



MORGAN FREEMAN and Matt Damon re-create a much-hailed moment between Nelson Mandela and South Africa rugby captain Francois Pienarr.

Eastwood proves he is still invincible

From director Clint Eastwood, 'Invictus' tells the inspiring true story of how Nelson Mandela joined forces with the captain of South Africa's rugby team

• By JONATHAN AMERIKANER

INVICTUS (US)
Drama (133 min.)
Rated PG-13 for brief
strong language.

In *Invictus* is the Latin for word for unconquerable, undefeated, invincible. In Clint Eastwood's latest film he uses rugby as a metaphor for the struggle of South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman), to unite his racially divided country. A sociology professor I had once gave a fascinating lecture on obsessive sports fans. He said that people love sports because they can vicariously get to see a conflict resolved. In real life conflicts tend to resist resolution.

Eastwood seems to innately understand this.

A Nelson Mandela film starring Morgan Freeman has been a non-starter for many years. It took Hollywood heavyweight Eastwood to make it happen. It is noteworthy that the film was released in President Barack Obama's first year. The first black American president also faces a deeply divided nation and constant verbal assaults. *Invictus* does not draw these connections explicitly. The best films never need to.

In a time when 3-D special effects films dominate the box office, it's nice to know films like *Invictus* are still made. Instead of flashy technique, Eastwood employs solid storytelling and intelligent dialogue to carry its message. Morgan Freeman delivers

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profound, thought-provoking statements. The actor becomes the statesman so completely that by the end of the film I was sure I was seeing the real Mandela.

Invictus is set in 1995 South Africa. Mandela has taken office after being released from more than 27 years in prison. He has the enormous task of repairing the harm done to South Africa after decades of apartheid, white supremacist rule. When South Africa is selected to host the Rugby World Cup, Mandela senses an opportunity. The South African rugby team, called the Springboks, is beloved by the white Afrikaners and generally hated by the blacks. The blacks who elected Mandela expect him to abolish the Springboks and start a new team. But Mandela refuses. He believes that a Springbok win will prove to the world, and most importantly to South Africa's white population, that his country is capable of forgiveness and greatness. To achieve this lofty (and unlikely) goal, Mandela enlists the aid of the Springbok's Captain, Francois Pienarr (Matt Damon). Pienarr is a man of few words – a foil to Mandela, the great orator. But every line Damon delivers is done with purpose and propels the story forward. Damon does a brilliant job of showing his character change, eventually coming to respect and revere Mandela.

Eastwood's previous films are often about revenge. From his *Man with No Name* westerns, *Dirty Harry* films through *Unforgiven* and *Gran Torino*, retaliation is a central theme. But *Invictus* is centered on Mandela's passion to unite his country through forgiveness, the "anti-revenge." That doesn't mean that vengeance and danger aren't lurking. Mandela's bodyguards provide much suspense and heartfelt humor. Black and white bodyguards must now work together. This is a problem at first, and I like the way Eastwood uses their evolving relationships as a microcosm for the country as a whole.

My only problem is that the film begins as a fascinating biography, but morphs into an underdog-must-win sports film. As the team battles for victory in the last third of the film, all I wanted was more Mandela. But if Mandela can forgive those who tortured him for 27 years, I can forgive this small flaw in an otherwise superb film.