

THE DESCENDANTS

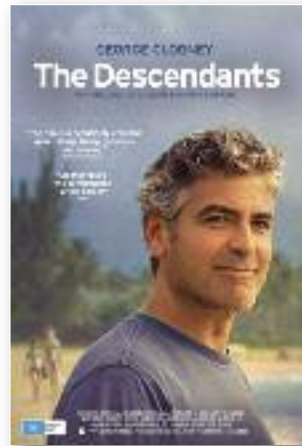
*An Ad Hominem Production / A Fox Searchlight Pictures Presentation
An Alexander Payne Film*

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser

And the nominees for Best Picture are... The Artist, The Descendants, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, The Help, Hugo, Midnight in Paris, Moneyball, The Tree of Life and War Horse... And the winner is... The Artist. However, although not this year's Oscar winner, it won in the category 'Best Adapted Screenplay' and was nominated in the categories 'Best Achievement in Directing', 'Best Achievement in Film Editing', 'Best Performance of an Actor in a Leading Role' and the 'Best Motion Picture of the Year', the film *The Descendants* was chosen by me for review as it has been a while since I have viewed a film that was as surprising, as moving and as entertaining, all at the same time.

Based on the novel *The Descendants* by Kauai Hart Hemmings the film tells the story of Matt King (played by George Clooney), a Hawaiian lawyer and landowner whose life changes dramatically following a boating accident in which his wife Elizabeth (played by Patricia Hastie) was seriously injured. As a workaholic and uninvolved father Matt is faced with serious decisions in his life. Elizabeth is in hospital on life support with no chances of recovery and his extended family members are pressuring Matt to sell 25,000 acres of unspoiled and undeveloped land on the island of Kauai that the family holds in trust. Matt's circumstances force him out of his comfort zone as a rich attorney and he has to now attend to his two daughters, Alexandra and Scottie (played by Shailene Woodley and Amara Miller respectively). That was previously his wife's responsibility and 'domain'. The two girls are at different developmental ages and levels and both are struggling with their mother's demise. Alexandra is acting out in a typical teenager way and it is only a bit into the film that her behaviour starts making sense. Here's the thing: Elizabeth was having an affair with a wealthy estate agent Brian Speer (played by Matthew Lillard) and Alexandra was the only one of the family members that knew about it. When she finally tells her father about it, Matt's attention is shifted to finding out who his wife's lover was, and he eventually ends up confronting him. This only follows after several trips to neighbouring islands and some very funny scenes in which Matt stalks the Speer family in his quest to get to the truth of his wife's infidelity. It also transpired that Matt and Elizabeth's friends knew about Elizabeth's affair and Matt is clearly shocked and hurt about this. To add to all the interesting developments Alexandra's friend Sid (played by Nick Krause) enters the story as a very charming yet seemingly dumb add-on and distraction to everything.

The film opens with Matt in monologue about Hawaii and the flip-side of life and love in Hawaii that is somewhat removed from the idyllic picture that one has about the island chain and life on it. It is very clear from the outset that Matt and



Elizabeth's relationship has broken down over the years and Matt is at a loss in trying to regain some sense of understanding and insight into his wife's life and the family's fragmented dynamics. Matt's family has been living in Hawaii for many generations and his ancestry traces back to the Hawaiian royal family. His family amassed a fortune in terms of the land that they owned, that was passed down from one generation to the next, from one set of descendants to the next. As trustee of the land Matt has the final say about the future prospects of the unspoiled paradise that the family owns and what happens to it in the end I will not divulge here.

Elizabeth's parents, Scott and Alice 'Tutu' Thorson (played by Robert Forster and Barbara Southern respectively) are also brought into play, and it is especially Scott that harbours a lot of anger and resentment towards Matt and he blames him for Elizabeth's misfortunes. Tutu suffers from Alzheimer's Dementia and she has very little awareness of the unfolding drama in her family's life. Matt has to deal with not only his immediate family's difficulties and his extended family's wants and wishes pertaining to the land issue, but also with his in-laws and their grief and interpersonal dynamics with him. Towards the end of the film it becomes clear that they are losing Elizabeth and Matt has to guide the various family members through the process of saying their goodbyes to Elizabeth as he prepares to discontinue her life-support. Matt personally is left with a lot of anger and resentment toward Elizabeth and the secrets that she kept from him without any possibility of discussing or resolving his feelings with Elizabeth in a meaningful manner. His heart breaks as he says his goodbyes to her and as he does so he verbalises his great love for her. Matt's sadness and sense of loss become very clear, although in the process it seems that he has moved closer to his daughters and his in-laws.

The Descendants made a big impression on me, especially in part to the frankness or directness in which the various processes and issues are portrayed. The film feels real and far removed from the usual, often glamorous, sometimes fake Hollywood production line. When viewing the film one gets a sense that the people portrayed are 'real', with 'real' struggles and 'real' feelings. Hawaii remains breathtakingly beautiful and the film does not detract from the island chain's natural beauty and charm. What the film does however is to give Hawaii a 'realness' in terms of its inhabitants, its culture and the threats of commercialization that it regularly faces. This is one film that should be on your 'must-see' list. Films that make an impact are rare to find lately and this is surely one of them that leaves the viewer with a lot to think about. Until the next review, enjoy!