Narrative faults saved by joy of Lillian Gish and Bette Davis reunion

By MANAVENDRA K. THAKUR

WHEN TWO SCREEN LEGENDS like Lillian Gish and Bette Davis appear together in a film like The Whales of August, it is virtually impossible not to take notice. The problem when stars of this caliber collaborate together is, of course, that respect and admiration can easily degenerate into heroine worship. While it is necessary to retain a healthy awareness and appreciation of the past, each individual performance and film should be evaluated on its own merits.

Even accepting that premise, however, it is difficult to criticize The Whales of August without appearing heartless or insensitive. Given all the odds and barriers against such a film being made in the first place, the fact that The Whales of August was completed is a minor miracle in its own right. And yet, it must be acknowledged that such a film by itself isn't necessarily enough. This film is more of a coda to the careers of Gish and Davis than a crowning artistic triumph of the skills of two remarkable actresses. While it is a sheer joy to see Bette Davis and Lillian Gish appear together in a role that suits their personality, the narrative vehicle is difficult to criticize without appearing heartless or insensitive.

The film continuously develops its premise and introduces its characters, with dramatic conflict arising only in its final third. The script, adapted by David Berry from his own stage play, concerns Sarah (Lillian Gish) and Libby (Bette Davis), two elderly sisters who have, without coming to terms, the past 60 summers together in the same house on an island near the coast of Maine. Libby, who has been watching her sister's health decline, has been unable to live with the thought of Sarah without care. Sarah, to the other hand, must decide whether she will remain with Libby or leave her sister to the care of her daughter.

Lillian Gish and Bette Davis in The Whales of August have grown and established themselves elsewhere, leaving Sarah and Libby to themselves. Libby has become blind, and her health is rapidly failing, forcing her to rely on Sarah's attention. Interestingly, the character of each sister parallels to a striking degree the respective personalities of Gish and Davis. Just as Davis has fought tooth and nail much of her way through Hollywood, and Gish has always been soothing and forgiving, so too is the appropriately named Libby Strong an acerbic, independent, and abrasive companion to the kindly Sarah Webber, whose happy spirits are rarely perturbed. After Sarah and Libby are first seen, the supporting characters are introduced and developed one by one. All of them fit into the elderly stereotype of enjoying a quiet and passive existence without much direction or interest in life. With a plethora of scenes describing their daily to daily activities the filmmakers' introduction of the supporting cast into the flow of the film creates an intelligent and three-dimensional depiction of the relatively isolated lives of Sarah and Libby lead together on the island.

Gish and Davis both shine in their roles during these parts; their contrasting personalities complement each other quite well. Their chemistry with the other actors is somewhat staid at a few points in the film, but is always believable and several moments quite touching. When Sarah cautiously leans over to pick up an item that has fallen to the floor, it is almost heartbreaking to realize just how old and frail she really is and the toll caring for her inner must have taken. Similarly, when Libby is first seen, she almost looks like a ghost with her long flowing white hair and dark beauty. But instead of appearing frightening or startling, Davis makes Libby endearing and strangely sympathetic, even as she macabrely brushes her cheek with a lock of her long-deceased husband's hair.

However, instead of simply letting this sensitive portrayal speak for itself, the filmmakers decide to inject drama and plot into the course of events. Libby keeps insisting to Sarah that their lives are over, although, ironically, she is the very vehemence with which she makes this proclamation bolsters her family and shows the life remaining behind the unseeing eyes. Sarah, to the other hand, must decide whether she will reaffirm her commitment to care for her sister or whether she will leave Libby to the unwilling care of her rich daughter. This conflict is, however, a wholly transparent one...

(please turn to page 11)