

REEL CULTURE

JEAN-ANNE SUTHERLAND

The Tenacity of Spirit in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Every now and then a movie like *Beasts of the Southern Wild* comes along. Not very often, but every now and then a movie comes along that slams us into questions about strength, faith, fortitude, survival and community. This is one of those films that works on every level. It is visually stunning. The actors are raw and authentic. The story is rich and complex. It's poetry without pretension. It's more of an emotional event than it is a movie.

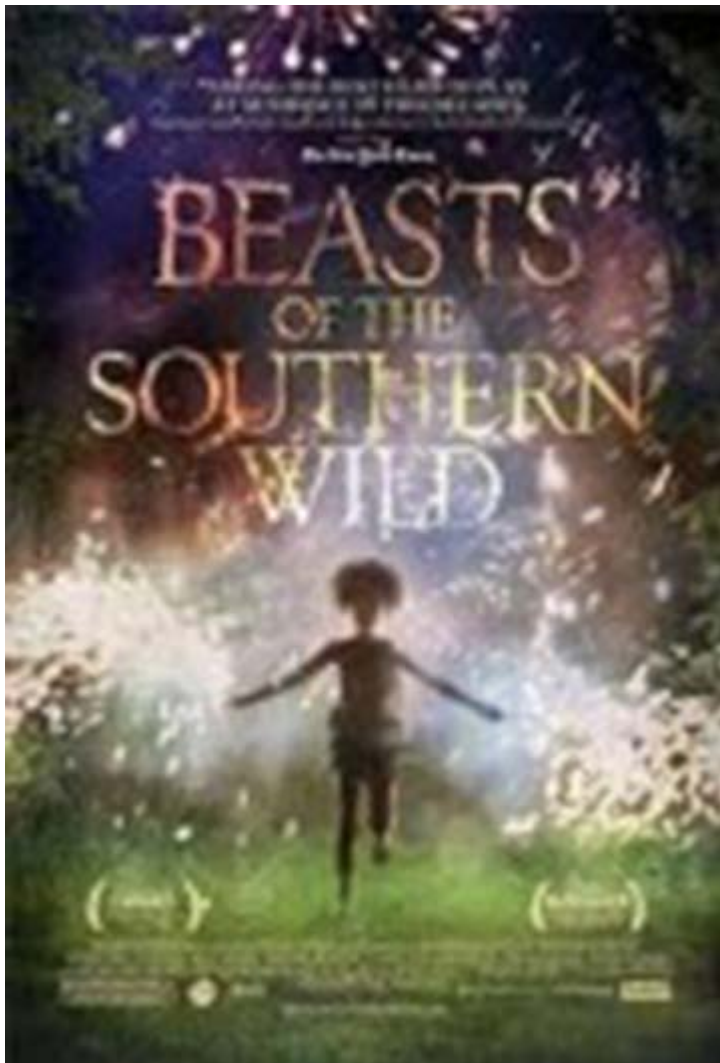
In the film, 6 year-old Hushpuppy faces the unraveling of the Universe. She and her father live in an impoverished region of southern Louisiana called The Bathtub. While the community is poor (and I mean poor, the kind of poverty we rarely see in film), they delight in the sense of community they've created far away from malls and shops and, well, civilization. As she tells us, The Bathtub "has more holidays than the whole rest of the world." But the community is shattered when a violent storm wreaks havoc. Several of the folk who refuse to abandon their home band together

to make shelter, find food and rebuild their lives, so very far apart from the rest of the world.

Hushpuppy observes, "The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece... the whole universe will get busted." When Wink, her father, falls ill, the universe shifts and those things that were once aligned are no longer holding together the whole. Ice caps melt, storms rage, and prehistoric animals roam the land. In the midst of survival, she and her community literally cling to floating, makeshift homes.

This is a story of hope and healing, of determination and will. Wink knows that soon he won't be there for his little girl and she needs to know how to survive. It's a wrenching story about a parent's love for his child, albeit a quick-tempered, beer-swilling dad. Love and strength don't look as we are used to them looking. It at times looks mad, irresponsible, life-threatening.

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But the film forces us to see dimensions of love outside of our comfort zone. These people are poor! They “should” evacuate and be relieved to land in the bright, white, sanitary hospital where they can be fed and medicated. They should curtail their drinking. They should better clothe the kids. The genius of this film is that it makes their choices look like wisdom while the “shoulds” feel like a kind of prison. And it does so without preaching or reliance on tired stereotypes.

This film can be used to explore myriad issues from family to death and dying. It’s a film that

will let you talk about loss and survival, tenacity and re-building a life out of what seems like ruin. It reminds us that even the smallest of us matter. It makes us question what we think we know about love and living.

Rarely does a film tell such poignant tales. Take advantage of the opportunity to explore this one.

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