

The Descendants

Alexander Payne is a stellar American filmmaker with a disappointingly thin résumé (his last film, the wonderful “Sideways,” came out way back in 2004). His latest is the winning “The Descendants,” another half-trenchant, half-wistful comedy-drama from a master of the form.

George Clooney plays a typically muddled Payne hero, a Honolulu lawyer named Matt King who is confronting a daunting trifecta: his wife is in a coma after a water-skiing accident, a grand family property in unspoiled Hawaii--of which he is trustee—is about to sell, and his two daughters, Scottie (Amara Miller), an unruly 10-year-old and Alexandra (Shallene Woodley) a surly 17-year-old, are giving him fits. “I’m the back-up parent,” Matt says. It appears like the wife will not recover. The land sale could make him and a passel of relatives very rich. Scottie is acting out at her school and Alexandra, at a ritzy boarding school, is drifting. In the latter case, he decides to bring the child home until a decision can be made about her mom.

Thrown into the mix is the revelation, which he learns from Alexandra, that his wife has been having an affair with a real estate guy, Brian Speer (Matthew Lillard), and the pressure is on Matt to balance his role as a father—too often neglected--with his desire for revenge. Plus, he remains the final arbiter on whether the family property will go to a major developer or stay pristine. Through this thicket of demands, Matt must find out what he really values. The film doesn’t end neatly, but it ends right.

The above summary might sound mundane, but it is on just such basic human material that Payne works his magic. You could call it Shaggy Dog Cinema because he sort of throws things out there without being totally precise or without always explaining them, but they somehow cohere like real lived life. You shouldn’t expect explosive drama or copious sentiment from Alexander Payne: he gives you instead smart, revealing character studies and believable, nuanced emotions. And he adds humor, a humor never forced but organic within the situation and the characters.

Payne co-wrote the film with Nat Faxon and Jim Rash (based on a novel by Kauai Hart Hemmings), and his script avoids the pitfalls that so many other standard American movies exhibit. For example, his two child actors at first appear the kind of easy stereotypes that mar so many movies and sit-coms: the young smart-ass and the all-knowing teen. But they, over time, develop distinctiveness and idiosyncratic personalities, and their playing off Clooney as their dad is full of interest and surprise. Also, he gives Alexandra’s boy friend Sid (Nick Krause), who appears to be a dim-bulb surfer, real dimension and warmth as he trails along with the family. He has handled young people well before, see, especially, the terrific “Election” of 1999, and here again he shows real mastery.

Few other directors handle any actors so well. Besides the kids mentioned above, the featured players in “The Descendants” are uniformly solid. Beau Bridges does a fine turn as Matt’s slightly seedy, slightly needy cousin Hugh, chummily desperate about making a killing with the land sale. Robert Forster plays, with bristling hostility, the father-in-law from hell. The comic actor Matthew Lillard (best remembered from “Scooby-Doo”) gets to show some range as the realtor confronted by the wrathful

Matt. Judy Greer, as Speer's sweet but clueless wife, Julie, is most affecting as a decent person who has been wronged and wants to atone for her husband's actions.

Clooney, of course, carries the load here. He is in almost every scene, and he pulls off the befuddled husband and father exquisitely. As cool as he can be, the guy can also do befuddled, witness "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" and "Burn Before Reading," but, unlike those previous films, he is not witless here, but rather intent and earnest and trying to do the right thing. Clooney, with Payne's guidance, makes you believe the logic of what Matt does because you've come to know him so well. While it is not what some would call a "showy" performance, it is a splendid one, one that should earn some award consideration at year's end.

Let me suggest that Alexander Payne might be considered the Preston Sturges of our time, Sturges being the brilliant Hollywood writer/director of the 1940's, except that Payne's characters are more realistically drawn and swear a bit. Also, perhaps more than any other current director of American comedy, his films—from "Citizen Ruth" through "Election" to "Sideways"—and now "The Descendants," offer convincing, sweet-and-sour examinations of the contemporary soul.

(The film is rated "R" and runs 115 minutes.)

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