

Oscars
2012

Hawaiï, FIVE-0

As they hit the half-century together, *Alexander Payne* and *George Clooney* deliver coming-of-middle-age, Hawaiian coma-comedy *The Descendants*

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The Descendants

Six years ago, *Iron Man* was obscure, *Twilight* was a time of day and Greece had money. One of that country's American descendants had just picked up an Academy Award. And when Alexander Payne took home the Best Adapted Screenplay gong for *Sideways* (shared with co-writer Jim Taylor), he could have had no clue that half a decade would pass and he'd be 50 before presenting his next picture to audiences. But — as his fifth feature, *The Descendants*, explores — time slips by without us noticing.

"It was four years from putting *Sideways* to bed, after all the promotion, to picking up the pen for this, in mid '09," he tells *Empire* when we meet at the Corinthia Hotel during the London Film Festival. "We doctored two movies. I produced *King Of California*, directed a short for Paris, Je T'Aime, and directed a TV pilot, *Hung*, for HBO. That was just because I was so desperate to beat up on actors..."

The itch wasn't scratched, though. After realising another of his and Taylor's scripts was going to be hard to finance, he looked around for new material, "desperate to make a movie". He'd read *Kaui Hart Hemmings'* novel *The Descendants* years before, but suddenly it came back into focus, with its story about an outwardly successful, middle-aged man who is forced to confront his failings when his wife falls into a coma. Matt King must deal with inevitable death, a painful secret and his rotten relationships with his daughters (Amara Miller and Shailene Woodley), as well as decide who to sell his sprawling family spread to, under huge pressure from the community and his cousins.

The role required someone handsome, capable, but emotionally contained — a bloke who appeared to have it all but was smart enough to realise, at some level, he didn't. The author and director agreed: George Clooney. >>

Clooney and Payne had met before, when the actor expressed an interest in playing the philandering, failing TV actor in *Sideways* (a role which went to then-unknown Thomas Haden Church). As Clooney recalls, with a shy smile, when he joins us: "We had a nice long, long, long lunch and talked... And then he gracefully passed. And I built a doll and stuck a few pins in it. That worked for six or seven years!"

This time around, though, Clooney was offered the role right out and said yes without reading the script. "It's funny," he says. "I remember this happening once, with the Coen brothers: I met with them in Arizona, shooting *Three Kings*, and they said, 'We're gonna send you a script, we were wondering if you wanted to do a movie with us?' I was like, 'Yes!', then I read the script and it was *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and I couldn't believe my luck. Then Alexander said, 'I'm going to send you a script,' and... There's always this fear that, 'I'm going to be in the first really bad Alexander Payne film, because I hadn't read the script!' Instead it was the exact opposite. I thought it was..."

Payne chips in: "... the only good one!" Clooney laughs. "I thought it was the best screenplay I'd read in a long, long time. There's not much that happens in the film, in a weird way. It's hard to explain it, because it's a film that so slowly unfolds. So beautifully unfolds. It takes its time. It's hard to describe the screenplay. You start reading it and you're involved from the minute you start. By the end you're really taken by it."

That's a fair reflection of the finished movie, which creeps up on you, underplaying rather than underscoring its emotion. Payne's pictures are often said to feature failures as leading characters, but what distinguishes those characters really is that they are normal. However peculiar the circumstances — whether the high school vote-rigging of *Election* or the wedding-foiling odyssey of *About Schmidt* — his expertise is the everyday, capturing our kinks, loneliness and desire to connect, as well as finding laughs in the darkest places. "Film is such a wonderful form," says Payne. "It really is the best way there



“It was the best screenplay I’d read in a long, long time. George Clooney”

is of showing other people — and yourself — how you view the world. 'Why do you have flawed characters?' 'How do you mix comedy and tragedy?' 'Why do you pick this tone?' All it is is how you see the world. Another question I'm asked about a lot is the sense of place. Showing the location I'm shooting with some degree of verisimilitude is important to me as I have that documentary urge. Emotionally, of course. Forgive the pretentiousness of this: emotional documentaries."

Payne could be regarded, likely is by some, as pretentious. But only if you think his discussion of ideas or sharing of discoveries — from quoting Antonioni to Tennessee Williams — is done out of anything other than honesty. He wants to engage, and has the curiosity that marks out the best filmmakers. While the authenticity of *Citizen Ruth*, *Election* and *About Schmidt* isn't too surprising (all largely shot in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska), it's matched by the scent of the California wine country in *Sideways* or the world of the 'descendants', the children of missionaries and native Hawaiians, with whom a lot of the islands' wealth resides.

"I had to find my own way in," says Payne. "I can't direct something if I don't feel it on some level. I try to be a professional and service the material but I know I can do a better job if I feel it. This upper class in Hawaii, it's not my world. It's not my story. I really wanted to be faithful to the book. That extended from the screenplay to spending a lot of time in Hawaii, meeting a lot of people and reading as much as I could. *Sideways* was getting it geographically correct in regards to that particular county in California. This was a step further, getting it geographically correct, getting it looking right, but also there was a sensibility to the people and the social fabric. I was ready for it, but it was new for me."

Clooney, in contrast, could have attended Harrison Ford's "Let's Pretend" School Of Acting. "I wish I could say I hung out with all these descendants, but the truth is, the screenplay did everything I needed." He did do some research, but, "I'm that actor that says, 'Today we go to work and this is what we're gonna do,' and I leave that at the soundstage or the location when I'm done." Payne says that Clooney's ability to turn it on and off — to switch from a scene to entertaining the crew



Clooney with onscreen family Shailene Woodley, Barbara L. Southern and Robert Forster.

between set-ups — was such that for the first week he nursed a worry he wouldn't get the performance he needed. It was groundless. Really, despite the fact he is one of our most burnished Movie Stars, Clooney has played more men in midlife crisis than he has debonair playboys. "It's the funniest thing. I get people saying, 'Surprisingly not bad in this film...' When are you gonna stop being so surprised?!" he laughs.

Obviously bright, the actor has used George Clooney™ to give himself freedom on camera and behind it, emerging as one of our most able directors, with four features now, including the excellent *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *The Ides Of March*. Watch him work a red carpet or a press conference and you can see that his greatest performance may be as himself. It brings to mind that great quote from the old-school star his persona most closely resembles: "Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant." For all of us, there's a distance between how we are seen and how we see ourselves. "I think [The Descendants] is a coming-of-age film, but the guy who's coming of age is a 50 year-old guy," says

Clooney, who himself turned 50 this year. "He's woken up to the fact that all of these betrayals that he feels — from his wife, to his children not really being great kids, to the fact that he's the only adult in terms of his family — he's as responsible as anyone else for being there. Then it comes down to forgiving yourself..."

"There's a great line in *Ordinary People*, Robert Redford's film, where it basically said, 'If that kid hadn't died, this family would have gone on and survived and everything would have worked out fine. They would have gone to colleges and stayed married and gone to country clubs and it all would have been this very antiseptic life, but something went wrong and threw it off.' And I think very much that's this. With his wife suddenly falling into this catastrophe, everything is thrown up in the air and suddenly you have to deal with issues you might have been able to avoid all the way to the casket."

The comatose wife is not the only one who is asleep. The film is about everyone waking up. "We're all victims of that," says Payne. "Sleepwalking. Always wishing to wake up. That's why we're supposed to meditate and breathe and be aware of, 'I am alive in this moment. I will be dead soon. Isn't this extraordinary?' Look at all of creation with the eyes of a child. At the wondrousness of it all... That's what you're supposed to do."

In *The Descendants*, the reality

of death becomes very real, very suddenly, for Clooney's character. Clooney himself was aware of mortality quite young, as he grew up Catholic in Kentucky, where the funerals have open caskets. But his real, personal wake-up call came when he was 27, as his uncle died of lung cancer, holding his hand. "He had just earlier kept saying, 'What a waste, what a waste...'"

The pair were close, and while his uncle had lived quite a life, Clooney knew he didn't want to be nursing similar regrets on his own death bed. "I remember thinking at that moment, 'I'm not gonna be 68 or 70 years old and laying somewhere and saying, 'What a waste...'" At the very least it's gonna be foot on the gas pedal all the way. As fast and as hard as I can.' So, if I get hit by a bus tomorrow, you go, 'Well, you jammed a lot in 50 years.'"

This may explain why, as Payne puts it, the actor is "irritatingly accomplished at everything he does". It may also explain the varied choices that mean while *The Descendants* may provide Clooney with another Oscar, it shouldn't really be a surprise to anyone. He learnt his lesson young: "Live. Do it all. Don't ever wake up and say, 'I should have done this.'"

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The Descendants is out on January 27, 2012, and will be reviewed in the next issue.

Briefing The Descendants

Released: January 27

Director:

Alexander Payne

Starring: George Clooney, Shailene Woodley, Amara Miller, Robert Forster, Judy Greer, Beau Bridges

Story: Moneyed Hawaiian

fiftysomething Matt King (Clooney) is hit by tragedy when his wife is left in a coma after a jetskiing accident. Left to look after two daughters (Woodley, Miller) he barely understands, he also has to see through a property deal when he's hit by a shocking revelation. It's a comedy.

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