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The Blind Side

The Boston Globe

'Blind Side' sticks to the playbook on race and renewal



In the movie, Leigh Anne Touhy (Sandra Bullock) invites Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron), an enormous, athletic African-American teenager into her Memphis McMansion to live with her two children and adoring husband (Tim McGraw). (Warner Bros)

By Wesley Morris
Globe Staff / November 20, 2009

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It may be based on a true story, but "The Blind Side" delivers two heart-yanking hours of Hollywood physics. One kid's bad existence gets better with the application of a great deal of upper-middle-class pressure. The movie recounts the story of how a tough-loving interior decorator named Leigh Anne Touhy (Sandra Bullock) invited Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron), an enormous, athletic African-American teenager into her Memphis McMansion to live with her two children and adoring husband (Tim McGraw).

Leigh Anne is the unstoppable force. Michael is the immovable object. But as his grades improve and as he's nudged toward a Division 1 football scholarship (he's a natural tackle), Michael starts to open up. But we're meant to believe that it's Leigh Anne who does all the growing. Which seems about right for a movie built around Bullock. She is as entertaining as she gets here.

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THE BLIND SIDE

Written and directed by: John Lee Hancock, adapted from Michael Lewis's book "The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game"

Starring: Sandra Bullock, Quinton Aaron, Tim McGraw, and Kathy Bates

At: AMC, Regal, suburbs

Running time: 125 minutes

Rated: PG-13 (one scene involving brief violence, drug and sexual references)

In miniskirts and clingy pants, and with a heavy cosmetic lacquer, Bullock sashays away from the camera, leaving the males in a tizzy. The last word is always hers. She's part Erin Brockovich, part Julia Sugarbaker. And like Sugarbaker, Leigh Anne is a designing woman. Her interest in Michael feels momentarily like an extension of her job. "Lord knows that place could use some color," she says of the private Christian academy that has charitably accepted Michael, who, until Leigh Anne, was homeless and could barely express himself. The state wrested him away from his birth mother, who's a drug addict.

Bullock's levelheaded acting frequently saves the movie from emotional garishness. She's hardly subtle, but she's not showy, either. This is basically one of her comedic parts given a "Real Housewives" gloss. But watching Bullock light up with satisfaction brought back unwelcome memories of that nauseating hug she gives her Mexican maid at the end of "Crash": I love you, person of color. Leigh Anne gives Michael his very first bed and a real shot at a college football scholarship. He reminds her that her dining room table happens to be useful for dining with the family someplace other than in front of the two TVs in the living room.

Writer and director John Lee Hancock bears down on the more affecting parts of Michael Lewis's 2006 book, "The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game." (Half of it was devoted to Oher, the other to Lawrence Taylor's arrival in the NFL.) The Touhys' compassion and the idea of a white community banding together to help a disenfranchised black teenager is a touching human display (Kathy Bates even shows up as a tutor).

Hancock doesn't exactly have a heavy touch. Following the arc of Lewis's journalism, he delicately raises possibilities of cynicism, boosterism, and liberal guilt, and the movie grazes the idea of being afraid of certain black male stereotypes - long after they occur to us, but still. And it seems to anticipate our worry that Michael, gracious and pacific as he is and as good as Aaron is in the part, has too few thoughts of his own. Oher plays in the NFL for the Baltimore Ravens now, and you wonder how he feels about being represented as such a passive part of his own success.

Commercial American movies seem interested in stories about young black men saved from God knows what by nice white people or sports. Here it's both. That double jackpot happens occasionally in life. But it's a staple in Hollywood, where large, kind black men are sometimes both a blessing and a threat (see "The Green Mile"). Oher's life is meant to make us feel good, and it mostly does. But how good we feel about his story is proportional to how blind we're willing to be about how it's told.

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