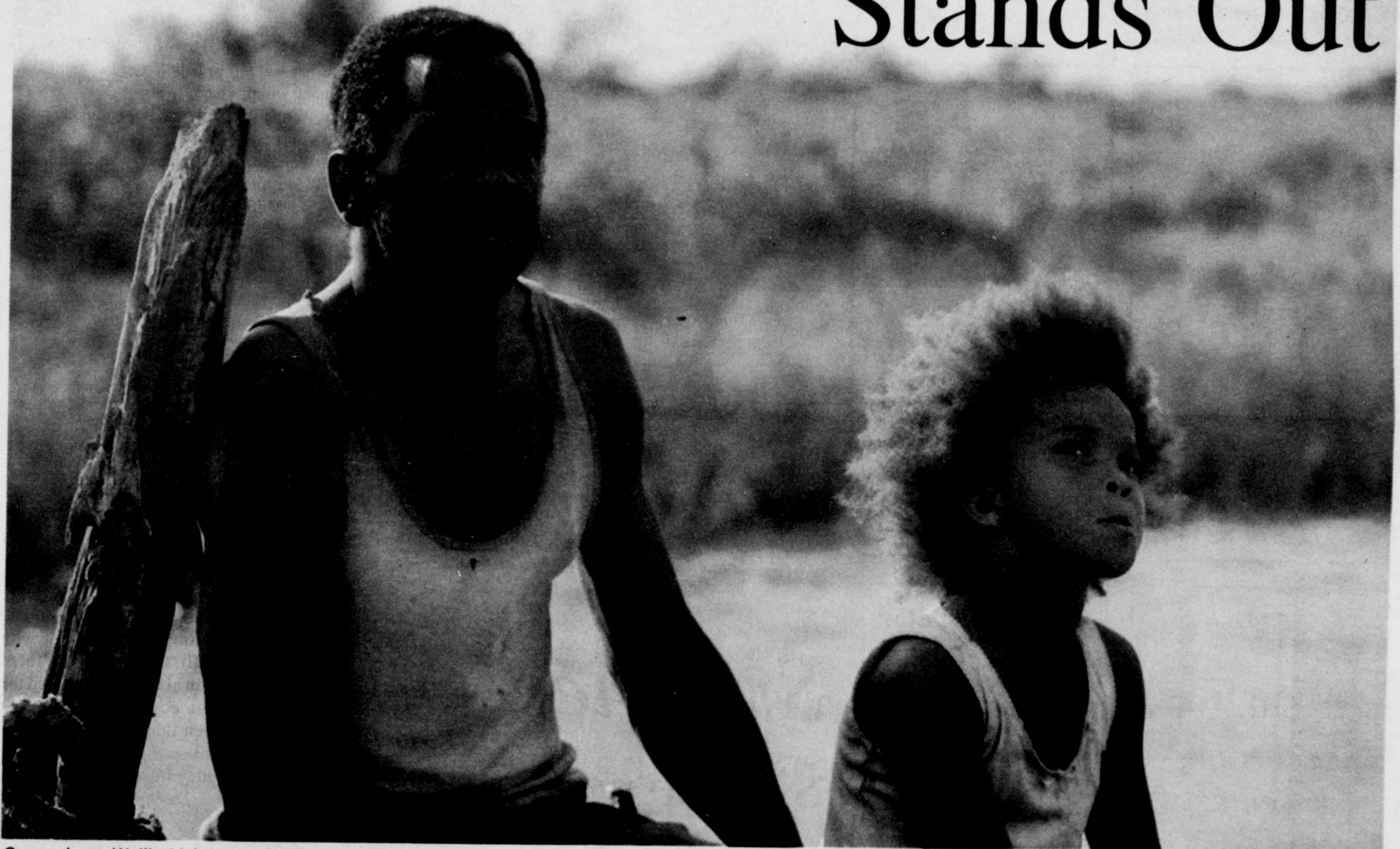


Mississippi
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'Beasts of the Southern Wild,' Stands Out



Quvenshane Wallis (right) stars in 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,' a story about a five-year-old child called Hushpuppy who lives in squalor in a shack next to one inhabited sometimes by her father, Wink (left), played by Dwight Henry.

I was disappointed, but not surprised, to see "Beasts of the Southern Wild" lose out on all of its four nominations at the Academy Awards ceremony, receiving only what I perceived as patronizing references that seemed more like the Academy patting itself on the back for generously according some recognition to "the little people."

The surprised reaction I got in some quarters for naming it the best picture of the year on my own personal top 10 list (opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com) reinforced my sense that, for all the critical acclaim it has garnered, it still is one of the most underappreciated films of the year. So, here's my best attempt to capture why this film earned my admiration.

The poor (which disproportionately means African Americans) are rarely accorded much dignity in American films, when

they are portrayed at all. In fact, compared to just about any other culture, American films overwhelmingly reside in the world of the wealthy and the beautiful, even when they purport to be portraying the middle class.

"Beasts" stands out, first, because it de-

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picts a community whose poverty is deep, intractable, and lived-in. Yet it is not exactly about their poverty; it aims to depict a community that feels itself to be rich in many ways, though its conditions are unimagin-

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DARLEEN ORTEGA



gaged in an epic struggle with a life-threatening illness.

Hushpuppy is too often alone, and Wink's treatment of her may well be questioned. Yet she experiences her community as a magical place and is attentive to the many lessons she receives from listening to the heartbeats of its creatures and observing her elders. She acquires from that community, especially from a wise artist and herbalist and from Wink, an epic determination and a sense of the mythical importance of her own life and

able to most movie-going Americans.

The motherless five-year-old child at its center, who is called Hushpuppy, lives in squalor in a shack next to the one inhabited sometimes by her father, Wink, who is en-

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