

Leatherheads: A failed comedy, and a talent at war with itself

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Directed by George Clooney, written by Duncan Brantley and Rick Reilly

In *Leatherheads*, his third directorial assignment, George Clooney makes an effort to shelve the serious themes for which he has recently gained recognition and instead attempts a light-hearted comedy-romance about the early days of American professional football. The result is very poor: a movie that manages to be awful in several ways at once, not the least insignificant of which is the spectacle of Clooney bending over backward to be harmless.

It's especially disappointing, because as a director Clooney was so sharp in *Good Night, and Good Luck*, and as an actor he demonstrated excellent comic timing in the Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Here he directs himself in a comedy, and it falls flat.

Part of the difficulty may lie in the very act of directing himself. Clooney plays Dodge Connelly, a charmer, promoter and captain of a struggling pro football team in 1925, when the sport was informal to the point of practicing in cow fields. The actor-director is on-screen for most of the movie, looking soulfully at the camera or tilting his chin in the late-afternoon light, and the script has Dodge relentlessly charming everyone and succeeding at everything.

There can be something a little narcissistic about a director helming a star vehicle for himself—e.g., Robert Redford's self-aggrandizing *The Horse Whisperer*. That depends of course on the film and the filmmaker. Orson Welles managed to direct himself, as did Charlie Chaplin.

But the central problem with *Leatherheads* is that Clooney gets hopelessly lost in both the story he's telling and the style with which he's trying to tell it.

The plot concerns Dodge's effort to revive his bankrupt team by luring college star Carter Rutherford

(John Krasinski) out of school to be his new quarterback. Carter, a World War I hero, is being trailed by Lexie Littleton (Renée Zellweger), a hard-edged yet vixenish reporter secretly out to debunk the claims of his battlefield exploits. Naturally, Dodge falls for Lexie, and he and Carter become rivals for her affection.

The film then can't decide which strand of the story to follow: the romance between Dodge and Lexie; the sports drama of the struggling team with its panoply of eccentric characters; the tension over Lexie's secret mission and Carter's mysterious past; or the birth of modern football's backroom politics. All these elements get thrown together and interfere with one another, so that the romance is perfunctory, the sports story is undramatic (a climactic game scene drags on excruciatingly), and the theme involving "rules that killed the game" feels tacked on.

Stylistically, Clooney stages a self-conscious revival of the screwball comedy, à la *Bringing Up Baby*, complete with rapid-fire dialogue and slapstick chase scenes. Some of the banter between Dodge and Lexie is successful, witty and invigorating, and offers a bright spot. A major problem, however, is that the premise is not inherently funny. A story of underhanded journalism and big-money sports promotion could easily be treated dramatically, and there are several moments where it wants to be. At least twice in the film, fist-fights break out that feel like they could be serious, and it takes the intervention of Randy Newman's score to assure the audience that it's all in good fun.

The screwball style, then, serves not to enhance, but defuse the emotions of the story being told. Clooney the director seems to be struggling to keep his own material tamped down to the level of a Saturday

morning cartoon, continually insisting that nothing here is of consequence.

Thematically, one can feel the same tamping-down process at work. Accidentally, as it were, *Leatherheads* brings up several important and potentially interesting issues, only to drop each like a hot potato. Carter's "war hero" story turns out to be largely a creation of media hype (echoing the Jessica Lynch affair at the beginning of the Iraq War). When Clooney says, "America needs its heroes," it looks like an interesting parallel is being drawn between war heroes and sports celebrities at the dawn of the age of propaganda. We even get a suggestive scene where the new football commissioner seems to be making an effort to suppress Lexie's truth-telling. In the end, however, that promising story line is also undermined.

Likewise, in this movie, we glimpse major newspapers resorting to tabloid journalism and deep-pocketed sports agents manipulating the game behind the scenes. Indeed, for a nostalgia piece about a vanished America, *Leatherheads* paints a surprisingly downbeat picture of a country in thrall to economic hardship and corrupt business powers. Nevertheless, the cartoon style comes to the rescue, trivializing the issues and quickly shoving them off-screen.

Shot-by-shot, Clooney remains a skilled director, and bits of the movie work effectively, especially the sentimental passages about the old-fashioned game. But the overall effect is of a film at war with itself, and in a recent interview, Clooney provided some clue as to how he came to direct it:

"Right after 'Good Night, and Good Luck' and 'Syriana'...everything that was coming to me was issues films. They were happy to let me direct, but it was the Richard Clarke book. It was 'We are going to do the big Valerie Plame story.' It was going to be something political and I had a great fear of being the 'issues director,' because the issues change and I have a much bigger interest in being a director. So, I wanted to do something that was completely away from this."

What emerges in *Leatherheads*, painfully, is an "issues director" raising provocative issues and trying his best to bury them in nonsense at the same time—with the added misfortune that the nonsense is his own face.

Whether the movie will open doors for Clooney in Hollywood is questionable. Were any really closed? It will not help his reputation for artistic integrity and

seriousness.



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