

It's Grand

Gran Torino

A Review by Heather Craig

I didn't want to like it. I thought I was so *over* Clint Eastwood. I consider **Million Dollar Baby** to be one of the most overrated films ever, and while worthy, I thought **Letters from Iwo Jima** to be one of the most emotionally exhausting of all time. I didn't think Eastwood had anything left to say to me. Then I saw **Gran Torino**.

We meet Eastwood's character, Walt Kowolsky, glowering and actually growling at attendees of his wife's funeral. Walt lives now alone except for an old retriever, in a house in a neighborhood that has few Caucasians left. He doesn't get along with his two self-involved but well-meaning sons, he is retired from the Ford factory, he barks epithets and racial slurs like most people say, "Good morning," and he absolutely never smiles. OK, the man is suppressing some grief in the loss of his wife, but few people are so uniformly unpleasant. In fact, if his across-the-board meanness wasn't so overdone as to be funny, I wouldn't have liked him at all. He seems at first a complete misanthrope. He likes his dog, and he likes his car, the eponymous Gran Torino, a mint condition 1970s car that he never drives, only leaves in his garage to wax.

His next door neighbors are a Hmong family, and Walt despairs of foreigners taking over the neighborhood. The neighbors too have experienced loss, that of the father. Still living next door are the grandmother, mother, and the two teenagers, Sue (Ahney Her) and Thao (Bee Vang). Thao is what my mother would call a good boy. He is introspective, gentle, and does not want to join the Hmong gang to which his cousin belongs. Early in the movie, Thao overhears his grandmother disparaging him, asking what kind of man he can ever be when he does everything his sister tells him. Sue, on the other hand, gets through life on sarcasm and witty comebacks.

Thao is ordered by the gang to steal Walt's car, and his botched attempt does not go over well with Walt, nor with the gang. Walt comes into their circle when Hmong gang members attempt to forcibly take Thao from his home. All of the family is outside, literally trying to fight them off, when some of the action spills over into Walt's front yard. At gunpoint, Walt orders the gangbangers to leave, and his leashed rage when he commands, "Get off my lawn!" has become the most recognized line of the movie. Many laugh at Eastwood going from "Go ahead, make my day" to "Get off my lawn" but there is nothing even slightly funny when he says it. The scene is a nail biter, oozing with menace.

Walt's attempt to protect his own property is misconstrued as heroism by the Hmong community, and they begin to reach out to Walt, who at first is typically rude in his rejection. Sue, however, is used to outwitting gang members by talking circles around them, so she is not put off by a foul-mouthed old man.

The focus of the movie is the budding friendship between Walt and Thao, a man who could never relate to his sons, and a boy whose traditional father has died. These two need each other, whether they know it or not, and their slow move toward genuine liking is the movie's emotional core. Bee Vang is a wonder as Thao, imbuing this quiet boy with all the hurt, loneliness, and the burden of rejection that I felt sorry for him from his first scene.

But the movie is Eastwood's. He owns this movie. His iconic presence permeates every scene. Walt, whether the young thugs know it or not, is a force to be reckoned with, and we the viewers know it. Would we know that this old, Korean War veteran who seems to long for a time long gone is capable of being a genuine threat to several young men if it wasn't for the body of work that has come before? I don't think so. While Walt is a new character, without the weight of the Man With No Name, Dirty Harry Callahan and Bill Munny behind him, I don't think we would take Walt so seriously. But we do, so we know the gang members are underestimating Walt, something they may come to regret.

I guess Eastwood had something left to say to me after all.