders and carries him out to the lake for one last viewing. Suddenly we realize that Benjamin isn't just another pretty-becoming-prettier face. We long to see more from this new hero. Yet we are denied.

Oh, well, at least the picture's a beaut. The attention to set, palette, costume, makeup and especially the light, from 1918 candles to gaslights to bulbs to the harsh fluorescents of the modern day hospital room, is remarkable. Had screenwriter Eric Roth gone to similar lengths in perfecting his screenplay, this project could have been one heck of a stunner.



But it's not. Aside from the framing device of the backwards-running clock, we get Hurricane Katrina. Must we? It turns out that Benjamin's lover Daisy just so happens to be dying in a New Orleans hospital in August, 2005. The constant cuts back to the impending weather disaster are intrusive. Katrina or not, she's expiring. Do we care whether she changes rooms? Or that the hospital staff is stressed? Category 5 storms notwithstanding, you'd think the struggle to recall her hot lover as she's forced to treat his diaper rash would be painful enough.

Another misstep occurs with Daisy's daughter (Julia Ormond), whose ignorance about her mother's career and later life is so odd that it verges on the unbelievable. As is a lengthy montage about an event in Daisy's life, a *Run, Lola Run* take on the whimsical order of happenstance that leads to a particular moment. It stands out, awkward and wrong, like an 80-year-old codger snacking on his mother's teat.

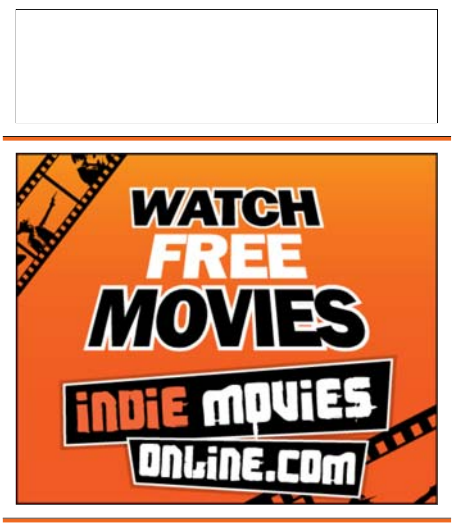
Taraji P. Henson and Tilda Swinton as two important women in Benjamin's maturation process give lovely performances. Blanchett, reliable as always, is only allowed to reveal some impressive backbone in the third act. As for Benjamin – we're still waiting.

You'd think we had nothing but time.

Rating on a scale of 5 stopwatches: 3

- **Kimberly Gadette** on *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Release dates: US: December 25, 2008; UK: February 6, 2009
Directed by: David Fincher
Screenplay by: Eric Roth
Screen story by: Eric Roth and Robin Swicord
Based on the short story by: F. Scott Fitzgerald
Cast: Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, Taraji P Henson, Julia Ormond, Jason Flemyng, Elias Koteas, Tilda Swinton,
Rating: US: PG-13; UK: 12A
Running time: 159 minutes



ACTIVE FORUM TOPICS

Iron Man II villains revealed!
Very cool Watchmen featurette
Thompson and Thomson
Guess the Movie Quotes!
Appaloosa

MORE

RECENT COMMENTS

stringer_mash on Golden Globe awards awarded
imo_admin on Iron Man II villains revealed!
stringer_mash on Golden Globe nominations announced
KingoftheMods on Guess the Movie Quotes!
Sy Zombie on Guess the Movie Quotes!