Hereafter

reviewed by John Petrakis in the November 30, 2010 issue

A plethora of films deal with the afterlife, the shady domain Hamlet calls "that undiscovered country." From them could be built a looming tower of unanswered questions and unreliable answers. From contemplating its existence and worrying about its consequences, to trying to make contact with its citizens or making a short visit to its eternal shores, the afterlife is one of life's great mysteries—and thus prime material for artists. And why shouldn't it be? What happens to us after we cross over to the "other side" can and should have a profound effect on how we live our lives while still hanging out on this side.

In *Hereafter,* director Clint Eastwood, working from a script by Peter Morgan (*The Queen*), takes his turn at dealing with life after death. This makes sense—between Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns and the Dirty Harry films, Eastwood has probably dispatched more on-screen souls to Hades than your average movie star. But more recently Eastwood has been more concerned with contemplating hell on earth. Here, he toes the line between the two worlds, suggesting that they may have more in common than we think.

Eastwood accomplishes this by employing three different stories, which appear to have little in common beyond brushes with death. One concerns a gentle young boy

in London grieving the death of his twin brother (played by twins Frankie and George McLaren). Another is about a high-powered French journalist (Cécile De France) who has a near-death experience that changes her life priorities. The third concerns a sensitive working stiff in San Francisco (Matt Damon) who is trying to piece together a normal life despite possessing a rare ability to communicate, via the touch of a shaky if hopeful hand, with those who have recently passed on.

The story of the reluctant psychic is by far the most compelling and developed. The film rightly doesn't bother with exposition as to how he got his powers. Instead, it hits the ground running, showing him making "connection" for a stranger as a favor to his pushy brother (Jay Mohr). The way he rushes through it, trying to balance his compassion with his distress, tells us almost everything we need to know about the weight he has to bear. This is reinforced in a sequence involving a woman (Bryce Dallas Howard) he meets in a cooking class, where it becomes even clearer why the ability to see into the next world sometimes means getting a peek into a living person's soul—not always a good thing.

The film is structured around searching. The young boy is looking for someone who can get in touch with his dead brother. The journalist is seeking meaning for a once-successful life that has suddenly turned empty. The psychic wants the pain to stop, as he searches for a way to hold together who he is in this world and what he knows about the next.

Despite its ambitious first act, however, *Hereafter* never gets beyond the level of curiosity to something a bit more challenging. Eastwood is intent on providing comfort and humor for his audience, which is not necessarily a bad thing when dealing with such weighty issues. But he seems to follow the well-lit easy road through the third act, rather than heading down the darker road of ambiguity and confusion. As a result, Eastwood is able to arrive at an ending that is surprisingly upbeat for him, but one that feels a tad forced and lacks any sense of irony. We are left instead with a feeling of whimsy and coincidence, a small reward given the story's high stakes.

Much has been made of Eastwood's maturation as a filmmaker, and rightly so. But *Hereafter* could have used a bit of the angry Eastwood of old, who seemed to insist that worrying about heaven or hell—or whatever lies in between—is a luxury that we can't afford, with so many fires on earth and in our own bellies that need to be addressed. Though the film poses in many ways as a spiritual tale, it lacks the religious anger of Eastwood's earlier tales of revenge and remorse, and it suffers a

bit as a result.