By PATRICK HALL
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Captivating and beautiful, while also at times, littered with grit and destruction, “Beasts of the Southern Wild” is a fantastic film tribute to those who chose to stay the course and not leave their homes during Hurricane Katrina, and the performance by its lead actress is downright amazing.

“Beasts” is a film not many around here had the chance to see, and thankfully, it is available to rent now, but it is one of nine films up for Best Picture at the 85th Academy Awards on Feb. 24. Directed by **Ben Zeitlin**, the film follows little bayou resident “Hushpuppy,” played brilliantly, and captivatingly by **Quvenzhané Wallis**, as she struggles with her father’s declining health and the apparent destruction of the physical world around her.

The first thing that will jump out at you is the setting. Taking place in a tiny bayou community, “the Bathtub”, at the very southernmost edge of Louisiana’s coastline, the community is simple and its residents are content with their lives and find joy in life.

Hushpuppy lives in a run-down mobile home on stilts, connected to her father’s home by a rope and bell, which he rings when he’s prepared supper. Her father, Wink (**Dwight Henry**) lives in a shack, almost like a tree house, and together they traverse the bayou in a boat that is an old truck bed on oil barrels with a motor attached.

The community celebrates more holidays than any other, as Hushpuppy puts it, and enjoys they life they have, which seems about as far from modern society as an American community can get nowadays.

Zeitlin celebrates the residents’ attitudes, their love for what they own and what they have created for themselves, and the destruction and loss of it all is heartbreaking. As the storm approaches, Wink’s health declines and his struggles with Hushpuppy are beautiful and full of raw emotion.

He tries to instill in her the strength and courage to move on, to live life without him, and to prepare a young girl walking around in dirty clothes and rubber boots, the ability to fend for herself. He drinks too much, disappears at times, but his love is evident in the stories he tells of he and Hushpuppy's mother.

When the storms come and the residents try to avoid forced-evacuation, the world is ending in the eyes of Hushpuppy, who sees the destruction of her home in the only way a child can, as a manifestation of melting polar ice caps, the unleashing of ancient beasts bent on trampling everything in their path.

"I'm the man!" She defiantly yells at her father's behest. Wallis truly is a wonder, narrating the story as she builds Hushpuppy's strength, love and courage to something unimaginably powerful and palpable.

Zeitlin moved to Louisiana in 2006 and the film is a wonderful mixture of artistic vision and celebration of the place he calls home. I found out that Henry is a local man, not a professional actor, but a baker. His performance as Hushpuppy's father is tragic and wondrous.

There are many lessons to draw from "Beasts of the Southern Wild," but perhaps the most poignant is Hushpuppy, a short, 6-year-old girl who stands her ground amid death, destruction, poverty and homelessness, and says, "I'm the man."

"Beasts of the Southern Wild" is rated PG-13 with a run time of 93 minutes. It is available in local video rental stores and, I found it at local RedBox kiosks.

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