

George Clooney Stars in Stunning ‘The Descendants’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 17, 2011 - 10:21am

- [Alexander Payne](#) [2]
- [Amara Miller](#) [3]
- [Beau Bridges](#) [4]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [5]
- [George Clooney](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Jim Rash](#) [8]
- [Judy Greer](#) [9]
- [Matthew Lillard](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]
- [Nat Faxon](#) [12]
- [Nick Krause](#) [13]
- [Robert Forster](#) [14]
- [Shailene Woodley](#) [15]
- [The Descendants](#) [16]



Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – If one looks solely at the central male characters, it can seem remarkably easy to classify Alexander Payne’s movies under the subgenre heading of “mid-life crisis comedies”: Jim McAllister (“Election”), Warren Schmidt (“About Schmidt”), Miles (“Sideways”), and now the memorable protagonist of his stellar new dramedy “The Descendants,” Matt King. But these characters are also among the most three-dimensional and fully-defined of the comedy genre in the last twenty years. Payne goes deeper than the cliché of the male mid-life crisis to find what’s real and relatable to people at any time in their lives. His latest is a stunning tightrope act of comedy, sentimentality, drama, and the character definition that can only come from a man who has spent his life observing the complexity of the human race.

“The Descendants” opens with a woman on the water (and is wonderfully book-ended in that respect by the penultimate scene in the film). An off-screen tragedy puts that woman, Elizabeth King (Patricia Hastie), in a hospital bed, deep in a coma and looking less likely that she’s going to come out of it by the day. While her emotionally-reserved husband Matt (George Clooney) deals with the grief surrounding his wife’s likely death, he is struck by a series of even-further life-changing situations.



The Descendants

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

First, Matt realizes that he doesn’t have the skill set to take care of his daughters – younger Scottie (Amara Miller) and older Alexandra (Shailene Woodley). It’s not that he can’t develop it, but they’ve clearly never been close to their dad and the fact that they have to be so now through tragedy makes it an even rougher sea to cross. In particular, Alexandra seems to be rebelling against all authority, even bringing home a boyfriend (Nick Krause), seemingly just to annoy dear old dad even more. She knows this guy’s not in her league but it pisses dad off, so he needs to stay.

One of the reasons for family drama with Alexandra comes to the surface when she reveals that she caught her mother cheating on Matt before the accident. Matt is dumbfounded. How do we react to infidelity when the person who betrayed us is on life support? Feeling like it’s the right thing to do, but also clearly to get a good look at the guy himself, Matt and his daughters begin a journey to track down the man who might have broken up their happy home if fate hadn’t stepped in.



The Descendants

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Meanwhile, Matt is faced with a monumental decision that will impact more than just his family. It turns out that the Kings are owners of a gigantic plot of land in Hawaii. The time has come to decide what to do with it and the cousins, led by Matt, are choosing between various options in terms of how much to sell and who has the best presentation. Turn it into a resort? Keep it clean? While facing drama at home, the very landscape is changing for Matt King and it’s up to him to determine how it’s going to look when it’s over.

If that last metaphor sounds a bit on the nose, well, it undeniably is, but the subtlety throughout “The Descendants,” co-written by Nat Faxon (a regular voice actor on “The Cleveland Show” and “Allen Gregory”) and Jim Rash (Dean Pelton from “Community”) with Payne from the book by Kauai Hart Hemmings, is so spectacular that the occasional bit of bolding and underlining can be forgiven. There are several scenes in “The Descendants” that are daringly subtle pieces of screenwriting, such as when Matt confronts a comatose Elizabeth (and then scolds his daughter for doing the same) or a masterpiece of conflicting emotions in what might be the best scene of the year as Matt and Alexandra meet the man who could have destroyed their family and are faced with the decision of whether or not to destroy his.



The Descendants

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

I'm blown away by the honest realism of "The Descendants," down to minor characters like those played by Krause, Robert Forster, Judy Greer, Beau Bridges, and Matthew Lillard – all parts that would have been mere plot devices in the hands of a lesser filmmaker. They're not here. They feel like they exist on and off-screen and it's that added weight to everything around the Kings that really elevates the final product. Great films are so down to their smallest characters and it says something about the entire tapestry of this film that a three-scene role like Greer's is being discussed as an Oscar candidate.

However, the film belongs to Clooney and Woodley. The former has arguably never been better than he is here, tapping into a deep well of sadness that isn't overplayed but essential to Matt King's life. We meet this character in crisis, but it's through the little notes of Clooney's performance that it feels like he hasn't been happy in a long time. Clooney's getting a bit older now and he allows himself to play defeated. This is not Michael Clayton or Danny Ocean. Matt King is an interesting character on paper but it's the brilliant, Oscar-worthy decisions by Clooney that allow him to become three-dimensional on film. Woodley matches him in every way, giving a performance that gets even richer in memory when one considers how easily "snarky daughter" could have devolved into another cliché.

And that's the thing about "The Descendants." It walks through a minefield of clichés and not only fails to hit any of them but proves that the journey to the other side can be an incredibly rewarding one. I don't care if Alexander Payne's films can be easily classified into their own subgenre. If they're as incredible as "The Descendants," classification means nothing.

"The Descendants" stars George Clooney, Shailene Woodley, Amara Miller, Nick Krause, Robert Forster, Matthew Lillard, Beau Bridges, and Judy Greer. It was written by Alexander Payne & Nat Faxon & Jim Rash and directed by Payne. It will be released in Chicago on November 18th, 2011 and is rated R.



[17]

By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [18]

Content Director

HollywoodChicago.com

brian@hollywoodchicago.com [17]**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 18 2024 - 11:21pm):**<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/16487/george-clooney-stars-in-stunning-the-descendants>**Links:**[1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/briantt>[2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/alexander-payne>[3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/amara-miller>[4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/beau-bridges>[5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/brian-tallerico>

- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/george-clooney>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jim-rash>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/judy-greer>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/matthew-lillard>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/nat-faxon>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/nick-krause>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/robert-forster>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/shailene-woodley>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/the-descendants>
- [17] <mailto:brian@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [18] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#BRIAN>