

Invictus



Starring Morgan Freeman, Matt Damon | Directed by Clint Eastwood | Warner Bros. Pictures | Rated PG-13

Before being invited to attend a media screening of *Invictus* last week, I didn't think I would see this new picture from Clint Eastwood. I've liked many of Eastwood's movies over the years, but this one wasn't calling to me for three reasons.

First, I simply didn't like the name. *Boring*. Who titles movies in Latin anymore and why? Second, I don't follow rugby, a sport that becomes central to the film as it unfolds. Third, I prefer Eastwood not as director but as actor—in front of the camera dispensing justice as Harry Callahan (*Dirty Harry*), William Munny (*Unforgiven*) or the unnamed grim reapers of *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider*.

Watching *Invictus*, however, quickly conquered my petty biases.

First, the title: I was foolish to imagine, however tentatively, that the eight-letter Latin name wasn't packed with significant meaning. It is borrowed from the title of an 1875 work by British poet William Ernest Henley and is deeply important to the film's main character, former President Nelson Mandela of South Africa (played by Morgan Freeman).

Second, rugby is one element of the film, a critical one, but arguably isn't the movie's primary focus. Besides, Matt Damon as Francois Pienaar, captain of the South African Springboks national team, bolsters these portions of the movie.

Third, though Eastwood isn't in front of the camera righting wrongs, he has created a film with a heavy sense of justice.

Depicting historical events in South Africa in the early to

mid-1990s, *Invictus* opens to convicted opposition leader Mandela being released from prison on Feb. 11, 1990, after serving a 27-year sentence. Jailed originally while leading the African National Congress, a group that at one time violently opposed white-only rule in South Africa, Mandela is rapturously welcomed by blacks in South Africa and later triumphantly tours Western Europe and North America making political speeches.

After a referendum banning apartheid is passed in March 1992, the country's first-ever multiracial elections are held in April 1994, and an overwhelming majority choose 75-year-old Mandela to lead the transitional, coalition government.

Invictus follows Mandela through the end of apartheid and into his first term as president, during a time when he opposed some of his black constituents in order to unite the country by supporting the mostly white national rugby team. Taking a personal, public interest in the Springboks, he campaigned internationally for South Africa to host the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

By bringing Mandela to life—as the country's first black head of state who is also weighted with unifying a population raised on apartheid—Eastwood captures the heart of an older, wiser Mandela with a new vision for his country's future. Whereas Mandela had tolerated violent change as a young man, he is dedicated to nonviolent change in his old age.

Freeman delivers a moving portrayal of Mandela as he chooses to carefully and deliberately to lay his political foundation with a spirit of forgiveness and to unify South Africa with acts of reconciliation. The film is at its strongest when it is showing the process Mandela went through to achieve unity. However, a portion that is dedicated to his imprisonment on Robben Island near Cape Town comes off feeling more like a tribute than historical background.

It was Mandela's dream to create a "rainbow nation" where all colors would be as one. Whether or not that is the South Africa of today isn't this film's issue. *Invictus* instead takes a slice from South Africa's history and tells a story about when that dream was realized.